



Professional Learning Academy: Supporting District Implementation of Early Childhood Policy

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INTRODUCTION

Local education agencies (LEAs) are working to manage and maintain commitment and enthusiasm to numerous initiatives mandated by the state to improve student success. The rapid pace of scaling up many initiatives at once often leads to relying on local administrators and educators to interpret and unpack the complexity of implementing these mandates. Not all LEAs are well equipped to do that effectively.

The State's Goal

The Early Childhood Academy (EC Academy) professional learning community was developed collaboratively by staff from The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), The Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) and the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE), in response to the need to support LEAs in effectively implementing new policies in early childhood.

Purpose of the EC Academy

The goal of the EC Academy is to build a community of practice among New Jersey school districts to provide support in their understanding of critical topics and their application to early childhood. This is done in collaboration with the State Education Agency (SEA) to support LEAs in implementing initiatives effectively in early childhood settings. The focus is on building a common understanding and implementation of three key policy reforms:

Background/Context

The New Jersey Early Childhood Academy is a focused community of practice for district teams of administrators and early childhood teachers to learn and share best practices on implementing state policy reforms. The Academy is a collaborative effort of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), The Center on Enhancing Learning Outcomes at Rutgers University (CEELO) and the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood (NJDOE/DECE). It serves as a model for other SEAs to build the capacity of LEAs to support children's school readiness and success.

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early childhood quality and program improvement, teacher evaluation, and Common Core State Standards. The Academy provides an opportunity for districts to come together to discuss these critical topics guided by literature, expert presentations, district presentations, and facilitated discussions across and within districts.

What We Know

LEAs are overwhelmed with attempting to implement multiple high-stakes reforms, often under very rapid timelines. We know that teachers are overburdened and undertrained on how to implement new initiatives effectively in their classrooms. The training that teachers receive is often on a single focus and they struggle to see how interconnected many of the reforms are in their practice. We know that teachers are not given enough time to collaborate. Though professional learning communities (PLCs) are an effective approach to changing practice, time and resources to engage in collaborative learning is not the norm in most districts.

Teacher evaluation is a high-stakes and potentially meaningful approach to improving teacher practice. However, we understand that evaluators are not always well-trained. Although the evaluators may have a working knowledge of a large span of grades, they often lack specific training in early childhood practices. One teacher described the following experience that demonstrates a lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood classrooms.

The early childhood teacher was busy at work with a small group on the rug while the remainder of the class was engaged in meaningful independent work. The evaluator came in and saw the teacher with the small group on the floor and commented, "It's OK. I'll just come back when you are teaching."

Early childhood teachers need documented guidance to support their work, and evaluators (or principals and other supervisors) need specific and tailored tools and resources to assist them in performing meaningful observations that lead to change in teacher practice. The SEA needs to provide the evidence and support for best practices and interpretation of initiatives for early childhood teachers and leaders. It is not enough to say that one reform will be replicated across the entire grade span without appropriate modifications. Good teaching is not necessarily good teaching for all. Rather, teachers of each grade level should unpack the initiative to reflect developmentally appropriate best practices for children in their classrooms.

How the EC Academy Was Structured

Local districts registered to participate in the EC Academy. The districts were required to send a team of three people from their district, including one administrator from the central office, a building administrator, and an early childhood teacher. This provided a unique opportunity for districts to discuss key initiatives and implementation in early childhood across stakeholders. Districts paid a small fee to participate in the EC Academy to ensure that they were invested in the program and participated fully throughout the year.

In year one of the EC Academy, 2013-2014, seven districts came together on three occasions to engage in professional learning as a cohort. The EC Academy provided professional development through various means. First, the meetings included important updates and information from Vincent Costanza, Executive Director, Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, New Jersey Department of Education. Second, the meetings included formal presentations by experts in the field to provide the latest research and guidance on the topics. These included:

- Dr. Dorothy Strickland, Professor Emeritus and Distinguished Research Fellow at NIEER, presented *Common Core State Standards and Early Childhood Education*.
- CEELO experts, Michelle Horowitz, Jana Martella, and Lori Connors-Tadros presented [*Is NJ on the Right Track to Improving ECE Teaching Practice? Implications from a Study of State Teacher Evaluation Systems*](#).
- Thomas Schultz, Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and CEELO, presented [*Don't Just Do the Assessment, Look At It: Understanding and Using Assessment Data to Improve Teaching and Learning*](#).
- Alexandra Figueras-Daniel, NIEER, presented [*Assessment and Dual Language Learners*](#).

