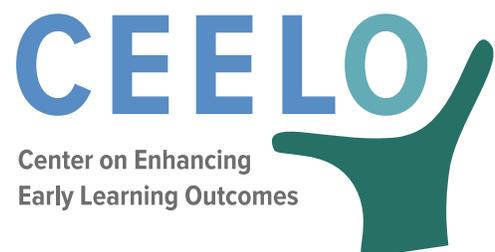


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CEELO Leadership Professional Learning Community-Final Report

Final Report

by Jim Squires and Penny Milburn



Summary

During 2017 – 2018, CEELO conducted a professional learning community (PLC) to support leadership development among newly appointed, high-level leaders of early education in state education agencies. The goal of the PLC was for participants to increase awareness, gain critical knowledge and develop leadership skills needed to guide highly effective offices of early learning within state education agencies.

Prior to the first webinar, participants completed an initial self-assessment of their individual and collective leadership skills based on the framework of CEELO's online Early Childhood Leadership Toolkit which provided the coaches with information to plan PLC activities. Designed and led by two former SEA early learning directors, the year-long program provided individualized executive coaching sessions on a monthly basis, quarterly webinars, and an in-person meeting in coordination with a national conference for state early education leaders. The self-assessment was completed a second time at the conclusion of the PLC to measure perceived growth and confidence, with participants reporting the PLC significantly contributed to their increased knowledge about state level early education systems and ability to provide leadership for their departments.

Highlights

- CEELO staff with SEA leadership experience developed a “Leadership Toolkit” sharing essential knowledge, skills and behaviors that benefit new leaders
- CEELO's PLC met participants' needs without burdening their calendars via webinars, monthly individual coaching calls, and one gathering
- Isolation was a common complaint among these new leaders, and the PLC provided needed support as they made the transition to upper-level roles
- Participants described the PLC as a worthwhile experience expanding their supportive network of similarly positioned leaders
- Participants reported greater confidence in their capacity to lead their offices of early learning, collaborate across agencies, and maximize resources to support their professional growth and effectiveness

“This PLC has been my professional lifeline over the past year. Knowing I could turn to my coach or colleagues who ‘get it’ at any time made a huge difference for me as a new leader.”

Background

A primary goal of the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes ([CEELO](#)) is to “increase leadership and organizational capacity within state education agencies (SEA) to implement effective early childhood programs and policy.” Early education, typically addressing preschool through third grade (P-3) education or, in some states, beginning with prenatal interventions, has been elevated to the “main stage,” taking on heightened importance and urgency as a proven, research-based component of comprehensive education reform at federal, state and local levels. As the more traditional paradigm of K-12 thinking expands to include the years prior to kindergarten, the need for well-informed and effective leadership within SEAs has never been greater.

Turnover within SEAs at upper leadership levels typically has been significant, particularly among leaders within state offices of early learning (SOELs). From its inception, CEELO has used a multi-pronged approach to cultivate and support multi-level leadership within SEAs, specifically through the CEELO [Leadership Academy](#) for emerging, mid-level leaders (currently in its fourth year); the leadership-focused [National Roundtable](#) Conference in partnership with the National Association of Early Childhood Education Specialists in State Departments of Education ([NAECS-SDE](#)); and intensive, state-specific technical assistance.

CEELO recognized many states had new people assuming the top-level role of director of their state early learning offices, a situation that escalated in recent years. Despite the best intentions, people assuming these high-profile roles often lacked “the complete package” of skill to enable them to “hit the ground running” for effectively advancing early education initiatives or policies despite high expectations of supportive governors, legislatures, superintendents, or the public. The complex, complicated early education system requires leaders who possess a combination of content expertise, knowledge of state and local government operations and culture, and experience and relationships within and across state agencies and organizations to maximize resources and opportunities. Too often, new directors came to their positions with exceptional expertise and skill in select areas but not necessarily the broad base of knowledge needed to satisfy the demands they were about to encounter. To exacerbate this situation, most SEAs lacked a functional orientation process and support system to facilitate a reasonable transition into the new leadership position.

Project Description and Desired Outcomes

Capitalizing on both its national reach and staff members’ experiences as former SEA early childhood education directors, CEELO addressed this need to support new directors of SOELs using a cost-effective and intentional approach by both creating an online [Early Childhood Education Leadership Toolkit](#) as a resource to address the

unique demands of SEA leaders and forming a nine-month Leadership Professional Learning Community (PLC) for newly appointed top-level directors. The purpose of the Toolkit was to provide a suite of information and resources addressing essential, early childhood specific content, skills, and behaviors for new leaders that could be readily accessed to both promote awareness and sustain effectiveness to advance early learning opportunities for all children. Using the CEELO Leadership Toolkit as a primary resource, CEELO invited newly appointed directors to engage in a peer-learning experience for purposes of strengthening their knowledge, skills and behaviors and developing an ongoing national network of colleagues for shared professional growth and mutual support.

