



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
***BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH AN
EARLY EDUCATION LEADERSHIP ACADEMY***

by Stacie G. Goffin, EdD
December 2013

This report presents findings from research conducted and submitted to the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) to inform the design of a new leadership development initiative—an Early Education Leadership Academy (EELA) for administrators in State Education and other Early Learning Agencies (SEA/ELAs). Nationwide, state early learning administrators face complex challenges and expanding expectations. In addition to their traditional role of monitoring state and district compliance with state and federal rules and regulations, state administrators must now provide direct leadership to schools and districts with the intention of reducing achievement gaps and ensuring college and career readiness. Sharp shifts in organizational contexts are creating new expectations for how they should do their work—and with whom—and requiring them to acquire new expertise and skills. This study shows that targeted leadership training and supports would increase capacity of early learning administrators to succeed in the increasingly vital roles they play in advancing our country’s birth through third grade reform agenda.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

CEELO commissioned Dr. Goffin to conduct four data collection efforts in order to identify content and formats for a leadership academy that would be most beneficial to state early childhood administrators:

1. Targeted review of the literature on leadership and leadership development—over 50 articles, books, and white papers—to provide the underpinning evidence for the design and content of an early education leadership academy
2. Examination of the changing contexts of state administrators to provide insight into the knowledge and skills they need to exercise leadership
3. Survey of 42 administrators from 35 states and one territory to inform customization of the content of the academy for its target audience

4. Interviews with 17 administrators in 14 states, as well as 7 individuals with related expertise, to inform customization of the format and content of the academy for its target audience

FINDINGS

These key questions from researchers offer a succinct summary of this review of the leadership literature and highlight the complexities associated with understanding leadership and planning for its development (Hackman and Wageman, 2007):

1. *Under what conditions does leadership matter?*
2. *How do leaders' personal attributes interact with situational properties to shape outcomes?*
3. *Are good and poor leadership qualitatively different?*
4. *How can leadership models be reframed so they treat all system members as both leaders and followers?*
5. *How can leaders be helped to learn?*

Literature Review. Three themes emerged from the extensive review focused on the changing context of state early childhood systems, leadership and its development more generally, organizational change, and capacity development:

- **Leadership matters** – *it plays an important role in facilitating change and increasing state capacity;*
- **Leadership is a complex, collective endeavor** – *it is a dynamic interplay among context, individual strengths and attributes, and leadership as a shared undertaking; and*
- **Leadership capacity development should be context-driven and change-focused** – *its key competencies include business acumen, the capacity to lead people and change, to build coalitions and to drive toward results.*

Examination of Changing Contexts. Increasingly, SEA and ELA administrators are finding their organizations are in flux. A review of Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) applications, as well as the interviews conducted for the study, found that states are considering or implementing significant changes, including: consolidating state agencies; creating a new independent state agency or entity; creating dedicated capacity and leadership for early learning in governors' offices; and, creating new interagency coordinating bodies.

In addition, the review of the RTT-ELC applications noted the emergence or presence of regional governance structures with varying levels of authority to allocate resources and accountability for results. These structures add a new governance layer in some states. The analyses found that state approaches vary widely, not only in terms of in terms of the location or placement of programs and

oversight responsibilities, but also in the preferred structure for managing, coordinating, and providing oversight and leadership.

Survey of SEA/ELA Administrators. State respondents were asked to indicate topics that were of high priority for leadership training and support. Their responses highlight a wide range of knowledge and skills of interest. Most highly ranked were visioning, change management, working collaboratively and engaging new partners. These skills were seen as most important in enhancing effectiveness as leaders and managers. Respondents also expressed the context of their work presented unique leadership development needs. These contextual factors include the politicized working environment, including the demand to interface with policy makers and contribute to policy development, and the need to work within a state bureaucracy and within other state systems.

Interviews with SEA/ELA Staff and Experts. The following six leadership themes emerged from interviews with the 17 state administrators and seven external early childhood education experts:

1. **Vision.** While the scope varied by individual, interviewees repeatedly spoke to the importance of having a vision and using it to set direction around a shared purpose—a leadership topic elevated by survey respondents as well.
2. **Relationships Matter.** The rationale for the importance of building relationships differed by individual, although interviewees didn't necessarily rely on only one rationale.
3. **Collaboration.** Closely related to “relationships matter,” many interviewees spoke to the importance of crossing established boundaries within their agencies as well as across agencies.
4. **Content Knowledge.** Every interviewee identified the importance of being knowledgeable about ECE content relevant to their state's policy issues—most especially child development as it relates to adhering to developmentally appropriate practices, current research, and the state's ECE system.
5. **Navigating the Agency's Political Context.** This theme encompasses understanding of politics and the policy making process, being politically savvy, and capacity to maneuver changes in the state's political landscape.
6. **Perseverance, Fortitude, Creativity—and even Courage.** Multiple interviewees explicitly acknowledged the need to take a long view: sticking with the effort; keeping “the big picture” in mind; being creative, as well as nimble, in identifying and pursuing possible next steps; and accepting the reality of having to live with tension (i.e., “being mentally tough”).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF A LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

The following recommendations for the design of a leadership academy reflect findings from the data collection efforts, as well as CEELO's current context and resources:

- Maximize integration of leadership development with CEELO's program components.
- Fuse leadership development content around job embedded projects.
- Organize around participant chosen and directed projects drawn from CEELO's five priority focus areas and performance measures.
- Employ an application process that includes project objectives accompanied by expressed in-state support at multiple levels.
- Craft an extended timeframe for the academy, incorporating content driven face-to-face meetings, highly interactive on-line learning and job-embedded coaching/mentoring.
- Identify core management and leadership content that includes increased knowledge of oneself as a leader; systems thinking; in depth understanding of collaboration; strategic thinking in a political context; using data to inform decision-making and continuous improvement; and negotiation and conflict management.
- Assess the academy's ongoing effectiveness - build in, from the beginning, formative and summative assessments.

These recommendations provide guidance to CEELO in crafting an implementation plan for a leadership academy directed at SEA/LEA administrators. The analysis confirmed that before now little attention has been paid to the direct and targeted development of needed leadership skills and capacities for CEELO's primary audience. Variations in states, policies, institutional structures, organizational roles, and leadership knowledge among SEA/ELA administrators are extensive. If the crux of leadership is mobilizing others to engage in the work of achieving common purpose, then an early education leadership academy would be poised to make an important contribution to ECE leadership development and to supporting the U.S. Department of Education's goals for expanding and improving early learning.

The full report is available at: <http://ceelo.org/ceelo-products/>