

Case Studies of Head Start Programs



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Background

This brief is part of Bellwether Education Partners' *Leading by Exemplar* project, a multi-year study researching the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs. This document provides in-depth case studies about the practices of these exemplary programs.

The *Leading by Exemplar* project has three goals: to identify Head Start programs that are producing powerful results for children, elevate them as proof points of what is possible for the field, and learn from their practices to inform policy and efforts to improve early learning outcomes. To identify potential exemplars, Bellwether Education Partners drew on publicly available quantitative data and recommendations from experts and stakeholders in the field. A program was eligible for this study if it had demonstrable evidence, via an external evaluation or internal analysis of longitudinal data, of positive impacts on children's learning that were either substantially larger than those of typical Head Start or other early childhood programs or sustained beyond kindergarten entry. We believe there are many more Head Start programs that meet this criterion, but our analysis focuses on these five programs.

This document profiles each of the exemplary programs, providing detailed information about five components of program practice:

- Curriculum, assessment, and instruction
- Meeting the needs of all children
- Ensuring high-quality teaching
- Family engagement
- Data utilization

Additional information about the *Leading by Exemplar* project, including methodology, lessons for the field, and other analysis, is available [here](#). Briefs synthesizing the programs' [instructional models](#) and [data utilization practices](#) are also available.

Head Start Exemplars



Acelero Learning Camden/Philadelphia



CAP Tulsa



Educare Miami-Dade



Fairfax County Public Schools



Utah Community Action

CASE STUDY

Acelero Learning

Location	Number of children	Year opened	Dosage	Percent of teachers with a bachelor's degree	Pay parity with district kindergarten salary
Camden, NJ / Philadelphia, PA*	1,446	2001	Full day/full week	100% (NJ) 25% (PA)	Yes (NJ) No (PA)

* For the purposes of this work, we focused on one Acelero Learning delegate, located in the Camden/Philadelphia region. The data in this table refer only to that delegate, not Acelero Learning as an agency.



Background and Introduction

Acelero Learning was founded in 2001 with a mission of closing the achievement gap between Head Start children and their higher-income peers. It pursues this mission by operating Head Start programs directly, and through an affiliated organization, Shine Early Learning, which helps other Head Start grantees improve their programs by implementing Acelero Learning's instructional model. In both these bodies of work, Acelero Learning's goal of closing the achievement gap for Head Start students serves as a "North Star" that informs all aspects of program design and implementation.

Throughout Acelero Learning's history, its commitment to this mission has driven a series of decisions about curriculum, child assessment, supportive family services, and staff professional development that add up to a unique and innovative instructional model and approach to service delivery. Since its inception, Acelero Learning has evolved its program model based on data and experience and developed resources and supports to streamline the implementation of that model. The result is a program that constantly assesses the effectiveness of its components and tweaks them until it's right — even if that means redesigning a component in house.

Acelero Learning is also unique among Head Start programs in that it is structured as a for-profit organization. Although for-profit providers are common in the early childhood sector, they are rare in Head Start, and federal regulations prohibit the use of Head Start funds to pay profits to a commercial organization. Thus, while its for-profit status has a number of implications for Acelero Learning as an organization, it does not impact children's experiences in Acelero Learning classrooms. As a mission-driven for-profit, Acelero Learning focuses on improving results for Head Start children and families.

Today, Acelero Learning serves 668 children in Early Head Start and 4,479 children in Head Start through relationships with four delegate agencies in four states: Wisconsin, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Through Shine Early Learning, its instructional model and approach to family services and data-informed improvement are implemented in an additional 38 programs serving more than 30,000 children.

This case study focuses on Acelero Learning's practices in programs that it operates directly, and specifically on its Camden/Philadelphia delegate. All Acelero Learning delegates implement a common program model and leverage its corresponding tools and content, but they customize execution of some aspects of the model based on local workforce conditions and differences in state-level policies and funding sources. These differences are most apparent in teacher credential requirements and the funding streams to which Acelero Learning has access, but also affect its facilities, staffing structure, and other program operations.

We chose to focus this case study on Acelero Learning: Camden/Philadelphia (ALCP) for the sake of simplicity and to provide a deeper insight into what Acelero Learning's model looks like in practice in one delegate. ALCP operates centers in Camden, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is funded to serve 1,158 3- and 4-year-olds in eight centers. Because ALCP's work crosses state lines, it also provides a compelling illustration of how Head Start grantees combine funding from various state and federal sources, as well as the ways variations in state policy and funding affect the work of many Head Start grantees. ALCP's New Jersey sites are located in school districts in which the state funds universal pre-k for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Because New Jersey uses a diverse delivery approach, ALCP is able to access those funds for its New Jersey sites. Philadelphia sites also have access to

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additional funding through the state-funded preschool program, Pre-K Counts, but funding levels are substantially lower than what ALCP receives from pre-k in New Jersey. Program standards and requirements also vary across states. In both Camden and Philadelphia ALCP offers six hours per day of Head Start services, and extended day services are available before and after school. But requirements for curriculum, teacher qualifications, and compensation vary across states. In addition to Head Start, Early Head Start, and state pre-k funding, ALCP accesses federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funding and state childcare subsidies to support extended day services for qualifying families.

Outside researchers help Acelero Learning gauge their success in meeting the mission of closing the achievement gap. Over a period of six years, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University analyzed the math and literacy skills of children who attended Acelero Learning programs and found that these children made larger gains on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, a norm-referenced assessment, than those in a national sample of Head Start children. In 2016, the last year of this analysis, the performance of the average Acelero Learning child was more than twice as high as that of the average Head Start child. These results are impressive, but fall short of the gains needed to fully close the achievement gap for Head Start children before school entry. Recognizing this fact gives Acelero Learning's leadership a sense of urgency that motivates continued experimentation and adaptation of the program in an effort to produce even stronger results — as the following case study highlights.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

Acelero Learning's commitment to ongoing improvement and its intensely tailored, data-informed approach to program operations are most apparent in the agency's approach to curriculum, assessment, and instruction. The agency's School Readiness Goals are a key driver of that approach: All Head Start grantees are required to have School Readiness Goals, but Acelero Learning defines those goals to reflect its mission of closing the achievement gap and then centers its work on them.

In the early years of the program, Acelero Learning leadership believed that they could produce better results for children by focusing on high-quality implementation of a traditional Head Start model. To that end, they initially adopted Creative Curriculum® and implemented the standard model: Teachers created their own lesson plans and chose or developed activities to go along with those plans. Acelero Learning leaders became concerned, however, that this approach was resulting in variability in instructional quality and content delivery among teachers.

Starting in 2009, Acelero Learning leadership engaged early childhood experts across the country to identify other programs delivering transformational results and determine what the program needed to do to achieve its mission of closing the achievement gap. They consistently heard that content-rich curriculum was an absolutely crucial component in improving early learning outcomes for children in poverty. Acelero Learning ran controlled pilots using other commercially available research-based curricula. They found several to be impactful and compelling, but ultimately determined that the strongest research-based curricula were best suited for market segments that could access the financial resources required to provide intensive support to teachers — which is not the reality in most Head Start programs. These factors pushed Acelero Learning to invest time and resources in developing a curriculum of their own.

During the next three years the team, led by Dr. Ellen Frede (then Acelero Learning’s senior vice president for early learning, research, and training), worked with curriculum developers and teachers to author a new curriculum model, Ready to Shine. Ready to Shine uses the foundation Acelero Learning had put in place — including an emphasis on learning centers — and builds on it with comprehensive materials and tools that support teachers in implementing high-quality content and instruction. Specifically, Ready to Shine provides teaching staff with foundations for delivering content-rich themes of instruction and differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all children in the classroom. It was also explicitly designed to meet Acelero Learning’s School Readiness Goals. Acelero Learning also created specific materials, such as sample lesson plans and sequences, to support teachers in implementing the curriculum.

Acelero Learning gradually implemented the Ready to Shine curriculum across its sites. Initially, Ready to Shine and its materials were optional for existing teachers and required for new teachers, but over a period of several years the program began requiring that all teachers implement the Ready to Shine curriculum.

Ready to Shine is intentionally designed to be highly scaffolded: Teachers receive all of the content, materials, and activities that they need to implement the curriculum, outlined in a clear sequence. Content is broken into 13 “themes,” or topic areas, that build on each other throughout the program year. The first theme of the year, for example, focuses on helping children get to know their peers, teacher, and classroom environment. Each theme has a series of weekly “big ideas,” or content messages, that are incorporated in and reinforced by activities and lessons throughout the week and build on the knowledge and experiences from the previous weeks.

Additionally, Ready to Shine includes activity packets that provide instructional strategies, as well as suggestions for how the teacher can extend key learning objectives into all parts of the day and individualize the activities based on each child’s age, ability level, and readiness for more complexity. Teachers can modify Ready to Shine’s content or activities

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at any time, but the goal of the curriculum is to create a structured experience for teachers: Rather than spending time on lesson planning, teachers can focus their time and energy on differentiating content for individual students.

Teachers individualize instruction using assessment data. Acelero Learning programs use one of two assessment tools: Teaching Strategies GOLD or the Early Learning Scale (ELS). Both assessments are observation-based child-level assessments in which teachers observe child behaviors and activities and compare them to a set of predefined objectives, allowing them to measure growth over time. In the Philadelphia/Camden delegate, as in all delegates, Acelero Learning's Head Start classrooms that are based in school districts use Teaching Strategies GOLD®, while all others use the ELS.

Consistent with its overall approach, the Acelero Learning tailored these assessments to better support teachers' implementation and align with Acelero Learning's School Readiness Goals. To that end, they created the Acelero Learning Focused Assessment (ALFA), a highly curated list of learning objectives based exclusively on the site's School Readiness Goals. The learning objectives are directly translated into Ready to Shine activities and embedded into the curriculum so that teachers can assess children's progress during planned activities aligned with Ready to Shine themes.

Acelero Learning teachers use the assessment data, other observations and artifacts, and the suggestions outlined in Ready to Shine to create individualized learning plans for children. Individualized learning plans provide a road map for teachers to differentiate their instruction. In these biweekly plans, the teacher clearly lays out a specific objective for the child (based on the assessment item and the School Readiness Goal), the reason behind this focus, when they will focus on this objective with the child, and the strategies or activities that the teacher will use to support the child in reaching this objective.

Finally, another Acelero Learning-created tool, the Teacher Success Rubric (TSR), links curriculum, assessment, and instruction by defining how a teacher implements the curriculum and assessments well along a developmental continuum from novice teacher to master teacher. The TSR clearly outlines what Ready to Shine curriculum fidelity looks like across several subdomains, such as the teacher's daily routine, transitions, and instructional practice during small-group time. Acelero Learning also developed supplementary materials, including an observational tool to help center directors, who serve as teachers' instructional coaches (discussed in more detail below), to support teachers in curriculum fidelity.

Acelero Learning refines the Ready to Shine curriculum and companion materials every year, at least to some degree. In 2014, the program did a substantial revision of the curriculum and developed a version specific to 3-year-olds.

Meeting the Needs of Dual Language Learners (DLLs)

Twenty-seven percent of ALCP children speak a language other than English at home – primarily Spanish. To support these children’s language and literacy development, every ALCP classroom employs Acelero Learning’s sheltered English instructional model. This model provides additional support to dual language learners so that they can both access rigorous thematic content and develop increasing proficiency in English over time. For example, small-group activity guides in the Ready to Shine curriculum include specific instructions for making content comprehensible for dual language learners. When one or both teachers are proficient in a dual language learner’s native language, strategic support for that language is also provided. The Teacher Success Rubric, which guides coaching and professional development at ALCP, reinforces sheltered instruction practices, including integrating children’s culture and language into the classroom.

ALCP Head Start



Children who speak a language other than English at home



Children who speak Spanish at home



Instructional staff who speak Spanish

2016–17 data

Whenever possible, ALCP uses parents and other volunteers to increase their capacity to support dual language learners. In fact, frequent volunteers to a site may be invited to participate in professional development. For example, Foster Grandparents – AmeriCorps members over 55 who work with children and youth – regularly participate in such training sessions. ALCP is also developing a training process to teach aides or volunteers how to administer screening in a child’s native language when bilingual staff are unavailable.

The broader Acelero Learning network continues to enhance its approach for dual language learners via its innovation cycle. One center in the delegate serving Monmouth and Middlesex Counties in New Jersey is piloting a dual language immersion model designed to simultaneously develop competency in both Spanish and English for all learners, not only dual language learners. In each pilot classroom, the educators follow a “one teacher, one language” model in which children alternate practicing content in each language with the teacher supporting that language.

Each center’s community is different, and the network seeks to build multiple models that meet diverse community needs. That dual language model, for example, is only possible in locations with both sufficient bilingual staffing and a high community concentration of

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a single home language other than English. To that end, next year the Acelero Learning network will pilot another model, this one for supplemental native language support, in locations where multiple home languages are represented at a given center and bilingual staff is limited.

These dual language and supplemental native language support pilots provide an example of Acelero Learning's broader approach to piloting new models and resources to meet identified needs. ALCP's educational leadership participates actively in pilot development for the network. If these pilots prove effective through the organization's innovation cycle, delegate-level leaders in ALCP and other locations will be able to choose the best models for their specific centers based on staffing and community language characteristics.

Ensuring Quality Teachers and Leaders

Acelero Learning takes an intentional, strategic approach to improving the quality of its teaching force. Because labor market conditions, funding sources, and state requirements vary across the states where Acelero Learning's delegates operate, the qualifications of its teachers also vary more, both across the network and within ALCP, than they do in some other exemplar programs. To support all its teachers in delivering high-quality teaching, Acelero Learning complements its curriculum and instructional supports with intensive professional development, including professional learning communities (PLCs) that support peer learning and a novel approach to coaching that deploys site directors as coaches and instructional leaders.

Teacher Credentials and Selection

As an agency, Acelero Learning recognizes the importance of high-quality, effective teaching and the role that formal education and experience play in ensuring that teachers are effective. To that end, the agency's goal is for all lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree. At this point, however, state-specific circumstances govern where and how Acelero Learning allocates its resources towards that goal. Acelero Learning analyzes labor market dynamics in the communities it serves and must respond accordingly; where robust district pre-k programs pay salaries commensurate with K-12 teachers, Acelero Learning faces

ALCP Head Start



Camden, NJ



Philadelphia, PA

Lead teachers who have a bachelor's degree

2016-17 data

greater competition for staff than in other communities. Across the agency, 66 percent of lead Head Start teachers have bachelor's degrees — but those numbers vary across delegates and states.

Acelero Learning operates in four states with very different funding contexts and policy environments. While teachers in all delegates must meet Head Start requirements, additional requirements for teacher credentials and funding for teacher compensation vary across states and funding streams. ALCP spans two states, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, that fund pre-k at very different levels and have different requirements for teachers in these programs. Because ALCP's New Jersey programs receive funding from the state pre-k program, teachers in ALCP's New Jersey sites must have bachelor's degrees and pre-K-3rd state teaching certification, which New Jersey requires for state-funded pre-k teachers, and earn salaries comparable to teachers in K-12 public schools. In contrast, the baseline requirement for teachers in ALCP's Philadelphia sites is an associate's degree. Funding levels also vary between states, based on both whether Acelero Learning's centers can receive state pre-k funding and the amount of funds state programs provide. All ALCP's New Jersey sites receive funds from New Jersey's state pre-k program, which is among the most generously funded in the country. In Philadelphia, by contrast, only one of ALCP's Philadelphia centers receives funding from the state preschool program, Pre-K Counts. Teachers in that center make more than teachers in ALCP's other Philadelphia centers, but less than teachers in ALCP centers in New Jersey. The result is that, even within the same delegate, the teaching teams at the Philadelphia and Camden sites look very different: 100 percent of ALCP's teachers in Camden have a bachelor's degree, while only 25 percent of teachers in ALCP's Philadelphia schools do.

Because Acelero Learning has to work with limited resources and across jurisdictions with differing policy requirements and funding levels, it needs to be strategic in how it recruits and what it prioritizes when selecting teachers. ALCP analyzed their delegate-level hiring and selection data and concluded that a candidate with an associate's degree may be stronger than a candidate with a bachelor's if the candidate has more relevant experience and if their interview shows that they are coachable and demonstrate competency in the role. This pattern applied to both new hires and internal candidates. This evidence allows Acelero Learning's leadership to accept variation in teacher credentials across jurisdictions, while also informing the program's selection processes and professional development systems.