The EC Academy meetings allowed districts to engage in small group work both within district and across districts. Districts also had access to an online community to provide additional support through resources posted by leaders and members. It also provided opportunities for the participants to engage in further discussions about key topics and post questions or ideas.

What We Found

The intended impact of the EC Academy was that participants would have a more comprehensive understanding and a cohesive implementation of key reforms or initiatives in a developmentally appropriate manner at the early childhood level. What we found was a much more diverse and substantial impact for our participants and the children they serve.

Relationship Impacts. Perhaps the biggest impact was an effect on relationships. Several different examples of relationship-building were evident. First, participating LEAs saw improved relationships with the SEA. The LEAs reported that the information shared at these sessions from the SEA was extremely valuable. This included hearing about current initiatives directly from the SEA (i.e., Early Learning Challenge Grant, Teacher Evaluation), being offered participation in new initiatives underway (i.e., Kindergarten Entry Assessment Pilot), and a general understanding of the NJDOE viewpoint on early childhood matters.

Relationships were built across districts. Participants reported that the opportunity to talk with other districts working through many of the same issues and concerns was very helpful. During our meetings we saw central administrators sharing resources with other central administrators. We saw teachers sharing ideas with other teachers. There were also “all calls” where participants would ask questions of

the group to gain information. One example was when a district was looking to implement a new assessment in kindergarten: The administrator connected with other administrators and teachers using the assessment currently. They engaged in a candid discussion about its strengths and limitations.

Knowledge and Understanding Impacts. A primary goal of the EC Academy was to provide an understanding of teacher evaluation systems. A deeper dive into the evaluation tools used in NJ provided districts with the opportunity for studying the tool specific to their district. They worked toward a common understanding within their district of the tool for early childhood teachers. This knowledge (content and procedural) of the systems and the understanding of the application in early childhood is a critical component to the effectiveness of the reform.

There was an impact on participants' knowledge and understanding of early childhood practices and implementation of reforms specific to early childhood. For example, participants reported having a better understanding of Student Growth Outcomes (SGOs). SGOs are measures of student growth included in the evaluations of all teachers in New Jersey. SGOs provide a method by which teachers can improve their practice while clearly demonstrating their effectiveness through student progress.

As a Race to the Top--Early Learning Challenge grant recipient, a lot is happening at the NJ state level that affects districts directly. The participants in the EC Academy were provided first-hand reports of the roll-out of the initiatives in the grant. They had opportunities to ask questions about the grant and learn how the grant money would affect their districts. Knowledge and understanding about upcoming initiatives and the intentions of the SEA is empowering. Although these districts had received notifications of much of the information shared by the director of the grant, they perhaps did not have the opportunity to digest the information in a meaningful way and ask questions regarding the information. Participants reported this knowledge (content and procedural) as strength of our sessions.

Potential Impacts on Instruction. The EC Academy generated a direct impact on the instruction in the participating districts. For example, one district began a pilot preschool program for children in the district. This demonstrated a true commitment to an early and effective start to education for young children. Additionally, several of the LEAs reported a stronger understanding of developmentally appropriate practice for young children. They also developed a stronger understanding of quality in the early childhood classroom.

The group overwhelmingly reported a heightened interest in and deeper understanding of using data to improve instruction and program quality. At one group meeting session the LEAs were asked to complete an assessment map of the assessments currently used in their districts. (See Figure 1 below for the mapping activity.)The map asked LEAs to analyze their current assessment practices. This provided a clear picture for districts of their assessment practices. It highlighted holes in the practice and also highlighted where there was too much assessment. Each district's map presented a different picture: Some had too many assessments, some had holes in certain domains or grade levels, others had too much burden on teachers for administration and yet others demonstrated a lack of "using" the data beyond collecting.

