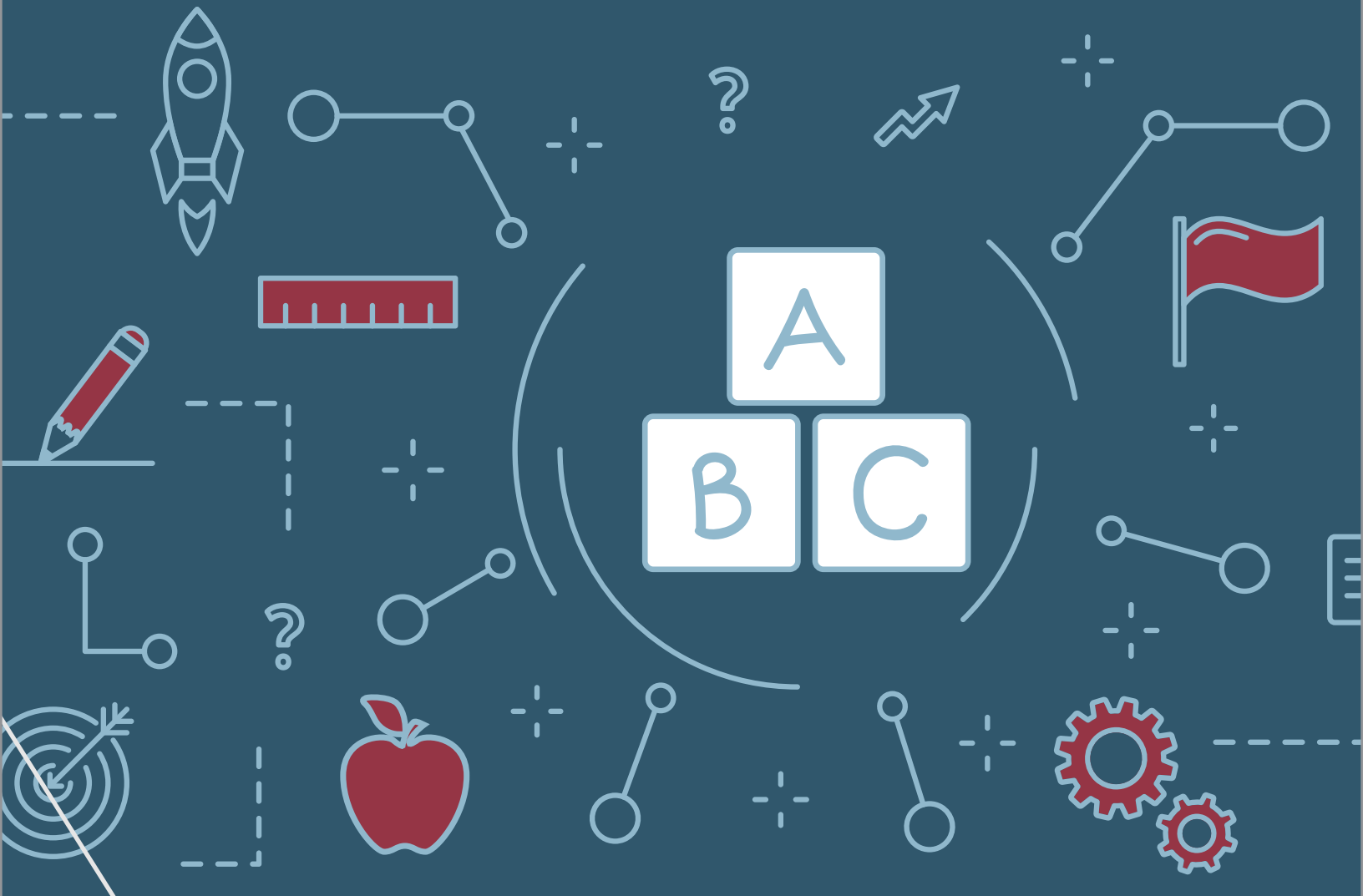# Instructional Models in Head Start Programs

