



# Primetime for Coaching

Coaching for Early Childhood Educators: Research Findings and Practical Considerations

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# About Me



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- Author, “Primetime for Coaching: Improving Instructional Coaching in Early Childhood Education,” (2017).
- Research, analysis, writing, and advising on policy across ECE and PreK-12
- Prior to Bellwether:
  - DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education
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# About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by **helping organizations accelerate impact and improving public policy and practice** for the education field.

**\ˈBEL-,weth-ər\**, noun;  
A leader of a movement or activity;  
also, a leading indicator of future trends.

Policy Analysis  
and Research

Strategy and  
Growth  
Planning

Organization  
Effectiveness  
and Efficiency

Implementation  
Support

Educational  
Program  
Evaluation

# Recent Bellwether publications on early childhood education

- **Primetime for Coaching:** Improving Instructional Coaching in Early Childhood Education
  - Bonnie O'Keefe, 2017
- **Pre-K Teachers and Bachelor's Degrees:** Envisioning Equitable Access to High-Quality Preparation Programs
  - Emily Workman, Lisa Guernsey, and Sara Mead, 2018 (with New America)
- **It Takes a Community:** Leveraging Community Colleges to Transform the Early Childhood Workforce
  - Marnie Kaplan, 2018
- **The Best Teachers for Our Littlest Learners?** Lessons from Head Start's Last Decade
  - Marnie Kaplan and Sara Mead, 2017
- **Moneyball for Head Start:** Using Data, Evidence, and Evaluation to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families
  - Sara Mead and Ashley Libetti, 2016



# Goals for Today's Webinar

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- **Define coaching** and its place in the world of ECE workforce development efforts
- Understand the **research and policy** landscape around coaching
- Learn more about various **examples** of coaching at a large scale
- Think through **decision points** for program leaders implementing a new coaching approach

# Coaching for educators has been around for a long time, but definitions are not always clear

“Perhaps the most striking difference in training athletes and teachers is their initial assumption. *Athletes do not believe mastery will be achieved quickly or easily.* They understand enormous effort results in small increments of change. We, on the other hand, have often behaved as though teaching skills were so easily acquired that a simple presentation, one-day workshop, or single videotaped demonstration were sufficient to ensure successful classroom performance.”

-The Coaching of Teaching, Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, 1982

“Coaching is a relationship-based process led by an expert with specialized early learning and adult learning knowledge and skills, who often serves in a different professional role than the recipient(s). Coaching is designed to build capacity for specific professional dispositions, skills, and behaviors and is focused on goal-setting and achievement for an individual or group.”

-NAEYC & Child Care Aware, 2011

# What differentiates coaching from other forms of professional development or technical assistance?

<b>Coaching is</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individualized and goal-based</li><li>• Led by a coach in an expert role, usually one with knowledge of both ECE instruction and training adults</li><li>• Designed to build capacity in specific areas of instructional practice</li></ul>
<b>Coaching can be</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Long-term or time-limited</li><li>• Targeted, tiered, or available to all</li><li>• Combined with other forms of professional learning</li></ul>
<b>Coaching is not</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Punitive, evaluative, or compliance-based</li><li>• The same as mentorship by a peer, supervision by a manager, or technical assistance (but in some cases a coach may wear multiple hats)</li></ul>

# Establishing these definitions can matter a lot, but there are some grey areas

- Many conversations I had about coaching for this research began with, **“Well, what do you mean by coaching?”**
- Many examples of “coaching” programs in policy and in practice that don’t meet the definition above. There are also programs called by another name that are functionally coaching.
- Most coaching activities happen one-on-one, so there isn’t always transparency between program leaders, coaches, and teachers.
- If we want a coaching program to achieve its intended results for children and teachers, we need clear, shared expectations and definitions.

*Recommended Reading:* “Personal Best: Top Athletes and Singers Have Coaches. Should You?” by Atul Gawande, *The New Yorker*, 2011



# Coaching takes on new relevance as part of discussions about ECE workforce quality improvement

- As access to publicly funded ECE has grown, so has the evidence around the importance of **instructional quality**.
  - ECE educators need tools and supports to improve their **instructional effectiveness** on the job; coaching is one vehicle to do that
  - Coaching can also be a tool to improve **implementation fidelity** for new curricula/teaching approaches
- Coaching focuses on **practical skill building**, and can be combined with other kinds of training, so teachers can grow their knowledge, skills, and understanding.
- Because coaching can be more labor- and time-intensive than other professional development approaches, it can be **expensive**, which means getting it right is important.

