



Exploring Demand for Leadership Development among Leaders in Early Childhood Care and Learning

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Introduction

Leaders in early childhood care and learning understand that to help the field achieve positive outcomes for children and families, they must navigate complex personal, organizational, and systemic challenges. To do so, leaders must become skilled at managing individuals and teams, stewarding organizational resources, and advocating for their communities' needs. Few leaders, however, receive comprehensive, formal leadership development training that strengthens these skills. Leaders are eager to pursue such opportunities; they see leadership development training as essential to their personal growth and as a critical step toward strengthening the field and effectively serving children and families.

Philanthropy can help cultivate a strong next generation of leaders in early childhood care and learning by investing in leadership development that fortifies leaders' skills, helps them build strong and lasting networks, and provides the financial support and flexibility required to make these programs accessible.

Context for this Research

In the summer of 2018, the New Venture Fund, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, commissioned Arabella Advisors to review the leadership development landscape within the formal early childhood education sector. As detailed in the **resulting report**, Arabella's researchers found that

strong leaders are vitally important to advancing the field's priorities, but there is a lack of relevant leadership development opportunities. In this follow-up research, we continue our analysis but focus on the needs and perspectives of leaders in the broader field of early care and learning. This report bridges our existing knowledge of the "supply" of leadership development programs with a deeper understanding of the "demand" for such programs among potential participants. Putting front and center the voices of those who aspire to one day lead the field is essential as we work to build more equitable, effective early childhood systems. Accordingly, leaders' voices figure prominently into this report and its recommendations.

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Methodology

To learn about the demand for leadership development, we began by convening a group of leaders from early childhood care, education, advocacy, and academia to discuss the field's leadership development needs and opportunities (see Appendix A for a list of participants). This group connected us with other leaders in three communities in which Packard works deeply: San Jose, Fresno, and Oakland. We selected our sample group from these leaders, as well as others from their networks.

We conducted in-depth phone interviews with 12 leaders in early care and learning (see Appendix B for a full list). We selected these 12 informants because they fell into one or more of the following categories:

- **An experienced ECE classroom teacher new to leadership** responsibilities and roles and/or exhibiting leadership potential
- **An experienced leader from another sector** new to the early care and learning context
- **An individual in line to assume a leadership position** within a school district or nonprofit early care or education provider
- **An external-facing policy or workforce advocate**, including experienced early care and education

practitioners new to external-facing policy and advocacy

Of the 12 leaders we spoke with, none focused primarily on external-facing advocacy or policy work. However, many of our informants did engage with policy and advocacy through their work, to a limited extent. Our sample was composed of eight informants from within early childhood education settings and four from other resource provider networks or organizations.

These 12 individuals illustrate the sheer diversity of leaders' educational and professional experience and aspirations. Our selection criteria were purposefully broad because the field of early care and education is inherently cross-sector. Holistically serving children and families involves participation across a range of organizational types. Leaders, accordingly, may come from nonprofit centers, state or local agencies, independent private child care centers, unions, advocacy organizations, or the health sector. Within these organizations, they may occupy roles ranging from classroom teacher to site administrator to program manager.



As leaders in these programs, we are it. We have to advocate for parents. We have to advocate for programs. We have to advocate for teachers and for ourselves as leaders.

- Interviewee

Findings

Leaders are committed to achieving lasting, positive outcomes for the children and families they serve; however, they face a host of challenges that often prevent them from doing so. We asked leaders to identify which of these challenges they believe are most critical to address. Overall, their answers fell into three categories: 1) systems and policy, 2) organizational and management, and 3) workforce and career development.

Systems and Policy Challenges

Early learning leaders are aligned in pursuing a vision of high-quality, affordable, accessible, and equitable educational systems for all children. However, the realities of **resource scarcity** within the highest-need communities, **disconnects between policy and practice**, and **poor alignment** between K-12 systems continue to confront the leaders as they try to effect change.

- **Resource scarcity:** Leaders relayed that schools and districts often lack adequate financial and staff resources to care for children, particularly those experiencing poverty, trauma, behavioral challenges, and special needs. School districts frequently

experience a scarcity of credentialed teachers and substitutes, especially those with special education credentials. Within the most under-resourced communities, leaders also witness a lack of parent advocacy and engagement, which leaders largely attribute to parents' own challenges navigating structural disadvantages like poverty.