Ashley LiBetti and Sara Mead

**BELLWETHER**
EDUCATION PARTNERS
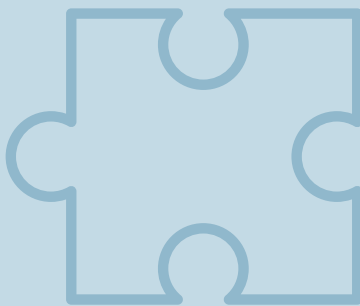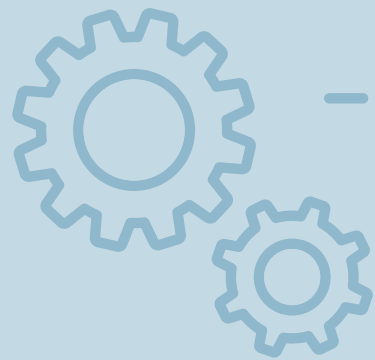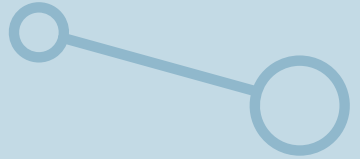
# Table of Contents

*Click on each title below to jump directly to the corresponding section.*

# 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 brief provides in-depth information about exemplary programs' instructional models.**

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.

Among our findings was that a program's instructional model is a key driver in its performance. In this brief, we synthesize the ways in which these programs intentionally align components of instructional content — including curriculum, assessment, data utilization, and supports for instructional practice — into a coherent instructional model. This approach provides lessons for other early childhood programs — Head Start and otherwise — as well as implications for the field.

Additional information about the *Leading by Exemplar* project, including methodology, lessons for the field, and other analysis, is available here. Case studies of each exemplary program as well as a brief synthesizing the programs' data utilization practices are also available.

## Head Start Examplars

Acelero Learning Camden/Philadelphia

CAP Tulsa

Educare Miami-Dade

Fairfax County Public Schools

Utah Community Action

# Introduction

*Head Start programs across the country relentlessly strive to provide children with high-quality early learning and development experiences.*

Head Start programs across the country relentlessly strive to provide children with high-quality early learning and development experiences. The way they do so, however, differs from program to program. In this project, we conducted in-depth analyses of five exemplary Head Start programs that have strong evidence of impact on children's learning outcomes, in order to identify the features that make these programs effective. One key theme that emerged across all these programs is that they intentionally integrate multiple components of their educational programs to create what we call, for the purposes of this paper, coherent instructional models.

What do we mean by instructional models? The concept is simple: It is a coherent approach to early childhood teaching that integrates the content of what teachers teach (curriculum), a clear perspective on what good teaching looks like (instructional practice), and measurement of children's learning and progress (assessment), and provides the tools, resources, and professional development to support teachers and programs to implement that approach consistently and effectively in their classrooms.

Each of the Head Start programs profiled here implements its own version of an instructional model. At a minimum, these programs integrate curriculum, assessment, data utilization, and supports for instructional practice. But each program's model looks different. Some programs integrate additional components, such as family engagement, and some programs' integration is more seamless than others.

*This brief highlights unique elements of these exemplar programs' instructional models; what they have learned from developing and implementing those models; and implications for other early childhood programs, policy, and the broader field.*

This brief highlights unique elements of these exemplar programs' instructional models; what they have learned from developing and implementing those models; and implications for other early childhood programs, policy, and the broader field. All Head Start programs have curricula, assessments, and systems of teacher professional development, and as such are already much further along than many early childhood programs in implementing the components of a coherent instructional model and integrating them with one another. At the same time, experience in the field suggests that even strong early childhood programs — both in Head Start and in other settings — struggle to truly integrate these program elements or to ensure consistent delivery of high-quality instruction. That's not surprising — this is hard work. So even Head Start grantees that already have strong instructional models in place may find opportunities to learn from the practices of other exemplar programs. And many of the practices and lessons shared here are also relevant for other providers in the early childhood field beyond Head Start, as well as for policymakers, who can take steps to refine existing systems and structures to support and incentivize programs to implement integrated instructional models.