Acelero Learning also deploys its human resources staff strategically to support selection and recruitment. Historically, each delegate had a dedicated human resource director who was responsible for designing and executing the systems for recruitment, selection, hiring, and onboarding. In staff surveys, however, Acelero Learning leadership heard that these roles were stretched too thin. In response, they narrowed the position's responsibilities to focus on developing the delegate's human capital strategy and building managers' capacity

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and skills, and shifted recruitment to an agency-wide shared services team. Acelero Learning staff also track and closely monitor their recruitment needs: Every week, each delegate's human resource director shares the number of open positions and the days to fill each position with the rest of the delegate staff, and the agency-level recruitment team reviews a recruitment and selection dashboard to understand the causes behind hang-ups or delays during the recruitment and hiring process and identify opportunities to improve the process.

Retention

Variations in compensation also affect teacher retention rates – both within ALCP centers and across the agency as a whole. ALCP's goal is to have less than 20 percent teacher attrition annually across the delegate.

ALCP Head Start



Retention of lead teachers



Retention of instructional assistants

2017–18 data

In addition to compensation, ALCP designed several other initiatives to improve retention at their centers. In 2016, for example, ALCP conducted a retention study to better understand the reasons behind staff exits. Respondents, particularly those who identified as millennials, were concerned about what they perceived to be a lack of clear advancement opportunities within the organization. In response, Acelero Learning has developed a career pathway road map for education staff, which outlines potential trajectories and the skill set required of each.

Acelero Learning has also worked to create realistic pathways for educators in all roles to advance in the organization based on experience and formal education. These pathways range from an internal Child Development Associate program for infant-toddler teachers and assistant teachers to a resource teacher program that allows teachers with master's and bachelor's degrees to lead by mentoring other teachers. In addition, Acelero Learning's size provides opportunities for upward advancement unavailable in other programs: Within the past five years, in the Camden-Philadelphia program alone, six senior leaders have left to take on greater responsibilities at other Acelero Learning locations or in the central organization.

Acelero Learning's investment in career pathway road-mapping also sets them up for a strategic succession plan. As part of the career pathway road map, staff members create professional coaching plans in which they map out where they could go within the organization. Highly effective teachers who show potential as managers, for example, are invited to participate in the Resource Teacher Program. Other staff have opportunities to do temporary externships outside of the ALCP, and Acelero Learning runs a cross-delegate leadership cohort program for staff who are identified as having the potential for promotion to leadership roles. Through the program, staff receive additional training and support to help them advance upward.

Professional Development

Given the variation in teacher credentials, professional development and support tailored to individual teachers' needs is crucial to enabling all Acelero Learning educators to be effective and to develop their skills as educators. Acelero Learning's professional development strategy has four components: workshop-style trainings, individual coaching, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and digital professional development. Workshop-style trainings make up the smallest part of the professional development menu and are differentiated as much as possible. All teachers receive training on components of the Teacher Success Rubric, but teachers are assigned to training on different topics (e.g. "conducting read-alouds" or "language modeling techniques"), based on self-assessment scores and feedback from coaches. Center directors work together to identify trends across centers and then arrange for training groups based on those needs.

Individual coaching comprises the bulk of Acelero Learning's professional development strategy, and the program's investments reflect that priority. In other exemplars profiled here, center or site directors are responsible for administration and compliance, and instructional coaches help teachers improve their practice. At Acelero Learning, however, site directors serve primarily as instructional coaches and supervisors. To enable this, Acelero Learning conducted time studies of how site leaders use their time and identified ways to shift site leaders' non-instructional responsibilities to other program staff in order to increase the percentage of time that site leaders can dedicate to coaching and instructional leadership. This structure enables site directors to form deep, practice-based relationships with teachers. Additionally, Acelero Learning believes that combining the coaching and supervision roles provides center directors visibility into teachers' instructional practice that improves directors' ability to supervise/manage performance of their staff.

The coaching process looks similar for all teachers, but the content is individualized to each teacher. At the beginning of the year, each teacher develops a coaching partnership agreement using the Teacher Success Rubric and identifying two or three goals that they are most interested in achieving for that school year, including a specific definition of success for each goal. Throughout the year, teachers and center directors complete a

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minimum of one coaching cycle each month, though new or struggling teachers may receive more frequent sessions. In the coaching cycle, the teacher sets a specific focus for the month based on the coaching partnership agreement. The teacher discusses the focus with the coach, who observes the teacher's classroom practice with this focus in mind, follows up to ascertain whether the teacher has met his or her goals for that focus or requires more support to do so, and works with the teacher to set next steps. Coaching partnership agreement goals are updated throughout the year and must be reviewed during the mid-year check-in. Coaching sessions, along with other supplemental observations throughout the year, are rolled up into annual performance appraisal conversations. All program staff go through the same cycle: Site directors coach and supervise teachers, delegate-level Early Learning Inclusion Specialists (ELIS) coach and supervise site directors, and ELIS in turn receive coaching from the director of education within each delegate.

An Excerpt of Acelero Learning's Teacher Success Rubric

Goal: Curriculum Section 3 Targeted Indicator: Circle time/opening meeting is primarily content-driven, enabling children to organize their day/thoughts, provide feedback on essential questions, and gain new concepts (typically related to theme/study).

Measure written by teacher: Teacher will achieve this goal when circle time is successfully and routinely set up with activities and interactions that reinforce the concepts, ideas, and vocabulary of the theme.

Undergirding every professional development conversation is the rubric defining success for each role. For teachers, that's the aforementioned Teacher Success Rubric. The TSR clearly articulates the expectations for being a successful teacher, outlined in domains such as Working with Families and Professional Growth and Collaboration. The TSR also has a domain dedicated to teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS. In the context of professional development, the TSR provides teachers with a developmental path to achieve mastery in specific components of their work. The TSR is used for a variety of purposes to support teacher development and evaluation, ensuring that the support and training teachers receive are aligned across supports and with the criteria on which teacher performance is being assessed.

Professional learning communities are facilitated working groups where teachers can collaborate with their peers and coaches on specific topics. PLCs serve as recurring opportunities for professional development on topics that are shared challenges among

several staff members, but would be best supported by troubleshooting rather than by structured workshops. ALCP's longest-running PLCs are the Curriculum Collaboration Meeting and the Assessment Work Group. The focus of these PLCs is not to provide prescriptive "how to" information, but rather to provide groups of educators opportunities to problem-solve very specific issues raised by either teachers or coaches. Teachers and coaches participate in Curriculum Collaboration Meetings before the start of a new theme, allowing them to collaborate and align with the targeted School Readiness Goals, the key instructional opportunities to work towards those goals, and the big concepts/ideas in the theme. Teachers also work together to understand children's skills and experiences from the previous theme. Similarly, the Assessment Work Group increases the reliability of Acelero Learning's assessments by giving teachers the opportunity to discuss with each other and their coaches how they would score a specific observation. Three times a year, the group dives into their assessment data. The PLCs were born out of the recognition that teacher workshops, while more scalable, are limited in their effectiveness.

Finally, in the past three years, Acelero Learning has made a significant push into digital professional development. In 2015, a new chief program officer came on board and identified that, in an otherwise strong professional development structure, there was relatively little attention paid to adult learning practices and that the quality of training facilitation varied across the network. That finding was also reflected in satisfaction survey results on new-hire orientation, as well as varied scores on training evaluations. In response, Acelero Learning created a professional development department. The department increases awareness of best practices and training design among senior leadership, and is working on standardizing the quality of professional development content across delegates. As of spring 2018, three full-time instructional designers are working to develop digital onboarding for key positions, including a scope and sequence and complete set of courses for each role. These trainings extend beyond traditional onboarding topics to build new hires' understanding of expectations for their roles at Acelero Learning and expand their knowledge and skills to implement tools and practices that are unique to the agency.

Family Engagement

Acelero Learning views family engagement as one of the primary levers for advancing their mission of closing the achievement gap. The agency's approach to family engagement starts with the assumption that every parent wants the best for their children, and prioritizes strategies that help parents prepare their children to be successful in school. Acelero Learning believes that parents should not be patronized, as can occur when programs mandate that parents declare specific needs and goals. Rather, Acelero Learning staff work to create an environment and relationships that meet families where they are and help them feel comfortable and motivated to set goals.

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The agency works with families to identify their strengths, areas of need, and aspirations for growth using the Family Success Road Map. This tool, created in house, is an instrument through which families self-reflect on 20 categories, such as depression, addiction, and domestic violence, as well as material needs like transportation, education, and employment. It is intended to help program staff better understand a family's hopes and aspirations, as well as any factors within a family environment that may negatively affect a child's outcomes. If a family scores below a specific threshold on the Family Success Road Map, Acelero Learning's family engagement staff automatically initiate a specific set of actions to address the family's needs.

Support for families is differentiated based on children's and families' needs and aspirations. Acelero Learning's family support services have three layers of staffing:

- **Family engagement advocates** work with the most stable and highly motivated families. They support families in creating social capital with other families as part of Acelero Learning's peer-support strategy.
- **Health and disabilities advocates (HDA)** support a caseload of families who have chronic health issues or special needs. They act as the "glue" with those families internally and externally. An HDA for a family that has a child with special needs, for example, works with center directors and other staff at the center to best support that child. The HDA might also accompany the family to an outside meeting, introduce them to other families, and provide other supports tailored to the children's and families' special needs.
- **Family support advocates** work with the most vulnerable families, including those who are homeless or involved with the foster care system. Family support advocates have a specifically identified caseload of families, often those who have other case managers in the community (e.g., child welfare workers).

Teachers also play a crucial, though slightly different, role in supporting families, sharing information with families about their children's academic progress and encouraging learning at home.

Acelero Learning intentionally integrates its family engagement work with children's experiences in the classroom. The program designed a family engagement curriculum called Shine On, Families to help parents better understand and participate in what their children are learning. Through Shine On, Families, parents receive specific activities that they can do with their children after the school day ends. These activities support children's learning, increase engagement between children and their parents, and raise parents' awareness of their children's experiences at school.

Acelero Learning developed Shine On, Families to connect children's learning and family engagement and help align family engagement strategies and priorities with teachers and family advocates. Shine On, Families gives teachers and family advocates a common system

and content to understand what kind of support families need. It further allows Acelero Learning to articulate an approach to involving families in children's learning that could be scaffolded for all staff, simultaneously building teachers' family engagement capacities and advocates' knowledge of the classroom's curriculum and School Readiness Goals.

From February through May, advocates spend six hours per month in classrooms engaged in Shine On, Families interactions with the children of the families that make up their caseloads. This time strengthens their relationships with teachers, deepens their understanding of the curriculum, and provides opportunities for them to utilize their classroom observations and experiences to engage families in conversations about their children's learning and development. Through this approach, Acelero Learning intentionally tries to break down the divisions that sometimes exist between family support staff and teachers so that teachers and advocates work together to better support families.

Teachers and advocates meet monthly to discuss their families in terms of several different metrics, including child-level assessment data, attendance, and parent engagement. Throughout the year, advocates and teachers formally and informally share information about children with their families. During parent-teacher conferences and home visits, which happen after the end of each assessment period, families receive information about their children's progress in the classroom. Program staff create report cards specifically for parents that share pertinent information from their child's TS GOLD® or Early Learning Scale reports in an accessible way. At the same time, advocates share family engagement data, such as attendance and progress towards goals. This data-sharing also happens informally throughout the year.

When a child is transitioning to kindergarten, the process becomes more formal. The advocates' goal is to prepare parents for their children's experiences in kindergarten, so they have a "transitioning to kindergarten" one-on-one meeting with parents, using a common form to help frame the conversation. Wherever possible, to further ease the transition between Acelero Learning and kindergarten, ALCP sends the child's overall child assessment data to the next placement.

Data Utilization

Acelero Learning relies on data utilization to inform its program design and improvement decisions. Data also informs the agency's operations at every level. Teachers use data to develop individualized learning plans and differentiate instruction; site directors use data to inform performance appraisal and coaching conversations; site leadership teams use data to institute new initiatives and make changes to practice; and the agency uses data to monitor the health of the organization, refine existing structures or create new ones, and identify challenges and successes across sites.

CASE STUDY: ACELERO LEARNING

A key component of Acelero Learning's approach to data utilization is Shine Insight, an electronic information management system developed in house. Through Shine Insight, Acelero Learning collects data on child performance, attendance, parent engagement at events, family areas of strength and support, and medical needs. Those data are synthesized into "report cards" or "scorecards" at multiple levels: program-wide, by classroom, and by family. Scorecards are designed to highlight the key elements that determine the program's health and child impact. Shine Insight is also structured to provide teachers and program staff with alerts when certain high-priority data require attention. Teachers and staff are alerted, for example, if a child requires an urgent health follow-up, such as an upcoming prescription renewal, or if there is a family emergency or crisis that must be addressed.

Site- and agency-level decisions are made using a data-informed, multi-year programmatic innovation process that includes vetting, design, implementation, and evaluation. This process, referred to internally as "pencil-pen-Sharpie," is the mechanism through which Acelero Learning developed its distinctive approach to curriculum, assessment, and other tools, and that it continues to use today in piloting and testing potential improvements and innovations. During the "pencil" stage, delegates, centers, and staff members can propose new ideas or initiatives that address existing needs or challenges identified in the data. Those ideas are implemented on a small scale (a handful of classrooms, for example) to determine if they are feasible and achieve their intended purpose, refined if necessary, and then selected to move into the "pen" stage. During this stage the plan of action is piloted in a larger number of centers, ideally across delegates. Data on pilot efforts is collected and linked to the agency's School Readiness Goals and other pertinent data points, such as student attendance or learning objectives. If the results are promising, the initiative will expand further until it becomes part of the Acelero Learning program approach in the "Sharpie" phase.

Acelero Learning has invested time and resources to develop staff capacity in using data to improve program operations. As part of the TSR, teachers are assessed on their ability to use data in informing their practice. This work is further supported during all staff meetings, in which teachers discuss student data with family engagement staff, and during the Assessment Workgroup PLC, when collaborating teachers examine each other's data using a "critical friends" protocol. Under this protocol, a teacher presents a problem they are trying to solve with a child and share the different data collected on that child. The teacher's peers are then expected to workshop the data and help the teacher identify a solution. Additionally, each of the four Acelero Learning delegates has a full-time, on-site staff member who is dedicated to monitoring and analyzing program data, facilitating trainings for other staff, and building and implementing the processes for making data-informed site-level decisions.

In addition to its internal processes, Acelero Learning partners with several outside organizations, including New York University, Temple University, Stanford University, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago to assess the impact of their early learning and family services models. Taken together, these processes allow Acelero Learning to analyze its effectiveness with confidence and understand where it can improve.

This cycle of continuous quality improvement, through which the agency perfects its systems, content, and practices, has enabled Acelero Learning to develop a variety of unique and innovative tools and approaches that it implements in its own centers and, through Shine Early Learning, supports other programs to replicate. While the program's own data and independent evaluations show that these strategies are working to narrow the achievement gap for its students, Acelero Learning is still working towards its ultimate goal of closing the achievement gap for Head Start children. As it does so, it continues to use these same continuous improvement practices to refine its existing tools and systems and develop new strategies and approaches to better serve families and children.

CASE STUDY

CAP Tulsa

Location	Number of children	Year opened	Dosage	Percent of teachers with a bachelor's degree	Pay parity with district kindergarten salary
Tulsa, OK	1,368	1998	Full day/full week	100%	Yes



Background and Introduction

The Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP Tulsa) is one of the largest anti-poverty organizations in Oklahoma. Founded in 1973 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, CAP Tulsa's mission is to end the cycle of poverty. Over its 45-year history, it has offered a variety of services to support low-income individuals and families, and began operating a Head Start program in 1998.

In 2016 CAP Tulsa served 2,206 children and their families, including 1,368 3- and 4-year-olds and 838 infants and toddlers. CAP Tulsa combines funding from a variety of sources, including Head Start; Early Head Start; Oklahoma state pre-k; the Oklahoma Early Childhood Program; federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECH-V) funds; a Health Professionals Opportunity Grant from the Department of Health and Human Services; and philanthropic funding. Combining funds from multiple sources allows CAP Tulsa to operate full school-day, year-round programming for all children, make investments in organizational capacity for data and ongoing improvement, and pilot innovative approaches to improve program quality and support parents.