- **Disconnects between policy and practice:**

Policymakers rarely solicit the perspectives of leaders when developing EC policy, despite the clear advantages of learning from their experience. While they have valuable insights, many leaders do not have opportunities to exert influence and do not know how to find “a seat at the table.” This ultimately leads to policies that are onerous to implement for administrators and teachers, and that may not ultimately align with their end goals. Leaders have an intimate, on-the-ground understanding of the negative consequences of disconnects between policy and practice, since they are often responsible for bridging these gaps. For instance, suspension policies may not reflect what teachers know to be effective in their work with behaviorally challenged students.



My school is the epicenter of many systems of oppression that are converging. I want to think about what's next but I don't have the mental capacity to do so because I'm consumed with making sure that the school is a safe, vibrant, and healthy place for kids and families.

- Interviewee

- **Poor alignment between ECE and K-12:**

Differences between ECE and K-12 curricula, staff compensation, and school funding are common, despite efforts to bridge these systems. Even leaders working in districts prioritizing integration with K-12 relayed that ECE administrators and teachers remain isolated from K-12 staff and receive less professional respect than their K-12 counterparts. Ultimately, this means it is harder for leaders to ensure children from birth to age 5 are well prepared for the next chapter of their lives, and that they can sustain their educational gains.

Organizational and Management Challenges

Leaders in early care and education aspire to make their organizations more efficient, data-driven, technologically savvy, and financially sustainable. Resource scarcity within early childhood systems means leaders must find ways to do more with less; however, they often do not have the necessary organizational infrastructure to do so.

- **Data systems:** Informants relayed that over the past several years, their organizations have been collecting more observational and outcomes data to monitor performance internally and report to external stakeholders. The systems they use

to collect these data are often cumbersome and poorly integrated with their organizations' other platforms. Many leaders also believe their organizations are not effectively using the data they collect to drive performance and quality improvement or to communicate compelling narratives to external stakeholders.

- **Time management and technology systems:**

Leaders are concerned about overall organizational efficiency and note that they and their colleagues need to identify and integrate better systems and technologies for time management, staff coordination, scheduling, and reporting. Reporting can be especially difficult to manage, as organizations must satisfy different reporting requirements at district, county, and state levels. Leaders spend too much time managing these systems, which detracts from time spent focused on the work itself.

Workforce and Career Development Challenges

Leaders in early care and learning want to participate in a workforce of resilient, skilled, well-compensated practitioners and providers. In practice, however, leaders experience **poor pipeline development for leadership succession, unclear paths for career advancement,** and, ultimately, **burnout**. Often, these workforce-related



challenges disproportionately and acutely affect leaders, who are attempting to navigate their own uncertain career paths while also advocating for the staff and teachers they manage. When leaders do not receive opportunities for growth and upward mobility, they become discouraged and may leave their organizations.

- **Poor pipeline development for leadership**

succession: Early care and education workers are rarely exposed to leadership settings and skills until they assume leadership roles. Leaders describe a lack of grooming for leadership succession within their organizations, which both holds them back from valuable professional development and puts the field at risk of disruptive leadership transitions. Many current leaders are not well equipped to plan for leadership succession or cultivate talent in preparation for their own transitions.

- **Unclear career pathways:** Throughout our interviews, leaders relayed that the professional paths available to them are unclear. ECE leaders rarely follow linear paths, in part because there is no set path to follow.¹ When asked to name five-year career goals, many informants had difficulty identifying a viable professional trajectory. Leaders

in ECE are also concerned about the teachers in their systems who are not getting the right degrees and credentials to achieve upward mobility. For instance, many teachers have permits rather than teaching credentials, which effectively caps their career advancement unless they pursue more advanced education. Leaders still involved in pedagogical instruction and site administration expressed reluctance to leave these roles behind because they care deeply about staying connected to direct service at school sites. However, they believed that to advance professionally and achieve larger-scale systemic change, they would need to move into district or regional administration. Several teachers and administrators expressed concern that to advance in the field of education, they would need to leave ECE altogether and enter K-12 systems.

- **Burnout within the workforce:** Leaders emphasized their concern about burnout for themselves and among those they manage and coach. They believe caregivers and educators are not adequately caring for themselves, particularly those who are themselves grappling with poverty, language barriers, and/or racial and ethnic inequities.



In meetings you only see the current leaders, and they are going to exit in a few years. You don't see other leaders at the decision-making table... [future] leaders don't have the opportunity to learn alongside those experienced leaders.

- Interviewee

¹Arabella Advisors, "Developing Early Childhood Leaders to Support Strong, Equitable Systems: A Review of the Early Childhood Education Leadership Development Landscape," April 2018.

