



New York
Early Childhood
Professional
Development
Institute

Coaching: The Essential Innovation in Early Childhood Education

INTRODUCTION

We know more than ever before about the benefits of high quality early childhood education. Children are born learning and need well-developed continuums of comprehensive service in order to thrive. A birth to five agenda must include a focus on elevating the workforce, the very heart of such an early childhood system. We have identified the competencies early childhood educators need in order to create safe, nurturing and stimulating experiences for young children. What are the most effective ways for early childhood educators to develop these competencies?

Coaching—individualized professional development grounded in the daily practice of the early childhood classroom—is one of the most effective strategies to equip our workforce for success (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018). In this brief, we discuss: (1) why we should expand access to coaching, (2) what makes coaching effective in a birth-to-five context, and (3) what steps New York State has taken to create a coaching infrastructure. The approach to coaching described here is distinguished by its focus on developing the relationship-based competencies and dispositions that educators of very young children need to be successful. This brief includes recommendations for expanding access to high quality coaching for New York State’s early educators, followed by a more extensive discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Develop capacity for program leaders to make critical decisions about coaching for their staff.
- 2) Expand the number of professionals who have earned the designation of Coach.
- 3) Identify additional resources for sites to engage, and sustain relationships with, credentialed coaches.
- 4) Collect data about coaching in New York State through The Aspire Registry.
- 5) Pilot partnerships with two and four-year institutions of higher education to provide credit for coaching hours.

The New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (the Institute) is a dynamic public-private partnership that exists to drive the excellence of services for young children through research, policy, and practice. All of the Institute's initiatives build systems to support professional growth and act as a catalyst to bring about necessary policy changes. Recognizing the importance of relationship-based, job-embedded approaches to professional development, the Institute has worked with a team of exemplary coaches to identify the following recommendations for the expansion of coaching in New York State:

1. Develop capacity for program leaders to make critical decisions about coaching for their staffs.

Program leaders make important decisions about how to spend professional development resources. Coaching is one of the most effective ways to support the professional growth of early childhood educators. In 2015, the New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) adopted the National Association for the Education of Young Children's definition of coaching as a relationship-based process led by an expert with the goal of building capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors. This definition distinguishes expert coaching from coaching provided by peers or supervisors. The Institute advises conducting outreach to leaders throughout the State to provide information about how expert coaching could work at their program, how to find an expert coach, and how to access public scholarships for coaching.

2. Expand the number of professionals who have earned the designation of Coach.

The New York Association for the Education of Young Children (NYAEYC) developed the Training and Technical Assistance Professional (T-TAP) Coach Designation to ensure that early childhood coaches are qualified for this role. This credential attests that coaches have developed the knowledge, skills and dispositions to be effective through years of study and practical experience. Their specialized training in adult learning theory leads them to interact intentionally to strengthen relationships and develop dispositions. Credentialed coaches are aware of the development of

New York State's early childhood system, and use the state's competencies as the starting point for setting practice-based goals. Identifying, recruiting and training qualified individuals is necessary to meet the state's professional development needs. Regional Coaching Specialists, trained by the Institute in collaboration with NYAEYC, are able to create a pipeline for aspiring coaches to become credentialed.

In order to sustain and develop their practice, aspiring and credentialed coaches require ongoing support. The coach's work can be isolating, and the challenges they face are formidable. Regular meetings of communities of practice, in which coaches reflect on success and challenges, is a necessary component of this professional role.

3. Identify additional resources for sites to engage, and sustain relationships with, credentialed coaches.

Coaching is relationship-based work, and relationships develop over time. Coaches who have developed relationships with programs are able to support program leaders and teachers in establishing safe, nurturing, and stimulating programs. QUALITYstarsNY has recognized the value of relationship-based coaching from its inception, and pairs participating programs with expert leadership coaches called Quality Improvement Specialists. In addition to providing leadership coaching, Quality Improvement Specialists connect teachers with coaches with expertise in specific areas such as infant/toddler care or Interest-Driven Learning. As the state initiative responsible for quality improvement and the tracking of that progress, QUALITYstarsNY recognizes that coaching is the most efficient and cost effective way to make and sustain gains. Additional resources are required both to expand QUALITYstarsNY, and to allow programs currently outside of QUALITYstarsNY to access and sustain a relationship with an external credentialed coach.