# There are several unique factors behind instructional coaching for early childhood educators

- Coaching is also often used for educators of older groups of students, and some research combines ECE coaching studies with other educator groups.
- **Why is it valuable to think about coaching in early childhood education, specifically?**
  - Diversity of ECE settings and funding structures
  - Different policy landscape around licensure, standards, and quality improvement
  - Educational backgrounds and prior training experiences of ECE educators differs from the typical K-12 educator
  - Substantially different knowledge and skills necessary for a successful coach and a successful educator in early childhood settings, for example: developmentally appropriate teaching techniques.

## Poll Question: Which of the following statements is *not* supported by coaching research?

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- The evidence base on coaching is stronger than that of many other forms of professional development
- Coaching can be more effective if paired with other forms of professional development
- The most important factor in successful coaching is how much time teachers spend with their coaches
- Most research on coaching in ECE focuses on pre-k aged students in school- or center-based programs

## Poll Question Answers: Which of the following statements is *not* supported by coaching research?

- The evidence base on coaching is stronger than that of many other forms of professional development - **True**
- Coaching can be more effective if paired with other forms of professional development - **True**
- The most important factor in successful coaching is how much time teachers spend with their coaches - **False**
- Most research on coaching in ECE focuses on pre-k aged students in school- or center-based programs - **True**

# Research suggests coaching can have a significant, positive effect on teacher practice

- A growing number of rigorous research studies (experimental and quasi-experimental) have found that coaching can significantly change teacher's instructional practices for the better.
  - This is usually measured by observational instruments such as CLASS or ECERS, or in terms of fidelity to a curriculum or teaching model.
- This stands in contrast to mediocre research results for common forms of professional development in general.

**A recent analysis of more than 60 rigorous coaching studies in ECE and K-12 found that coaching had a positive effect on teacher practice “larger than differences in measures of instructional quality between novice and veteran teachers.”**

– Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, 2017

**In a review of ECE-specific coaching studies, 14 linked coaching to curriculum implementation, and nearly all had positive results. 26 studies looked at classroom instructional quality – results were largely positive, with 4 examples of mixed or null results.**

– Aikens and Aker, 2011

# Coaching may work even better when combined with other forms of training and support

- Many of the research studies on coaching can't isolate the effects of coaching because it is combined with other things (like training, coursework, or a community of practice).
- **But** – this may be coaching's secret sauce. It's an ingredient that boosts the effects of other PD approaches.
- Coaching focuses on skills and behavior – other forms of PD may focus on knowledge.
- **For example:** In one study, 250+ pre-K teachers in 4 states were randomly assigned to four PD groups:

Course, in classroom coaching and detailed feedback on children's progress	Course, in classroom coaching, limited feedback
Course, detailed feedback, no coaching	Business as usual

- **Teacher with the most comprehensive PD did best.**
- “These teachers...improved the quality and the frequency of instruction in early writing, phonological awareness, letter knowledge and shared reading. They also showed more effective center based instruction.”  
-Landry et. al., 2009

# Fewer studies look at student outcomes as a result of teacher coaching, but results are generally positive

- Student learning outcomes from coaching are harder to measure – as you all know, assessing learning in the early years can be complicated and time consuming.
- The studies we do have find generally positive effects, but these are smaller than the impact on teachers.
- This is to be expected, since the intervention on students from coaching is indirect.

**Generally, student learning effects from coaching are smaller than teacher effects – so teachers have to change a lot in order for student outcomes to change moderately.**

# Some innovative coaching approaches hold promise for lower cost coaching approaches

- Several studies have found significant impacts on teachers and students from **virtual coaching** programs – when these are well-designed and implemented, they can work just as well as in-person coaching.
- **Quality** is more important than **quantity** for coaching. In the meta-analysis cited above, the number of hours spent coaching was not associated with teacher or student outcomes. Other studies have found that **time-limited** coaching interventions can have a long term impact for teachers and help them keep improving over time.
- Coaches do not have to be external consultants or new hires. Some evidence-based models **embed coaching duties** in the jobs of people already on the ground.
- Both these results are good news for ECE program leaders who feel coaching would be cost-prohibitive, or qualified coaches are hard to find in your area.



# Head Start has responded to this research with both mandates and encouragement

- **Head Start Performance Standards:** Require programs to “implement a research-based, coordinated coaching strategy for education staff” as of 2017:
  - Programs must provide intensive coaching to staff most in need of support.
  - These staff must have opportunities to be observed, set goals, and receive feedback from coaches with adequate feedback and expertise.
  - Head Start provides guidance and suggestions, but most details left open to program discretion.
  - Because so many ECE programs have blended funding, many state or local pre-K programs are subject to these requirements.
- New performance standards are the culmination of earlier pilot programs and evaluations that led to many of the popular models and research base we have today.

