



Strategies to Improve Instructional Practice in Early Childhood Settings

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INFORMATION REQUEST

A state asked CEELO and Child Trends to review national research on best practices that have been shown to improve results on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS),¹ with a specific focus on research that impacts instruction and is applicable to teachers in school and community-based settings.

State's Goal

The state is implementing a legislative mandate to unify the state's early childhood education programs, including all publicly-funded pre-K, child care, and Head Start. The state is seeking to build upon previous advances made in their ECE system by including research-based professional development models and use of effective implementation to improve instructional practice in early childhood settings.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESPONSE

The authors reviewed the research on curriculum implementation and effective professional development interventions and identified selected examples of promising approaches to professional development and coaching. The memo concludes with next steps and considerations for policymakers.

What We Know

Research has indicated that the quality of teacher-child interactions, the quality of instruction, and the effective use of developmentally-appropriate curriculum and assessment practices have the greatest impact on children's outcomes during the preschool years.^{2,3,4} When the curriculum, instructional and assessment practices are aligned, developmentally appropriate, and implemented with fidelity the two practices can work together to support the growth and development of individual children and their needs.⁵ These constellations of factors—teacher-child interaction, quality of instruction, and use of an evidence-based curriculum and assessment—when considered together as the focus of teacher

preparation and professional development are most likely to result in improved child outcomes and the best bets for improving teacher practice.

Better education and training, including ongoing support, for teachers can improve instructional practices related to curriculum and instruction and the interactions between children and teachers, which in turn affect children's learning.⁶ Research suggests that professional learning and continuous coaching are instrumental for supporting teaching practices related to high quality experiences for children.⁷ Good teachers are actively engaged in their continuing professional development.⁸ Recent research indicates that coaching focused on improving interactions with children based on feedback from direct observations of teachers can lead to significant improvements in classroom practices and children's outcomes.⁹

Components of Effective Professional Development (PD)

Effective PD practices are designed to provide differential support to the knowledge, learning styles and goals of adults and within a system of continuous quality improvement in order to improve teacher practice and children's learning. Additionally, effective PD is tightly coupled to curricula, assessment and student learning needs.

According to a recent report¹⁰ effective professional development incorporates most, if not all, of the following elements:

- ***Is content focused?***
- ***Incorporates active learning***
- ***Supports collaboration***
- ***Uses models of effective practice***
- ***Provides coaching and expert support***
- ***Offers feedback and reflection***
- ***Is of sustained duration?***

Zaslow et al (2010) conducted a review of features of effective professional development, specifically for early childhood educators.¹¹ In addition to the above features, the authors noted additional characteristics of effective professional development that are important to consider when designing professional development for educators of young children. These are:

- ***There is collective participation of teachers from the same classrooms or schools in professional development.***
- ***Educators are prepared to conduct child assessments and interpret their results as a tool for ongoing monitoring of the effects of professional development.***

Policy Standards for State Professional Development Systems

The National Institute for Early Education Research, *2016 State Preschool Yearbook*, identified new Preschool quality benchmarks for the first time since 2002 to reflect the more recent research on quality indicators in preschool.¹² The new NIEER quality benchmark on professional development includes the following:

Professional Development Quality Benchmarks

- At least 15 clock hours per year (or the equivalent) of approved professional learning activities for Lead teachers and Assistant teachers. (Note: The majority of these hours should be on topics other than health and safety)
- Written individualized annual professional development plans for Lead teachers and Assistant teachers.
- Coaching is required for all lead teachers (or all classrooms).¹³

Continuous Improvement Models of Professional Development

Effective implementation of curricula is characterized by intensive professional development that often involves coaching at least twice a month, in which an expert teacher provides feedback and support for in-classroom practice, either in person or in some cases through observation of videos of classroom teaching.¹⁴ For professional development to impact child outcomes, teacher quality and specifically instructional quality must be improved.

Promising Models of Professional Development to Improve Instruction

We identify models that merit further consideration—“promising models” because they have demonstrated impact on instructional quality and could be cost-effective. “Additional models” are noted because they have evidence that the professional development model is comprehensive, relatively cost-effective, and implemented in community-based settings. As most of the research on professional development models has not been conducted in child care settings, the final section reviews the research on coaching in child care.

Professional Development Model	Description
My Teaching Partner (MTP)	Web-based professional development/coaching system aligned to the focus areas of the CLASS assessment that includes video exemplars and web-mediated consultation on specific dimensions of interactions with children.
Making the Most of Classroom Interactions , (MMCI)	Targeted professional development model developed to be delivered to a group of teachers. This model could be more feasible for state-wide implementation, more cost-effective and aligned with the role of lead agencies in the Community Networks.
Early Ed U	Developed by faculty at the University of Washington for Head Start teachers (formerly known as Head Start University). Early Ed U offers research-based video courses to institutions of higher education and state professional development networks. A unique feature is the coaching companion, a method to jointly view videos and comment/consult to identify areas to improve practice.

Professional Development Model	Description
Additional Models of Professional Development to Consider	
Head Start REDI	A professional development intervention involving four days of workshop training and weekly in class support from a mentor teacher, significantly improved intervention teachers’ classroom practices.
Every Child Ready (ECR)	The ECR is Apple Tree’s instructional model. Apple Tree is a non-profit research and development institute operating charter schools in Washington, DC. The ECR is an instructional model includes an affordable research-based curriculum, differentiated professional development for adult learners (teachers and leaders), and provides educators with a developmentally appropriate robust assessment tool kit to help measure the effectiveness and quality of instruction.