CEELO Leadership Toolkit

Recognizing there is no single pathway to becoming an early education leader in SEAs, CEELO staff with prior SEA leadership experience identified essential knowledge, skills and behaviors that benefit new leaders. Categorized into separate sections of Personal and Collective Leadership, brief descriptions are provided on numerous topics along with suggested resources and activities for additional learning. The Toolkit provides asynchronous accessibility, permitting leaders to access information at any time based on specific needs.

To familiarize leaders and other online users with the content and simplify navigation through the resource, the Toolkit begins with a [Leadership Needs Assessment](#) which every user is encouraged to complete. Further, users are encouraged to contact their CEELO liaison for additional information and technical assistance with applying the resource directly to their specific situation.

Design of the Leadership Professional Learning Community

CEELO developed the Early Childhood Education Leadership Professional Learning Community (PLC) knowing there was a shared interest on SEA leadership among different participants new to their positions. New leaders from Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, North Dakota, and Tennessee were identified and invited—and all accepted. The PLC was led by former SEA early childhood education directors and Past-Presidents of NAECS-SDE, CEELO Senior Fellow Jim Squires (VT) and Consultant Penny Milburn (IA).

The PLC used three approaches to engage participants in the content and practice of the information: quarterly webinars, monthly individualized executive coaching calls, and one in-person meeting in conjunction with the CEELO Leadership Academy and National Roundtable. Topics for all meetings and coaching calls were based on results of participants' leadership self-assessment surveys, allowing targeted content delivery and individualized attention while facilitating a collaborative learning experience. Group discussions during webinars and in-person meetings incorporated a Problem/

Opportunity of Practice method to ensure relevance and model techniques applicable when working with their state staff and partners.

Webinar 1: Introduction to Leadership in a SEA, Levels of Leadership, Problems of Practice as Opportunities for Learning, Achieving Competence, the CEELO Leadership Toolkit

Webinar 2: Management or Leadership, Leadership Boundaries, High-performing State Offices of Early Learning, Aligned Contributors and Contributions

Webinar 3: Data and Results-based Accountability, Results-based Leadership and Facilitation, Mental Models, Action Commitments

Webinar 4: Ingredients for Improvement, Collective Leadership Cycle, Revisiting Levels of Leadership

The first face-to-face meeting of participants was held in conjunction with the CEELO [Leadership Academy](#) for emerging mid-level leaders in Austin, Texas in advance of the CEELO [National Roundtable](#). At this time, participants had the opportunity to meet directly with their coaches. Topics addressed during this gathering included: The Power of Perception in Individual Leadership; The Imposter Syndrome in State Leadership; Effective Communication; and The Collective Leadership Cycle--Planning, Action & Results. In addition to individualized coaching time, participants also engaged in focus group discussions with Leadership Academy Fellows as part of CEELO's [Legacy 2030 Project](#) exploring the next decade of early childhood education from state early learning leaders' perspectives.

A keystone of the Leadership PLC was highly focused, individualized executive coaching calls held monthly between participants and coaches. Monthly communication proved to be critical given the rapidly evolving and shifting nature of participants' growth in response to ever-changing political and programmatic landscapes. Coaching logs were maintained to ensure continuity, and participants progressively assumed greater responsibility each month for designing the agenda of the call to address pertinent matters, applying the framework of the Toolkit to their personal leadership goals and growth.

Evaluation

CEELO conducted both formative and summative evaluations of the Leadership PLC. The formative approach was used by project leaders as a regular part of their weekly calls. Discussions examined evolving needs and goals of participants to ensure appropriate resources and support were provided during monthly coaching calls, as well to address shared concerns through Toolkit resources and other means during webinars and the face-to-face meeting. The summative approach was conducted by a trained evaluator who administered a survey of participants, interviewed participants and coaches, and reviewed documents such as a pre-/post-PLC assessment using the Leadership Self-assessment Tool, coaching logs, and webinar materials.

Participant Reflections

Overall, participants found the PLC to be particularly beneficial as they assumed new levels of leadership. They acknowledged the unique nature of the role accompanied by high expectations with little or no SEA guidance available. Participants reported that a model of this type tailored to the demands faced by new leaders is needed.

Participants acknowledged their own “ignorance and unconscious incompetence” while trying to learn agency structure, cope with a dizzying pace of work, address shifting and competing priorities, and navigate internal and external politics. Isolation was a common complaint among these new leaders, and the PLC provided them with needed support as they made the transition to upper-level roles.

Several times throughout the PLC, some participants found it difficult to engage as fully as they would have liked. Demands from governors’ offices, state superintendents, legislatures, their staff, and stakeholders occasionally prevented participation in webinars or even the single face-to-face meeting. Despite these challenges, they were still able to take advantage of individual coaching on a regular basis. Flexibility and persistence by coaches, along with periodic group email messaging, ensured ongoing communication throughout the PLC.

The initial goal of the Leadership PLC, to “increase leadership and organizational capacity within state education agencies (SEA) to implement effective early childhood programs and policy,” appears to have been met as demonstrated by leaders’ increased knowledge, skills, and actions. More importantly, leaders reported greater confidence in their capacities to lead their offices of early learning, collaborate across agencies and organizations, and maximize resources to support and advance their professional growth and effectiveness.