Leaders are eager to address these challenges in their current positions and in the leadership roles they hope to move into. However, they need training and development to do so effectively. The competencies in the highest demand among leaders mirror the systemic, organizational, and workforce challenges they face. Without exception, informants expressed enthusiastic interest in pursuing leadership development opportunities. While a majority of informants (75 percent) had received general professional development, only a small minority (8 percent) had participated in non-academic professional development with a formal leadership curriculum. The strength of leaders' interest in pursuing leadership development training was consistent across geography, role, educational background, organizational type, and previous experience with formal and informal leadership development.

In our 2018 report, we discovered that the most effective leadership development programs across the country focus their pedagogy on a small set of leadership competencies, which we organized into five categories: 1) content and pedagogy, 2) operational and management, 3) team and interpersonal, 4) individual, and 5) policy and community. Across our interviews with leaders, informants prioritized skill-building in three of these five categories, listed here in order of frequency of mention: **policy and community, operational and management**, and **team and interpersonal**. Leaders

believe that developing the following competencies will best help them achieve the outcomes they seek.

Policy and Community Competencies

- **Systems change:** The skill leaders most frequently mentioned wanting to develop was the ability to effect change at the systems level. This approach would involve design, planning, coordination, and mobilizing support to achieve large-scale changes for the field, beyond a single organization.
- **Policy and advocacy:** Becoming more effective communicators and advocates is a top priority for leaders. Leaders are excited about the scale and immediacy of the impact of policy, specifically as it influences resource allocation for the communities they serve. Leaders understand that actively engaging decision makers (including funders, district leaders, and legislators) and the communities they serve (including families) is essential to driving the changes they wish to see in their schools and districts. One current teacher described her “secret dream” to serve on a task force that “works toward making high-quality, affordable preschool education available to all children in California.” The most motivated and dedicated leaders should be serving in exactly such capacities.

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Operational and Management Competencies

- **Data analysis:** Leaders are actively collecting observational and outcomes data and want to use these data to drive change and improve school performance. They are seeking the skills to translate these data into meaningful narratives and actionable insights for their districts, schools, and classrooms.
- **Financial and operational management:** Given the resource constraints in early childhood care and learning, administrative leaders want to more efficiently manage their resources and provide sound and strategic stewardship of their organizations. A subset of leaders mentioned that within a rapidly changing policy landscape, they need to understand how to more quickly respond to such changes and modify organizational processes and protocols accordingly.

Team and Interpersonal Competencies

- **Managing and coaching:** From managing teaching assistants to coaching teachers to coordinating providers, leaders consistently named their interest in becoming more supportive, effective, empathetic, inspiring, and motivating managers. Leaders want to learn to galvanize people around a shared vision for their organizations and communities. They want to help their direct reports thrive and advance in the field. They are aware that their successes will rely on their ability to support and mobilize their teams.



Recommendations

To build lasting change, leaders desire access to cohort-based programs with extended learning time horizons and applied opportunities to implement and refine their new skills.

While there are some existing professional development opportunities for leaders to hone these competencies, they are isolated, scattered, and difficult to access.² Leaders need programs that comprehensively and holistically address the most in-demand competencies.

Leaders emphasized the need for networks to advance their careers, platforms to share ideas and experiences, and a sense of belonging and support. Accordingly, it is important for a leadership development program to bring participants together for peer cohort-based learning and exchange both during and after the program, via a robust alumni network. Most informants felt that regular, in-person meetings would be critical to establish strong networks and fortify relationships within the cohort. However, most informants also emphasized that they are already contending with existing demands on their time. For this reason, many suggested a combination of in-person and online content to introduce flexibility within their already busy schedules.

Given the complexity of the skills leaders prioritized, this learning and development will take time. A one-day seminar or several-day conference will not be as effective as a longer-term program with a clear progression, peer accountability, and institutional support along the way. Advocacy, systems change, management, and interpersonal skills build upon and enhance one another over time. Informants expressed interest in participating in programs lasting **at least six**

months and up to three years; within this range, **one year** was commonly considered an appropriate program duration. They were willing to regularly spend between **three and nine hours per week**, with an understanding that in-person meetings might require additional time commitments. Without knowing more about program content or design, however, informants were not well equipped to provide more concrete ranges. Many informants had already completed undergraduate, graduate, and/or teaching or administrative credential programs while working full-time and therefore understood how much time an intensive leadership development program might require. (In fact, 75 percent of respondents in our sample had a master's degree, which is not representative of the broader early childhood workforce.)

