



EQUITY IN PRE-K CLASSROOMS

LEARNING LAB SUPPORTS NEW YORK CITY'S EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS

BY HELEN BARAHAL AND HUMBERTO CRUZ

High-quality early childhood education supports later student success. School districts around the country are focusing on their early childhood classrooms, investing in their youngest learners to get better outcomes in the upper grades.

A high-quality early childhood classroom is a bustling place, full of activity and conversation. It's where

children begin to learn the routines, communication skills, and love of learning that support them as they advance in their schooling. School systems need leaders who understand what good early childhood education looks and feels like so some of the tenets of the early grades can make their way into upper elementary grades, middle school, and even high school.

Early childhood education leaders are dedicated, resilient, and

caring professionals. They are master multitaskers, seamlessly transitioning from comforting crying children to managing a plumbing problem; from writing a facilities report to meeting with a family to help them better understand their child's development. But they are often not able to dedicate enough time to their crucial role as instructional leader.

This is a well-documented issue among many school leaders (Hornig et

al., 2010), but may be more evident in early childhood than at other grade levels because often districts don't require instructional leadership training for early childhood leaders nor is professional learning available.

With this in mind, last year the New York City Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education initiated a pilot program called Leader Learning Lab to build the instructional leadership capacity of the city's early education leaders.

The New York City Department of Education serves 1.1 million students from birth through grade 12; about 100,000 of those students are in pre-K or below. In 2014, the Division of Early Childhood Education began expanding its reach to offer pre-K to all 4-year-olds in the city.

The expansion has ramped up in recent years, with the Division of Early Childhood Education now serving children from birth through pre-K in a range of settings, including family child care programs, public elementary schools, New York City Early Education Centers run by community-based organizations, and pre-K centers.

Within this sector, pre-K centers play a unique and important role. Pre-K centers are public schools that only serve 3- and 4-year-olds. Each pre-K center is led by a site coordinator who is an experienced educator but is not required to have a leadership license or training.

Early childhood directors, who oversee multiple pre-K centers and the site coordinators who run them, have

been critical as the city's Department of Education expanded its early childhood footprint with two initiatives focused on early education.

While maintaining high quality in its buildings and classrooms, the department has also focused on issues important to the communities it serves. In some areas, the central issue might be homelessness. In others, it might be immigration. In all communities, there has been an increased focus on racial equity in education.

BUILDING THE LEADER LEARNING LAB

When the Division of Early Childhood Education began creating the Leader Learning Lab, we turned to early childhood directors to co-construct it with us. Early childhood directors, and the assistant principals they work with, report to their district superintendent. There are 32 districts within the city's Department of Education, 17 of which have a total of 91 pre-K centers.

Through conversation with the early childhood directors, we learned that pre-K center site coordinators would benefit from targeted leadership support. Site coordinators lead their buildings and support teaching teams composed of lead teachers and assistant teachers or paraprofessionals.

However, several factors challenge their capacity to be instructional leaders. For example, site coordinators are technically considered teachers within the city's education system and therefore not allowed to evaluate other teachers.



WHAT LEARNING LOOKS LIKE

New Teacher Center designed many of the activities for the site coordinator professional learning and shared drafts with us for input. In one of our first sessions, New Teacher Center previewed a role-play scenario that they wanted to use.

The scenario portrayed a teacher and a coach debriefing something that had happened in the classroom. The pre-K students had been working on self-portraits. One child reached for a light brown crayon for her portrait. Another student stopped her and said, "That color is too light for you." The student handed her a darker brown crayon and giggled. In the role-play, the coach asks the teacher about their response in the moment.

When we initially shared the scenario, the room got quiet. Questions and concerns emerged about elevating race: Was it too early in the year? Would it overshadow the coaching strategies being taught? It was a critical moment for Leader Learning Lab and the collaboration. We knew it was essential to be able to have explicit conversations about race.

In that moment, we allowed people to share, process, and ask critical questions. The group was able to name how racial inequity is perpetuated when we do not give it voice. We were able to connect this imperative with the Division of Early Childhood Education's mission and the Early Childhood Framework for Quality, and anchor the conversation in the needs of New York City's children.

We ultimately used the role-play in the first Leader Learning Lab session. Site coordinators later said that they appreciated the role-play's authenticity, as well as the opportunity to discuss with New Teacher Center's facilitators and their peers.

IDEAS

As we began to flesh out a structure for the program, we considered the supports site coordinators would need to be successful instructional leaders, even without the ability to evaluate others. Collaborating with early childhood directors, we determined that Leader Learning Lab would focus on supporting site coordinators in two areas: instructional coaching and designing and facilitating customized professional learning for their teaching teams, tailored to the site's specific needs and data about program quality and teachers' strengths and areas for growth.

All content would be grounded in the Early Childhood Framework for Quality, the Division of Early Childhood Education's unifying birth-to-5 framework, which outlines high-quality practices for program leaders and teaching teams across the city's early childhood programs. Programs use the framework to guide their practice in a way that advances positive outcomes for all children and families.

Early on in the process, early childhood directors thought about which elements of the framework were most essential for site coordinators to focus on. The group agreed on element 5: *Work collaboratively toward continuous quality improvement.*

They also made a strong case for element 1: *Respect and value differences.* The group expressed a desire to focus on building a culture of trust, especially in the context of cultural diversity and racial equity — something that the entire system has grappled with.