4. Collect data about coaching in New York State through The Aspire Registry.

Early childhood educators in New York State have the opportunity to keep track of their professional development through The Aspire Registry, New York's

workforce registry. Credentialed coaches currently use The Aspire Registry to log coaching hours provided and professional development topics covered. As more providers take advantage of coaching as a form of professional development, The Aspire Registry will have valuable data to help drive and evaluate policy decisions.

The Institute proposes enhancing the technical assistance and coaching module within The Aspire Registry. These changes would make the technical assistance and coaching module more intuitive and would appeal to both coaches and the educators working with coaches. Examples of opportunities for system improvement include:

- An interactive reflective tool accessible from the New York Works for Children site that would help educators identify competencies within the NYS Core Body of Knowledge on which to focus their coaching goals.
- Connections between training events and follow-up coaching offered through initiatives such as the NYS Pyramid Model.
- A calendar function for coaches to schedule sessions and remind educators of upcoming visits.
- A platform for program leaders to see which technical assistance providers are visiting their sites, when they are coming, and which competencies their visits are addressing.

5. Pilot partnerships with 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education to provide college credit to teachers for coaching hours.

Educators are eager to enhance their professional qualifications but often are not able to afford to leave work to attend class. Many courses, such as child observation and assessment, or environment and curriculum, may be taught effectively through a combination of competency-based on-site coaching and interactive online classes.

WHY COACHING?

Coaching is a relatively new approach to professional learning. Traditionally, professional development opportunities for early childhood educators have consisted of one-time lecture-style trainings. Two to three hours is rarely enough time for a concept to be introduced and internalized by the attendee. When a center is only able to send one educator to a training, the educator often struggles to implement the new strategies without a model of practice or the collaborative support of their colleagues. As an alternative form of professional development, webinars and online training have become increasingly popular, but demand a minimal investment of time, attention and money, and often no time interacting with the instructor or peers. This even more impersonal modality also fails to engage leaders and teachers who have questions about specific students and challenges unique to their own practices. Educators who participate in traditional and online professional development often return to their classrooms and carry on as before (Showers & Joyce, 2002), and the resources expended on professional development are lost.

To counter this trend and sustain change, federal, state and local initiatives have begun to provide individualized, practice-based approaches to professional development. Rather than requiring a specific number of hours of professional development for each educator, states are moving toward requiring individual professional development plans (Loweus, 2017). These plans include competency-based goals and job-embedded professional development strategies – such as professional-learning communities, series-based trainings and coaching – that are carefully selected to meet educators' goals. These efforts share the fact that they are each relationship-based, a key ingredient to making and sustaining essential progress. The 2016 Head Start Performance Standards require programs to implement a research-based, coordinated coaching strategy aligned with the program's performance goals, curricula, and other approaches to professional development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Administration for Children's Services, 2016). The 2016 revision of the NIEER State Preschool Quality Benchmark Standards added individualized professional development plans and coaching to the professional

development standard (Friedman-Krauss, 2017).

All early childhood professionals, including principals, directors, teachers, assistant teachers and family workers, who are curious and motivated to grow in their work benefit from coaching. For the purpose of this brief, the term 'educators' will be used to describe all of these roles.



WHAT MAKES EARLY CHILDHOOD COACHING EFFECTIVE? A RELATIONSHIP-BASED PROCESS

The NAEYC definition refers to coaching as a 'relationship-based process,' and, in the field of early childhood, relationships are especially important. Research shows that early relationships with family members and caregivers "determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior and health" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Healthy early attachments, developed through consistent care and responsive interactions, give young children the confidence to navigate school and life.