# What are Instructional Models and Why Do They Matter?

The concept of an instructional model is not a new idea. Montessori programs, for example, have been integrating the components of an instructional model for over a century. More broadly, integrated instructional models are a feature of most early childhood programs that independent research shows improve young children's learning and development.[1] As the Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation concluded in 2012, "Programs showing impressive effects on the school readiness of children in low-income families feature thoroughly integrated systems of assessment, curriculum, and professional development. Although these programs may focus on different content or skills, they share a tight integration of the curriculum and pedagogy with defined school readiness outcomes, integrated progress monitoring, and professional development."[2]

While the concept is simple, however, implementing it in practice is anything but. The exemplar programs included in this project devote substantial time, staff capacity, and resources to refining and integrating their curricula, assessments, and supports for quality instruction and to creating and delivering tools, resources, and coaching that enable teachers to implement their models with fidelity. Some exemplars have created their own curricula and assessments or made novel modifications to existing ones. What really differentiates their approaches from common practice in the field, however, are not the resources themselves, but the intentionality with which these programs integrate all the components in a coherent approach to teaching and learning, and the resources, support, and processes they use to ensure that teachers are able to deliver that approach in a consistent, high-quality way.

This labor-intensive approach is not scalable across all early childhood programs, however, and is particularly difficult to replicate in smaller programs with limited resources and staff capacity. Today, most early childhood providers cobble together their programs using a variety of commercially developed and in-house resources for curriculum, assessment, instructional materials, and professional development. This often results in a set of instructional tools and practices that are not truly integrated, do not match the needs of the population of children served or provide the richness of content they need, and do not adequately support teachers to consistently deliver high-quality teaching.

*Quality improvement efforts have at times themselves created barriers to integration by focusing on only one component of the instructional model, rather than working with programs to address all of them in an integrated way.*

Further, quality improvement efforts have at times themselves created barriers to integration by focusing on only one component of the instructional model, rather than working with programs to address all of them in an integrated way. For example, the inclusion of a measure of adult:child outcomes, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), in Head Start monitoring also spurred Head Start programs to invest in CLASS-focused professional development and coaching for teachers. These initiatives, which in many cases have produced improvements in teaching practice, have not always been integrated with curriculum, assessment, and other supports for effective teaching. And CLASS itself is designed to be curriculum-neutral.

Over time, efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs tend to swing from one lever to another — assessment, adult:child interactions, curriculum — without building the programs' capacity to use all these levers in an integrated way to support quality teaching. This results in a situation in which local program staff are expected to make program content and design changes to drive improvement, but aren't adequately equipped with the tools and evidence-based models to make those choices effectively.

Even when early childhood program standards require all the components of an instructional model and set standards for their quality, as is the case with Head Start, that doesn't necessarily result in a truly integrated system or the supports teachers need to implement the system with quality and fidelity. This is why the Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation called for federal investments in Head Start technical assistance to focus on "helping programs select and implement the strongest available evidence-based practices in all areas," including curriculum, assessment, and professional and organizational development, and "ensur[ing] that these are integrated practices, not stand-alone pieces."[3] Robert Pianta, dean of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, takes this recommendation a step further, calling for the development of "*turnkey early education programs*" that would design all the key details of early childhood classrooms, including teacher-child interactions, curriculum, assessments, and implementation protocols and supports; provide training and professional development aligned to those designs; and be implemented in partnerships with local early childhood programs and teacher-training programs.[4]

*Over time, efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs tend to swing from one lever to another — assessment, adult:child interactions, curriculum — without building the programs' capacity to use all these levers in an integrated way to support quality teaching.*