Figure 1. Assessment Map

Grade	Assessment Name	Area Assessed	Why Assessed	When	Who Administrates	Who Uses Data	How Data is Used
<i>PreK</i>	<i>Early Learning Scale</i>	<i>All domains</i>	<i>Formative to improve instruction</i>	<i>On-going; scoring 3 times a year</i>	<i>Classroom teacher</i>	<i>Teacher and Principal</i>	<i>Teacher uses data to inform instruction; Principal uses data to identify PD needs</i>

Impact on Policy. An evidence document tailored to the specific requirements of the LEA’s teacher evaluation system was developed for each district in Year One. Districts were presented with the document [Teacher Evaluation Support Document: PreK & K](#) written by the Workgroup on Teacher Evaluation Evidence. Since New Jersey provides LEAs several options for teacher evaluation systems, it was a necessary exercise for LEAs to generate an evidence document specific to their district’s model. Even the few districts that implement the evaluation system outlined in the evidence document presented by the Workgroup on Teacher Evaluation Evidence chose to participate in this exercise. These districts found that modifications were appropriate, based on their particular curriculum and context. Going through each component carefully to consider what evidence would be present in the early childhood classroom to support each domain/item was extremely valuable.

By the conclusion of the EC Academy in the spring of 2014, each district had begun developing a formal document useful for assuring that teacher evaluation in the early childhood classroom was implemented justly and effectively. No longer subscribing to, “good practice is good practice,” theory, LEAs had a document to describe suitable teaching for young children. Each district reported that this was a valuable tool for administrators who lacked the necessary training in early childhood.

As a part of developing and using this document, districts began to re-think using professional development time with teachers. One district provided coverage for the participating teacher, which allowed the team of three to work collaboratively during the work day to complete the document. Another district used a full professional development day for the entire early childhood faculty to work on the document. This enabled every teacher to be vested in the criteria that would be used to evaluate him or her. Districts showed their commitment to the project.

A final, and somewhat unexpected, impact of the EC Academy was the increase in understanding of the participants' role in supporting awareness around the needs of young children and the role of the public school. We invited a local advocacy group to come and speak to our audience at one of our sessions. Following this, we saw a spark in several participants to begin to focus on advocating for the needs of young children. One veteran teacher of 19 years responded that she would now begin advocating for young children in her district through specific actions. We also saw an increase in promotion for our EC Academy and the professional learning that occurred there. For example, districts provided press releases to their local paper regarding their participation and several more districts generated presentations to their boards of education and attendees at board meetings, about their involvement in the EC Academy.

What's Next

LEAs participating in this year of the EC Academy developed plans for next steps in their districts. These plans include completing their evidence document and disseminating information throughout the district. Beginning open discussions and plans for a central vision and shared goals across early childhood preschool to grade three was also a priority for several districts. Districts also report plans to begin PLCs in their districts around the topics and information shared through the EC Academy. Finally, nearly all the districts noted that next steps would include work around data. They reported plans to collect the "right" data and increase their work to use data effectively to improve teaching and learning. Intended to be a long-term project and professional learning community, the EC Academy will grow in year two to support districts in engaging in systematic data collection and analyses, responsive coaching, and intentional and facilitated cross-district visits, in addition to group meetings. The focus of the EC Academy will expand from preschool and kindergarten into the early primary school years, for a comprehensive and seamless focus on early childhood preschool through third grade. Emphasis for this year will remain on a cohesive approach to initiatives such as teacher evaluation and the new first grade through third grade guidelines. Data literacy, early childhood education quality, and creating harmony in implementing new reforms will be at the center of these continued discussions.

There will be a renewed focus on the online community in an effort to generate discussions and support in between the whole-group meetings. Online surveys of the participants will continue to be a part of this effort, to evaluate the sessions and experiences and guide the planning of future sessions.

Resources and Links

Connors-Tadros, L., & Horowitz, M. (2014). *How Are Early Childhood Teachers Faring in State Teacher Evaluation Systems?* (CEELO Policy Report). New Brunswick, NJ: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes. Available: http://ceelo.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/CEELO_policy_report_ece_techereval_march_2014.pdf

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Workgroup on Teacher Evaluation Evidence (2013). *Teacher evaluation support document: PreK & K*. Trenton, NJ: New Jersey Department of Education. Available: <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/eval/Evidence.pdf>

ABOUT CEELO:

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