Coaching in Child Care and other Early Childhood Settings

Coaching in child care settings is a common approach to increasing the quality of care and providing professional development to early childhood educators.¹⁵ The Head Start Performance Standards require coaching (within educator professional development) and define certain aspects of what coaching should entail. A growing body of research suggests that on-site coaching, when combined with professional development, can contribute to improvements in the quality of teaching and gains in children’s learning, especially when it is focused on teaching practices that support growth in key domains of school readiness such as language, early math, and social-emotional development.¹⁶ While research on specific coaching models that are effective within child care settings is less prevalent, the field is beginning to work towards identifying the effective elements of coaching systems for child care, which are typically incorporated in the state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).¹⁷

Based on recommendations from national policy organizations such as Child Trends, NAEYC, and OPRE, elements of a statewide coaching system include:

- professional standards, competencies, and role definitions for coaches,
- a career pathway and system for credentialing coaches,
- a system of ongoing training support for coaches,
- state advisory body that provided oversight for coaching initiatives, and
- state data system for tracking and monitoring coaching.

State Models

Two promising State models for coaching are Alabama’s First Class Reflective Coaching Model and Massachusetts Coaching Model.

Alabama’s First Class Reflective Coaching Model. Alabama’s pre-K program, [First Class Voluntary PreK](#), is implemented in mixed delivery settings. The state has developed a “reflective coaching model”.

Implementation of the curriculum is embedded into the Alabama Reflective Coaching Model that includes effective teaching practices, curriculum content based on early developmental learning standards, and professional development. Support for curriculum selection is provided by a team from the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. All curricula must promote appropriate instructional practice and be used to compliment the framework. Lead teachers and ancillary teachers participate in a continuous improvement cycle of coaching and professional development based on child assessment data (e.g. TSGold). See [here](#) for further information on Alabama’s Reflective Coaching Model and other resources on coaching.

Massachusetts Coaching Models. Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care provides different models of coaching to educators in early childhood settings and afterschool programs. The state offers an “Educator and Provider Support Grant” to provide content coaches to teachers and administrators and a “Peer Assistance and Coaching Model” that utilizes a peer-peer approach. Massachusetts also offers a number of free technology based supports to educators and coaches, including a cloud-based video platform and a guide for a five-step approach to a professional conferencing (coaching) model. See [here](#) for further information on these models.

Next Steps and Considerations

The research clearly indicates that a strong professional development system impacts early childhood educator’s instructional practice and under some conditions, improves child outcomes. There is an abundance of information that could inform next steps in enhancing the professional development and supports to early childhood educators. The key features synthesized on features of effective professional development and coaching models, plus the lessons learned from state and local models identify next steps to develop a robust statewide professional development (coaching) system.

Consider the following next steps:

- **Conduct a gap analysis of your state’s current PD and coaching system.** Identify the current opportunities for all programs, teachers and administrators for professional development and coaching. Consider developing a matrix or framework to identify the types of PD you are interested in and then engage key PD providers in mapping current offerings. See, for example, the report, “[Mapping Current Professional Preparation and Professional Development Opportunities for New Jersey’s Early Learning Workforce](#)” for an approach your state could design.
- **Develop a state early childhood education professional development plan.** Engage a cross-sector leadership team to develop a 3–5-year plan to consider the highest priorities, most cost-effective, and most salient strategies, with specific goals for each sector that are targeted to the program and community collaborative performance profiles. See [Primetime for Coaching: Improving Instructional Coaching in Early Childhood Education](#) for guidance for policymakers on coaching models; see the New America [new multi-media guide](#) that offers resources for policymakers on implementing Transforming the Workforce report.

- **Identify promising practices of coaching in your state.** Before launching any new coaching model or professional development system state-wide, identify a sample of communities, districts or programs and conduct interviews on features of successful coaching models and other supports to determine what would work best in your state. See the interview protocols in this resource, [“Coaching in Early Care and Education Programs and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems”](#) as an example.

Endnotes

¹ The Classroom Assessment Scoring System, University of Virginia. Retrieved from <https://curry.virginia.edu/classroom-assessment-scoring-system>

² Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L. M., Gormley, Jr., W. T., Ludwig, J., & et al. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development. Available at http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb_2013_10_16_investing_in_children.pdf.

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⁹ Barnett, W. S. & Frede, E. C. (2017). Long-term effects of a system of high-quality universal preschool education in the United States. In H.-P. Blossfeld, N. Kulic, J. Skopek, & M. Triventi

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to high-quality public programs at scale. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2, 37-46.

¹⁰ Darling-Hammond, L., Hyeler, M., & Gardner, M. (2017) Effective Teacher Professional Development, Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/effective-teacher-professional-development-report>

¹¹ Zaslow, M. et al (2010). Toward the Identification of Features of Effective Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators: A Literature Review. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/professional-development/literature-review.doc>

¹² Barnett, W. S., Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Weisenfeld, G. G., Horowitz, M., Kasmin, R., & Squires, J. H. (2017). *The State of Preschool 2016: State Preschool Yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

¹³ See also Beyond the Benchmarks Webinar for further information on the new benchmarks and selected state approaches. Available at <http://nieer.org/video-webinar/behind-benchmarks-webinar>

¹⁴ Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L. M., Gormley, Jr., W. T., Ludwig, J., et al. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in

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