Neither the Advisory Committee's nor Pianta's recommendations have been fully implemented in practice, however. Acelero Learning, one of the exemplars in this sample, offers something like a turnkey early education program to Head Start grantees that participate in its Shine Early Learning network. Every Child Ready, an instructional model developed by the AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation, offers a similarly integrated model to early childhood programs, primarily in Washington, DC. But there are relatively few such models and they reach only a small percentage of the broader early childhood market. New Profit, a venture philanthropy organization that supports social entrepreneurs in education and public health, is implementing an Early Childhood Support Organizations Initiative that seeks to develop and scale a set of early childhood models similar to Pianta's vision for turnkey early education programs,[5] but this work is nascent.

Further, because most early childhood teachers and leaders have spent their entire careers in a system that expects providers to build their own programs from a mix of commercially developed and in-house resources for curriculum, assessment, instructional materials, family engagement, and professional development, many have never seen what a truly integrated approach looks like or do not know that such an approach is possible. By the same token, many policymakers are eager to mandate specific components of early childhood programs, but unsure how policy levers can support providers to implement them with fidelity and coherence at a classroom level.

In this context, the instructional models developed by these exemplar providers play two valuable roles. First, they model what a truly and intentionally integrated early childhood instructional model looks like and demonstrate the power of such intentional models to enable quality teaching and produce learning results for children. Second, the experience of these exemplar programs in developing and refining their instructional models, and the strategies they use to support teachers to implement them with fidelity, offer lessons for other providers in Head Start and elsewhere who are seeking to more intentionally integrate their own approaches to curriculum, instructional quality, and assessment, and develop and support their staff to implement these approaches with fidelity.

# Common Practices of Exemplary Programs

*These exemplary programs all rely heavily on teachers to execute their instructional models.*

These exemplary programs exhibit common practices that support their instructional models. Most important, all these programs rely heavily on teachers to execute their instructional models. Each program develops a program-level strategy for integrating curriculum, assessment, and professional development, and designs systems and resources to support teachers, coaches, and other staff in implementing that strategy. In practice, this means that while programs provide teachers with the resources to implement a coherent instructional model — such as tools to translate assessment data into changes in lesson plans based on a list of suggested activities — they also trust teachers with the autonomy and responsibility to translate the program-level efforts into effective instruction that is differentiated for each student. Providing pre-selected curricula, guides for implementation, and targeted professional development doesn't mean programs treat teachers as automatons. Rather than strategies for controlling teachers' behavior or teacher-proofing instruction, these tools become resources that empower teachers and allow them act with autonomy in customizing instruction to benefit the students in their classrooms. This point cannot be overemphasized: The ultimate goal of integrating curriculum, supports, and professional development — and of instructional models generally — is to enable teachers to exercise their professional skills and judgment to individualize instruction for children.

**These exemplary programs rely on four program components to deliver an integrated instructional model:**

**1** **Curriculum**   **2** **Portfolio of materials and resources**   **3** **Professional development**   **4** **Program leadership**

Every curriculum, assessment, and professional development decision these programs make is designed to support teachers in providing the highest-quality instruction. All programs believe that **curriculum** — the content that teachers deliver — is the foundation of an instructional model, and none of them are satisfied with any one off-the-shelf curriculum to provide that foundation. Acelero Learning and Fairfax County Public Schools created their own curricula entirely in house, while Utah Community Action, CAP Tulsa, and Educare Miami-Dade supplement existing curricula with components of others. None of these providers, however, believe that existing curricula and materials are adequate on their own to meet the needs of their specific populations of children, provide the richness of content they seek, or give teachers adequate support in determining what to teach or customizing instruction to children's needs.