# State level Pre-K and QRIS programs have also followed suit

- **State Pre-K:** 25 states (as of 2016) required some form of coaching in their pre-K programs
  - NIEER quality standards for state pre-K now recommend all lead teachers and assistant teachers have individualized professional development plans and coaching, plus at least 15 hours of in-service professional development.
    - This is an ambitious benchmark – only nine state pre-K programs met it in 2017 (AL, GA, IN, MI, MN Head Start, NM, OR Head Start, RI, SC).
- **State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS):**
  - Several states have incorporated vetted coaching providers in their QRIS systems, or created coaching competency standards to guide programs
  - Others (e.g. Florida) have supported voluntary coaching training/certification

# But, there is still a lot we don't know about how to maximize the effects of coaching in different contexts

- Much of the research on coaching is either **very general**, looking at coaching as a broad category, or **very specific**, evaluating models designed and implemented in controlled, small-scale environments.
- Most ECE coaching research focuses on pre-K aged students in center- or school-based classrooms – other environments are less well studied
- This means that right now, there are very few hard and fast rules about what makes a coaching approach “high-quality” or “evidence based”
- It also means there are many open possibilities for programs to design, adopt, or implement coaching programs in ways that work best for them.

**What makes coaching most effective for your teachers and students?  
The best answer is often “it depends.”**

# How can you think through all the design choices that go into a coaching program?

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- Options are wide open. This can be intimidating, but it means that coaching can be within reach for your program. **On the other hand, a check-the-box coaching approach will almost surely fail to yield improvements for students.**
- The following decision framework is meant to help you think through the key facets and design choices that go into a successful coaching model.
- This can apply whether you are considering bringing in a outside model, adapting/refining an existing model, or creating something entirely new.
- I've adapted this framework into a worksheet that will be available on the ECE investigations website after the webinar!

# Coaching design framework (1/3)

**This is a design framework to help differentiate among coaching approaches, and think through the impact of different choices.**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Key Decisions</b>	<b>Research &amp; Best Practice Takeaways</b>
Theory of Change and Goals	What are the program's goals? How will coaching lead to student outcomes?	A defined theory of change should explain how coaches will effect educator skills, and how those skills connect to student outcomes
Targeting	Which educators receive coaching?	Many research studies use volunteers – but large programs tend to focus on new teachers or struggling teachers. Coaching may be stigmatized if only “bad” teachers get it.
Staffing	Who are the coaches? What are their qualifications, and relationship to programs?	Most coaches have experience as ECE teachers or program leaders. Their role and their place in programs vary a lot

## Coaching design framework (2/3)

<b>Category</b>	<b>Key Decisions</b>	<b>Research &amp; Best Practice Takeaways</b>
Dosage and duration	How often does coaching happen, for how long?	More is better, holding quality constant, but high-quality short term interventions can have strong results.
Leadership	How should coaches work with program leaders?	No research consensus – but beware blurring lines between evaluation and support
Content	What is the content focus of the coaching?	Common: language/literacy, general pedagogy, and/or social-emotional development
Process	What strategies do coaches use? How consistent should they be?	Tools, rubrics, and structure can be important to ensure fidelity, but should not impede individualization and relationships

## Coaching design framework (2/2)

Category	Key Decisions	Research & Best Practice Takeaways
Context	How does coaching fit into the context of PD, evaluation, curriculum, and improvement strategies?	Research focuses on pre-K in centers or schools. Sometimes framed as a curriculum fidelity tool.
Venue	Is coaching in-person, virtual, or a hybrid?	Mostly in-person, but there are several research-supported virtual or hybrid models
Evaluation	What metrics determine success or inform program strategy?	Plans for evaluation and continuous improvement should be part of any coaching initiative. Metrics should align with goals.

# Next, we'll talk through a few examples of different coaching approaches in the real world

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- These are all approaches with evidence of effectiveness, but that does not mean that their way is the only way – these are examples, not endorsements.
- Throughout, I'll highlight differentiating points and how those link back to the research and the design framework.
- We'll conclude with some recommendations and summary thoughts.



