

*Supporting Early Childhood  
Teachers through the use of  
Professional Learning  
Communities*

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## **Early Childhood Overview for School Administrators**

The first five years of life are vital to later learning. Key findings from a report by the Rand Corporation indicate that high-quality early childhood programs produce benefits in academic achievement, behavior, delinquency, and labor market success for those who participate. The study also points out that high-quality early childhood programs generate a return to society “ranging from \$1.80 to \$17.07 for each dollar spent on the program.” (Rand Corporation, 2005). Children who miss out on opportunities during the early years are often at risk for school failure.

An increasing number of early childhood programs are housed in elementary schools making it important for school principals and administrators to be knowledgeable about high-quality early childhood programs. A significant consideration in the school improvement plan is how to address specifics regarding quality services to young children with and without disabilities. Further, leaders can ensure that early childhood educators receive ongoing professional development by establishing professional learning communities within the school. The use of professional learning communities is a proven approach for enhancing teacher knowledge, improving teaching skill and sustaining recommended instructional practices. (Further information on learning communities begins on p. 13.)

This TACTic provides a brief overview of the elements for high-quality early childhood education programs. Part I describes several proven models of early childhood education that have had significant positive impact on children at risk for school failure. Part II includes suggestions for ongoing professional development that can be implemented by school principals and administrators in support of early childhood professionals.

## **Part I: Proven Models of Early Childhood Education**

### **High/Scope**

The High/Scope Perry Preschool longitudinal study randomly divided subjects into two groups; one that received a high-quality preschool program based on High/Scope's participatory learning approach and a comparison group that received no preschool program. In the study's most recent phase, 97% of the study participants still living were interviewed at age 40. Additional data were gathered from the subjects' school, social services, and arrest records. The study found that adults at age 40 who attended the Perry preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool. In an interview (Brandt, 1986) that addressed how a preschool program could lead to long-term effects such as committing fewer crimes, study author Lawrence Schweinhart suggested a possible influence when he stated, "...High Scope programs gave children a measure of control over classroom activities, which may have led to greater individual responsibility and initiative" (p. 17).

### **High/Scope Components**

1. A child development educational model
2. Low enrollment limits, with a teaching team assigned to each group of children
3. Staff trained in early childhood development
4. Supervisory support and in-service training for a child development educational model
5. Involvement of parents as partners with program staff
6. Sensitivity to the non-educational needs of the child and family
7. Developmentally appropriate evaluation procedures

(Retrieved July 10, 2007 from:

<http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>)

## **Abecedarian**

The Abecedarian project was a carefully controlled scientific study of the potential benefits of early childhood education for poor children. The Abecedarian Project began with children in early infancy whereas other programs began at age 2 or older, and children had five years of exposure to early education in a high-quality child care setting whereas most other programs were of shorter duration.

The Abecedarian project found that:

- Children who participated in the early intervention program had higher cognitive test scores from the toddler years to age 21.
- Academic achievement in both reading and math was higher from the primary grades through young adulthood.

Intervention children completed more years of education and were more likely to attend a four-year college.

(Retrieved July 10, 2007 from: [http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/#major\\_findings](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/#major_findings))

The Rand Corporation (2005) identified several effective early childhood intervention programs.

<b>Home Visiting or Parent Education Combined with Early Childhood Education</b>
Carolina Abecedarian Project Chicago Child-Parent Centers Early Head Start Early Training Project Head Start High/Scope Perry Preschool Project Houston Parent-Child Development Center Infant Health and Development Program Project CARE — with early childhood education Syracuse Family Development Research Program

## **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**

NAEYC (1997) offers a position statement on developmentally appropriate practice with guidelines for making decisions about developmentally appropriate practice for quality early childhood education programs. Guidelines include:

1. Teachers respect, value, and accept children and treat them with dignity at all times
2. Teachers make it a priority to know each child well
3. Teachers create an intellectually engaging, responsive environment to promote each child's learning and development
4. Teachers make plans to enable children to attain key curriculum goals across various disciplines, such as language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health
5. Teachers foster collaboration with peers on interesting and important enterprises
6. Teachers develop, refine, and use a wide repertoire of teaching strategies to enhance children's learning and development
7. Teachers facilitate the development of responsibility and self-regulation in children.