Comments from Participants

Participants uniformly reported the PLC as a worthwhile experience providing “just-in-time” individualized coaching and learning while expanding their supportive network of

similarly positioned leaders. Following are participants' comments about the value they gained from the PLC:

"I am very thankful for the coaching and networking opportunity that has been afforded to me. Everyone needs a good mentor and lifeline as they move in to new phases of leadership. Leadership at the state level is like no other. The webinars, coaching calls, (and) face-to-face meetings have been of significant benefit to me."

"As a new leader, the learning curve had me 'bending over backwards' and it would have been much more difficult had it not been for the support of the coach and this PLC. Having a coach who has been there before was invaluable."

"Through both the leadership toolkit and my participation in the Leadership PLC, I have grown the most in this area of system thinking! I've been able to use the habits of systems thinking with my Office of Early Learning team."

"The collective leadership cycle tool has been most useful! I have used it with my team to help us build out our three-year strategic plan."

"I have learned more about Results-based facilitation and have been incorporating it into my strategic planning with my Office of Early Learning team. The leadership toolkit was also helpful in creating our strategic plan."

"I have learned that the pace never slows down, there will always be more to do, so it's best to prioritize and do fewer things well than to do all things not so well. I have also learned to block time on my calendar for reflection and focused work time."

"The PLC met the Goldilocks Rule. It wasn't too easy or too hard but just right. The combination of webinars, monthly coaching, and shared learning was just the right amount for me as a busy administrator."

"We do not often get the opportunity to engage in most of the leadership topics and issues included in our PLC. With that said, I'm very excited to see where this will lead me."

"This PLC has been my professional lifeline over the past year. Knowing I could turn to my coach or colleagues who 'get it' at any time made a huge difference for me as a new leader."

Lessons Learned for Building Capacity of State Early Education Leaders

Throughout the PLC, and at its completion, co-leaders noted several lessons that underscore the need for such a model, along with key improvements to support replication.

- **On-Board New Leaders.** Despite the best of intentions, SEAs do not provide a proper orientation or comprehensive, ongoing support for new high-level early education leaders to be successful in their new positions. The focus is on “doing and producing results” immediately, often without an understanding of what the position fully entails. This lack of essential resources and support can be a barrier to ensuring stable, consistent leadership necessary for advancing early childhood education. Outside organizations such as CEELO, fill the void across SEAs by providing a short-term, leadership-focused venue for new leaders to learn and collaborate.
- **Tailor the Approach.** Just as there is no singular path for becoming a director of early childhood education in a SEA, there is no “one size fits all” approach for fully preparing and supporting new leaders. Demands on leaders are unique and support must be tailored individually. PLCs must consider both personal and collective growth of individuals and leadership networks.
- **Balance Self and System.** Balancing Individual Leadership with Collective Leadership provided the right mix for participants to examine themselves within a larger system. Tools providing greater insight into the Individual side of the leadership equation such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or StrengthsFinder would be particularly beneficial when resources are available.
- **Commit to Consistency.** Consistent participation is a necessary ingredient to build relationships and form an effective learning community. PLC participants may have the best intentions to engage fully but unforeseen demands may preclude their regular involvement. As coaches flexibly support the growth of individuals, there is also a need to build and support the community. To ensure a critical mass of engaged participants, it may be advisable to begin with a cohort commitment from 6 – 8 participants with the realization that the final PLC may have fewer participants.
- **Connect Participants from the Beginning.** If multiple face-to-face convenings are not possible, arrange one at the start of the PLC –rather than the end. Relationships are critical for a functional PLC and the sooner they can be established, the better. Technology is a useful tool but should not replace personal connections.

- **Match the Program to Their Reality.** Capitalize on participants' pressing, real-life situations by using a Problem of Practice approach as frequently as possible. Though coined as a "problem" of practice, the emphasis should be reframed as an "opportunity for learning and improvement."
- **Provide Credible Coaches.** Coaches who have been in similar positions and experienced similar, real-life challenges lend credibility to the PLC and benefit the coaching relationship by building trust and confidence with participants.
- **Ensure Tools are Ready from the Start.** While it is occasionally necessary to begin a major project such as the Leadership PLC before all the pieces are in place, establish ambitious deadlines for ensuring participants have all necessary resources and tools at their disposal as soon as possible. Delays can become a source of frustration and interfere with leaders' initiative to be more self-reliant in meeting their needs and those of their staff.

Conclusion:

Turnover of state government personnel is a common occurrence which adversely impacts productivity and results. This is particularly true in state offices of early learning when new leaders need to hit the ground running, often in the absence of institutional guidance and support.

The unique nature of early childhood education places demands on new and experienced leaders alike, and efforts to support new leaders in navigating state government is critical.

Through individualized executive coaching and a collaborative learning model as incorporated in the CEELO Leadership PLC, new early education leaders gain valuable knowledge and skills which both ease their transition and support the SEA in achieving its goals for early education.

Resources:

[CEELO Leadership Toolkit](#) and [Self-assessment](#)

[CEELO Leadership Academy](#)

[Building Highly-effective State Offices of Early Learning](#) (CEELO, 2018)

[Additional Leadership Resources](#)

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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