

# Research Notes

## Support One, Impact Hundreds: Evaluation of a Facilitated Cohort Model of Online Director Training

As the gatekeepers to quality, early childhood directors set the standards and expectations for staff performance, family engagement, and community outreach. Research has consistently shown that the effectiveness of program administrators is directly related to their own level of formal education and specialized training in leadership and management. Unfortunately, few program directors have had specialized training in educational leadership and business management prior to assuming their administrative duties. Comprehensive, online leadership training is one option to ensure that busy directors attain the administrative training they need.

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership conducted an evaluation study to explore the impact of the Aim4Excellence™ facilitated cohort model which was delivered to three successive cohorts in the Quad Cities area of Illinois and Iowa. The study was designed to evaluate the impact of the training experience on the participants, their programs, and the communities in which they work.

### CONTENT AND FORMAT OF TRAINING

The Aim4Excellence training consists of nine, self-paced, online modules that focus on the essential knowledge and skills needed by early childhood program administrators to deliver high-quality services for young children. The curriculum for each module is designed to promote active learning and cognitive engagement through the use of interactive activities, problem-solving tasks, video clips, and scenario-based assignments.

Each module is the equivalent of approximately 16 clock hours (or 1 semester hour) of instruction. The nine modules are: Leading the Way; Recruiting, Selecting, and Orienting Staff; Promoting Peak Performance; Managing Program Operations; Building a Sound Business Strategy; Planning Indoor and Outdoor Environments; Supporting Children's Development and Learning; Creating Partnerships with Families; and Evaluating Program Quality.

Participants were part of a facilitated peer learning group. One of the key components of the Quad Cities Aim4Excellence training experience was the facilitation of learning provided by a cohort leader at monthly, face-to-face meetings held at the participants' centers. These meetings were designed to develop a network of support based on trust and open communication, essential to the development of a community of practice.

### SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

At the time of the evaluation study there were 645 participants from 44 states (plus Canada and Puerto Rico) enrolled in one or more of the Aim4Excellence modules. The 28 early childhood professionals who comprised the sample for this study completed their training experience in one of three facilitated Aim4Excellence cohorts funded by a local community foundation. The majority was female (96%), Caucasian (82%), had a minimum of an associate's degree (75%), and worked in an administrative role (75%). Nearly all of the centers at which the participants worked provided state-funded pre-K (96%) within the context of a full-day,

full-year early care and education program. The centers represented both the for-profit (46%) and the nonprofit (54%) sectors.

One-hour structured phone interviews were conducted with the participants from the three cohorts between December 2011 and May 2012. After transcribing the interviews, a content analysis was done to determine themes in their responses.

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### FINDINGS

The results of the data analysis, summarized below, relate to the key research question explored in this study. What was the impact of the training experience on participants, their centers, and their communities?

#### Impact of Training on Participants

Participants' perceptions of their change in knowledge and skill as a result of their participation in the Aim4Excellence online management training were measured by an Assessment of Learning completed before and after each module. Results of the data

analysis revealed statistically significant changes in professional competence between the pre- and post-assessment for each of the nine modules as well as total knowledge and skill (pretest  $M = 333.17$ , posttest  $M = 609.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Participants were also asked to note personal or professional achievements accomplished since completing the training. One overarching theme emerged—a heightened sense of self-efficacy as a result of completing the training. They were able to achieve goals that they did not previously think possible such as finishing a degree, obtaining the Illinois Director Credential, achieving a higher QRIS rating, or attaining NAEYC program accreditation.

- Eight participants have assumed roles within their centers with expanded leadership responsibilities and five participants have completed additional college coursework since completing the Aim4Excellence training.
- Nearly all participants spoke of a heightened sense of confidence and feeling empowered to take on new challenges. *“I give myself more credit... I used to think of my job as taking care of paperwork. Now, I view myself as a leader and advocate for the early childhood field. I have gone from being a clerk to being a leader.”*

### Impact of Training on Participants' Centers

Participants were asked if they perceived any impact on their centers as a result of participating in the Aim4Excellence training. Content analysis of participant responses clustered in four areas: changes in program operations, changes in the quality of work life for staff, changes in responsiveness to the needs of enrolled families, and perceptions of the value of more than one staff member participating in the Aim4Excellence training.

- All participants described concrete, specific changes made in their early childhood programs as a result of their participation in the Aim4Excellence training. *“We improved the clarity of policies in our employee handbook.” “We now include staff in the interviewing process.” “I have implemented staff evaluations for the first time.” “We increased parent involvement in assessment of both child and program outcomes.” “I have implemented continuous recruitment strategies.” “I have made changes to the orientation policy for both staff and families.” “We are getting paychecks to staff earlier.” “We added staff in the morning and late afternoon to aid in communication with parents.”*

- There was universal agreement on the value added by having more than one staff member participate in the Aim4Excellence training. *“I think having a shared vision is promoted by more than one person participating.” “We speak the same language—we remind each other of lessons learned.” “There are three of us participating in the training; it has definitely served as a platform for mentoring emerging leaders.”*

### Impact of Training on Participants' Communities

Participants were asked if they perceived any impact on their communities in the Quad Cities as a result of 28 participants attaining their Aim4Excellence credential. Two themes emerged related to collaboration and advocacy.

- More than two-thirds of the participants (71%) commented on the enhanced collaboration with other early childhood programs as well as other community service providers. *“We support each other; together we have what it takes to remain in the field. We have a map and a light, a full blown navigational system.” “The community of directors has expanded networking opportunities; we now have an*

*established professional community...now we are partners more than competitors.”*

- One-third of the participants spoke of their increased advocacy efforts. *“I am now more likely to go into the community and spread the word about quality child care... I have presented at the high school about the career potential in early childhood education.” “We now have a common language to explain the importance of our work when we talk to others not in the early childhood field.”*

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study suggest that the Aim4Excellence facilitated cohort model has increased the knowledge and skill of the participants from the Quad Cities, resulting in enhanced confidence and self-efficacy. The personal and professional changes reported appear to have had a measurable impact on the quality of their programs. By supporting the professional growth of a small number of center administrators, hundreds of children and their families have benefited.

One unexpected finding was the universal perception of participants of the value added by having multiple staff members participate in the Aim4Excellence training. This finding highlights the lack of administrative capacity in early childhood programs. Having multiple staff “all on the same page” when it comes to administrative knowledge and skills, appears to provide the director with the back-up and support needed to overcome resistance and lead organizational change efforts.

Further research is needed to assess the impact of the training on the participants' communities and to determine whether the improvements to program quality are sustained over time. This inquiry should consider whether there is a “tipping point” at which support for leadership development results in improved community outcomes.

For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800.443.5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the McCormick Center's *Research Notes* is provided by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.

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