Similarly, these programs have created a **portfolio of materials and resources**, such as curriculum maps and rubrics, to support teachers in delivering high-quality content with fidelity. Implementation guides are a particularly common and effective tool. An implementation guide provides teachers with a checklist outlining the practices necessary to deliver the curriculum content with fidelity. All but one of the programs profiled here use some version of an implementation guide, though they look different in practice. CAP Tulsa created an implementation guide in house that includes a checklist showing what teachers' activities and classroom environment should look like if they're implementing the curriculum with fidelity. Utah Community Action, on the other hand, uses the Creative Curriculum fidelity tool and classroom environment checklist developed by Teaching Strategies to support implementation. Regardless of the details of any implementation guide, it is still up to teachers to integrate assessment data and lessons from professional development to individualize instruction.

Additionally, each of these programs deliver individualized, job-embedded **professional development** focused primarily on improving teachers' instructional practice. Coaching is the primary vehicle for doing so and, ultimately, the most crucial and culminating component of successfully executing a program's instructional model. In coaching sessions, curriculum content and supports, assessment data, and observations of teacher practice are integrated into improvements in instructional quality. All of the exemplar programs facilitate coaching sessions this way: The Demonstration School's coaches, called Master

Teachers, observe teachers' practice for several hours each week, looking specifically for progress towards instructional goals that the teacher set. Coaches at Utah Community Action also review teachers' lesson plans and observe teachers delivering those lessons to inform coaching content.

Finally, **program leadership** plays a crucial role in ensuring that each of these components is integrated across program practice. Each of these programs have incredibly strong leadership teams that are structured similarly: One program leader, often with the title of executive director or chief executive officer, drives the vision of the program at the macro level. Below that leader is a senior leadership team, each member of which specializes in and oversees one aspect of program operations, such as human capital or academics. This team executes the program's vision and mission via day-to-day operations and decision-making. Each program's instructional model starts with the program leader's vision and is executed by the senior leadership team, and every decision the senior leadership team makes is taken in the context of how it affects the instructional model. The person who designs professional development content, for example, makes those decisions based on what the academics and data teams identify as teachers' challenge areas, and the person who recruits and selects new teachers relies on the data and academics teams to inform how to adjust recruitment and selection criteria based on the performance of current teachers. As such, the leadership team both ensures integration of all program components and models the organization's central priority: consistent delivery of high-quality instruction.

## Core Components of Exemplars' Instructional Models

Each program has tailored the instructional model concept to best fit its needs. The lessons below highlight the unique features of each program's instructional model that play a key role in the program's positive impact on children's learning and offer potential models or lessons for others in the field.

### Acelero Learning developed a formative assessment of children's learning objectives that is embedded in the program curriculum.

The Acelero Learning Focused Assessment (ALFA) is a child-level formative assessment developed in house. The goal of the ALFA is to distill the myriad learning objectives, such as those outlined in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and other common authentic early childhood assessments, into a highly curated list based exclusively on each site's School Readiness Goals. The ALFA narrows the focus of the data points used to inform instruction and, in doing so, makes it easier for teachers to focus on the data they need to individualize content for each student. Additionally, Acelero Learning embedded the ALFA learning objectives into Ready to Shine activities, so teachers can assess children's progress as they are delivering curriculum content. Through the ALFA, Acelero Learning makes it easier for teachers to integrate child assessment data into their instructional practice to better individualize and differentiate instruction.

**Fairfax County Public Schools designed an instructional model founded on and tightly linked to the Virginia Early Learning Foundations and the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework.**

The FCPS early childhood team used these two sets of standards as the foundation for the Early Childhood Program of Studies, which outlines the skills and competencies that children should master in an FCPS early childhood classroom. Using these standards as a foundation, the FCPS early childhood team developed a curriculum that supports children's mastery, supplementary materials for teachers to implement the curriculum and see the connection between the content they are teaching and the standards, and a district-developed formative assessment that informs teachers' instruction. Each program's instructional model is driven by an overarching idea of what children should know and be able to do, but FCPS stands out for the degree to which Virginia and Head Start standards drive instructional content.