Early childhood professionals can refer to NAEYC guidelines as they examine their practices for program improvement. Visit [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org) for further information.

## **Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC)**

The Division for Early Childhood embraces the NAEYC guidelines and has also developed recommended practices in early intervention and early childhood special education (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). DEC identifies five strands listed below that relate to direct services for young children.

- 1. Assessment:** includes collaborating with families to identify their resources, concerns, and priorities related to their child's development and using multiple measures to assess child status, progress, and program outcomes. Professionals rely on materials that capture the child's authentic behaviors in routine circumstances.
  
- 2. Child-Focused Practices:** includes designing environments to promote children's active engagement, learning, participation, safety, and membership. Teachers individualize and adapt practices for each child based on ongoing data collection to meet children's changing needs. Teachers, use systematic procedures within and across environments, activities, and routines to promote children's learning and participation.
  
- 3. Family-Based Practices:** includes formal and informal supports that are needed by families to promote their child's development. Also consists of how those supports and resources are provided.
  
- 4. Interdisciplinary Models:** include consultative practices from four specific disciplines (i.e. early childhood special education, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech-language therapy). The interdisciplinary model refers to individuals from the various disciplines working together. Going a step further, a transdisciplinary model is defined, in part, as "team members share responsibilities and information

to the extent that one team member can assume the role of another” (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005, p. 306).

**5. Technology Applications:** includes recommendations in three areas of technology: 1) assistive, 2) instructional and educational, 3) informational. Assistive technology should be considered for every child with disabilities according to the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act (IDEA).

To ensure that early childhood special educators are apprised of all the DEC recommended practices, refer them to the publication entitled *DEC Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/ Early Childhood Special Education* (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005) and to [www.dec-sped.org](http://www.dec-sped.org).

### **National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)**

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) endorses NAEYC's criteria for early childhood programs. Based on NAEYC criteria and the Head Start performance standards, NAESP (2005) has developed a list of characteristics of high-quality early childhood program, as follows:

- Supportive interactions between teachers and children
- Safe, supportive and engaging learning environments
- Focus on the whole child
- Meaningful learning for the individual child
- A culture of authentic assessment and continuous learning
- Connections to families and community organizations
- Effective administration.

The ideal for young children’s learning as outlined by NAESP (2005) includes programs that are:

- Available to all three-, four- and five-year-olds in every community;
- Grounded in sound early childhood development practices like investigation and play;

- Guided by ongoing classroom-based assessment, rather than by an over-reliance on norm-referenced testing;
- Funded to serve young children well;
- Designed to support young children’s varied learning needs, languages and cultures;
- Part of a continuum of learning that extends from pre-K through third grade with a strong transition to the start of fourth grade;
- Operated by schools or other community organizations, with communication and shared expectations between schools and the communities they serve;
- Designed to provide full-day options for working families (NAESP, 2005, p. 2).

Principals and school administrators may wish to consider utilizing the NAESP characteristics of high-quality early childhood programs as well as the following standards when developing the school improvement plan.

### **NAESP’s Standards for Early Childhood Education**

**Standard One:** Embrace high-quality early childhood programs, principles and practices as the foundation for education throughout the school community.

**Standard Two:** Work with families and community organizations to support children at home, in the community and in pre-K and kindergarten programs.

**Standard Three:** Provide appropriate learning environments for young children.

**Standard Four:** Ensure high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster young children’s learning and development in all areas.

**Standard Five:** Use multiple assessments to create experiences that strengthen student learning.

**Standard Six:** Advocate for universal opportunity for children to attend high-quality early childhood education programs (NAESP 2005, p.8-9).