Profound and growing inequality threatens early attachments in a myriad of ways: through families' need to work multiple jobs, parental exhaustion, shifting childcare arrangements, social fragmentation, migration, deportation, and incarceration. Significant ruptures in early relationships cause 'toxic stress,' which has been shown to interfere with the healthy development of the brain, influencing behavioral, educational, economic, and health outcomes decades and generations later (Committee on Psychosocial

Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2012). Relationships with stable, responsive educators in childcare settings can buffer the impact of these stressors, and help children to develop a sense of safety and the confidence to learn.

Early childhood educators do crucial relationship-based work. The best teachers gather infants from their cribs the moment they wake, talk and laugh with them as they change their diapers, and delight in their first words and emerging sense of self. They provide continuity for young children by visiting their homes, noticing what they love, and bringing related books and toys into the classroom. They welcome family members each morning with warmth, presence and generosity. Early childhood educators, many of whom face the same stressors as the families they support, provide the secure base for the community of young families.

The early childhood coach understands the importance of strengthening relationships across the program. The coach supports the educator through a 'parallel process' in which their strengths-based, reflective interactions serve as a model for the interactions that the educator will have with colleagues, families and children (Jablon, 2016). The coach takes time at the start of the relationship to develop trust. They acknowledge the experience and skills that the educator brings to their work and establish clear lines of communication. Throughout the course of the relationship, even as the coach challenges the educator to experiment with new practices, the coach maintains the educator's trust by being knowledgeable, dependable, and optimistic. Regular meetings provide a safe space for educators to ask questions, discuss problems, get support, gather feedback, reflect on practice and try new ideas. Educators develop professional wellbeing through the coaching process; they have a greater sense of comfort, security, engagement, connection, efficacy and agency as result of this support (McMullen, McCormick, & Lee, 2018).

Early childhood coaches take an ecological perspective to working with a program: to build relationships and sustain growth it is helpful for the coach to work at multiple levels within the program, including administrative leaders, pedagogical leaders, teachers and assistants. This comprehensive approach to service delivery fosters a common vision of quality practice and cultivates a stable, nurturing community. When the coach is able to develop a

Definition of Coaching adopted by the New York Early Childhood Advisory Council

Coaching is a relationship-based process led by an expert with specialized and adult learning knowledge and skills, who often serves in a different professional role than the recipient(s). Coaching is designed to build capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills and behaviors and is focused on goal-setting and achievement for an individual or group.

complete picture of how the educator's strengths and needs fit within the working environment, they can more effectively make coaching decisions that improve program climate. An ecological perspective also allows the coach to take into account the myriad of supports a program receives. Childcare programs may receive technical assistance from their Quality Rating and Improvement Specialist, State Office of Early Learning staff, district coordinators, and Head Start training and technical assistance professionals. Too often, these support providers are not aware of one another's relationships within the program, technical assistance goals or visiting schedules. Professional early childhood coaches reach out to other technical assistance providers to attend one another's trainings, share calendars and establish complementary approaches to service delivery (Bansal, 2010).

Learning occurs within the context of trusting relationships, and trust develops over time. For this reason, it is helpful for a coach to have an ongoing relationship with a program. Some programs, such as Educare Schools, found in many cities across the country, and, locally, at FirstStepNYC, use a Master Teacher model. In this model, a coach, embedded within the program, is dedicated to meeting the individual professional development needs of the staff. When it is not possible for a program to engage a full time on-site coach, it is helpful for an external coach to maintain a relationship with the program, supporting different educators in meeting their self-selected professional development goals as needed. As coaching works in parallel process to the educator's work with children, the coach's trusting, responsive relationship with the educator is a model for the educator's trusting, responsive relationships with families and children.



WHAT MAKES EARLY COACHING EFFECTIVE? DEVELOPING EDUCATORS' DISPOSITIONS

The NAEYC definition of coaching states that the goal of the coaching relationship is to build the educator's capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors. *The Core Body of Knowledge: New York State's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* describes the research-based skills and behaviors that early childhood educators need to be successful. However, as hours wasted in ineffectual trainings have shown, the exposure to new skills does not translate into their use.