**The Educare Miami-Dade provides intensive support for teachers to deliver an emergent curriculum with a high degree of quality and fidelity.**

Emergent curriculum — in which teachers plan lessons in response to children's interests and progress, rather than following a set curricular scope and sequence — has a long history in early childhood programs and is regarded by some experts as the gold standard. Most of the exemplar programs in this study do not use emergent curriculum, but the Educare Miami-Dade's approach illustrates how an emergent curriculum can result in truly integrated instruction for students and teachers if it is implemented carefully and well. The Educare Miami-Dade leadership provides materials to support teachers' implementation of this model, such as curriculum rubrics, suggested activities, and intense coaching from master teachers. Effective implementation of this format produces a coherent and seamless instructional practice, but requires teachers to have deep knowledge of the available activities and projects and an intimate understanding of their children's needs — and the ability to connect the two in real time. Of the programs profiled here, the Demonstration School relies most heavily on teachers to integrate available resources and supports and children's assessment data to create an instructional model that is specific to their classrooms. The program's Master Teachers play a crucial role in helping teachers do this.

**CAP Tulsa's relentless commitment to data-informed, ongoing improvement has led the organization to identify gaps in existing curricula and pilot supplementary curricula to address those gaps.**

CAP Tulsa currently uses Teaching Strategies' Creative Curriculum as its primary, foundational curriculum, but supplements it with Building Blocks, a math curriculum. The program identified the need for a supplementary math curriculum after an analysis of internal data that showed that children's math scores were consistently lower than their literacy scores. They piloted Building Blocks as well as several other math curricula, and after further analyses decided to implement Building Blocks program-wide. Currently, CAP Tulsa's leadership is still looking for ways to improve the program's curriculum and is piloting another comprehensive, research-based curriculum as a potential alternative to their current combination of Creative Curriculum and Building Blocks. The program collects a variety of qualitative and quantitative data on both the pilot and existing curricula and compares these data to determine which curriculum they will use moving forward, or if they need to extend the pilot stage. With these pilots, CAP Tulsa continues to strive for better and better content to serve as the foundation of their instructional model. CAP has also used a similar approach to refine and improve their approach to instructional coaching over time.

**Utah Community Action teachers receive instructional support from two separate coaches, one of whom focuses specifically on processes and systems.**

The people in these roles, called program specialists, also serve as teachers' supervisors. Program specialists monitor processes and systems to ensure that teachers are using curricula and assessments in ways that set them up to provide high-quality instruction. To do so, they observe teachers weekly using the Creative Curriculum fidelity tool and the classroom environment checklist, which is Utah Community Action's version of an implementation guide. 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 the planned lesson isn'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.

# Implications for the Field

Early childhood programs — Head Start and otherwise — strive to deliver the best possible programming for children. Constructing a cohesive, integrated instructional model is a key strategy for doing so. To support this goal, the early childhood field must learn from the exemplary programs already doing this work.

## Supporting quality teaching needs to be a central focus of early childhood policies, practices, and programmatic improvement efforts.

These exemplar programs have developed highly customized and intentional strategies for supporting the quality of their teaching. This intentional focus is central to their ability to produce impressive results for children, and informs every decision that these programs make. But by the same token, the existing policies, systems, and incentive structures for Head Start and other early childhood programs do not explicitly encourage programs to create instructional models, and in some cases make it more difficult to do so. Quality teaching must be at the center of efforts to improve the quality and outcomes of other early childhood programs. Just as senior leaders in exemplar programs make instructional quality a central priority for their organizations, all policies, requirements, or initiatives for early childhood programs should be explicitly oriented in service to this goal.