# Practice-Based Coaching

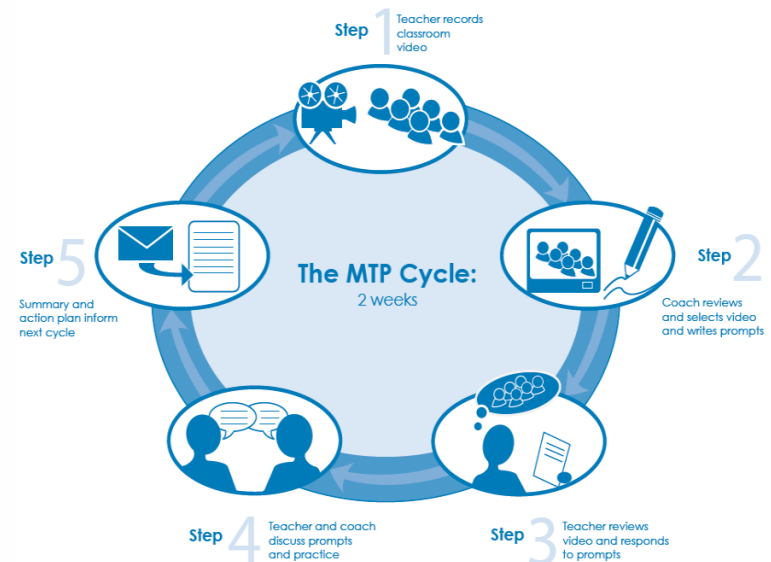
- Influential framework developed by the Office of Head Start National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL).
- 3-Part Cycle:
  - Goals and Planning,
  - Observation,
  - Reflection and Feedback.
- Many variations and well-known coaching models are built on this architecture.
- For example: EarlyEdU Alliance, “The Coaching Companion.”
- **Designed to be implemented with flexibility, depending on program goals and context. Not many hard design rules.**



**EarlyEdU**  
Alliance®

# My Teaching Partner

- Virtual coaching and professional development designed at the University of Virginia around the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)
- Teachers tape classroom activities, receive feedback from a virtual coach – about 4-6 hours a week
- Can be paired with other CLASS-centric resources
- Research evidence suggests improved instructional practices and child outcomes, especially for low-income children.
- **Virtual coaching, aligned with evaluation instruments and other resources, delivered on a broad scale.**



# Acelero Learning

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- Head Start grantee serving more than 5,000 children in four states – NJ, WI, NV, PA.
- Coaching Key Features:
  - **All teachers and assistant teachers** receive coaching; one of three central pillars of their educational strategy
  - **Center directors** serve as coaches
  - Regional specialists support **coach the coaches** across sites
  - Amount and focus of coaching **differentiated** by teacher need around reflective cycles; coaches use a mix of techniques such as modeling, video review, side-by-side instruction
  - **Extensive** rubrics, tools, and resources to create consistency and clarity



# Southwest Human Development

- Head Start/Early Head Start grantee serving more than 1,300 children in Arizona. Also home to Educare Arizona
- Coaching Key Features:
  - Coaches serve in a **specialized role**, covering 10 classrooms each
  - **All teachers** receive job-embedded coaching, differentiated to their needs.
  - Began with a focus primarily on CLASS, but expanded
  - **Paired** with bi-weekly professional learning community
  - Uses **tablet-based** observation software
- When SWHD got a grant to share their approach with other AZ community-based child care centers – **revealed different pressures** with time, staffing, and budgets, and led them to develop stronger coaching systems for center leaders.



# What do we see across these examples?

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- Different/flexible approaches to **who serves as a coach** and where they are located – geographically and organizationally.
- Coaching aligned with specific goals/metrics/frameworks, with **clarity** for teachers and coaches on expectations.
- Differentiated coaching depending on teacher need, but framed as the **default**, not a punishment.
- Systems for **supporting coaches** and program leaders up the ladder of coaching.
- Adaptations to make high-quality coaching experiences **accessible** and **sustainable** for ECE educators in a variety of environments

# Closing Recommendations

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- Think about coaching in the context of your entire professional development and instructional approach.
  - Consider alignment with curriculum, learning standards, and evaluation
  - Set goals for your coaching approach, and monitor its progress
  - Think about systems of support for assistant teachers, instructional leaders, and coaches themselves
- Consider how coaching can be a sustainable, job-embedded part of your day-to-day operations and systems.
  - Quality > Quantity
- Be wary of any model that promises rapid results without broader operational changes, or alignment with other program areas.
- Program leaders' attitude towards coaching can determine how teachers receive it.
- Look for inspiration, assistance, and guidance from other program leaders, local and state agencies, Head Start, and higher-education institutions.

# Thank You!

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- Read the full Primetime for Coaching report:  
<https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/primetime-coaching-improving-instructional-coaching-early-childhood-education>
- Reach out via email: [bonnie.okeefe@bellwethereducation.org](mailto:bonnie.okeefe@bellwethereducation.org)
- Follow me on twitter for education and ECE policy musings, and the occasional dog picture: [@bonnierok](https://twitter.com/bonnierok)
- Have a happy and safe Halloween!