Following is a brief overview that outlines what administrators of early childhood programs look for to help identify high-quality early childhood environments, instruction and curriculum.

### **Appropriate Learning Environments**

#### **A few things to look for:**

- Physical Space
  - Space is divided into interest areas
  - Quiet areas and noisy areas are in different sections of the room
  - There are clearly defined places for large groups, small groups and individuals
- Materials
  - There are clearly designated spaces for learning materials that are accessible to children
  - Materials introduce children to curriculum content
  - Materials are rotated on a regular basis
  - Literacy materials are evident in each interest area
- Schedule
  - Challenging activities are in the morning
  - There is at least 60 minutes of choice-time
  - Quiet activities are balanced with noisy activities
  - Child-directed activities are balanced with teacher-directed activities (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1999 and Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002)

## High Quality Instruction and Curriculum

### What to look for:

NAEYC (2005) identified the following areas as being vital to children's learning:

- Social-emotional development
- Language development
- Literacy development
- Mathematics
- Technology, scientific inquiry and knowledge
- Understanding ourselves and our communities
- Creative expression and appreciation for the arts
- Physical development and skills

Curriculum is based on outcomes and should provide teachers with a framework for choosing learning experiences and materials.

Indicators of effective curriculum are:

- Active engagement of children
- Clear goals
- Evidence-based
- Investigation and focused, intentional teaching
- Built on prior learning and experiences
- Comprehensive
- Beneficial

(Retrieved July 18, 2007 from:

<http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSDAP98.PDF>)

Teachers should use the curriculum framework to plan coherent classroom experiences. They should consider children's development to determine the sequence and pace of learning and should make connections to prior learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006).

Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning provide standards for pre-K programs in Literacy, Mathematics, Science, and History and Social Science. According to the Virginia Department of Education, "The purpose of this document, then, is to provide early childhood educators a set of minimum standards in literacy,

mathematics, science, and history and social science with indicators of success for entering kindergarten based on scientifically based research. The standards reflect a consensus of children's conceptual learning, acquisition of basic knowledge, and participation in meaningful and relevant learning experiences.” (Virginia Department of Education, 2005, p. 7). Teachers should consider how these standards can be used as a tool in developing curriculum and meaningful classroom activities.

(Retrieved July 18, 2007 from:

[http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/Elem\\_M/FoundationBlocks.pdf](http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/Elem_M/FoundationBlocks.pdf))

Finally, through an initiative of the Virginia Governor's office called The Alignment Project, a team headed by the Virginia Department of Social Services recently developed the Milestones of Child Development. This is a comprehensive set of child development indicators as well as strategies for adults to use in order to support the growth and development of young children from birth to kindergarten entry. The milestones are organized by the following domains: social and emotional; approaches to learning; language and literacy; cognition and general learning; fine arts; and physical development and health.

(Retrieved August 25, 2007 from:

<http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/cc/publications.cgi>)

**Part 2:**  
**Developing Professional**  
**Learning Communities**

## **An Overview of Professional Learning Communities**

A promising improvement strategy for both teaching quality and student learning is developing the ability for school personnel to function as learning communities. Richard DuFour (2005), a previous school principal and a nationally recognized educational consultant, identifies key characteristics of a professional learning community. Characteristics include powerful collaboration and a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. From multiple studies, researchers have concluded that when teachers engage regularly in authentic collaborative work focused on explicit, common learning goals their collaboration pays off richly in the form of higher quality solutions to instructional problems, increased teacher confidence, and gains in student achievement.

Important characteristics of a true learning community include disciplined professional collaboration as well as ongoing assessment. Schmoker (2005) cites previous studies on successful learning communities and differentiates them from grade-level teams and other collaborative arrangements found most commonly in schools. In order for teachers to learn best from each other collaboration cannot be casual or general. Instead, Schmoker (2005) notes, it is characterized by “frequent, continuous, and increasingly *concrete* and *precise* talk about teaching and practice...and capable of *distinguishing one practice and its virtue from another*” (p.141-142).

