

A Summary of the CEELO Leadership Academy Retrospective Study

By Tracy Jost

Improving learning outcomes for all young children requires skilled and knowledgeable leaders who are disposed to effectively promote early care and education program and system goals. Yet, state early education administrators—those responsible for overseeing pre-Kindergarten policies and programs—vary in their leadership competencies. To address this gap, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) designed a Leadership Academy to support the development of early education administrators' leadership skills and competencies.

WHAT CEELO DID

CEELO engaged in an intensive planning process to design a Leadership Academy tailored to specifically strengthen leadership competencies of individuals responsible for state early childhood education systems, programs, and policies. CEELO is a national technical assistance center funded in 2012 by the U.S. Department of Education. Drawing on research, promising practices from thought leaders, interviews with stakeholders, and data compiled from a needs assessment, CEELO tailored the Academy to emerging leaders responsible for early education programming who had a track record of accomplishments. To date, CEELO has offered the intensive Leadership Academy to 21 leaders across 15 states.

The most notable unique features are as follows:

- Participants experience an **intensive, year-long opportunity** to work with national leaders, peers, and coaches that leads to stronger networks among early childhood leaders across the country.
- Fellows participate in readings, complete job-embedded projects, receive coaching, engage in journaling and reflections, learn from peers and national experts, engage in team-building through structured and fun activities.
- The Academy curriculum is tailored to **early learning specialists working in state government** to account for the unique challenges and opportunities of emerging leaders working within political and bureaucratic contexts. The curriculum offers Fellows opportunities to learn about Results Based Leadership and Accountability approaches used across state agencies, how to engage others by understanding their dispositions through taking and reviewing personal assessments such as the Myers-Briggs, what strategic communication strategies are most effective, and how to manage projects during times of change and learn about their own personal styles that are most effective through journaling and reflection.

- The Academy offers Fellows the opportunity to **apply lessons through a job-embedded project** that each applicant articulated prior to participation. These projects are chosen by Fellows and designed to effect specific changes within their state agencies. With experts and one another, reflection on the project during in person interactive sessions, reflective journaling, and coaching, Fellows were encouraged to consider how to apply lessons learned from the job-embedded project to their leadership role within their state agencies.
- **Coaches**, former state specialists with decades of experience navigating early childhood leadership challenges and managing publicly funded programs, **provide each Fellow with regular support and feedback**. The coaches offer each Fellow a “thought partner” by engaging in reflective coaching that is designed to support ongoing growth and development. Through regular support, coaches help Fellows practice skills learned during in-person meetings to support development of leadership competency

WHAT CEELO EXPECTED

CEELO designed the Leadership Academy with the aim of achieving specific, measurable outcomes. The objectives are to support participants so they are better positioned to:

- Improve the effectiveness of publicly-funded programs for children from birth through age five
- Improve the implementation of state policies and initiatives that improve pre-Kindergarten through third grade teaching and learning opportunities
- Increase partnerships with state leaders and organizations to build a more unified, equitable, and efficient birth through third grade state early childhood system

WHAT THE RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW DOCUMENTED

A senior technical assistance provider and consultant to CEELO designed a review with the aim of describing the unique aspects of the CEELO Leadership Academy, gathering stakeholder perspectives on how the Academy informed participants’ leadership capacity, and in turn, how the participants (called Fellows) have used the knowledge, skills and experiences from the Leadership Academy to improve the capacity of their respective state offices of early learning to better target their work to improve early learning outcomes.

Fellows reported that the Leadership Academy led to improvements in their personal leadership as well as outcomes for their states. Specifically, the Fellows reported that participation. . .

- Increased knowledge, skills, and competencies as a leader
- Enhanced understanding of racial equity
- Expanded their professional network

- Enhanced their professional voices
- Provided a chance to share expertise with others
- Increased their confidence as leaders
- Contributed to their professional growth and development
- Informed the conceptualization, refinement, and/or implementation of early childhood policies

Participants in the retrospective study reported that the Leadership Academy improved outcomes for the participating fellows and led to some improvements in state education agency capacities. Specifically, all (100%) of the survey respondents reported that the Leadership Academy had a strong impact on their leadership knowledge, skills and competencies and increased their confidence as a leader. Less than half reported that their participation in the Academy had a strong impact on their understanding of racial equity. This is not surprising as the issue of racial equity was introduced to the third cohort of Fellows but not the previous cohorts. Additionally, the study participants reported that the Leadership Academy's design toward continuous quality improvement led to enhancements of future Leadership Academies through recommendations and feedback. This process allowed for adjustments to benefit subsequent cohorts and enhancements to the curricula such as adding-in a more intensive content focus on equity.

Lessons Learned

Despite highly favorable perceptions of the Leadership Academy, several study participants recommended changes that could improve future Leadership Academies. Based on analysis data collected for this study, we recommend CEELO consider the following changes to future Leadership Academies:

- Create an explicit Theory of Change to both demonstrate results-based leadership and to succinctly communicate the links between Leadership Academy activities and intended short- and longer-term outcomes
- Develop an evaluation that includes baseline data collection, follow-up, and final data collection and analysis
- Provide participants with information regarding the overall curriculum for the year and expected follow-up activities
- Incorporate Leadership Academy tools, strategies, and processes into technical assistance and CEELO's work of building state education agency capacity
- Explore options to expand additional opportunities to offer a Leadership Academy specifically for senior leaders

- Investigate the possibility of allowing teams of participants to attend the Leadership Academy

Additional findings from coaches and faculty were also captured. Please review the ***Leadership Academy Retrospective*** for more detail.

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR FUTURE LEADERSHIP ACADEMIES

As managers of this flagship project, CEELO directors have always applied a process of continuous quality improvement to the Academy, and changes are made that reflect this ongoing process. CEELO's Leadership Academy Cohort 4 launched in April 2018 and will continue through March of 2019. CEELO hopes that these future leaders will become strong advocates and managers to create effective policies impacting children aged birth-grade 3.

Reports from both fellows and their supervisors illustrate that participation in the Leadership Academy encouraged growth in personal leadership and enhanced capacities of state education agencies to advance early learning priorities.

About CEELO

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) strengthens the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO works in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability. For other *CEELO Policy Reports, Policy Briefs, and FastFacts*, go to <http://ceelo.org/ceelo-products>.

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