Leadership Development in the South: Where Do We Go From Here?

Poonam S. Ramgopal, Kevin P. Dieterle, Jill Aviles, Barbara McCreedy, and Caroline F. Davis

The field of early care and education continues to change, and strong leadership is needed to ensure that it is moving in the right direction to benefit young children and their families. Early childhood programs face pressure at national, state, and local levels to meet performance standards, increase accountability, ensure efficiency, and offer high-quality services, placing increased demands on leaders.

Well-qualified leaders are needed to ensure that early care and education experts are leading the profession rather than being led by others. Fragmentation and ambiguity often characterize the early childhood field (Abel, Mauzy, Thornburg, & Heger, 2008).

In order to develop strong leaders prepared to meet future challenges, the field must form a unified, articulated vision, mission, and strategic plan of action. “To affect political decision making and exert influence during moments of opportunity, field-wide leadership is needed—leadership that can act with a coordinated voice on behalf of young children and their early care and education” (Goffin & Washington, 2007, p. 8).

Through effective leadership, the early care and education field can be seen as a strong force that holds itself accountable to ensure that children, families, and professionals reach their full potential. This leadership will assure that the field has a strong voice that will be at the table when decisions are being made. Children, families, and early childhood professionals from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds depend on leaders at all levels to take action and make sure that the right decisions are made for the right reasons.

“Because of early care and education’s strong economic and social impact, developing and nurturing leaders in the field is a worthwhile investment” (Munn, 2004, p. 13). States, including SECA states in the South, are urged to respond with strategic plans for identifying and mentoring a rich pool of leaders going forward. These efforts must include coordination and integration of funding, communication plans, and provisions for evaluation.

The Leadership Challenge

A lack of effective leadership can result in a decline in program quality and services for children and families. Cultivating the next generation of early care and education leaders at the national, regional, state, local, and program level is a key element in ensuring that children, families, and early childhood professionals from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds benefit from high-quality services.

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levels is critically important. Strong, well-educated lead teachers, program directors, administrators, and association leaders are needed to build better environments for children and families and the professionals who work with them (Goffin & Washington, 2007).

The early care and education field is increasingly in the public eye (Goffin & Washington, 2007), particularly around child outcomes and the need to ensure that children are ready for school. As a result of the increased exposure to the public domain, the transformation and growth of early care and education is influenced by political and environmental factors.

In order to provide guidance to political decision makers and parents on the most appropriate strategies for preparing children for school, leaders need to be well versed in the research on school readiness and children’s brain development. Likewise, with the increasing emphasis on accountability at the program level requiring compliance with higher standards and criteria, strong, well-informed leaders, accompanied by resources and support, are essential to meet these requirements proactively.

While the importance and value of early education is well established (Barnett, 2008; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008), the importance and value of having well-prepared early education professionals in the United States is often overlooked. As leaders in the field retire and high turnover continues to characterize practitioner positions, the difficulty of achieving qualified, strong, effective early childhood leadership is increasing.

During the last 20 years there have been declining numbers of early childhood staff with formal degrees. Much of the workforce enters the field with no pre-service training or education (Child Care Bureau, 2007a). Low salaries and few benefits make it difficult to make a living as an early education professional and many leave the field in order to find more highly paid careers. Establishing new leadership is difficult when low pay forces even the most dedicated professionals out of the field.

Additionally, center-based early education professionals are unlikely to receive health care as a benefit of their job, and one-fourth earn incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005). Although there is a noticeable difference in pay for center-based professionals with college degrees versus those without a degree, those with college degrees still make far below the average hourly rate of those with college degrees working in other professions (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005).

While some state-funded pre-kindergarten programs pay teacher salaries on par with elementary school teachers, many states do not offer such programs, and consequently, teachers in early education programs are paid well below the state’s average salary. In SECA states:

- child care workers make, on average, $3,000 less annually than the national average for child care workers,
- preschool teachers (excluding special education teachers) make $3,500 less annually than the national average salary for regular education preschool teachers, and
- child care and preschool administrators in SECA states make nearly $5,000 less than the average national annual salary for their profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006).

Leaders are needed to instill the passion, vision, and ongoing development of individual professionals with the intent of mitigating the effect of limited financial compensation. Linking education to increased compensation is an important factor in developing and growing strong leaders in the field of early care and education. Rates of practitioner retention are related to positive work environments that offer appropriate support, salaries, and benefits (Child Care Bureau, 2007b).
How SECA States Develop Leaders

Many states are looking toward the future and implementing changes that will ultimately cultivate and retain early childhood leaders. All SECA states are taking initiatives to raise standards and provide opportunities in response to the growing need for leadership development. Key initiatives across the states include:

- the development of Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs),
- Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) for early childhood programs,
- statewide professional development systems, and
- initiatives for linking education to increased compensation.

While each initiative recognizes the urgency to support emerging and established early childhood leaders, one clear path or program for developing these leaders still does not exist.

ELGs are designed to raise awareness of the stages of children’s development from birth through 5 years. ELGs provide a basis for setting standards for good quality practices and programming. Future leaders in the field must have a thorough understanding of the various stages of development within each domain—and the ways in which young children progress through them—in order to make decisions related to good quality, appropriate programming.