The school principal plays an important role in creating professional learning communities. Mike Schmoker (2005) clarifies this important role when he states:

The leader’s function is to provide opportunities for teachers to work together in self-managing teams to improve their own instruction, always with the expectation for improved learning. The principal’s job is to monitor, discuss, and support teachers’ progress in achieving higher levels of student learning on both short-term and annual assessments. This is the best use of his or her valuable time (p.147).

Following are guidelines for creating a professional learning community within a school. Specific examples for early childhood learning teams are included.

## **Developing Professional Learning Communities**

The information on the following pages about professional learning communities has been adapted and reprinted with permission:

Wald, P.J., & Castleberry, M.S. (2000). *Educators as learners: creating a professional learning community in your school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a world- wide community of educators advocating sound policies and sharing best practices to achieve the success of each learner.

### **Establishing a Staff Development Plan Consistent with the School Improvement Plan**

**Step One:** Identify areas of staff competencies and needs

- Staff members look at their own strengths as well as interests and needs for professional development
- Reflect on potential areas for growth

<p>Questions to Identify Areas for Professional Growth</p> <hr/> <p>What do I need to grow to contribute to the realization of the school's vision? What do I need to learn?</p>
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**Step Two:** Staff members share their interests through formal and/or informal means, searching for common interests among the group.

A question to ask could be, “What do you need to know in order to increase your capacity to offer high-quality early education programs to young children and families?”

- Participants write ideas/interests on post-it notes
- Share ideas in round-robin format
- Cluster similar ideas together
- “Title” each cluster (pp. 43-44)

**Step Three:** Specific topics of study are selected based on common collective needs and interests. (Refer to clusters identified in Step 2.) Collaborative learning teams are self-organized around topics that are meaningful to participants.

- Membership is open to ALL-instructional assistants, specialists, administrators
- Membership is voluntary
- Membership is flexible

## **STAGES OF THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROCESS**

(Adapted from Wald, P.J., & Castleberry, M.S., 2000, pp. 47-58.)

### **Stage One: Define**

- Create shared meaning about the study topic and define terms

#### **Promoting Shared Meaning**

“Can you help me understand your thinking?”

“Am I correct in saying that you think\_\_\_\_\_?”

“What do you think about what I said?”

- Refine the topic of study
- Formulate a question that focuses on the topic
- Share the topic with the rest of the school

**Formulating a Study Topic**  
“What can we do differently?”  
“How can we increase our capacity in this area?”

*Example: Individual staff members identify the need to learn more about evidence or research-based practices in early literacy. The question might be, “What does the research say regarding early literacy instruction in preschool?”*

### **Stage Two: Explore**

- Develop a Game Plan

This stage takes a significant amount of time as team members identify current practices and explore new practices they want to consider for implementation.

**Identifying Current Practice**  
\*What are we currently doing?  
\*What theories and assumptions guide our actions?

*Example: The staff might, through a round robin format or other means, identify what the current literacy practices are in their early childhood classrooms and explain both the strengths and areas they wish to improve.*

- Look for New Ideas
  - Observe other early childhood classrooms
  - Interview experts

- Research and read (consider materials from the T-TAC ODU library, [www.ttac.odu.edu](http://www.ttac.odu.edu), including other TACTics for early childhood educators)
- Attend conferences
- Network with peers

**Exploring New Ideas**

What new ideas did we learn about?  
 Do we need more information about any of these new ideas?  
 Where will we search for more information?  
 What theories and assumptions are behind the ideas?

*Example: Staff might break into subcommittees to search for more information. One subcommittee might explore model sites, another might look for information on research-based practices in the area of early literacy and still another could explore conferences or communicate via email with early literacy experts.*

- Refine the Question

**Sharing Insights and Honing the Question**

What did we learn?  
 What do we want to continue to explore?  
 What question will best guide our work?