Credit-granting programs are most appealing to leaders who have not yet received a master's degree and/or teaching/administrative credential. These degrees and credentials are essential to career advancement and salary growth; therefore, for this subset of leaders, credits would maximize the value of a leadership development program. Leaders with master's degrees, doctorates, or their credential-based equivalents were far less motivated by educational credits but were not opposed to receiving them in recognition of program participation. This differing level of interest has implications for program structure and cohort recruitment: programs that prioritize providing credits should focus recruitment on those without advanced degrees and/or credentials.

More than just instruction, leaders are also seeking applied opportunities to work on advocacy, policy, and systems-level design and planning. This is particularly

²*Ibid.*

important for leaders without existing access to cross-sector networks or inroads to policy-level discussions. Leaders should learn to advocate for systems-level change from within the EC workforce and need practice to do so effectively. Additionally, working on systems-level design gives leaders chances to expand their networks across sectors. Hands-on practice also provides opportunities to explore alternative career paths in a field where advancement within schools and districts is limited.

In addition to supporting a leadership development program, funders should prioritize reducing barriers to access to leadership development by providing financial and other in-kind supports for leaders.

Leaders need financial support to access leadership development training, including program tuition plus any associated fees and travel and lodging costs. While many leaders' organizations provide some funding for professional development, the amounts they offer are almost always insufficient to cover the cost of an intensive program. However, some districts have provided tuition reimbursement for degree- or credential-granting programs post-completion. Leaders are frequently uncertain about how much funding their organizations or districts will provide in support of their professional development. Most leaders were not aware of external funding sources, but a few had received professional development stipends from local or statewide funders.

Leaders require more than just immediate tuition funding. Leaders who work in classroom settings will also need substitute teachers if their leadership development program requires participation during school hours. Some schools will provide substitute teachers, but it is often difficult to secure them. Additionally, leaders who have children need support for child care if training occurs on evenings or weekends.

Invest in leadership development opportunities that are relevant to the systems, management, and workforce challenges that early childhood leaders face.

Though our research was with a relatively small sample, the message was clear: leaders want intensive, experiential leadership development opportunities that help them tackle the systemic issues of early childhood education and care. They want further training in managing organizations and people. Given that there is relative low demand for ECE-specific pedagogical training, even among current ECE providers, there is an opportunity to provide programming for leaders working across sectors in early childhood, not just those in education. This approach enables participants to learn from others who engage with children and their families through different lenses (e.g., physical health, mental well-being, safety). It also has the potential to strengthen connections and collaboration across sectors, enhancing coordination of systems.

In considering investments in leadership development, funders should prioritize cross-sector learning and program sustainability.

Taking a big-tent approach also allows more room for collaborative funding, which can help sustain programs. Too often, leadership development programs rely on a single funder, and when priorities change, programs have to replace all of their funding or close. Program sustainability is essential to developing a robust alumni community, which in turn helps to ensure sustained impact. There is potential for alumni to continue to work together and learn from one another, particularly when programs continue to cultivate connections across alumni participants. In short, engaging a broad community—both as funders and participants—can drive sustainability and impact, allowing programming and participants to thrive for years to come.

Appendix A.

Early Childhood Leader Convening Participants

Name	Title	Organization
Andrea Youngdahl	Technical Assistance Liaison	Oakland Starting Smart and Strong
Catherine Atkin	Executive Director	Early Learning Lab
Gail Joseph	Bezos Family Foundation Distinguished Professor in Early Learning	University of Washington
Nora Silver	Founder and Faculty Director and Adjunct Professor, Center for Social Sector Leadership	University of California, Berkeley
Scott Moore	CEO	Kidango



Appendix B. Interviewees

Name	Title	Organization	County
Aneli Leon	Site Supervisor	Central Valley Children's Services Network	Fresno
Anna Arambula	Fresno Language Project Coach	Fresno Unified School District	Fresno
Barbara Carmody	Assistant Director of Early Learning Services	Santa Clara County Office of Education	San Jose
Caroline Jones	Principal, Early Childhood Education	Oakland Unified School District	Oakland
Debbie Ignacio	National Program and Operations Director	Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors	Los Angeles
Domenica M. Benitez	Director of Provider Services	California Child Care Resource & Referral Network	San Francisco
Elizabeth Alvarez	Program Director, Franklin McKinley Children's Initiative	Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County	San Jose
Erika Mathur	Early Childhood Specialist	Franklin-McKinley School District	San Jose
Maria Ceballos Tapia	Manager II for Starting Smart & Strong	Fresno Unified School District	Fresno
Maria Sujo	Kindergarten Readiness Program Manager	Oakland Unified School District	Oakland
Neymiya Moore	Teacher	Oakland Unified School District	Oakland
Wenonah Elms	Health, Mental Health, and Disabilities Coordinator	City of Oakland Head Start	Oakland