## Ensuring quality teaching in early childhood programs requires an integrated approach.

It's natural to wish that a "silver bullet" solution could ensure quality teaching. But the experience of these programs suggests that focusing on a single lever, such as curriculum, CLASS, or coaching, isn't going to do the trick. Quality early childhood teaching isn't just a matter of curriculum, assessment, or teaching practices, but requires the integration of all these pieces. A central theme of these programs' instructional models is that they simultaneously pull on each of the levers to support teachers in delivering high-quality instruction individualized to children's needs. Providers looking to implement a high-quality instructional model must not only integrate curriculum, assessment, and teaching practice at the outset, but must ensure that all decisions they make about program operations and practice take into account the effect they could have on the instructional model. Further, policymakers, and philanthropic funders seeking to improve early childhood quality and outcomes, must look at all of the components of quality instruction and the supports provided for teachers to implement them.

## Efforts to improve early childhood teaching quality must build programs' capacity to integrate their curricula, professional development, and assessments and support effective teaching.

Because there are no silver bullets, improving the quality of teaching in early childhood programs, at scale, will require building program-level capacity to design, adapt, and implement integrated instructional models that meet the needs of their population of students and teachers, and putting in place systems of professional development, supervision, use of data, and support that build teachers' capacity to implement these models with fidelity. Program leaders are particularly crucial for leading the development of these systems and putting in place the conditions that support their implementation. Cultivating the capacity of program leaders to lead development and implementation of strong instructional models should be a key priority of program improvement efforts. But doing this work effectively will require cultivating capacity and embedding practices and systems at multiple levels within early childhood organizations. Building capacity in a systematic way will also require enhancements or changes in state and federally funded infrastructure supporting professional development, training, and technical assistance for Head Start and other early childhood programs.

## The field needs new tools, resources, and strategies to make this work more viable for more providers.

Even with investments in capacity-building, many early childhood programs will likely need additional support to integrate their curricula, assessments, and professional development and to put in place systems of support that enable consistent delivery of high- quality teaching. It is not reasonable or efficient to expect all early childhood programs to do this work for themselves, nor should they have to. To enable more early childhood programs to implement strong, integrated systems of support for quality teaching, the field needs new tools, resources, and models that do more of the work of integrating curriculum, instruction, assessment, and structured supports for implementation of new tools as well as the few that do exist, while also providing space for programs and teachers to tailor these models to their individual needs. Many existing offerings in the field provide some of the components of a comprehensive instructional model, but not all of them. And while a few comprehensive instructional models already exist, a greater variety is needed to meet the diversity of settings, philosophies, workforce conditions, and populations of children and families served by early childhood programs today. This creates an opportunity for commercial vendors, as well as for early childhood providers who have developed strong instructional models, to codify those models and build the systems that support replication by others. If the market does not respond to the needs of the field, philanthropic funders and government actors may need to invest in supporting the development of new instructional models or help existing providers build the capacity and tools to codify and support replication of their approaches.

# Conclusion

The exemplar programs profiled here have carefully and intentionally constructed instructional models to ensure that children receive the best possible instruction. This work, while it requires a substantial investment of time and money, is a crucial driver of these programs' positive effects on children's learning outcomes. Yet the existing policy and regulatory environment in which Head Start programs exist does not provide incentives for creating such models. In serving as positive proof points, the exemplar programs provide lessons for other Head Start programs, policymakers, and early childhood providers, advocates, and other stakeholders in the field generally.

# 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 Cubbage

Marquita Davis

Libby Doggett

Steven Dow

Linda Espinosa

Danielle Ewen

John Fantuzzo

RB Fast

Ellen Frede

Yvettee Sanchez Fuentes

Cathy Garland

Jackie Govan

Sharon Huang

Stephanie Jones

Victoria Jones

Myra Jones-Taylor

Gayle Kelley

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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4    Pianta, Robert. "Early Childhood Education: Research, Assessment, Effective Teaching." Lecture, University of Virginia. http://sfc.virginia.gov/pdf/education/2014/020614_No2a_Pianta.pdf.

5    See https://www.newprofit.org/about/.

# Acknowledgments

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## About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.