



Blended Early Learning in Educational Foundations (BELIEF) Project

According to the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) the Iowa Department of Education (Department) may use state funds “for emergency needs as determined by the state educational agency to address issues responding to coronavirus, including measuring and addressing learning loss, which may be addressed through the use of grants or contracts.” The Department is using the authority provided in CRRSA and similar authority in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) to fund exploratory projects that build capacity to address Iowa’s ability to respond to interrupted learning due to this pandemic and future needs to accelerate learning. Successful exploratory projects can serve as models for further implementation across Iowa.

Exploratory Project (2021-2024)

The Department is using ESSER II funds for the Blended Early Learning in Educational Foundations (BELIEF) exploratory project to better understand what it takes for a school district to start early childhood and preschool programs that blend childcare and quality early learning experiences for children birth to five within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework.

The Council Bluffs Community School District (CBCSD) is currently constructing an Early Learning Center (ELC) to provide a full continuum of child development programming and wrap-around supports, including:

- parent and family engagement;
- health, safety, mental health, medical, dental, and nutritional services;
- an option of before- and after-school care.

Services at the ELC will be provided in partnership with the Council Bluffs Schools Foundation. The ELC will be a model for the implementation of public-private partnerships to meet a community need. CBCSD is leveraging \$7 million in ESSER II relief funds provided by the Department along with \$5 million in district funds, a \$4 million lead gift from an anonymous donor and an additional \$4 million in private donations.

Expert Consultants

Expert consultants will assist the Department, CBCSD, and additional districts to:

- **Create and Support Implementation of a Strategic Plan.** This includes conducting a needs assessment around current practice in existing childcare and early learning settings, development and support of a strategic plan, and helping to create a model for start-up of early learning programs.
- **Coordinate Support.** This includes coordinating the work across experts and implementation of the strategic plan.
- **Inform Statewide Work.** This includes identifying barriers to start-up and continued operation of such programs, including potential legal and policy barriers and recommendations.

Planning Grants (2021-2022)

The purpose of Planning Grants is to expand our shared understanding about Iowa communities’ needs for ELCs and work with school districts to start evidence-based, customized early childhood and preschool programs that blend childcare and quality early learning experiences for children under five.

The Department of Education is providing up to \$10,000 each in ESSER III funds for 10 district programs to engage in planning toward the pursuit of a blended early learning and childcare model through a competitive grant application process starting in November 2021. The Department will ensure grants are awarded equitably across the state geographically, as well as with regard to district size. To qualify for a planning grant, districts will be required to establish a public-private partnership intent on exploring the development of a blended childcare and early learning model in their community tailored to fit their documented needs. Examples of how the funding can be used include:

- Costs of substitute teachers so team members can attend training/planning sessions;
- Travel expenses (e.g., mileage, hotel, meals);
- Costs of transportation for service models using multiple locations for service;
- Marketing and communication materials and services for parent and family outreach.

See the [ESSER II Guidance: Use of Funds and Expenditures document](#) for additional information on allowable uses of funding and how to apply for a planning grant through the Department's CASA application.