In order to put the skills into practice, the educator must develop the dispositions to experiment, to reflect, and to be self-directed. In fact, these dispositional approaches to learning have a parallel in the goals of early childhood teaching practice: that children should learn through play, that they should develop self-reflection, self-regulation, and initiative. Because "dispositions are less likely to be acquired through didactic processes than to be modeled," coaching is uniquely situated to support educators growing alongside children (Katz, 1993).

One of the most important dispositions that early childhood educators develop is the disposition to be *strengths-based*. In order to nurture this disposition, the coach identifies strengths in the educator's practice looking for moments of effectiveness and reflecting them back to the educator. The coach extends the educator's learning by articulating the ways in which their everyday decisions support children and families (Jablon, 2016). By linking

the important work that they do to establish early childhood educator competencies, the coach empowers the educator to generalize their skills and describe their work to families and colleagues. The educator who is confident that the coach will respond to them in a strengths-based way is more likely to experiment with new practices. The coach's strengths-based disposition serves as a model for the educator, who then takes a more optimistic view of children's development, leading the children in turn to be confident and resilient learners.

The second disposition that the early childhood coach develops is the disposition to be *self-reflective*. Reflective capacity has long been recognized as a crucial disposition for early childhood educators. In 1933, Dewey wrote about the change from routine action to reflective action as a critical feature of a teacher's professional development (Dewey, 1933). Through a process of "questioning assumptions, identifying alternatives, weighing options, deliberating on how to proceed, and choosing courses of action," the educator uses their reflections to respond intelligently and develop productive relationships with children and families (Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8; Board on Children, Youth, and Families; Institute of Medicine; National Research Council, 2015). The early childhood coach develops the educator's disposition to be reflective by asking just-right questions and listening well. The coach's reflective conversation serves as a model for the educator, who then approaches the children with curiosity, asking open-ended questions and making intentional decisions. Taking time with a trusted expert to develop reflective capacity is what differentiates coaching from other forms of professional development, such as consultation (Riley, 2003).

Finally, coaching develops the educator's disposition to be *self-directed*. An individualized, ongoing approach to professional development planning requires educators to develop the disposition for self-regulated growth (Sheridan, Edwards, & Marvin, 2009). The best early childhood educators seek to continually develop and deepen their practice of the core competencies across their careers. Coaching develops this disposition by asking educators to determine what goals are most relevant for them. The *Core Body of Knowledge* describes the research-based practices that educators must develop, providing coherence to the childcare system. The educator prioritizes the competency

that they would like to develop through coaching. The educator's goal may not be the one that their supervisor would select for them. However, the professional coach honors their choice, recognizing that the educator knows themselves and their community best, and that they will develop the disposition to be self-directed if given the opportunity to make decisions. The educator who sets their own goals is likely to be ready to make the changes they have envisioned, use coaching sessions productively and sustain newly developed practices (Peterson & Cairns, 2012).

COACHING IN NEW YORK STATE

New York State has been a leader in the shift toward coaching as an effective form of professional development. As a first step, in 2015, The New York State Early Childhood Advisory Council created the New York State Coaching Competencies, which describe the professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors of coaches. The New York State Coaching Competencies clarify what coaching is and what makes it effective in an early childhood context. New York State has adopted the National Association for the Education of Young Children's definition of coaching as a "relationship-based process led by an expert with the goal of building capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors" (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), 2011). Although research sometimes describes short-term coaching with the goal of implementing a specific curriculum model to fidelity, the New York State Coaching Competencies describe coaching more broadly as going "beyond the surface of quality practice to explore the roots of what supports children's growth and development" (New York Early Childhood Advisory Council, 2016).

Second, to ensure coaches are qualified for this role, the New York Association for the Education of Young Children (NYAEYC) developed the Training and Technical Assistance (T-TAP) Credential Coach Designation. In order to dig deep into the roots of quality practice it is necessary for the early childhood coach to have expertise in child development, early childhood program design, and adult learning theory. The T-TAP attests that coaches have the appropriate expertise for this professional role.