*Example: The team comes back together and discusses findings. They determine whether they are using research-based practices. They decide whether to continue with the original question or revise.*

*They might decide to ask, “How can we incorporate research-based practices in our early literacy instruction?”*

**Stage Three: Experiment**

- o Design an action plan based on the question and assumptions

In this third stage, the team decides the specific actions they want to take as they implement new ideas. It is helpful to use a planning form (see Figure 1) as a means to facilitate discussion and an action plan (See Figure 2) to specify action steps, team member responsibilities, and to record results which will ensure progress monitoring.

<p>TEAM QUESTION: How can we incorporate research-based practices into our early literacy instruction?</p>				
Challenges	Strengths	New Ideas	Continue to investigate	Next steps

Figure 1. Discussion Chart for Exploring Stage  
(Adapted from “Exploration Grid” in Wald & Castleberry, 2000, p.52.)

*Example:* The team could use the chart to organize answers to the questions they initially posed. The team identifies challenges to using specific research-based practices and, in the strengths column, they clarify what is currently working. Next, list new ideas gathered from the research phase. In the last two columns identify what else the team needs to know in order to plan for next steps

and implement new instructional strategies in the classroom. Create an action plan (See Figure 2) that outlines specific implementation steps.

ACTION PLAN GRID				
What do we want to do?	What actions do we need to take?	Who is responsible for each action?	By when?	Observation/Results
<p><i>Implement research-based literacy instruction in the early childhood classrooms</i></p> <p><i>Collect assessment data on children's stages of early literacy</i></p>	<p><i>Organize classrooms so that all selected approaches to literacy instruction are incorporated</i></p> <p><i>Increase daily literacy activities</i></p> <p><i>Add literacy materials/activities to all interest areas</i></p>	<p><i>Ms. Doe</i> <i>Mr. French</i> <i>Mrs. Dell</i></p>	<p><i>November 1</i></p>	<p><u><i>Review how changes are working during subsequent meetings</i></u></p> <p><u><i>Review data</i></u></p> <p><u><i>Revise plan accordingly</i></u></p>

Figure 2. Action Plan Grid (Adapted from Wald & Castleberry, 2000, p. 55.)

- Observe and document results
  - Team members ask, “Since the changes have been implemented what is currently happening?”
  - Document with photos, video, anecdotal records, student work samples, interviews, etc.

## **Stage Four: Reflect**

- Individual reflection – provides ideas for team reflection, therefore an ideal starting point for the reflective process.
- Team reflection- consider multiple perspectives, identify what was learned is Stage 3.
- Look at results and consider how the actual results compare with the expected results.

<b>Questions for Reflection</b>
<hr/>
<u>Individual</u> What did I learn? What has changed as a result of what I learned?
<u>Group</u> Were intended results achieved?

*Example: The team reflects individually by writing down answers to above questions or through the use of 3-2-1 Reflection: 3 things I learned, 2 things I want to pursue, 1 question I have. Then team members report on their reflections in order to answer the group reflection questions.*

## **Stage Five: Share**

- Team members communicate their insights, discuss their learning process, and share the knowledge they have gained. Groups might share through PowerPoint presentations, formal or informal discussion groups, poster sessions or other written formats.
- Members of the larger school team provide input and feedback.

<b>Questions to Guide Sharing</b>
What has the learning team accomplished? How did the team do it? What effect does the change have on our school, students, and families? What's next?

During stage five, teams also reflect on the overall experience of professional development within a learning community. Such reflection on the collaborative learning process is an important part of the on-going professional development that occurs in a professional learning community. Team members should be encouraged to take time to examine and refine their ability to learn collaboratively.

**Reflection Questions**

What did we learn about professional growth and development using a team learning process?

How has this process helped us to provide high-quality services to young children and their families?

Learning as a school community, as described above, is a powerful way to support the professional development of early childhood educators. When teachers and staff work together to improve student learning by engaging in joint-study of research-based and recommended practices, the result is improved educational services and better outcomes for young children and their families.

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