It also means that CAP Tulsa has played a role in some of the most well-known research demonstrating the impacts of pre-k programs. For over 15 years, Georgetown University researchers have been studying the results of Tulsa’s pre-k program, which includes children from both CAP Tulsa’s Head Start and Tulsa Public Schools pre-k. Their research found evidence of significant learning gains for pre-k students,¹ particularly low-income and Hispanic students and dual language learners. Subsequent studies documented that these learning gains occurred for both children enrolled in CAP Tulsa and those served by Tulsa Public Schools,² and that pre-k benefits were sustained into the elementary grades. Most recently, a longitudinal study of middle school outcomes for students who attended CAP Tulsa Head Start found that CAP Tulsa alumni had higher math test scores in eighth grade and lower rates of chronic absenteeism through middle school.³

Externally collected data indicate that CAP Tulsa is producing learning benefits for children, but the agency’s commitment to ending the cycle of poverty drives it to seek further improvement in these outcomes. A commitment to data-informed continuous improvement is a hallmark of the organization’s culture and has driven substantial changes and improvement initiatives over the past several years.

In 2010, program leadership realized that, although internal measures showed nearly all children leaving CAP Tulsa “kindergarten ready,” many of these children were not achieving proficiency on state standards by third grade. This inspired CAP Tulsa’s leadership to reframe their vision to ensure that “all children served by CAP reach their full developmental potential by the end of third grade.”⁴ This goal has in turn informed continuous improvement efforts to further boost learning, development, and family outcomes for CAP children and families.

What truly differentiates CAP is the intentionality with which it implements and adjusts all components of its program — curriculum, assessment, teacher support and professional development, and family engagement — in order to ensure quality instruction and continuously improve both the quality of its programming and the results it produces for students. The program relentlessly works to improve and holds itself accountable for results.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

CAP leadership’s commitment to data-informed continuous improvement is obvious in their approach to curriculum, assessment, and instruction. The program regularly conducts internal analyses to assess the effectiveness of each of these elements and makes strategic, controlled adjustments when necessary. These efforts are rooted in a recognition that children’s learning requires an integrated approach to high-quality instruction that includes research-based curriculum and supports; use of formative assessments to individualize instruction; a clear vision for what high-quality teaching looks like in practice; and supports for teachers to implement all of these components with quality and fidelity.

CASE STUDY: CAP TULSA

Like many Head Start programs, CAP Tulsa uses Teaching Strategies' Creative Curriculum[®] as its primary, foundational curriculum. The program supplements Creative Curriculum[®] with Building Blocks, a math curriculum, and is currently piloting several other curricula and supplements. CAP's decisions about curriculum are informed by careful analysis of data. In 2010, internal data analyses showed that children struggled to meet developmental objectives in math. After further analysis, program leadership realized that children's math scores were consistently lower than literacy scores across all school sites and for both new and veteran teachers. Aware of research showing the importance of early math skills for later success, CAP leadership sought to understand the reasons for this disparity. A closer look at teacher lesson plans and practice indicated that teachers had difficulty implementing Creative Curriculum[®] activities intended to build math skills. In response, CAP Tulsa leadership searched for supplementary math curricula and decided to pilot Building Blocks, an evidence-based math curriculum. CAP selected Building Blocks because of research studies that found the curriculum positively affects children's math knowledge and because it gives teachers a wider range of options for math activities using commonly available materials. After data from the pilot showed that Building Blocks was well received by teachers and effective with children, CAP adopted it program-wide as a supplement to Creative Curriculum[®].

CAP Tulsa's leadership is still looking for ways to improve the program's curricula. CAP is currently piloting another comprehensive, research-based curriculum as a potential alternative to their current combination of Creative Curriculum[®] and Building Blocks. CAP collects a variety of qualitative and quantitative data on both the pilot and existing curricula and compares these data to determine which curricula they will use moving forward, or if they need to extend the pilot stage.

CAP's definition of quality early childhood teaching emphasizes differentiating instruction based on individual children's progress, and formative assessment tools are crucial to teachers' ability to do this. Currently, CAP Tulsa teachers use Teaching Strategies' GOLD[®], an observational assessment aligned with Creative Curriculum[®]. Teachers use GOLD[®] data to assess how children are progressing towards their developmental goals and learning objectives and to design lesson plans, individualize instruction, and improve their practice, both on their own and through coaching sessions. Teachers use data to assign children to small groups for additional support, and if the whole class is already demonstrating skill on a specific objective the teacher may spend less time on it.

Combined, curriculum and assessment serve as the foundation for high-quality instruction. Program leadership realized, however, that teachers needed additional supports. In 2015–16, CAP Tulsa designed the Preschool Classroom Implementation Guide, a holistic guide and support system for teachers. The guide describes what high-quality instruction looks like in a CAP Tulsa classroom and includes a checklist outlining what a teacher's activities and classroom environment should look like if they are implementing the

curriculum with fidelity, so teachers can self-assess their practice and make adjustments. The Implementation Guide also gives teachers and coaches a shared language: Coaches use it as a road map for assessing and providing feedback on teacher practice at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year.

CAP Tulsa uses data to assess the relationship between teachers' performance on the Implementation Guide and child outcomes, and to inform ongoing revisions to the guide. Data shows that improved teacher performance on the guide is correlated with higher outcomes for 3- and 4-year-olds across a range of domains, including social-emotional learning, literacy, and math. CAP staff continue to revise the Implementation Guide in response to what they are learning from data and to align with program priorities.

Meeting the Needs of All Children

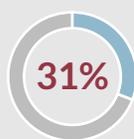
CAP Tulsa's approach to instruction is sufficiently individualized to provide a high-quality experience for most enrolled children. Using MyTeachingStrategies™ data and Building Blocks and Creative Curriculum®, teachers are able to identify challenge areas and adjust instruction to foster growth. For certain populations of children, however, it's necessary to gather additional information and further individualize instruction and supports.

One pillar of CAP Tulsa's strategic plan is to increase child outcomes across a range of various risks and abilities. To that end, the program focuses attention on improving instruction and outcomes for subgroups of students who may face additional challenges.

CAP Tulsa Head Start



Children who speak a language other than English at home



Children who speak Spanish at home



Instructional staff who speak Spanish

2016-17 data

CAP Tulsa serves a relatively high percentage of children who speak a language other than English at home, primarily Spanish. To support these children's development in English and their home language, CAP Tulsa uses a model known as "English with home language support." In this model, teachers and staff provide content in English, but they structure instruction so that children are continually exposed to their home language. For example, children learn vocabulary words in both English and Spanish, and CAP Tulsa encourages parents to read with children in their home language.

CASE STUDY: CAP TULSA

In this model, ideally teachers should be fluent in both English and the children’s primary home language. CAP Tulsa has struggled, however, to recruit qualified teachers who speak both English and Spanish. To recruit Spanish-proficient teachers, CAP Tulsa offers a salary bump to prospective teachers who are bilingual. In some cases, it also extends the impact of bilingual staff by structuring center staffing to allow bilingual teachers to “float” between connected classrooms. And it deploys volunteers and paraprofessionals to ensure that children receive home language support even if the primary teachers in their classrooms do not speak Spanish.

As with other program decisions, CAP Tulsa leadership is vigilant about monitoring how effectively the program serves dual language learners. CAP Tulsa’s internal metrics (measured by two TS GOLD® objectives) suggest that dual language learners are making gains in English language acquisition. The program also partners with the University of Oklahoma to assess dual language learners’ expressive and receptive English proficiency. But, as is true for most early childhood programs, the program’s existing assessment tools do not track children’s progress in home language acquisition, so CAP Tulsa does not know how effectively it supports children’s home language development. CAP Tulsa is exploring strategies to further strengthen supports for dual language learners, such as incorporating conversations about the child’s home language acquisition in home visits and conferences.

CAP Tulsa Head Start



Children who have an Individualized Education Program

2016–17 data

As required by the Head Start Performance Standards, CAP Tulsa screens children for developmental delays and works with partner school districts and SoonerCare, Oklahoma’s Medicaid program, to determine how to best serve that child. For some children, this process reveals behavioral or developmental needs that require an Individualized Education Program (IEP) administered by the local school district; other children are flagged for special services delivered by CAP Tulsa or a partner.

In recent years, however, CAP Tulsa developed several initiatives focused on another group of children with special needs: those who consistently exhibit challenging behaviors, which CAP Tulsa defines as behaviors that are chronic and highly disruptive, including destructive behavior; physical aggression towards themselves, peers, or teachers; and inability to navigate the classroom’s daily routine without continuous one-on-one support

from an adult. Because children who consistently exhibit these behaviors often do not respond to general behavior management and support strategies, they require additional supports to thrive.

CAP Tulsa's focus on challenging behaviors emerged in response to feedback from teacher surveys. A large and growing percentage of teachers reported that they encountered challenging behaviors in their classes that could not be addressed with traditional behavior management techniques. Teachers indicated that they didn't have the strategies or resources to address these behaviors and that the behaviors of a small number of children were affecting the quality of instruction for the entire class.

In response to this feedback, CAP Tulsa started a Challenging Behaviors Charter Team, a working group to drive agency-wide efforts to better support teachers in responding to challenging behaviors. The team concluded that schools needed to design and test crisis intervention plans. These plans prescribe specific school leader and teacher responses for when children are destructive and physically aggressive, and outline strategies for reliable and consistent implementation. CAP Tulsa's strategic framework, which establishes a priority of increasing child outcomes across a range of risks and abilities, also includes a specific goal of improving identification and treatment of students with challenging behaviors.

Ensuring Quality Teachers and Leaders

Realizing that the success of its curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies depends on the quality of its teachers and leadership, CAP Tulsa has made and continues to make significant investments to attract, retain, support, and develop top teachers. These investments reflect a broader organizational belief that great people are central to achieving CAP Tulsa's mission. As its strategic framework states, "Most critical to CAP Tulsa's past and future success are the employees who directly serve young children and their families, and those who support the administrative and operational systems of the agency. Without excellent, dedicated employees at all levels, CAP cannot make adequate progress towards desired results, and will ultimately fall short of realizing [the organization's] vision."⁵ CAP's commitment to retaining excellent staff at all levels, and the steps it takes to do so, have earned it national recognition: Every year since 2015, *The NonProfit Times* has recognized CAP Tulsa as one of the best nonprofits in the country to work for.⁶

Teacher Credentials and Selection

All lead teachers in CAP Tulsa's preschool classrooms serving 3- and 4-year-olds have bachelor's degrees and specialized training in early childhood education. CAP Tulsa receives funding from Oklahoma's state pre-k program, which requires lead teachers in 4-year-old classrooms to have a bachelor's degree and an Oklahoma teaching certificate in early childhood education, so CAP Tulsa must ensure that all teachers in its 4-year-old classrooms meet these requirements. But CAP Tulsa exceeds both Head Start and

CASE STUDY: CAP TULSA

Oklahoma pre-k requirements by also requiring teachers of 3-year-olds to hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, an early childhood teaching certificate, or a bachelor's degree and 36 hours of early childhood education coursework. CAP Tulsa chose to require all its preschool teachers to have a bachelor's degree and early childhood training because it believes that these credentials are important to enable delivery of the quality instructional experience it wants to offer children. It also made a deliberate investment in increasing teacher compensation to support this goal.

CAP Tulsa Head Start



Lead teachers who have a bachelor's degree

2016–17 data

The same commitment to data-informed continuous improvement that characterizes CAP Tulsa's decisions about curriculum also informs the qualifications it looks for in teachers. For most positions within the organization, CAP Tulsa seeks candidates who have past experience in a similar role. When hiring prospective teachers, however, program leadership has found that otherwise strong candidates who lack teaching experience are not necessarily at a disadvantage. Instead, those candidates are particularly valuable: They are generally high-performing, but can be trained in the CAP Tulsa method before they form habits at other schools.

Careful analysis of data has led to other tweaks in CAP Tulsa's hiring criteria. For example, the program previously required candidates to complete a multiple-choice behavioral assessment that attempted to predict a prospective teacher's success in the classroom, but got rid of the assessment after internal data analysis showed that it narrowed the pool of candidates and was actually negatively correlated with success in teaching roles at CAP Tulsa. CAP Tulsa now asks open-ended, behavior-based questions that allow them to better gauge a candidate's perspective on the work.

Retention

Because CAP Tulsa believes high-performing employees are at the root of their success, organizational leadership pays careful attention to staff retention. Program leadership estimates that the cost of turnover is \$6,608 per employee, creating a sizeable incentive to get the right staff in the right positions initially, and then retain and promote them over time. These efforts have paid off: In 2016, CAP Tulsa retained 92 percent of its staff, which included 84.2 percent of lead teachers and 79.3 percent of teacher IIs (the title CAP Tulsa gives staff who are called assistant teachers in many other programs).

CAP Tulsa Head Start



Retention of lead teachers



Retention of instructional assistants

2016–17 data

CAP Tulsa attributed its high staff retention to several program design decisions. The first factor is getting the right people to begin with. CAP Tulsa’s human capital strategy – from hiring through performance management – emphasizes “fit”: ensuring the organization hires the right teachers and staff for their positions.

The second factor is teacher compensation. CAP Tulsa bases its teacher salaries on the Tulsa Public School’s salary schedule for preschool teachers. But, because CAP Tulsa operates throughout the calendar year and Tulsa Public School preschool teachers get summers off, CAP Tulsa pays its teachers more. CAP Tulsa pre-k teachers make an additional \$500, plus a 7 percent salary bump, over the TPS salary base and also have a generous paid-time-off program.

CAP Tulsa conducts an agency-wide compensation audit every two years. The human resources team compares staff salaries to market compensation data and makes adjustments if necessary. For example, the 2015 compensation audit revealed that CAP Tulsa translators were earning less than their counterparts elsewhere, so the agency decided to increase the pay of all translators. The organization applies this approach to competitive compensation to both classroom-based and administrative staff roles.

Third, CAP Tulsa is intentional about career advancement and succession planning. The organization believes that cultivating staff for future leadership and promotions both supports retention and helps ensure a strong pipeline of leaders to meet future needs. To that end, CAP Tulsa’s leadership team ensures that employees have visibility into potential career trajectories within the organization. As part of the performance management process, employees and their supervisors regularly discuss advancement opportunities and future roles, determine interim benchmarks and goals, and map out a clear pathway for the employee to meet those goals and advance. CAP Tulsa has also built in formalized opportunities for staff to communicate their interest in leadership positions to supervisors and receive organization support to prepare for or pursue leadership roles. The Aspiring Leader Program, for example, is a two-stage training program that prepares high-performing staff – from lead teachers up through assistant school leaders – for the responsibilities and expectations of being a school leader. CAP Tulsa also offers a tuition assistance policy that provides employees with resources to complete additional degrees.

CAP Tulsa's annual succession planning process supports senior leaders to proactively identify leadership needs and plan for staff transitions and advancement. During this process, all directors and school leaders assess staff based on their current performance, potential, and likelihood of leaving ("flight risk"), and the business impact on the organization if they leave. Using this information, the team identifies people who are most likely to leave and whose departure would significantly affect the organization's work, and identifies strategies to prevent or mitigate the impact of their departure. The team also uses this information to identify high-potential employees, determine future leadership and promotion opportunities for them, and plan for the resources necessary to support their development.

Finally, CAP Tulsa credits its strong internal culture as a driver of staff retention, particularly the organization's core values of honesty and transparency. The organization regularly asks for feedback from staff — formally through an annual "pulse check" survey, and informally through supervisor/employee relationships. These structures create a culture in which staff are heard and their feedback can change the organization's practices and systems.

Professional Development and Coaching

In addition to hiring the right people, retaining them in their roles, and providing opportunities for advancement, CAP Tulsa also invests in professional development and coaching to support teachers to improve their practice. Even after making substantial investments to ensure that all preschool teachers have bachelor's degrees, CAP Tulsa recognized that teachers who have completed formal pre-service training still need additional support and training to be truly effective in the classroom.

CAP Tulsa's approach to professional development provides staff with intentional, rigorous trainings and then sustains those learnings through opportunities to collaborate with peers. This approach has two primary components: ongoing coaching for all teachers and professional learning communities.

All CAP Tulsa teaching staff, including lead teachers, teacher IIs, and other instructional staff, receive regular, individualized coaching to help improve their instructional practice. Every week, coaches review teachers' lesson plans, provide feedback, and suggest opportunities for improvement. Coaches then observe teachers at some point during the week to assess their lesson plan delivery. Coaches and teachers debrief and identify lessons for the next week. Because coaches are often former CAP Tulsa lead teachers, they are intimately familiar with CAP Tulsa's curricula, assessments, and instructional model and can support other teachers to implement them effectively. Coaches enter information about the content of their sessions with teachers into the Learning Zone, an online portal provided by the New Teacher Center, which allows them to track teachers' progress over time. Through monthly "learning labs," CAP Tulsa's research team supports coaches in interpreting teachers' performance data and translating it into specific feedback and lesson plan revisions to better plan for classroom instruction.