The New York State Training and Technical Assistance Professional (T-TAP) Credential – Coach Designation

The New York Association for the Education of Young Children (NYAEYC) awards the Training and Technical Assistance (T-TAP) Credential Coach Designation to attest that early childhood coaches have appropriate expertise for this professional role. <http://nyaeyc.org/coach/>

All coaches applying to become a T-TAP Coach must meet education and experience requirements and demonstrate expertise in child development, early childhood program design, and adult learning theory. Coaches are listed in the Aspire Trainer and Technical Assistance Professional Directory (<https://www.nyworksforchildren.org/aspire/go/>) on the New York Works for Children website (<http://www.nyworksforchildren.org/>).

The next step is to enable educators to find qualified coaches. New York Works for Children, New York's early childhood professional development system, has led this process by integrating a coach search component into The Aspire Registry. The coach search connects educators with credentialed coaches who have expertise in the desired area. In 2018, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services released a new policy stating that the professional development educators receive through coaching counts toward licensure requirements. The Educational Incentive Program now provides scholarships for coaching. Finally, NYAEYC and the Institute have trained Regional Coaching Specialists to provide professional development to aspiring and credentialed coaches throughout the state.

As coaching expands throughout the state, data about who is coached, the dosage of coaching delivered, and the competencies addressed through coaching may be collected through The Aspire Registry. On the individual level, this data will incorporate coaching into the individual's professional development record, enabling licensors to count coaching toward required training hours. On the system level, this data can be used to drive the equitable distribution of resources and other policy changes.

Currently, coaching programs throughout the state maintain similar data about coaching in a ad-hoc manner, replicating efforts and siloing important information. In order to appeal to coaches and coachees, the Institute recommends enhancing the coaching and technical assistance module

within The Aspire Registry to address several common needs of coaches. First, coaches need a common reference point for identifying research-based practices with which to set coaching goals. Integrating an interactive reflective tool based on the skills and behaviors described in the *NYS Core Body of Knowledge: Core Competencies for Early Childhood Educators* could fill this need. Second, reminding coachees of upcoming visits and plans for focused observations is a significant part of each coach's work. Including a calendar function and text reminder in Aspire's coaching module would motivate coaches to regularly log visits in Aspire. Third, research shows that introducing pedagogical theory in training and then following up with individualized coaching is an effective lever of change (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018). Aspire could connect participants in trainings, such as the Pyramid model, with coaches who are knowledgeable about those practices. Last, large programs with multiple funding sources often receive visits from a variety of technical assistance providers. An expanded coaching module in Aspire could allow program leaders to see who the technical assistance providers visiting their programs are, when they are visiting and what competencies they are supporting during their visit.

Licensors and professional development organizations are not the only groups shifting their focus to coaching. In recognition of the effectiveness of job-embedded approaches to professional learning, universities have begun to explore offering college credit for competency-based coaching. The Institute of Medicine report (*Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*) recommends that lead teachers of all infants and young children hold a Bachelor's degree (Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8; Board on Children, Youth, and Families; Institute of Medicine; National Research Council, 2015). However, low wages and inflexible working hours are often barriers to educators who would like to move up the career ladder. Recently, programs such as the ECE Career Pathways Partnership Program in Philadelphia have experimented with apprenticeship programs in which teachers learn on the job with a coach and receive college credit along with their regular salary (McCarthy, 2017). Programs such as this not only advance equity for a diverse workforce but also may be more successful than traditional approaches at imparting the complex and specific competencies early educators need and deserve further study.

CONCLUSION

A strong early childhood workforce requires a systematic and intentional approach to professional development. Relationship-based, competency-driven approaches grounded in the educator's practice are most effective. As a result of the requirements of the updated Head Start Performance Standards and the new training policy from the NYS Office of Children and Family Services, programs across New York State are moving to coaching. As they shift toward this form of professional development, it is important that program leaders understand what coaching is, why it is effective, and how to identify and access a professional early childhood coach.

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The New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute is a public/private partnership that brings together a range of public agencies, a consortium of private funders, and the nation's largest urban university to build a comprehensive system of workforce development for individuals who work with young children in New York.

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