QRISs are designed to raise standards of quality in early childhood programs. They provide an incentive for programs to raise not only the quality of the environment and programming but to also raise expectations for education of classroom and management staff. An expectation for increased education and professional development within a program sends a message that the program, and the state, are looking for leaders committed to their own professional growth in order to bring quality improvements to the field.

Professional development systems are the foundation for growing strong leaders. States can be compelled to make informed decisions about professional development for their early care and education workforce. Today, nearly all states have developed or are working on some type of professional development system. Professional development systems can:

With the increasing emphasis on accountability at the program level requiring compliance with higher standards and criteria, strong, well-informed leaders, accompanied by resources and support, are essential to meet these requirements proactively.
Professional development can no longer rely on random training initiatives, but must be part of a comprehensive delivery system that includes professional development planning and ongoing evaluation. Knowledge gained through classroom experiences must be transferred into increased competencies in the care provided to young children.

An ideal, comprehensive professional development system for early care and education personnel:
- is accessible and based on a clearly articulated framework;
- includes a continuum of training and ongoing supports;
- defines pathways that are tied to licensure, leading to qualifications and credentials; and
- addresses the needs of individual, adult learners (Child Care Bureau, 2007b).

A Call to Action

The field of early care and education is in need of leaders who can act with a coordinated voice on behalf of its professionals, young children, and their families. Without this type of leadership, early care and education initiatives will continually be blocked by the lack of a collective voice.

Early childhood professionals at all levels are expected to work together to bring the importance of early education to the forefront of state and national issues and create a sense of urgency. Together they can establish a national culture that values the early education profession and will support optimal working conditions, higher salaries, greater recognition, and more incentives to stay in the field.

A movement toward universal preschool and a focus on credentials will add legitimacy to the career and encourage salary increases. Opportunity and compensation for professional development will be the rule, rather than the exception, so that all professionals can maintain up-to-date knowledge and continually improve and share their knowledge of best practices.

Statewide leaders are urged to carefully examine their professional development plans to ensure they include an articulate vision for the future and a specific plan of action for getting there.

Planning of effective leadership programs begins with comprehensive and inclusive brainstorming with representative stakeholders from...
across the state and region. This type of strategic planning provides a thoughtful, proactive opportunity to put forward a program that is responsive to possible participant’s needs and interests. It also takes into consideration the range of opportunities and resources in a region or state and develops possible collaborations, partnerships, and sharing of efforts. Strategic planning takes into consideration and anticipates possible barriers, challenges, or obstacles and incorporates solutions and actions to ensure overall program success.

Work together to bring early education to the forefront.

SECA states are encouraged to work to coordinate and integrate the initiatives and lessons learned throughout their states and across the region. “With a professional development system that serves the entire workforce, training require-ments for different sectors can be aligned to help streamline program, trainer, and provider efforts” (Child Care Bureau, 2007b, p. 10).

Policy and direct service programs that work together at the state and local levels can focus on the goal of developing and supporting early childhood leaders. Coordination at this level will:

- provide clear information and leadership pathways;
- eliminate overlap, duplication of services, or barriers;
- maximize funding; and
- reach a greater number of professionals.

Early childhood professionals will then be able to access information on leadership development training and professional development opportunities throughout their state. State initiatives will ideally coordinate their communication efforts and use traditional (newsletters, resource & referral dissemination, local licensing offices) and innovative (Web sites, e-mail alerts, electronic newsletters) means of communication for attracting new and continuing leaders’ participation.

In addition, outreach efforts must include materials written in a variety of languages. Leadership programs and opportunities must be led by speakers of practitioner’s preferred languages in order to fully serve diverse emerging leaders.

Ongoing evaluation is a key component to ensuring that professional development and leadership initiatives are successful. States must identify what data will be tracked and then construct systems to carefully and easily collect accurate and meaningful data. Data collection is tied to initial planning and measures how well a program is meeting the established goals and objectives. Data will provide valuable information on what efforts are successful; what efforts are not working; and what should be continued, altered, eliminated, or replicated across the state.

In summary, this is a critical time to develop effective and responsive leadership initiatives that will support and advance the early childhood profession in the Southern states and across the country. Thoughtful, well-planned, and coordinated efforts will not only launch and support the early childhood profession, but also will directly benefit children and their families. While developing new leadership is a difficult task, it is an essential step toward securing a bright future for the field of early care and education.

References


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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Southern States’ Quality Improvement Initiatives

All SECA states are taking initiatives to raise standards and provide opportunities in response to the growing need for leadership development:
- the development of Early Learning Guidelines (ELGs),
- Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) for early childhood programs,
- statewide professional development systems, and
- initiatives for linking education to increased compensation.

Characteristics of an Ideal, Comprehensive Professional Development System

- is accessible and based on a clearly articulated framework;
- includes a continuum of training and ongoing supports;
- defines pathways that are tied to licensure, leading to qualifications and credentials; and
- addresses the needs of individual, adult learners (Child Care Bureau, 2007).

Early Childhood Salaries in SECA States

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Benefits of Coordination

Policy and direct service programs that work together at the state and local levels can focus on the goal of developing and supporting early childhood leaders. Coordination at this level will
- provide clear information and leadership pathways;
- eliminate overlap, duplication of services, or barriers;
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Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.