Coaches support teachers in achieving individualized goals. At the beginning of the year, every teacher works with a coach to develop MyPlan goals – goals that they want to achieve by the end of the year – based on program-, teacher-, and child-level data. Returning teachers craft their MyPlan goals based on their performance during the prior year, including past child achievement data and the performance rubrics for their roles. All teachers have goals related both to their practice (e.g., increased parent engagement experiences in the classroom) and to child achievement. Teachers and coaches discuss progress towards those goals over the course of the year. Program leadership also relies on the staff’s MyPlan goals to identify promising individuals for succession planning.

The second major component of CAP Tulsa’s professional development strategy is professional learning communities (PLCs), regular meetings in which all staff come together to collaborate with other educators, workshop specific challenges, and share lessons on best practices. Coaches often craft the content of PLCs, using data from the Learning Zone and other sources including MyTeachingStrategies™ objectives, child attendance, and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) scores.

CAP Tulsa regularly reviews staff feedback and data to assess and continuously improve the quality and effectiveness of professional development offerings. Based on employee feedback, they revised their professional development strategy over the past several years to be more targeted to individual staff’s needs. In the past, for example, CAP Tulsa’s pre-service training sessions looked like conferences: general content delivered in a large group with limited opportunity for follow-up. Now, the only all-staff session is a keynote address, and the rest of the pre-service content is differentiated based on teachers’ characteristics and roles (e.g., new teachers, 3-year-old teachers, 4-year-old teachers, etc.) as well as individual school needs.

Similarly, CAP Tulsa has modified its approach to coaching over time. CAP Tulsa has employed instructional coaches since 2012. Initially, CAP Tulsa engaged MyTeachingPartner™ and the University of Oklahoma to train coaches in an approach to coaching focused heavily on the CLASS. Internal data analysis showed that teachers were improving CLASS scores as a result of coaching and professional development, but also found little clear relationship between individual teachers’ CLASS scores and student learning outcomes. As a result, CAP Tulsa decided to shift to a more holistic coaching approach using the New Teaching Center’s cognitive coaching model. This approach builds on the skills, knowledge, and common language that coaches have already developed around CLASS, and helps them take their coaching to the next level by cultivating their skills to build relationships with adult learners. The ultimate goal is to create a teacher/coach relationship in which the teacher is comfortable and willing to identify areas of growth without fear of reprisal. Coaches receive intensive training from the New Teacher Center, and their job performance is based on their ability to successfully implement this cognitive coaching model.

Family Engagement

CAP Tulsa's theory of change assumes that child outcomes are dependent on family outcomes: For children to reach their developmental potential, they must have a nurturing and secure family environment. To that end, supporting families is an integral component of achieving CAP Tulsa's mission to end the cycle of poverty.

CAP Tulsa's approach distinguishes between two linked but separate family support efforts: family engagement and family advancement. A different team of specialists leads each effort. The family engagement team builds parents' and families' capacity to support their children's learning and development, while the family advancement team supports families' career advancement goals, language acquisition, and financial security. Taken together, these two prongs of CAP Tulsa's family support work illustrate the agency's commitment to a holistic, two-generation program.

The family engagement team consists of Family Support Specialists and a Behavioral Health Specialist who build deep relationships with families and provide information to support children's learning. They gather information about what's happening in the home and share information about how the child is doing in the classroom; lead family conferences and conduct home visits; facilitate monthly group meetings for parents, called Family Connections, on topics like nutrition, stress management, and life transitions; provide access to a parent resource room; and provide some direct child services, such as mental health counseling.

The family advancement team provides resources and supports, such as job training and adult education opportunities, that are targeted to families' specific financial and career-related needs. A key vehicle for this goal is CAP Tulsa's *CareerAdvance* program, through which Head Start parents can earn qualifications to work in several healthcare careers. With funding from a Health Professionals Opportunity Grant from the federal Administration of Children and Families, *CareerAdvance* covers the cost of tuition, fees, and supplies required for training; assigns participants a coach to support them throughout the training program; builds peer support through a cohort model; and provides childcare assistance and a monthly fuel/transportation subsidy. Early results are promising: According to a study released in March 2017, "*CareerAdvance* promotes parents' career certificate attainment, employment in the healthcare sector, and overall well-being. *CareerAdvance* also improves children's Head Start attendance and reduces chronic absenteeism. [There is] strong evidence that pairing high-quality Head Start services with job training for parents produces positive outcomes for parents and children beyond the benefits of Head Start alone."⁷

CAP Tulsa's leadership reviews data on family engagement and advancement monthly. Currently, the program looks primarily at attendance and completion metrics, such as if home visiting sessions were conducted, how many parents participated in a given Family

Connection meeting, and what percentage of *CareerAdvance* participants secured full-time employment. This data is used to monitor progress and inform changes in family engagement and family advancement practice. CAP Tulsa is also revising the family support data they collect to enable the agency to better identify, understand, and make decisions based on opportunities to improve.

Data Utilization

It is clear from the preceding examples that a commitment to continuous quality improvement characterizes all aspects of CAP Tulsa's work. CAP Tulsa has put in place systems, processes, and capacity to use data to inform decision-making at all levels of the organization – from classroom teachers to site leaders to senior leadership – and assess the impacts of its work. It also partners with external researchers to evaluate its effectiveness and impact.

CAP Tulsa collects a wide variety of data, including child and family demographics; child progress data collected by teachers using *MyTeachingStrategies™*; classroom quality and teacher practice data collected via CLASS and the Implementation Guide; information on families' participation in and dosage of family programming; and operational data including staff turnover, child attendance, parent participation, and referrals to disability and mental health services.

To support staff at all levels of the organization in using data to inform practice and programmatic decisions, CAP Tulsa employs a dedicated in-house, four-person research team composed of analysts with deep quantitative and qualitative research expertise. This team aggregates and analyzes data to understand trends within the organization, assess the results of pilots and innovations, and inform decision-making and quality improvement efforts. They also merge data across multiple sources to examine bigger questions, for example about associations between child assessment scores, demographics, attendance, and classroom quality measures, or between teacher quality and other teacher characteristics. The team then prepares customized data analyses to meet the needs of different audiences within the organization, including the organization's executive leadership team, site-level leadership teams, and instructional leaders across sites.

CAP Tulsa's executive leadership team meets quarterly to assess the health of the organization, monitor progress towards goals, and identify opportunities for improvement. To support that work, the research team created a data dashboard, which lays out the agency's success metrics and key data points that tell the story of the agency's performance on those metrics. These meetings are intended to paint a picture of the organization's overall health, so the metrics are aggregated at the organization level: Rather than looking at an individual teacher's CLASS score, for example, leadership looks at CLASS score trends across sites. The executive leadership team only dives deeper into the data if there is a positive or negative outlier, or if the data suggest there is cause for concern or celebration.

CASE STUDY: CAP TULSA

To support school-level leaders in using data to inform ongoing improvement, CAP Tulsa convenes quarterly meetings, called INSPIRE meetings, which bring together leaders from across CAP Tulsa schools to review school-, classroom-, teacher-, and child-level data. Unlike the executive team meetings, INSPIRE meetings are meant to provide leadership with the data to understand what is happening at the school on a more granular level, using CLASS scores, attendance, formative assessments, and other data to drill down to the classroom level and identify strengths and opportunities to improve. For example, if school leaders identify a teacher who has particularly strong student attendance or MYTS results, this teacher can become a “go to” for other teachers at the site who may be struggling in these areas. CAP Tulsa leaders explicitly designed the INSPIRE meetings to help foster a culture of data use by supporting school site leaders and instructional coaches to explore data in a non-threatening setting. Site leaders and coaches are then supported to take data back to their schools and teachers, fostering a more data-informed culture at all levels of the organization.

To better measure progress and inform efforts to improve child learning and development outcomes, CAP Tulsa developed and adopted the Pilot Child Assessment Study, a battery of norm-referenced assessments administered to a sample of CAP Tulsa children every fall and spring. Whereas the Teaching Strategies’ GOLD® assessment is designed primarily to measure individual children’s progress and teachers’ instructional planning and differentiation of instruction, the Pilot Child Assessment Study monitors trends at a program-wide level. The Pilot Child Assessment Study, selected to provide a comprehensive picture of children’s progress across multiple domains, currently includes assessments such as the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, the Woodcock-Johnson Letter-Word Identification and Applied Problems tests, and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment. But CAP Tulsa’s research team adapts the combination of assessments over time in response to what they are learning from data. This approach enables CAP Tulsa to track program progress and results over time in a way that is not possible with their other tools, while limiting the burden on teachers and students.

CAP Tulsa’s ability to analyze and customize data for different audiences sets it apart from many other early childhood organizations. But CAP Tulsa leadership believes that the culture the organization has cultivated around data is equally important. CAP Tulsa is dedicated to transforming weaknesses into opportunities for coaching or goal-setting for improvement, and has worked hard to build a culture in which staff at all levels of the organization understand that data is not collected or used as a punitive measure or “gotcha” but as a tool to support instruction and ongoing improvement.

Further, while data-driven decision-making is one of CAP Tulsa’s core values, this does not mean that data dictates a course of action without careful consideration of other contextual features. Rather, data is a tool to make thoughtful, well-informed decisions. When CAP Tulsa leadership present data to site leaders in INSPIRE meetings, for example, they often

ask staff if what the data indicates aligns with what they are seeing on a day to day basis in schools and classrooms. This creates space for an ongoing dialogue about data and how it is used, and also helps navigate situations in which different data points may be pointing in conflicting directions.

Finally, CAP Tulsa partners with external researchers to independently evaluate the program's effectiveness and impact. Since 2010–11, the University of Oklahoma has annually assessed a random sample of enrolled children using norm-referenced assessments. Similarly, in late 2016 the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa Early Childhood Education Institute began working with researchers from Georgetown and Harvard Universities to conduct a multi-year study following 900 children in Tulsa-based early childhood programs, including children enrolled in CAP Tulsa.

Taken together, these processes for analyzing and acting based on data allow CAP Tulsa to make informed decisions and support continuous improvement at the classroom, site, and program-wide levels. Through this approach, CAP Tulsa regularly and intentionally evolves its practices and programming in pursuit of its vision that “all children served by CAP Tulsa reach their full developmental potential by the end of third grade” and its mission of ending the cycle of poverty for children and their families.

CASE STUDY

Educare Miami-Dade

Location	Number of children	Year opened	Dosage	Percent of teachers with a bachelor's degree	Pay parity with district kindergarten salary
Miami, FL	116	2007	Full day/full week	100%	No



United Way of Miami-Dade

Background and Introduction

Educare Miami-Dade exists within the United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education, a nonprofit organization that seeks to elevate the quality of early childhood education in Miami-Dade County by operating an early childhood program, providing professional learning to early childhood educators in the county, and engaging in state and local advocacy.

Educare Miami-Dade operates an exemplary Head Start program with a number of distinctive features: It uses a mixed-income model where Head Start-eligible children learn alongside tuition-paying children; provides a full bilingual English-Spanish program; and is a part of the national Educare Network. These unique characteristics, as well as evidence of strong learning gains for low-income children, distinguish Educare Miami-Dade as an exemplar Head Start program.

Educare Miami-Dade is a Head Start delegate serving 116 children from birth through age 5. It offers full-day programming five days a week. Under its mixed-income model,

approximately half of enrolled children are served with Head Start or Early Head Start funds and the other half come from families who pay tuition to enroll their children. This allows Educare Miami-Dade to provide a socioeconomically integrated early learning experience in which children in poverty learn alongside children from middle class and more affluent families. Additionally, the center receives funding for the 4-year-olds that it enrolls through the statewide Voluntary Prekindergarten program (VPK), which is available to all Florida 4-year-olds regardless of income.

As part of the Educare Network, which includes 23 schools around the country offering high-quality early learning to children aged 0–5, Educare Miami-Dade seeks to provide a model of best practices in early childhood education that can inform and influence policymakers and the larger early childhood field. As such, it regularly hosts visitors from other early childhood programs, researchers, and policymakers. All Educare schools, including Educare Miami-Dade, also implement the four key components of the Educare model — data utilization, embedded professional development, high-quality teaching practices, and intensive family engagement — but customize their implementation of these features to their unique contexts and populations. Research shows that the Educare model narrows the achievement gap for young children growing up in poverty. Researchers from the Frank Porter Graham Institute at the University of North Carolina found that low-income children who attended an Educare preschool outperformed their peers who attended non-Educare Head Start on measures of vocabulary skill and social-emotional development.⁸

Educare Miami-Dade participated in the national Educare research that produced these findings, but it has also participated in research studies designed to assess the distinct impacts of its own individual program. A team of researchers at the University of Miami, led by Dr. Daryl Greenfield, studied the effect of Educare Miami-Dade on children’s learning outcomes and found that Head Start children who attended Educare Miami-Dade made greater gains on a vocabulary assessment than children who attended other Head Start programs,⁹ with particularly strong gains for Latinx children. Educare Miami-Dade

Further, Educare Miami-Dade stands out among — and offers lessons for — other programs because of the strategic and carefully tailored approach it uses to produce these outcomes. One of the key features of Educare Miami-Dade is a tendency to leverage pieces of prepackaged materials and resources to produce an individualized instructional model, human capital strategy, and family engagement approach. Rather than simply implement off-the-shelf models, program leadership selects the components from each model that will best serve their children and combines them into one integrated, tailor-made product. Doing so creates a mosaic of practices that teachers and staff further personalize in their respective contexts.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

Educare Miami-Dade's approach to curriculum is perhaps the best example of their mosaic technique, and is unique among exemplar programs. Program leadership integrates components from a variety of different curricula and approaches without relying exclusively on any one model, producing an instructional model that is uniquely their own.

Educare Miami-Dade teachers use a constructivist approach, implementing an inquiry-based learning model that engages children in "active participatory learning." Children's decisions about their interactions with people, objects, events, and ideas in the classroom provide the backbone of their instruction. Teachers weave together content from several different curricula specific to different subjects (e.g., the MindUP curriculum to support social-emotional development) to form instructional projects based on children's interests.

Unlike some other exemplars, which use a structured curriculum, Educare Miami-Dade's approach reflects what is known in early childhood development lingo as "emergent curriculum." In programs or classrooms using emergent curriculum, teachers plan activities and projects based on the interests, needs, and developmental progress of the group of children in the classroom, rather than using a predefined curriculum. This is a common practice in early childhood programs, and one that is taught as ideal in many programs that prepare early childhood educators. But this approach can be challenging to implement and requires highly skilled teachers.

In emergent models, the quality of instruction depends on the teachers' knowledge of the curricula, understanding of their students' needs, and ability to connect the two in real time. To ensure high-quality, coherent instruction in all its classrooms, Educare Miami-Dade developed a system of supports and resources that ensure teachers have what they need to implement this approach with coherence and fidelity. Teachers rely on curriculum rubrics created by Educare Miami-Dade leadership, which outline the behaviors and actions that signify the teacher is implementing the curriculum with fidelity. These rubrics serve two purposes: They give teachers a roadmap for how to implement the curriculum, and they guide and inform the support that master teachers provide to teachers.

Master teachers play a crucial role in Educare Miami-Dade's approach to ensuring instructional quality. They are former teachers who have deep expertise in early childhood instruction and who Educare Miami-Dade has trained to work with teachers to improve their practice. Master teachers support teachers work with teachers in a continuous improvement cycle that includes four key components: They review child data, review and troubleshoot lesson plans, conduct observations, and provide individual coaching. First, the master teacher and teacher review child assessment data together to identify and categorize children's needs. Then the teacher creates a set of weekly lesson plans, informed by those data and the curriculum rubrics. The master teacher reviews the lesson plans, provides feedback, and makes suggestions for improvement. At least once a week

the master teacher then observes the teacher implementing their lesson plans. And at the end of this cycle, master teachers conducts an individualized coaching session with the teacher. During these coaching sessions, master teachers use curriculum rubrics to provide feedback on the teacher’s practice and work with teachers to co-create individual development plans to support their instructional goals.

Child data plays a central role in informing this process, and Educare Miami-Dade uses two formative assessment tools to collect data on children’s progress: the Galileo G3 Assessment Scales and Teaching Strategies’ GOLD®. Miami-Dade County, the Head Start grantee through which Educare Miami-Dade receives Head Start funds, requires the use of Galileo G3 in all its programs and delegates, so Educare Miami-Dade uses Galileo G3 in Head Start programs; however, it prefers TS GOLD® and uses it with non-Head Start students. Educare Miami-Dade Teachers and master teachers use the data from these assessments to construct a cohesive instructional plan that meets the needs of all students.

Meeting the Needs of Dual Language Learners (DLLs)

Nearly 80 percent of children enrolled in Educare Miami-Dade are dual language learners, and the vast majority of them speak Spanish as their home language. To support children’s development in both their home languages and English, Educare Miami-Dade implements a fully bilingual Spanish-English program, using a “one teacher, one language” model. In this model there are two teachers in each classroom; each teacher is assigned a primary language and speaks only that language throughout the school day. The teachers alternate planning weekly lessons so that every other week children receive instruction in each language. This approach is possible because the large native Spanish-speaking population in Miami, combined with Educare Miami-Dade’s strong reputation in the community, makes it relatively easy to recruit fully qualified Spanish-speaking teachers.

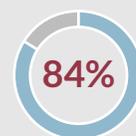
Educare Miami-Dade Head Start



Children who speak a language other than English at home



Children who speak Spanish at home



Instructional staff who speak Spanish

2016-17 data

Educare Miami-Dade chose to offer a fully bilingual Spanish-English program because Miami-Dade County has a large and growing native Spanish-speaking population, and most children will need to master both these languages to be prepared to participate in the city’s

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economic and civic life. Educare Miami-Dade supports children who speak other home languages in learning English and Spanish, while also employing resources and supports to support home language development for all languages.

Educare Miami-Dade’s approach also engages parents as crucial partners in supporting children’s home language development. At the beginning of the school year, Educare Miami-Dade administers a dual-language questionnaire to parents to better understand the families’ language backgrounds. Teachers explain to families what languages the school will be using to communicate, and during the first orientation the director walks parents through Educare Miami-Dade’s daily language practices in the classroom, the research behind those practices, the importance of supporting children’s home language development both at home and at school, and opportunities for parents to support their children in developing their home languages.

All incoming children’s English and home language skills are screened using the Preschool Language Scales (PLS-5) assessment, which assesses both children’s ability to express themselves in a language and to receive and understand it. PLS-5 data is used to monitor children’s growth throughout the year and provide teachers with information on the abilities of students in their classes so that they can better individualize instruction.

Ensuring Quality Teachers and Leaders

As a program that uses an approach to curriculum and instruction that is demanding for teachers, Educare Miami-Dade needs teachers with a high level of skills. To ensure it has quality teachers, Educare Miami-Dade uses a rigorous hiring and selection process, has invested in improving the competitiveness of its teacher compensation, and provides extensive professional development and supports for teachers.

Teacher Credentials and Selection

All lead teachers in Educare Miami-Dade have bachelor’s degrees. As a Demonstration School, however, and one that uses an approach to curriculum and instruction that is demanding for teachers and requires a high level of skill, Educare Miami-Dade knows that it can’t rely solely on qualifications to ensure potential teachers’ ability to implement the school’s approach. To that end, Educare Miami-Dade has created a teacher selection process that is tailored to the specific position that each candidate is applying for.

Educare Miami-Dade Head Start



Lead teachers who have a bachelor’s degree

2016–17 data

In the first stage of the application process, United Way of Miami-Dade’s organization-wide human resources department, which handles initial applicant screening for all positions within the organization, filters applications based on qualifications and experience and shares the remaining applications with Educare Miami-Dade’s director, who selects candidates for an in-person panel interview. Each interviewee is assessed based on a rubric specific to that position; based on the interview’s results, the hiring team selects the top three candidates for a two-day interview. During the first day, applicants observe the classroom they’re applying to teach in and answer questions from the center director and a master teacher about what they observed. On the second day of the interview, the applicant spends the full day in that same classroom and completes an abbreviated version of the teacher coaching cycle: The applicant designs and executes an activity for the classroom, receives feedback and guidance from the master teacher, and then goes back into the classroom to tweak the practice based on that feedback. The center director and the master teacher observe the candidate’s practice and make a hiring decision. With candidates who are applying for Spanish-language teaching positions, both days of interviews are conducted in Spanish. This process provides an opportunity to assess candidates’ teaching skills and dispositions and their responsiveness to feedback, which are crucial in Educare Miami-Dade’s model.

Although all lead teachers have bachelor’s degrees, Educare Miami-Dade is flexible about credential requirements for otherwise strong candidates. In those situations, Educare Miami-Dade may hire a candidate and place them in a more junior position, such as an instructional assistant, until they complete the requirements needed to become a lead teacher.

Educare Miami-Dade Head Start



Retention of lead teachers



Retention of instructional assistants

2017-18 data

Educare Miami-Dade reliably attracts effective candidates to all open positions, but has more difficulty retaining them. In part, this struggle is a consequence of compensation. In 2014, Educare Miami-Dade conducted a salary comparability study and found that lead teachers in 3- and 4-year-old classrooms made between \$5,000 and \$6,000 less annually than teachers in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS). Exacerbating the disparity, teachers at Educare Miami-Dade worked year-round compared to a 10-month school year for MCDPS teachers. The combination of a higher salary and a shorter school year regularly lured teachers out of Educare Miami-Dade classrooms.

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In response, Educare Miami-Dade initiated a series of annual raises with the intention of achieving parity with MDCPS within several years. It also shortened Educare Miami-Dade's program year to match the MDCPS schedule, so Educare Miami-Dade teachers now have summers off. Because some families may go on vacation or send children to visit relatives in the summer months, Educare Miami-Dade needs fewer teachers during the summer. But it still offers programming for the remaining children, so teachers who want to work through the summer have the option to do so, for additional pay. Despite these efforts, Educare Miami-Dade still loses teachers to MDCPS, however. And because the district has raised its salaries, Educare Miami-Dade is again fighting to catch up on pay.

Professional Development

Educare Miami-Dade's approach to professional development relies heavily on the ability of master teachers to coach and conduct reflective supervision with teachers. At the beginning of each year, each teacher meets with a master teacher to develop a Performance Management Plan (PMP), which outlines the teacher's goals for that year based on the job description and the specific areas the teacher wants to improve. Through the PMP, the teacher and master teacher identify actions and set deadlines for making progress towards goals over the course of the year.

Master Teachers support teachers' professional growth through two distinct types of support: coaching and reflective supervision sessions.

In coaching sessions, teachers learn new ideas and strategies for improving their effectiveness based on issues identified in their classroom data. Often these strategies come from the master teacher, but the master teacher may decide to bring in an outside consultant to determine the right strategy. As part of the coaching cycle described above, master teachers spend one morning each week in each teacher's classroom, observing for a specific goal that the teacher is working on. The master teacher then reviews their observations with the teacher, and together they create a plan for how the teacher will change their practice.

Every month, the master teacher holds reflective supervision sessions. In contrast to coaching sessions, which focus on specific strategies, reflective supervision sessions provide an opportunity for the master teacher and the teacher to step back and think about their overall work with children, families, and colleagues. Reflective supervision is focused on supporting teachers through goal-setting, quality service supervision, and performance appraisals based on past experiences, values, and expectations.

The observations and goals gleaned from coaching and reflective supervision are rolled up into the teacher's PMP. Each teacher's performance is formally reviewed three times a year, and teachers and master teachers regularly review the PMP content more informally to inform coaching and reflective supervision sessions throughout the year.

Master teachers are critical to the successful implementation of Educare Miami-Dade's curricular and instructional approach, and also have a high degree of discretion in how they choose to work with individual teachers. To ensure consistency in PMPs, reflective supervision, and coaching delivery among master teachers, the center director regularly observes teachers' classrooms along with master teachers and observes full reflective supervision and coaching cycles. The center director also meets with all master teachers prior to each PMP checkpoint and discuss the teachers' progress towards their PMPs to ensure that all teachers are held to the same set of performance expectations.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a crucial component of Head Start programs generally and the Educare model in particular, and the Educare network has developed a set of practices around intensive family engagement that are implemented across Educare schools. As it does in other areas of its practice, Educare Miami-Dade uses existing models, such as Educare's intensive family engagement and the Brazelton Touchpoints model, and customizes them to its unique needs and context. The result is a combination of formal family engagement strategies and informal connections that result in deep, authentic relationships between families, teachers, and family engagement staff and deep integration between work with families and children's learning experiences in the classroom.

At the beginning of the year, the family engagement staff, who have bachelor's degrees in relevant fields such as psychology and public health, meet with parents and caregivers to create a family partnership agreement based on what the family wants to work on. Parents also complete a survey, administered by Educare, on their stress points, interactions with children, and experience in the program. Throughout the year, family engagement staff follow a cycle of monthly meetings in which they connect with parents and families about their child's progress, and twice a year the family engagement staff complete a formal assessment of the family's goals and overall well-being. Parents can also participate in monthly parent meetings, school-wide events, and other trainings. These interactions form the backbone of Educare Miami-Dade's formal relationship with parents and families.

Just as data play a key role in informing children's learning experiences, they guide Educare Miami-Dade's approach to supporting families. One Educare survey, for example, revealed that families struggled with food insecurity and that a large number of families received food stamps. To address this need, Educare Miami-Dade started a community cupboard where parents can select items every month based on what they need. Similarly, after parent survey and Program Information Report data identified access to dental services as an area of need, Educare Miami-Dade partnered with a local dentist to provide children with dental services on site.

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In addition to these formal avenues, Educare Miami-Dade's approach to family engagement relies on staff developing deep informal relationships with families. This expectation permeates every interaction that family engagement staff have with parents. Monthly meetings aren't just a time for family engagement staff to share information with families or provide support, but also a chance to connect and build trust with families. Family engagement staff are also expected to connect with parents face to face during child pick-ups and drop-offs.

Educare Miami-Dade's model builds deep connections between family engagement staff, teachers, and children's learning experiences in the classroom. Family engagement staff visit classrooms and observe children at least daily and share information from those visits with parents. They also participate in multidisciplinary meetings in which teachers and academic program staff talk about children's progress. During these meetings, which occur twice a month, academic staff provide performance and observation data, and family engagement staff connect data to insights about what's happening to children at home and ensure that the family's goals are prioritized alongside the education goals for children. These connections allow family engagement staff to serve as the crucial link between instructional programming and families. When information emerges about a child's experience – from teachers, classroom observation, or multidisciplinary meetings – family engagement staff communicate immediately with the family, leveraging their relationships with them. This approach stands in stark contrast to some program models, where family engagement specialists focus on families' material needs and economic well-being, and are largely siloed from the academic programming and staff.

Family engagement staff receive a variety of trainings to better serve families. As part of the Educare network, they have access to an annual conference and quarterly webinars hosted by Educare for family engagement staff, and new staff members receive a year of peer mentoring from an effective veteran staff member. Educare Miami-Dade also provides additional supports and resources, including training on the parent-child relationship through the Brazelton Touchpoints Center.

Data Utilization

As should be clear by now, Educare Miami-Dade's approach relies heavily on data to design classroom teaching practice, professional development, and family engagement. Program leadership also uses data to inform professional development and design new curriculum supports. To support the collection, analysis, and use of data for these purposes, Educare Miami-Dade has established strong internal data utilization processes, as well as research partnerships to conduct more rigorous evaluations of their program's work.

Educare Miami-Dade uses a cycle of assessments throughout the year to collect data on child and family characteristics, student progress, and classroom quality. In the fall, staff collect child assessments, including the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, the Preschool Language Scales, and the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, and conduct parent interviews to understand enrolled children's development and identify children's and families' needs. Children are also screened for language ability and developmental delays. These data are also used to refer children for services, assign them to classrooms, individualize instruction, and support family goals. In the winter, the program collects data on classroom quality using CLASS, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), and other observational tools. These assessments are primarily used to flag any areas of concern and to inform master teachers' sessions with their teachers. Finally, in the spring, Educare Miami-Dade conducts the same assessments that they did at the beginning of the year in order to understand the progress that children and families have made.

Taken together, these data sources enable the program to begin to understand its areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Similarly, teachers use the fall and spring assessment data as regular "pulse checks" to validate or tweak the data that they're seeing through the TS GOLD® and Galileo G3 assessments. These data are also used by master teachers during reflective supervision and coaching conversations.

All Educare sites must partner with an outside research institution to monitor their impact, and Educare Miami-Dade partners with the University of Miami to better understand the impact and effectiveness of its programming. Most recently, the University of Miami research team accessed program data and conducted analyses to determine if the program's science framework was effective, and what the program should do to improve implementation. As mentioned above, Educare Miami-Dade also participates in the National Implementation Study of Educare, conducted by researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, to assess the effectiveness of schools within Educare's network and Educare schools as a group.

By combining curriculum, instruction, and family engagement practices from a variety of sources, using data to customize them to its unique population and context, and providing intensive, highly reflective support to teachers and staff, United Way of Miami-Dade's Center for Excellence in Early Education and Educare Miami-Dade have developed a unique approach to high-quality early learning that draws on a rich mosaic of practices and offerings to meet the needs of diverse children and families and model educational excellence in one of the nation's most diverse cities.

CASE STUDY

Fairfax County Public Schools

Location	Number of children	Year opened	Dosage	Percent of teachers with a bachelor's degree	Pay parity with district kindergarten salary
Fairfax County, VA	1,843	1965	Full day/full week	100%	No



Background and Introduction

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is a public school district in northern Virginia, less than 20 miles west of Washington, DC. FCPS is a sub-recipient under the Fairfax County Office for Children, which serves as the grantee. FCPS serves nearly 188,000 students from early childhood through 12th grade, making it the 10th largest school district in the country. FCPS is also highly diverse: Roughly 40 percent of students are white, 25 percent are Hispanic, 20 percent are Asian, 10 percent are Black, and over 5 percent are two or more races. Nearly 30 percent of the district's students speak a language other than English at home, and the district's students reflect a wide variety of home languages and nations of origin. Fairfax County as a whole is an affluent region — its average household income is the third highest of any county in the United States — but also has pockets of poverty and vast inequities in wealth and student learning outcomes for poor and racial/ethnic minority students. In this context, Fairfax County's early childhood program, which focuses on low-income students, plays a crucial role in helping to mitigate economic and educational inequalities and preparing children from the county's least privileged families to succeed in public education and benefit from their communities' economic advantages.

CASE STUDY: FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 2017 the FCPS early childhood program enrolled nearly 1,800 children across 106 classrooms in 65 schools. Ninety-seven percent of children served were 3- and 4-year-olds. The program targets low-income children from families that receive free or reduced-price meals, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Social Security Income, and/or are homeless. Because of funding limitations, however, not all children who qualify for the program are able to enroll; selection is based on need, with priority given to 4-year-olds.

FCPS funds its early childhood through several sources, including federal Head Start and Early Head Start grants, the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), local revenue, and Title I funding. Each of these funding streams has its own program requirements: VPI, for example, requires recipients to administer the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening tool as a pre/post assessment every fall and spring. Because Head Start requirements are the most stringent, all early childhood classrooms across the district are held to the Head Start Performance Standards, even though Head Start funding makes up only 13 percent of the early childhood budget. Thus, FCPS's early childhood program provides a strong illustration of how many Head Start programs braid Head Start dollars with funds from other sources and how Head Start standards can help raise the bar for quality across early childhood services not funded directly by Head Start.

FCPS's early childhood program is also noteworthy for its deep alignment with other district initiatives. In 2014, Fairfax County Public Schools defined a new set of ideal attributes for its students, which it calls Portrait of a Graduate.¹⁰ The goals articulated in Portrait of a Graduate are intended to complement the skills outlined in Virginia's statewide standards, but are more comprehensive: They reflect an intentional effort to see beyond the traditional benchmarks of success for a school, such as performance on standardized assessments, and instead focus on the skills all students need to be successful in a "rapidly changing, increasingly diverse, and interconnected world."¹¹ FCPS translated the overarching goals outlined in the Portrait of a Graduate into resources for each grade that build towards mastery of the district's ultimate goals for children, starting in the early childhood program. As a result, both FCPS's early childhood program and its standards and expectations for K-12 students reflect a comprehensive understanding of learning and child development that is aligned across all age and grade levels.

In 2016, the FCPS Office of Program Evaluation released a study of the impact of pre-kindergarten experiences on district students. The purpose of the study was to compare academic and behavioral outcomes for students with and without formal pre-kindergarten experiences, and to analyze the cost, funding streams, and return on investment of FCPS's early childhood program. Through this analysis, the research team found that children who attended the FCPS early childhood program demonstrated stronger reading skills at kindergarten entry and stronger math skills in middle school, required fewer special education services in elementary and middle school, and had higher on-time graduation

rates than FCPS children who did not attend preschool. The findings underscore the long-term benefits of FCPS's early childhood programs, both for individual students and in terms of return on investment of district dollars.