Last year, the department's Office of Equity and Access began implementing professional learning on implicit bias awareness. We know that inequity starts early. For example, Black children are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended than white children. Black children represent about 19% of all preschoolers but account for nearly half of all preschool suspensions (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

After beginning important



Leader Learning Lab launched in fall 2019 with 90 site coordinators.

conversations about these issues in the professional learning, pre-K center staff wanted to continue building on these conversations through Leader Learning Lab.

To help us, we partnered with New Teacher Center, an organization known for its work disrupting educational inequities for systemically underserved students by accelerating educator effectiveness. New Teacher Center was fully committed to co-constructing the program with our early childhood directors. The center brought national expertise and experience, supported and sharpened the focus on racial equity, and helped us move from broad strokes to specifics.

HOW THE LAB WORKS

Together, the Division of Early Childhood Education, New Teacher Center, and early childhood directors decided on a structure for Leader Learning Lab. Over the course of the school year, New Teacher Center would provide four professional learning sessions, through the lens of framework elements 1 and 5, for site coordinators. Each session would focus on building leaders' coaching skills and supporting them in designing professional learning that they would facilitate for their teaching teams.

Between the four sessions, site

coordinators would go back to their buildings and conduct customized professional learning for their own teaching teams. Then they would come together with a smaller group of site coordinators in small professional learning communities to debrief on how their teaching team sessions went and discuss problems of practice.

This sequence — coming together as a large group to learn and practice new skills, then implementing professional learning for their teaching teams, then coming together with the smaller group — supported the site coordinators as they developed their instructional leadership skills.

We launched Leader Learning Lab in fall 2019 with 90 site coordinators. The morning session focused on coaching strategies, including time for site coordinators to work together on role-plays and other interactive experiences. In the afternoon, we focused on designing professional learning. In November, pre-K center staff across the city participated in professional learning designed and facilitated by site coordinators. After the launch, many site coordinators were eager to further explore their roles as instructional leaders.

Site coordinators fine-tuned their skills as facilitators and coaches in two-hour small-group sessions. Emily Whitmore, a senior consultant at New Teacher Center, created space in these sessions for site coordinators to practice coaching language and stances using real examples from their pre-K centers. The small-group sessions allowed site coordinators to build community and find solutions to problems of practice.

“Over the course of the year, the most exciting growth I observed in the site coordinators was a shift in the way I heard them speak about their roles in relation to teacher development,” Whitmore said. “At the start, we received many questions, such as, ‘My teacher won’t do ___, how can I get her to?’ or, ‘I told this team that they need to ___ but I am getting pushback. How can I help them see that they need

to do it?’ By the end of our first year of Leader Learning Lab, I was hearing questions like, ‘How can I help this team collaborate more effectively?’ and even, ‘How can I continue to build a more equitable and inclusive learning community?’ ”

ENTER COVID-19

As the second Leader Learning Lab sessions and forums solidified site coordinators’ learning and our collaboration, the world changed drastically. The COVID-19 virus spread quickly through the city, and we moved all our professional learning online. Site coordinators’ already complex set of responsibilities evolved rapidly as they supported their teaching teams, children, and families remotely.

Not only was New York the epicenter of the epidemic in the U.S., but some of the communities served by pre-K centers were hit the hardest, leaving Black and Latinx families disproportionately affected. As a system, we needed to be sensitive to this reality, not exacerbate the trauma that community members had experienced.

Because of our strong partnership and alignment of mission, New Teacher Center was able to be flexible with content, shifting to virtual spaces and including even more explicit discussions of race and equity as well as strategies for anti-racist leadership.

We added a focus on framework elements 2: *Create safe and positive environments* and 4: *Promote families’ roles as primary caregivers, teachers, and advocates*. Site coordinators maintained their sense of community with each

other and New Teacher Center facilitators through virtual synchronous forums and asynchronous discussion boards on our online professional learning management system.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the first year of Leader Learning Lab, we learned that the right professional learning content matters. The focus on instructional leadership needed to meet site coordinators’ needs. The group wanted explicit support for coaching strategies and designing high-quality professional learning.

For a different group of leaders, the focus might be different, but we listened to what this group asked for. Responsiveness and agility were critical. If we had been too attached to our original plan, not willing to listen and shift, we would have failed. We entered into the project with this attitude and were prepared to make major changes, like moving the whole program online midstream.

And, finally, we saw the power of bringing professionals together. Whether in person or online, the time to brainstorm and collaborate with other professionals was something site coordinators highly valued.

We plan to build on what we have learned and continue to evolve Leader Learning Lab’s content and focus, maintaining the goal of developing early childhood leaders’ skills as instructional leaders. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we had begun discussing what the second year of Leader Learning Lab might look like for our first cohort. That will depend

on what this school year looks like and what will best support those who lead during these historic times.

Amid so much uncertainty, one thing we know for sure is that early childhood leaders will need support more than ever. Leader Learning Lab began as a collaborative program co-constructed by stakeholders and partners. This year will be no different.

While we do not know exactly what Leader Learning Lab will look like, we know that it will continue to be co-constructed and responsive with a focus on equity to help early childhood leaders in New York City support and lead their teams.

REFERENCES

Hornig, E., Klasik, D., & Loeb, S. (2010). Principals’ time use and school effectiveness. *American Journal of Education*, 116(4), 491-523.

U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014, March). *Civil rights data collection: Data snapshot: Early childhood education.* www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-early-learning-snapshot.pdf

Helen Barahal (hbarahal@schools.nyc.gov) is executive director, teaching and learning programs, and Humberto Cruz (hcruz7@schools.nyc.gov) is program quality frameworks manager, policy development and support, in New York City Department of Education’s Division of Early Childhood Education. ■



*Thank you for
being a member.*

learningforward
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION