



The Directors Academy: A Case Study

Why Is This Important?

During the first year of their partnerships, many Early Head Start-Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnership grantees learned that partners needed a significant amount of technical assistance around basic program management and operations. Many child care centers and family child care providers were small businesses that did not have the same level of organizational capacity that Early Head Start (EHS) programs had developed to meet Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). Support around using data and information systems and maintaining adequate fiscal and records management systems were critical for meeting program requirements.¹ Child care directors often are successful child care providers with an early childhood background who have been promoted to the role of director in the same center where they have been working, or they have started their own child care center business. Without the necessary fiscal knowledge, directors and family child care providers may be unaware of the true cost of quality child care, endangering their program's sustainability. It is essential for grantees to support their child care partners in building a strong fiscal foundation to provide continuity of care for infants and toddlers of families who are working, in school or training and have low-incomes.

Case Study: The Directors Academy

The Maricopa County (Arizona) Human Services Department (MCHSD), an EHS-CC Partnership grantee funded to serve 160 infants and toddlers, partners with nine child care centers in high-poverty areas that have a high number of children receiving subsidies. MCHSD understands that a high-quality workforce is essential to ensuring positive outcomes for the infants, toddlers, and families they serve. They also recognize that center directors provide the leadership and messaging about quality. Child care directors play a huge role in shaping the child care environment and supporting the staff which, in turn, impacts child outcomes. In this case study, you will learn about one EHS-CC Partnership's journey to support their child care director partners through a director's academy.

From experience, MCHSD knows that strong systems in the areas of human resources, fiscal operations, ongoing monitoring, planning, and communication are crucial to implementing EHS services effectively. They understand that child care partners need to have similar strong and well-developed systems. Any quality improvement must be sustainable and impact the entire center; going beyond the efforts to enhance the Early Head Start classroom.

MCHSD used the Program Administrative Scale² as a screening tool during the verification visits to determine the

- 1 Office of Early Childhood Development, Administration for Children and Families. (2016). *Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships: Growing the supply of early learning opportunities for more infants and toddlers*. Year One Report, January 2015-January 2016. Washington, DC: Office of Early Childhood Development, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- 2 McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. (2016). Program Administration Scale (PAS). Retrieved from mccormickcenter.nl.edu/program-evaluation/program-administration-scale-pas



“So, instead of feeling like we were competitors, we became colleagues and friends.”

—Susan Laurita, Child Care Director

business needs of each child care partner. The verification visit consists of an on-site interview and completion of the scale. The purpose of the verification visit is to learn more about the program’s leadership and management practices and to begin building rapport with the director. Information from the visits is used by MCHSD to make decisions about partnering with child care providers and about how to support providers when moving forward with agreements. At the end of the visits, Eve Del Real, child care partnership coordinator, stated, “We found that we really needed to focus on the business practices of our child care partners. We noted and observed that independent child care programs were of good quality, but they didn’t [stay in operation] for more than 3 years due to business practices, and many had difficulty staying afloat.” Given the findings during the verification process and the need for an increased understanding in business practices, MCHSD decided to implement a **Directors Academy** (the Academy).

Recognizing the innovative work around professional development that Rio Salado College (RSC), a local community college, was doing to retain students and to build capacity in child care directors, MCHSD reached out to them. Because RSC already offered a Directors Academy, MCHSD created a partnership with them to build on what RSC learned and to individualize their approach in their work with MCHSD’s program and child care partners. The goal was to develop and support a cadre of teachers and directors who provide high-quality services for the families in Maricopa County. The Academy was modeled after the RSC Directors Academy, using a unique model of coaching, peer-to-peer mentoring, and consultation to support the ongoing professional development of the center directors. Through an agreement with MCHSD and RSC, directors participating in the Academy receive college credit from RSC toward an administration and management certificate.

The Academy brings directors together as a community of learners to receive training and support on business

practices and policies as they relate to staffing, marketing plans, creating and implementing effective management systems, and ongoing program monitoring. The Academy provides vital opportunities for directors to network and mentor one another, which can lead to fewer feelings of isolation. The ability to share challenges and solutions for everyday issues with their colleagues and build relationships has been a key element in the success of the Academy.

MCHSD called in a fiscal consultant with a background in small business practice and knowledge of the child care field to work with the child care directors. Sessions with the consultant focused primarily on the directors’ need for a solid working knowledge of:

- fiscal and record-keeping issues and best practices;
- promoting understanding of HSPPS and connections to business terminology and concepts; applying them to the child care environment. For example, exploring how the HSPPS keywords “Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment, and Attendance” correlate with the child care marketing plan and what recruitment, eligibility, enrollment and attendance means for children, families, and providers.

Helping child care center directors understand HSPPS, with a focus on program operations and management, fiscal accountability, and continuous quality improvement, and how these are different from or similar to child care business practices, helps support the effective implementation of standards, Child care center directors need to know and understand Child Care and Development Fund regulations, which also differ from HSPPS and state child care licensing requirements. The Director’s Academy provides a forum for child care directors to compare HSPPS, federal Child Care and Development Fund regulations, and state child care licensing requirements and how each impact the program operations and management.



DIRECTORS ACADEMY STRUCTURE AND KEY COMPONENTS

Participants

- Two participants per center (*director and assistant or director and owner*).
- (*At least*) one grantee staff member.
- A fiscal consultant (*provided by the grantee*)—with background in small business practice and knowledge of the child care field.

The Academy launched with a celebratory “Baby Shower” (with decorations, games, and prizes), and:

- intro to HSPPS
- an overview of the Academy, and
- “gift basket” (including resources to assist with program implementation such as copies of the HSPPS and Creative Curriculum).

Meetings (*held monthly and chaired by grantee; then (later) held quarterly and chaired by members themselves*).

Meetings end with a topic reflective period.

Shared Group Learning

Improve skills through readings, peer dialogue, reflection

- Mutual mentoring/coaching
- Reflection on key factors in quality care, such as:
 - organizational culture and how that impacts staff, families, and children
 - workplace diversity
 - leadership styles and function
 - fiscal accountability, resource development, and budget development
 - risk management and cost control
 - tools for enhancing services

Formal Educational Opportunities

- Through RSC, directors participating in the Academy receive free college classes and credit toward an administration and management certificate.
- Participation in a national conference such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as well as several state-wide conferences is supported by the Academy.

Relationship-Based Communication Strategies

MCHD’s philosophy is to use a communication approach with their child care partners that is open, honest, and shows mutual respect. Their approach, which uses motivational interviewing and individualized supports, encourages both MCHSD and their child care partners to be transparent.

When selecting child care partners, MCHSD uses motivational interviewing as a strategy to implement Head Start relationship-based practices with their partners. Through this process, conversations afford a personalized approach to support their partners. Both grantee and partner need to have the ability to share their vulnerabilities. Through transparent conversations, MCHSD provides peer learning opportunities and individualized support. Challenges are addressed collectively, and both are open about concerns from the beginning and throughout the partnership. Early in the development of one Academy cohort, MCHSD lost a potential opportunity to partner with a small center. The child care provider was not transparent during the motivational interviewing about their base enrollment and fiscal business practices. They went out of business before MCHSD could implement a working agreement and assist. This experience demonstrated the importance of being transparent about vulnerability

and impacted the Academy cohort. Ms. Del Real states, “We all impact each other.” In the next section are some activities the Academy uses to emphasize the importance of transparency and program impact.

TRANSPARENT VULNERABILITY	
<p>The Barriers Board—Sharing Challenges</p> <p>During a conversation with Ms. Del Real, a director stated, “You’re just one piece of many things I have to do.” This statement led to “the barrier board” where participants wrote down a barrier impeding their success on a sticky note and placed it on a poster board decorated to look like a brick wall. On the brick wall was this quote: “You don’t see that you’re surrounded with a system of support because your head is down. Look up and see the support.” The participants would then remove the sticky note barrier and help their colleague develop strategies to remove the barrier.</p>	<p>Pass the Marble—Impact of Decisions</p> <p>Participants stand in a circle and work together to hold 6-inch PVC pipes to pass a marble through to the end. This activity demonstrates decision making. How they make the marble go through each pipe, passing it on to the next person through to the end, represents how the decisions each participant makes impact the grantee, cohort, and community.</p>



TRANSPARENT CONVERSATIONS

One director shared that she ordered plates and cups one day online from a restaurant supplier and that she would order them again a few days later when she runs out. Due to this decision, the director was spending an additional \$200 every week on shipping. A conversation became a valuable teaching moment when MCHSD helped the director set up a structured schedule to order from a local retailer offering free shipping when \$250 was spent, saving the director time and money.

One small center director was having difficulty making ends meet. When she talked with MCHSD, she shared that she provided free child care for all staff and this was affecting the amount of enrollment slots available for partnership children. Together they strategized that offering a discounted rate rather than free child care to staff was an acceptable way to meet the center's bottom line.

MCHSD selected a new small center to partner with because they felt the owner understood the needs of working families and had the heart they were looking for. The center's policy handbook stated that they do not charge families for absences. In a conversation with the director, she stated the reason for the policy was that she felt families couldn't afford to pay when their children were absent because they weren't being paid either. By leveraging the additional resources available through participation in the EHS-CC Partnerships, MCHSD will make it more financially viable for the center to maintain this existing policy for partnership enrolled children and families.

The Directors Academy is one approach the EHS-CC Partnership grantee uses to support the unique needs of their child care partners' directors. Often directors visualize themselves walking a lonely road, operating day to day, thinking they are alone. Yet, many directors have faced similar challenges and have overcome them. The Academy provides a safe forum to share challenges and successes. By implementing these simple and cost-effective meetings, child care directors report an

overall greater sense of job satisfaction. They find sharing challenges and solutions with other directors to be very helpful. They are also better able to support their staff, which may lead to higher quality care. The Academy provides an opportunity for directors to learn about the requirements and standards for EHS-CC Partnership programs which leads to increased understanding and more effective implementation.

Photos courtesy of the Partnership Center.