This type of data on longer-term results is relatively rare among individual Head Start programs due to the challenges of collecting longitudinal data. Fairfax County's ability to track results at this level is unique among the exemplars profiled here. The FCPS early childhood program also stands out among other Head Start programs because of its intense commitment to aligning with state and district standards. This commitment drove the design of FCPS's early childhood program from its beginning, and still continues to animate all aspects of the program, from curriculum to professional development to parent supports.

Nationally, nearly 20 percent of Head Start grantees are school districts, and being part of a school district can offer both advantages and drawbacks for Head Start programs. The FCPS early childhood program takes advantage of the potential opportunities and benefits of being part of a school district: They align the early childhood/Head Start program with the early elementary grades, track results for children beyond preschool, provide comparable compensation for teachers, and leverage the district's financial resources and capacity to deliver quality programs and results for children and families.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

Fairfax County Public Schools' approach to curriculum, assessment, and instruction processes and practices is a unique feature of the program that exemplifies its intentional alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices with state and district standards.

In the FCPS approach, every grade has a "Program of Studies" that serves as the basis for curriculum and instruction and outlines the competencies children should master in that grade. In the FCPS early childhood program, curriculum, assessment, and instruction are all anchored in the Early Childhood Program of Studies, which outlines the skills and competencies that children should master in an FCPS early childhood classroom and provides a network of standards, content, and resources that is the foundation for early childhood classroom instruction. The FCPS early childhood team and other stakeholders developed the Early Childhood Program of Studies in 2008 to replace High/Scope, the district's previous early childhood curriculum. And FCPS regularly updates the Early Childhood Program of Studies to remain consistent with the other standards that inform it; most recently, FCPS updated the Program of Studies to incorporate the 2014 Portrait of a Graduate standards.

The Program of Studies for each grade is aligned with the grades above and below it, creating a vertically aligned curriculum articulating how students develop skills and knowledge sequentially over the course of their schooling. Within each grade, the Programs of Studies are organized into a hierarchy of standards, benchmarks, and indicators. Standards describe the overarching ideas that inform the content of that year, benchmarks

are the expected outcomes and progress points as the children move towards the standard, and indicators are the observable behaviors that signal the children's mastery. Together, they define the instructional content appropriate to that grade.

FCPS designed the Early Childhood Program of Studies to reflect the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and the Virginia Early Learning Foundations. The Early Childhood Program of Studies covers seven content areas — math, science, social studies, language arts, social emotional development, music and art, and health and physical education — that are common across grade levels, as well as “approaches to learning,” which include executive function, persistence, initiative, curiosity, cooperation, and attentiveness and are unique to the Early Childhood Program of Studies.

To operationalize the Early Childhood Program of Studies, the FCPS early childhood team created a curriculum that supports children's mastery of the standards and supporting materials to enable teachers to implement the curriculum with fidelity. The curriculum is divided into four overarching themes throughout the year, and each theme is further divided into three supporting topics that prompt project-based learning and performance-based assessments, which are aligned with the district's K-12 work. Topic organizers, created by FCPS early childhood leadership, give a high-level overview of what the teacher should accomplish while covering that topic and outline the benchmarks for the quarter, guiding questions for the topic, and key vocabulary. Monthly curriculum maps provide a further level of detail for teachers. Each curriculum map breaks down that month's topic content and benchmarks into a week-by-week guide. It also includes the key indicators — the specific behaviors that reflect children's progress — that teachers should look for that month. Finally, weekly lesson plans are templates that teachers use to design their learning experiences and translate the curriculum maps into day-by-day and session-by-session instructional plans. Each weekly lesson plan template is tailored to the goals and content of that specific week.

These materials are tightly linked: The weekly lesson plans roll up into monthly curriculum maps, and the monthly curriculum maps roll up into quarterly topic organizers. Taken together, they help teachers see the connections between the content they are teaching and the overall standards.

Finally, the early childhood team developed a companion assessment for the Program of Studies, called the Early Childhood (EC) Rubric. It defines what, specifically, a child must do to demonstrate mastery of a given standard, then maps out a continuum of behaviors, organized into five levels, that lead to that mastery. The middle level reflects grade-level expectations, the top level reflects the expectations for the grade level above, and the other levels reflect progress up to and beyond grade-level mastery.

CASE STUDY: FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Teachers use the EC Rubric as a formative assessment to measure children’s progress throughout the year. Because the EC Rubric focuses specifically on observable behaviors, teachers can easily and quickly assess children’s level of mastery. Teachers also use the information from the EC Rubric to differentiate instruction based on that mastery, for example by creating skill-based instructional groups or identifying students for targeted support. Teachers and school staff use the EC Rubric to organize and document children’s performance and progress. This information is further used to inform professional development, changes to the Program of Studies, and other program improvement efforts on a system-wide level. Because the EC Rubric is tightly aligned with the Head Start and Virginia standards, teachers and staff can confidently make decisions based on data from the rubric that are in line with and ultimately support broader goals.

FCPS uses other assessments — the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) and the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Pre-K (PALS Pre-K) — to provide an external check on the validity of the EC Rubric and the Program of Studies. The program administers DECA and PALS Pre-K every fall and spring, tracking progress from the baseline to the end of the year and trends and patterns in students’ learning across years.

This assessment regime provides FCPS with the information necessary to improve the EC Rubric and Program of Studies to better suit their goals. In 2016, for example, program leadership noticed that children scored low on PALS items that measured nursery rhyme awareness. In response, FCPS provided targeted professional development to teachers to strengthen their skills in this area, and developed additional curriculum maps that teachers use as the foundation for their instruction.

Meeting the Needs of All Children

As part of the FCPS Portrait of a Graduate, all children are expected to develop the skills necessary to succeed in a changing, increasingly diverse world. FCPS has developed structures and processes that support all children in achieving that goal and further built out those processes to provide tailored supports to dual language learners and children with special needs.

FCPS Head Start



Children who speak a language other than English at home



Children who speak Spanish at home



Instructional staff who speak Spanish

2016-17 data

As noted above, FCPS serves a highly diverse student population. Across FCPS as a whole, nearly 30 percent of students are English language learners, and within the early childhood program, 80 percent of children are dual language learners. To support dual language learners in developing skills in both the home language and English, FCPS uses an approach known as “English-only with home language acquisition.” In this model, teachers deliver instruction and monitor children’s progress in English, and parents are engaged as essential partners in supporting child’s home language development. Because FCPS children speak many languages besides Spanish, including Amharic, Vietnamese, and others, early childhood program leaders believe that embedding supports for dual language learners into best practices for all children offers the most effective way to support children’s language and literacy development.

Even though instruction is delivered in English, FCPS designed the Early Childhood Program of Studies to support early stages of language development for all children, including dual language learners. The techniques that help all children build their language skills, such as vocabulary, picture walks, visuals, and content based on common background knowledge, are particularly important for dual language learner students, and FCPS’s Early Childhood Program of Studies frontloads key language skills into the curriculum’s early lessons so that students build some foundational English skills before moving on to other content. The EC Rubric also provides a developmental guide that maps out the continuum of progress for the vast majority of children, regardless of home language.

At the same time, teachers and family engagement staff encourage and support parents in fostering their children’s development in the home language. During monthly parent meetings, parents learn strategies and techniques for nurturing their children’s development at home, primarily in literacy and executive function. In a recent parent meeting, for example, program staff shared strategies on how to use a children’s book to build the child’s literacy in English or the child’s home language, whether or not the parent can read that language.

This is also an area where FCPS leverages connections and alignment across grade levels to support children’s learning. In kindergarten and later grades, FCPS uses the WIDA Measure of Developing English Language assessment to measure dual language learners’ progress in English language acquisition. This assessment is not validated for preschool-aged children, but early childhood teachers can access the tool and use WIDA Model descriptors to better understand and informally track students’ language development.

FCPS Head Start



Children who have an Individualized Education Program

2016–17 data

In addition to helping teachers monitor the progress of dual language learners and customize instruction for them, the EC Rubric helps support instruction for students with special educational needs. The FCPS early childhood team intentionally designed the EC Rubric to map out and track the developmental trajectory of children with a wide range of abilities, including children who need specialized behavioral or learning supports. Teachers use the EC Rubric to assess where children are currently, set appropriate expectations, and provide an adequate level of support and differentiated instruction to help them meet those goals. In situations in which the Program of Studies, EC Rubric, and companion materials do not, as they currently exist, provide guidance on how to best support a child, the child’s early childhood teacher and a special education teacher work together to develop a plan for the child’s instruction, identify potential supports and interventions, and conduct home visits and parent conferences. At the same time, early childhood resource teachers and special education coaches work together to create a coaching team to support teachers to more effectively serve children with special educational needs.

Ensuring Quality Teachers and Leaders

Working within a district offers FCPS a variety of advantages in attracting and retaining high-quality early childhood teachers. FCPS’s early childhood program is able to leverage district resources for teacher recruitment, hiring, and professional development and to offer professional growth pathways for teachers, and the district uses state and local funds to compensate teachers in its early childhood program at the same level as teachers in K–12 classrooms. These benefits contribute to FCPS’s ability to deliver high-quality teaching in its early childhood classrooms, but do not fully insulate it from workforce challenges facing other Head Start and early childhood programs.

Teacher Credentials and Selection

All teachers in the FCPS early childhood program must hold a bachelor’s degree, a Virginia teaching license (or comparable qualifications from another state), and an endorsement in early childhood education. Teachers for FCPS early childhood programs are hired through the same recruitment and selection policies and processes that apply to all other teaching

roles in the district. The district’s department of human resources receives all applications for open positions and filters out those that don’t meet credential requirements or other “must-have” qualifications.

FCPS Head Start



Lead teachers who have a bachelor’s degree and licensure that includes pre-k

2016–17 data

Candidates who make it through this initial stage then participate in a panel interview and performance exercise administered by the FCPS early childhood program leadership. In the interview and the performance task, program leadership is looking for evidence that candidates have the ability to work on a team; openness to new learning and professional development; and a deep understanding of early childhood development, the impact of poverty on children and families, and the importance of family engagement. Other highly sought-after characteristics include the ability to speak children’s non-English home languages. Following the interview process, the early childhood program leadership team recommends certain candidates for hire and shares information about those candidates — including a summary of findings from the interview and performance exercise — with principals, who have the final say in hiring decisions for their school. Principals can immediately hire someone from this pool of candidates or select candidates from this pool for their own interview process.

Over time, FCPS early childhood program staff revised the selection process to better fit their schools’ needs. Instead of only screening applicants when there are open positions, for example, the program started to recruit a “pool” of candidates. This pool allows them to quickly respond to and interview interested candidates when they apply, even if there are no open positions, and provide a list of vetted candidates to principals when positions do open.

Early childhood program staff also made adjustments over time to the panel interview questions. In recent years, for example, new teachers had difficulty working with children from high-need backgrounds. The program staff revised the interview questions to better assess candidates’ ability to work with children who live in poverty or have experienced trauma and the candidates’ empathy for families experiencing those circumstances. Similarly, the program staff revised the performance task to assess how candidates would address challenging behaviors.

Retention

Many early childhood programs lose teachers to the local school district: Kindergarten teachers often have credential requirements similar to those of early childhood teachers, but make substantially more money. This is not an issue for the FCPS early childhood program. FCPS early childhood teachers are compensated according to the same district-wide salary schedule as other FCPS teachers. As a result, their compensation mirrors that of teachers in other grades and subjects, and is higher than other local early childhood programs. Indeed, the program regularly receives applicants from other local early childhood programs. Of the exemplary programs we profiled, FCPS is the only one that pays its teachers fully on par with kindergarten teachers.

FCPS Head Start



Retention of lead teachers



Retention of instructional assistants

2016-17 data

Their approach to compensation is evidence of how FCPS values its early childhood program and leverages district resources to operate a high-quality program. Just because Head Start teachers work in a district, that does not mean they are paid comparably to other teachers. In fact, many Head Start programs that are operated by school districts do not pay their teachers according to the same salary schedule as K-12 teachers.

Similarly, operating from within a school district gives FCPS other advantages that make it particularly appealing to teachers. The district's visibility and strong reputation make it an attractive employer, and it can offer benefits that many early childhood programs can't, such as clear opportunities for advancement, greater resources, deep connections within the community, and employment benefits (such as access to health insurance and a retirement plan).

Additionally, FCPS early childhood program staff have instituted programs to further support the retention of its teachers. For example, all new teachers are paired with veteran mentor teachers, who support them as they acclimate to the FCPS environment.

Despite all of these advantages and the degree to which FCPS values and invests in its teachers, circumstances outside of their control lead to substantial teacher turnover. The attrition of both lead and assistant teachers in the FCPS early childhood program is lower than the average for early childhood programs, which some estimates suggest is as high as

30 percent annually.¹² Unlike teachers in other early childhood programs, FCPS teachers do not leave for higher-paying jobs; instead, it's common for teachers to transfer to other teaching positions within the county in order to shorten their commutes or leave the region due to military deployment or relocation.

Professional Development

FCPS's supports for early childhood teachers are part of the larger, district-wide system of professional development for all teachers. As a result, FCPS early childhood teachers have access to multiple different professional development opportunities to help them improve their practice.

Working within a district provides opportunities for career growth and professional advancement that are less common in smaller programs focused on young children. Being part of a large district system also increases complexity, however. A variety of roles within FCPS have responsibilities for supporting early childhood teachers' development, including the principals and assistant principals who lead each school site, resource teachers and specialists from the central office, and mentor teachers.

Principals (or, in some cases, other school-level administrators) are teachers' official supervisors and evaluate their performance. At the beginning of every year, early childhood teachers work with these leaders to formally define the teachers' goals and objectives for the upcoming year. These goals are largely focused on their instructional practice and students' progress in the classroom, as measured by child- and classroom-level data from the EC Rubric, CLASS, work samples, and other sources. The process for defining goals varies across schools and administrators, but in many schools the early childhood teachers define their goals as a group so that each teacher has goals that complement, align with, or mirror the goals of the other teachers at the school. Teachers meet with their evaluators at the mid-year point to check in on their progress towards their goals, and at the end of the year to measure their overall performance based on their goals.

Resource teachers, employed by the FCPS Office of Early Childhood, provide regular coaching and reflective supervision for early childhood teachers. They have deep early childhood expertise, particularly in instruction, and were formerly early childhood teachers themselves. Resource teachers conduct regular formal coaching sessions with each teacher, during which they review data from the teacher's classroom to identify students who are making progress towards their goals and pull out potential best practices. Resource teachers also work with teachers to identify students who may need more individualized instruction and develop strategies for working with those students. In addition to these formal sessions, resource teachers have more frequent, informal sessions with teachers that directly respond to a teacher's specific need. The best resource teachers can greatly extend a teacher's

CASE STUDY: FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

impact. According to one FCPS early childhood teacher, “If there was something that I felt I was weak in, [my resource teacher] would come in, model it, and work with me until we got it right. When she was in my classroom, it was like having another teacher — she got to know all of my kids and families, remembered their names and their stories.”

In the past, resource teachers were required to conduct formal monthly coaching sessions with teachers, but they found that many teachers didn’t need that level of formal coaching support. Under the current model, resource teachers conduct at least four formal coaching sessions with each teacher every year. Teachers who need additional support, such as new teachers or those experiencing challenges with instructional practice or behavioral supports, receive more frequent coaching. This structure, which provides flexibility and capacity to adjust levels of support based on teachers’ needs, offers a model that other Head Start programs may wish to consider when implementing new coaching requirements in the Head Start Performance Standards.

Education specialists are Office of Early Childhood employees who supervise and coach resource teachers. Together, resource teachers and specialists develop and lead professional development for teachers. In designing professional development, education specialists use child- and classroom-level performance data to identify challenges that are shared across schools and classrooms, and create supports and resources to address these challenges. In 2017, for example, kindergarten entry data suggested that children who went through the FCPS early childhood program had higher social and emotional learning scores but slightly lower literacy scores compared to children in other counties in the area. In response, the program sent out teams of staff for additional external training on preschool literacy; the education specialists will build that information into training for next year’s professional development and use it to create instructional frameworks to better support teachers.

All teachers receive training on the Program of Studies, companion materials, and EC Rubric at the beginning of every year and after winter break. This support is complemented with training on social emotional and executive function skills and trauma-informed practices. New teachers receive more frequent training in their first several years of teaching. All teachers also participate in ongoing community learning teams, which gives them additional opportunities to learn from their peers.

Finally, new teachers work with mentor teachers — high-performing veteran teachers who provide peer support. These mentor relationships allow teachers to receive guidance from high-performing peers on best practices for implementing the Program of Studies and understand how the Program of Studies is individualized to best serve different groups of students across the district.

Family Engagement

As a Head Start sub-recipient, FCPS's early childhood program emphasizes family engagement. Two types of staff members play distinct but important family engagement roles: Family service partners (FSPs) are staff dedicated to family support and engagement, and early childhood teachers are also expected to engage families and partner with them to support children's learning. Both teachers and FSPs have regular contact with families, but their roles differ. Teachers are expected to share information with families about their children's social, emotional, academic, and behavioral progress in the classroom and provide resources and information that strengthen the family's capacity to support their children's development in those areas. Family engagement staff, on the other hand, support children and families' well-being outside of the classroom. FSPs and teachers have access to key information about families, such as background information from their family interview, the family's identified strengths and challenge areas, and their goals. Throughout the school year, FSPs and teachers regularly share information with each other about family progress and issues or successes in the classroom and in some situations. Together, FSPs and teachers form a support team for families.

Families are encouraged to contact the FSP as their primary liaison with the school, both for accessing supports and communicating with the school. To play this role effectively, family service partners must develop deep relationships with families; although they have several other responsibilities, connecting with families is their top priority. FSPs host monthly meetings with parents focused on a range of topics, such as children's developmental trajectories, financial literacy, attachment and nurturing relationships, and parents' roles as education advocates for their children. Teachers are encouraged to participate in these monthly parent meetings. FSPs often observe children in class to gain more complete information to share with parents, and FSPs and teachers sometimes conduct home visits together. In this way, FSPs and teachers work together to engage families to support children's development in and outside of school.

FCPS's approach to child attendance provides an example of what this looks like in practice. Family service partners are responsible for attendance because FCPS's theory is that child attendance and family support are closely intertwined; attendance issues can be a sign that families need additional supports. FSPs monitor daily attendance, flag when the average daily attendance rate drops below a certain percentage, identify patterns and trends of chronic absenteeism over time, and design and implement attendance interventions. These interventions start quickly: After a child has been absent two days in a row, for example, the FSP initiates a strategy with the family. In collaboration with teachers, the child's family, and other school staff, FSPs work to figure out what the issue is (does the child have access to transportation, are they ill, is the family in crisis?) and connect families with community resources when possible.

Data Utilization

As is clear from the examples presented earlier in this case study, FCSP's early childhood leadership team uses data to inform regular practice and ongoing improvement efforts.

To date, the early childhood program managers, who oversee every early childhood program in the district, have also led most of the analyses of CLASS, EC Rubric, PALS, and DECA data, as well as other data, such as family engagement and attendance. Using those data, program managers run dozens of analyses intended to measure progress towards School Readiness Goals, compare performance over time and to other counties, disaggregate performance by schools and subgroups, inform professional development content, and share information with teachers and staff. These efforts have informed many of the program's current practices and their evolution over time. But the Office of Early Childhood also recognizes a need to enhance its data utilization processes and capacity. Analyzing all early childhood data for the entire district across a wide range of measures and assessments is incredibly burdensome for program managers. As a result, program managers do not have the capacity to respond to real-time requests from principals, and principals have to wait for program managers to share the analyses with them in order to use data for decision-making. To mitigate some of those issues, the Office of Early Childhood recently hired a part-time data analyst and is working to develop a data dashboard so that principals and teachers can access a variety of aggregated and disaggregated data — such as attendance, behavior, Pre-K PALS, and DECA data — at any time and look at these data over time, allowing them to identify trends and see progress.

While the Office of Early Childhood is responsible for collecting and analyzing data to inform real-time program decisions and ongoing improvement, FCPS's Office of Research and Strategic Improvement, a separate office within the district, collects and analyzes data to conduct research and evaluate the impact of its early childhood programs. This office conducted the study of the impacts of FCPS's early childhood programs that enabled this program to be identified as an exemplar Head Start program. They also have the capacity to conduct research studies on questions of interest to the district, including myriad research questions related to the FCPS early childhood program.

The Office of Research and Strategic Improvement's evaluations show that FCPS's early childhood programs are producing positive results, both for children who participate in them and for the district as a whole, and that the benefits extend throughout the children's schooling. The strong vertical integration of FCPS's early childhood curriculum and instructional model with standards and curricula in the later grades may help to ensure that early learning gains are sustained over time. By using Head Start standards as the foundational requirements for all its early childhood programs, aligning curriculum and instruction across early childhood and later grades, embedding supports for dual language learners and students with disabilities in best practices for all children, and leveraging district resources, FCPS is delivering a high-quality early learning program that improves results for low-income children.

CASE STUDY

Utah Community Action

Location	Number of children	Year opened	Dosage	Percent of teachers with a bachelor's degree	Pay parity with district kindergarten salary
Salt Lake City, UT	1,758	1965	Full day/full week	100%	No

*UCA historically offered part-day programming but began transitioning to full day. The evaluation of their impact was conducted when the program still offered part-day programming.



Background and Introduction

Utah Community Action (UCA) is an anti-poverty organization that helps low-income individuals and families overcome barriers to self-sufficiency and move out of poverty. UCA was founded as the Salt Lake Community Action Program in 1965. It was the first organization of its kind in Utah and one of the original Head Start grantees when it started as part of the War on Poverty.

UCA, and Head Start more generally, play a crucial role in the state's early childhood landscape. Utah does not have state-funded preschool – one of only seven states nationally that does not¹³ – so UCA offers the only early learning option available for many poor children in Utah. In 2017, UCA served 1,758 3- and 4-year-olds, nearly 5 percent of all Head Start-eligible children in the state. UCA is unique in our sample of programs because until

CASE STUDY: UTAH COMMUNITY ACTION

recently, the program primarily offered single-session or partial-day programming. As of 2016, nearly 65 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in UCA attend the program for 3.5 hours a day, four days a week. The remaining 35 percent of enrolled children are in full-day (between 6 and 10 hours per day), center-based classrooms for four or five days a week. Starting in school year 2018, however, the program is gradually moving towards serving all children in full-day programs.

In addition to operating Head Start, UCA provides a number of other social services that support Head Start children, their families, and other members of the community — including adult education classes, subsidies to help low-income families cover their heating bills, resources during times of housing insecurity, weatherization support, and nutrition education and services. But Head Start services account for the lion's share of UCA's work: Of the organization's \$23 million budget, \$14 million was dedicated to Head Start in 2016.

In addition, UCA receives funding from a variety of sources, including federal and state grants, philanthropic contributions, and other donations. Several UCA classrooms participate in Utah's High Quality School Readiness initiative. These classrooms are evaluated annually by outside reviewers; if they are deemed to be "high quality," children in those classrooms have access to scholarships through the Utah High Quality School Readiness program. All of the participating UCA classrooms have been rated high quality.

UCA also generates earned revenue from its Central Kitchen initiative, an innovative program that reflects UCA's entrepreneurial approach to meeting the needs of the children and families it serves. UCA developed Central Kitchen to provide healthy, affordable meals for its Head Start children, mitigating their risk for undernourishment and obesity. But it also uses Central Kitchen to help Head Start parents build life and workforce skills: Through the Sauté program, parents learn how to cook under the guidance of Central Kitchen staff. Central Kitchen also has an external-facing fee-for-service business line, offering catering for events and companies. The profits generated through these engagements make the initiative financially sustainable and provide additional revenue for the organization as a whole.

One of UCA's goals is to ensure that 95 percent of the children who attend its Head Start program are developmentally prepared for future school success, and multiple instruments suggest that UCA is on track to meet this goal. Children who attended the UCA Head Start program outperformed their peers who did not attend Head Start on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a literacy assessment administered by the Salt Lake City School District. At the beginning of kindergarten, 39 percent of non-Head Start children scored at or above grade level, compared to 62 percent of children who attended Head Start. At the end of kindergarten, children who attended Head Start maintained that advantage.

UCA also partnered with Weber State University to conduct an independent evaluation of the program's impact, as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT). This evaluation showed that children who attended UCA Head Start outperformed their peers who did not attend the program. These findings are a key reason that UCA is identified as an exemplary Head Start program.

UCA's focus on ensuring that children who attend its Head Start program are prepared for school success has also led it to work with students' future school districts to access their kindergarten entry assessments, in order to understand both the standards children are expected to meet at school entry and how UCA children fare in meeting these standards. This information, in turn, has informed changes in UCA's curriculum, assessments, and other practices in order to better support children for school success. This is just one example of the ways UCA uses data to support ongoing continuous improvement, and goes beyond what Head Start requires to support children and families to succeed.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

Utah Community Action realizes that, to achieve their goals for children, they must go beyond what is technically required of Head Start programs. At the same time, program leadership is highly cognizant of both resource constraints and the burden additional initiatives put on staff, particularly given the myriad expectations already included in the minimum Head Start requirements. UCA's approach to instructional quality illustrates how the organization balances these competing priorities to efficiently deliver a high-quality program. The organization's approach seeks to maximize the potential of Head Start-approved tools and systems while strategically complementing them where necessary to support children's learning and teachers' effectiveness.

UCA uses Teaching Strategies' Creative Curriculum as its primary curriculum and the companion assessment tool, Teaching Strategies' GOLD[®], as its primary assessment system. This combination of curriculum and assessment is common among Head Start programs, and with good reason: Creative Curriculum meets Head Start standards and allows teachers to be responsive to children's needs and interests, including children with special needs and dual language learners. Teachers use TS GOLD[®], the observational assessment aligned with Creative Curriculum, to assess children's progress on curriculum objectives and inform weekly lesson planning and differentiation to student needs. At the end of each week, teachers use TS GOLD[®] data to review the effectiveness of each lesson, then course correct for the next week based on Creative Curriculum activities. These Teaching Strategies tools drive the bulk of the program's instruction.

But UCA also supplements Creative Curriculum and TS GOLD[®] with additional curricula and assessments to address gaps that program leadership have identified in the Teaching Strategies tools. The program uses three additional curricula: Second Step, to support

CASE STUDY: UTAH COMMUNITY ACTION

children’s social-emotional development, and High 5 Mathmatize and Count on Math to develop children’s math skills. UCA added the Second Step curriculum to meet Head Start requirements related to social-emotional problem-solving and self-regulation. It added the math curricula in response to teacher requests and data showing gaps in children’s math learning. UCA’s internal metrics showed that children typically made greater progress in foundational language and literacy skills than they did in math. Data from school districts’ kindergarten entry assessments also highlighted specific math standards that UCA students had difficulty meeting. Although UCA children did well with geometry, classification, and basic counting, they were making less progress in areas relating to number sense (e.g., counting objects and telling “how many” and matching quantities to numerals). Program leadership realized that these skills were more difficult for teachers to effectively integrate into the curriculum, so they adopted additional curricula and provided training on ideas and strategies to build these specific math skills.

Similarly, UCA developed a new assessment tool after they recognized that children’s performance on TS GOLD® data did not predict or correlate to measures of kindergarten readiness used by the public school districts where UCA Head Start children enter kindergarten.

Using kindergarten readiness data provided by local school districts, UCA found that children who met the necessary objectives to be deemed “school ready” by TS GOLD® might not meet the school-ready standard, as measured by the school district’s kindergarten entry assessment. In response, UCA developed the Pre-K Skills Assessment to complement the TS GOLD® objectives. The Pre-K Skills Assessment measures children’s foundational literacy and numeracy knowledge, allowing UCA to better understand and track their progress in these areas. In contrast to TS GOLD®, which teachers administer on an ongoing basis, UCA administers the Pre-K Skills Assessment three times a year, establishing a baseline at the beginning of the year and assessing students again in mid-winter and spring to monitor progress throughout the year.

Until recently, different Utah school districts measured children’s school readiness using their own kindergarten entry assessments. UCA has tweaked the Pre-K Skills Assessment over time to reflect changes in districts’ kindergarten entry assessments and perceived gaps in children’s readiness. Alignment was never perfect, however, as long as each district had its own entry assessment. That changed in 2017 when Utah mandated a statewide assessment, the Kindergarten Entry and Exit Profile (KEEP). UCA is in the process of updating its Pre-K Skills Assessment to align with KEEP, and will likely make further changes to its assessments soon. Utah’s State Office of Education is developing a pre-k assessment for the beginning and end of preschool. Once this assessment is complete, UCA will either further modify their internal Pre-K Skills Assessment or, more likely, adopt the new statewide assessment when it becomes available.

UCA also provides a variety of supports to ensure that teachers and staff implement curricula with fidelity and use data to inform classroom practice. At the beginning of the school year, all teachers receive training on all program curricula; new teachers who start after the school year begins receive this training during their onboarding. Teachers also complete two online courses at the beginning of their employment: one that explains how the curriculum is integrated into classroom learning and one that outlines how to use the TS GOLD® assessment to complement the curriculum. The training at the beginning of the year revisits the material each year to refresh teachers' knowledge and update them on any changes to the curriculum and assessments. Every three years, teachers also complete a Teaching Strategies Inter-Rater Reliability training to ensure the reliability and consistency of teacher-collected TS GOLD® data.

Additionally, two staff roles are dedicated to supporting teachers in instructional quality: program specialists and coaches. Program specialists, who also supervise teachers, monitor processes and systems to ensure that teachers are using curricula and assessments in ways that set them up to provide high-quality instruction. They observe teachers weekly using the Creative Curriculum fidelity tool and the classroom environment checklist. They also review and approve teachers' lesson plans for the following week, focusing specifically on process indicators, such as whether the teacher individualizes based on child data. During observations, program specialists look for signs that the teacher can nimbly course correct if their planned lessons aren't productive. This approach reflects UCA's belief that systems and processes must be executed well in order for teachers to focus on the substance of instructional quality.

Coaches, on the other hand, are less involved in the process and systems and instead focus on the substance and quality of instruction. To that end, they primarily use the Classroom Assessment Scoring Assessment (CLASS), a measure of the quality of teacher-child interactions. Coaches work with individual teachers to create goals and improve their instructional performance, as measured by CLASS and other metrics of a high-quality learning environment. They also identify opportunities for program-wide professional development, differentiated based on shared challenge areas across groups of teachers.

Both program specialists and coaches meet with teachers on a weekly basis to support them in implementing the instructional model and improving their practice. Each program specialist supervises approximately seven classrooms, and each coach works with approximately eleven classrooms.

Meeting the Needs of All Children

As a program in which 39 percent of enrolled children are dual language learners, UCA recognizes the importance of supporting children’s development in both English and their home languages. But workforce constraints and the demographics of UCA’s student population create challenges: Although most of UCA’s dual language learners speak Spanish at home, a substantial population of children (roughly 9 percent of all enrolled students) speak other languages at home, including Arabic, Vietnamese, Sudanese, and Chinese.

UCA Head Start



Children who speak a language other than English at home



Children who speak Spanish at home



Instructional staff who speak Spanish

2016–17 data

Because of the linguistic diversity of its students, UCA implements “English with home language support” as its classroom language model. This means that teachers and staff primarily use English in presenting content and interacting with children, but also provide intentional exposure to the children’s primary home languages. Ideally, teachers using this model should be fluent in English and in the child’s primary home language. UCA requires that at least one staff member in each classroom – whether it be the lead teacher or the assistant teacher – speak one of the home languages represented in UCA’s population of dual language learners. Where possible, classrooms with high concentrations of children who speak a specific home language are assigned a lead or assistant teacher who speaks the same language. Given the diversity of students’ home languages, however, and challenges hiring qualified teachers or assistants with fluency in some languages, some children must be assigned to classes in which neither teaching staff member speaks their language. When this happens, UCA engages parents and volunteers who speak children’s home languages, such as Foster Grandparents, to come into the classroom and provide support for home language development.

UCA is also intentional about equipping all teachers, regardless of language skill, with the training and resources to effectively support dual language learners’ English and home language acquisition. Teachers receive training to understand the child’s language progression and strategies to support that progression in their daily classroom instruction (e.g., using visual cues, modeling language, learning key phrases in the home language). Support materials – such as weekly planning and classroom manuals – include information, literature, and strategies for incorporating the needs of dual language learners in classroom activities and instructional decisions.

UCA engages parents as allies to support dual language learners' development in their home languages and English. During the application and enrollment process, for example, parents complete a home language survey, which tells UCA more about the child and family home language and background. UCA also regularly provides information to parents about the importance of supporting children's home language development and strategies for doing so at home. Parents also help to create individualized language and literacy goals that UCA establishes for each dual language learner, which enables them to support teachers in meeting them.

UCA has structures in place to identify and effectively serve children with special needs, which are required by the Head Start Performance Standards and mirror the processes of other programs in this sample. UCA is different, however, in its approach to supporting children who demonstrate concerning behaviors.

UCA Head Start



Children who have an
Individualized Education Program

2016-17 data

UCA has invested heavily in training teachers to support children whose behavior raises concerns or creates classroom challenges. Since 2002, UCA has used the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young children, initially as a pilot and now throughout the program. The program's internal data suggest that this model is effective: Teacher feedback surveys are positive, children have demonstrated academic gains, and there has been a decrease in the number of challenging behaviors. UCA leadership is concerned, however, that the program's commitment to and implementation of the model is flagging, so they are in the process of developing Pyramid Pilot 2.0.

Additionally, UCA has a four-person special needs support team that supports frontline staff in serving both children with special educational needs and those who manifest challenging behaviors. This team can provide specialized support for teachers in observing and documenting child behavior or helping to implement behavior plans; it also assists with administrative aspects of serving children with special needs, such as arranging meetings with parents and school district personnel and making referrals to child mental health providers. In addition to supporting teachers in working with individual children and families, the special needs team provides behavior management skills training and support for all teachers.

Ensuring Quality Teachers and Leaders

Utah Community Action’s approach to staffing is similar to their approach to instruction: The program uses the Head Start requirements and common practices as the foundation, but adjusts elements and structures to better meet the program’s specific needs. In particular, UCA’s expectations for teacher credentials and training exceed what Head Start requires, and its implementation of coaching for all teachers pre-dates changes in the Head Start performance standards that require Head Start grantees implement systems of coaching supports. This early adopter status makes UCA a model from which other Head Start grantees can learn as they seek to raise teacher credentials or implement coaching systems.

Teacher Credentials and Selection

UCA strives to ensure that all lead teachers in preschool classrooms serving 3- and 4-year-olds have bachelor’s degrees and specialized training in early childhood education (with certain exceptions, discussed below). In typical UCA fashion, this goal was informed by, but goes beyond, what federal Head Start standards require. Following the 2007 Head Start Act reauthorization, which required 50 percent of Head Start lead teachers nationally to have bachelor’s degrees by 2013, UCA took this requirement as a catalyst to raise their own expectations for all teachers.

UCA Head Start



Lead teachers who have a bachelor’s degree

2016–17 data

UCA is willing to consider applicants without a BA if they have prior teaching experience teaching in a Head Start or preschool classroom and perform well on the program’s other hiring criteria and performance tasks. In those cases, UCA may decide to temporarily hire the applicant in an assistant teaching position and provide a variety of supports to help the prospective teacher complete their degree. UCA may also decide to hire the applicant in a lead teacher position, particularly if turnover requires them to hire a teachers on a short timeline.

Supports for credential attainment are customized based on the individual: Some prospective teachers receive direct financial support with tuition costs, while others can take on-site courses UCA offers through a partnership with Salt Lake Community College. For teachers who are hired with a BA degree in a “related field,” for example, but

do not have the required coursework in early childhood, UCA pays for the teachers to take the needed early childhood courses during the summer months. UCA provides Child Development Associate credential training to staff who need early childhood credentialing (primarily assistant teachers) and supports staff to access T.E.A.C.H. scholarships to enroll in early childhood degree programs.

UCA also revises its selection process as it learns from data and experience. In the past, for example, program leadership hired applicants based on their online applications and in-person interviews. They found, however, that applicants who performed well in the interview weren't necessarily effective in the classroom once hired, and that some internal candidates who had already demonstrated their effectiveness in the classroom performed poorly in the interview. In response, the program added a classroom-based performance task before the in-person interview, and now only advances candidates to the interview after seeing their comfort and skill in the classroom.

Retention

Like many early childhood programs, UCA struggles with teacher retention. In 2016, the agency had a 52 percent turnover rate (though more than half of those teachers went on to work in other positions in the organization). Compensation is a key issue: UCA's educational requirements for Head Start pre-k teachers are similar to those for kindergarten teachers in the local school districts, but UCA cannot match the districts' kindergarten salaries. As a result, the program often loses teachers to local school districts. Utah's low unemployment rate – 3.3 percent statewide and even lower in Salt Lake City – exacerbates these challenges, creating an employee's market in which strong candidates often have multiple employment options and little incentive to pick the one with lower pay.

UCA Head Start



Retention of lead teachers



Retention of assistant teachers

2017–18 data

UCA has tried to address turnover issues by making compensation more competitive. UCA teachers make less than district kindergarten teachers, but their salaries are higher than those of district preschool teachers, and UCA teachers are some of the highest-paid preschool teachers in the state. UCA regularly compares wages to market rates, makes changes where appropriate, and has developed a new salary schedule based on the market.

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All new teachers come in at a base salary determined by their experience and education, and then have the opportunity to move up the scale based on those factors. Additionally, new teachers receive a signing bonus, and UCA is working on developing specific criteria for determining other ways that staff can earn bonuses.

Because it can't compete with elementary schools on compensation, UCA uses non-tangible incentives, such as working conditions and a focus on staff morale, to boost retention. In the past, the program has used shout-out cards, incentive gift cards, and recognition during all-staff meetings to publicly appreciate staff. Using materials from Partners in Leadership (a leadership training and organizational culture firm), they also conduct regular staff surveys, focus groups, and detailed exit interviews and analyze the resulting data to understand why people leave and to identify actionable patterns. Program leadership learned, for example, that staff were leaving in order to start families. In response, UCA started offering child care for teachers and staff with young children, which has been hugely successful. As the program expanded its Early Head Start program, it has offered a limited number of tuition slots to UCA employees at a substantially lower cost than what employees would pay for child care on the open market. They also heard that teachers were frustrated with program changes, such as curriculum pilots and the new data collection initiatives, all of which trickled down to changes in expectations of teachers. In response, they are now more transparent about what changes are coming and what they mean for teachers. UCA leverages these non-tangible benefits, as well as professional development and other support opportunities, to remain competitive to candidates.

Professional Development

UCA differentiates its professional development strategy based on three tiers of need: individual goals, shared gaps identified across select groups of staff, and program-wide trainings.

The bulk of UCA's professional development content is delivered through individualized feedback and coaching delivered by program specialists and coaches and aligned to individual staff goals. As noted above, two groups of individuals support teachers in improving their instructional practice: Program specialists, who are also teachers' supervisors, provide feedback on teachers' implementation of curriculum and processes, and coaches provide more individualized feedback on instructional practice. At the beginning of the school year, each staff member works with a program specialist to develop a goal-setting and professional development plan. These plans are based on teachers' CLASS, TS GOLD®, and Pre-K Skills Assessment scores and growth from the prior year, as well as recommendations from their program specialists. Staff discuss these plans with their program specialists during three formal check-ins throughout the year, and use the plans to drive more frequent professional development conversations with their supervisors. Additionally, every week teachers are observed by and meet with both their program specialists and instructional coaches.

UCA complements individualized support with differentiated trainings for groups of staff based on their specific needs. Coaches and program specialists use information from their one-on-one sessions with teachers and other staff to collaboratively identify common challenge areas and design professional development offerings in response to them. In the past, all UCA teachers and coaches received the same CLASS training every year, regardless of their experience with CLASS or their past scores. Now, however, UCA tracks teachers into trainings with different content and duration based on their needs: Some teachers receive a CLASS foundations training, some receive training directed at increasing their scores in a specific domain, and others receive full-time coaching and mentoring on CLASS for several weeks. Similarly, UCA differentiates delivery of other professional development offerings (e.g., child behaviors, language, math, literacy) according to teacher skill. UCA's large size enables them to offer this variety of trainings.

Finally, UCA provides regular all-staff professional development. Some of the content is common to all Head Start programs — for example, mandated reporting requirements — but others are specific to UCA and based on needs identified by program leadership. For example, UCA is experimenting with several interventions to better address behavioral challenges and support children's social and emotional development, so they provide all-staff trainings on these strategies.

Family Engagement

Like most of its program design decisions, UCA's family engagement strategy maximizes common Head Start practices and tweaks them to reflect the program's specific needs. As required by the Head Start Performance Standards, all UCA families complete a Family Partnership Agreement (FPA) and a self-sufficiency matrix at the beginning of each school year. Using these tools, families create goals for the year based on their strengths and areas of growth, then define steps towards those goals. Throughout the year UCA hosts events, holds meetings, and provides materials based on common areas of family need, as identified using FPA data. Every fall, for example, UCA hosts a Fall Family Festival. Families come for a "field day" that includes games, crafts, and representatives from children's museums and the local PBS affiliate. The event is fun and engaging for children, but is also an opportunity for the program to provide medical screenings for families who do not yet have a medical home (providing a medical home is one of the agency's goals for families) or who do not have health insurance. At the end of the year, UCA looks at individual family outcomes to determine where the agency's support can improve, as measured by an end-of-year evaluation survey and the pre-post comparison on the self-sufficiency matrix.

For the past several years, UCA has taken a unique approach to staffing its family engagement efforts: Approximately two-thirds of UCA teachers serve as both classroom instructional leaders and family advocates. As discussed previously, the majority of UCA children only attend 3.5 hours of instruction every day. For the remainder of the day,

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teachers serve as family advocates. This makes teachers the primary contact between the families and the school. They receive information about the children from the families, share program updates, and support families in working towards their goals.

This approach is relatively new. As recently as 2015, a lead teacher was responsible for both the morning and afternoon instructional sessions, and a separate staff member served as a family advocate for three classrooms and connected with the families in those classrooms. UCA made this change when teachers suggested they were overwhelmed by having to plan and implement individualized curriculum for two sets of children, and didn't have the opportunity to develop deep relationships with families. Under the new model, program leadership sought to "bring the whole child under the purview of the teacher" and make child and family services work together more seamlessly.

One of the key advantages of teachers serving as family advocates is that they have intimate knowledge of the children's experience in and outside of the classroom. UCA has leveraged this role to address issues with child attendance. In the past several years, for example, UCA analyzed child data to demonstrate the relationship between a child's attendance and their performance in the classroom. Teachers posted this information outside of their classrooms, connected with parents about it informally during pick-up and drop-off, and emphasized the importance of attendance during sessions with families.

UCA will again change its approach to family engagement starting in the 2018 school year. The program plans to transition all part-day classrooms to full-day, meaning the family advocate and teacher roles will again be separate, and each family advocate will have a caseload of 30–36 families. There are advantages and disadvantages to both models: The single-session teacher model, in which the teacher also serves as the family advocate, fosters greater understanding of both the child's experience in the classroom and the experience of the family. At the same time, it requires the teacher to effectively, work two jobs, each with its own complex set of competencies and skills. A separate family advocate position allows the advocate to focus more intensely on identifying family needs and coordinating referrals and family support, but at the expense of having the substantial experience of interacting with the child in the classroom. Because a third of classrooms already use the separate family advocate model, UCA is taking steps to preserve the benefits of tightly linking teaching and family engagement, even as it shifts back to separating the teacher and family advocate roles. Teachers and family advocates, for example, meet each week to talk about children's experiences in the classroom and the progress of families towards meeting family goals.

In recent years, UCA developed an additional layer of support for children who do not qualify for special education services but still need additional supports to enable them to thrive. UCA's special needs/mental health support team leads these efforts, working closely with teachers, program specialists, and coaches to support teachers. When teachers identify a child whose behavior raises concerns, team staff personally observe

and document the children's behavior in the classroom, then work with the teachers and families to understand the observed behavior and identify potential support strategies. This process may lead to an IEP administered by the local school district. If not, parents and support personnel may develop a specific behavioral plan focused on helping the child develop self-regulation.

Data Utilization

Utah Community Action's internal data utilization processes reflect the same trend seen throughout the program: UCA built these processes based on requirements outlined by Head Start, supplements them with other tools to meet their specific needs, and revises its approach over time based on what it learns from the data.

UCA's use of CLASS data offers a case in point. UCA prioritizes CLASS performance data in part because CLASS performance is a component of the Designation Renewal System.¹⁴ But the program also emphasizes CLASS scores because internal data analysis shows a strong relationship between teachers' CLASS scores and children's learning. This analysis found predictive associations between CLASS scores in the fall and winter and increases in children's social-emotional development, fine motor development, language/literacy skills, and math skills in subsequent Pre-K Skills and TS GOLD® assessments. In addition, UCA teachers anecdotally reported that as their CLASS scores increase, they notice an increase in child inquisitiveness and engagement with learning in the classroom.

Over time, UCA has developed systems and processes that go far beyond what Head Start requires to enable the program's leadership to make improvement decisions based on data. In 2016, for example, the program funded a research analyst role, a full-time staff position. The research analyst, who leads the program's data utilization work internally, must have managerial, data analysis, and early childhood expertise. They develop and execute the data collection timeline and processes, aggregate and disaggregate data across different subgroup characteristics, and interpret the data for child-, classroom-, and program-level implications.

The research analyst works with the UCA leadership team to analyze CLASS and TS GOLD® data and make recommendations about program practice. They disaggregate CLASS performance data by domain — instructional support, classroom culture, and emotional support — and indicator, and they disaggregate TS GOLD® data by objective. Both sets of data are also disaggregated by child demographics, teacher characteristics, and changes over time. Using this data, the research analyst and UCA leadership together identify potential problem areas and areas of strength and determine appropriate action based on those findings.

UCA explicitly expects staff at all levels of the organization to use data to improve their practice. The executive team uses the data to develop program-wide goals; continually monitors the effectiveness of their curricula, assessments, and instructional supports; and

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meets quarterly to discuss progress towards those goals. Staff who are closer to practice, including coaches, specialists, and leadership team members who are responsible for program implementation, meet more frequently to discuss what the data mean for teachers and classrooms. Coaches meet weekly to review trends among teachers and troubleshoot individual coaching data, both qualitative and quantitative. Teachers use TS GOLD® data on a weekly basis to develop their lesson plans, and Pre-K Skills data to monitor children's progress over the course of the year.

The UCA leadership team's analysis has led to changes in program practice, such as additional professional development opportunities for teachers. After CLASS data showed, for example, that several teachers were struggling with behavior management, UCA developed a series of interventions and trainings to help teachers improve behavior management. Similarly, UCA chooses teachers to participate in its summer program, which helps children bridge the gap between preschool and kindergarten, based in part on their CLASS scores: Teachers with higher CLASS scores are asked to lead classrooms and serve as mentor teachers, while those with lower scores use the summer program as a way to observe a highly effective mentor teacher and improve their practice.

Finally, like other exemplary programs in this sample, UCA closely monitors its organizational impact on children's learning outcomes. UCA partnered with an outside research partner, Weber State University, to assess a sample of students at the beginning and end of the year. Weber's data provided an external, unbiased evaluation of the program's effectiveness, but working with them was expensive. Moving forward, UCA will conduct the PPVT assessment internally to evaluate the program and provide a pulse check and a method to identify opportunities for improvement.

UCA's investments in external evaluation, as well as its collaboration with local school districts to track children's kindergarten readiness results, reflect its deep commitment to ensuring that children who attend UCA Head Start programs are prepared for future school success. This commitment has informed investments in assessment, data utilization, and evaluation that have in turn informed changes in UCA's programming over time to improve quality and outcomes for children. By treating the Head Start standards as a floor, rather than a ceiling, and using data to inform adaptations and additions to those standards, UCA has been able to efficiently build a program that is supporting teachers and families and producing strong results for children. In doing so, it has often pioneered strategies or approaches that can serve as models for other Head Start programs seeking to improve teaching quality and child outcomes or to meet new Performance Standards.



Appendix

Interviewees

Maralyn Akiyama
Steve Barnett
Melissa Beard
Rebecca Berlin
Laura Bornfreund
Jennifer Brooks
Adia Brown
Amanda Bryans
Donna Bryant
Miriam Calderon
Jeffrey Capizzano
Lydia Carlis
Erin Carroll
Jenna Conway
Amy Cabbage
Marquita Davis
Libby Doggett
Steven Dow
Linda Espinosa
Danielle Ewen
John Fantuzzo
RB Fast
Ellen Frede
Yvette Sanchez Fuentes
Cathy Garland
Jackie Govan
Sharon Huang
Stephanie Jones
Victoria Jones
Myra Jones-Taylor

Gayle Kelly
Joan Lombardi
Amy Madigan
David Mandell
Jana Martella
Kelly Maxwell
Jim Minervino
Rick Mockler
Barbara Montero
Pamela Morris
Jennifer Park
John Pruette
Craig Ramey
Colleen Rathgab
Monica Roers
Joel Ryan
Aaliyah Samuel
Tom Schultz
Kathy Stack
Lisa Stewart
Cynthia Stringfellow
Abby Thurman
Eric Vaughn
Albert Wat
Sarah Weber
Christina Weiland
Elizabeth Weingartner

Endnotes

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