

Early Education Essentials

Illustrations of Strong Organizational Practices in Programs Poised for Improvement

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Introduction

Extensive evidence demonstrates that high-quality, well-implemented early childhood education (ECE) positively impacts the learning trajectories of children, especially those from vulnerable populations. Yet many early childhood programs across the nation struggle to implement high-quality programming and, consequently, fail to sufficiently advance children’s early learning. A growing body of research on school improvement demonstrates that strong organizational conditions will be necessary to lift stagnant levels of quality in early childhood settings. But this begs the question: What do strong organizational conditions look like in ECE settings?

The Ounce of Prevention Fund, in partnership with UChicago Consortium, developed and validated the *Early Education Essentials*[™] surveys to provide the field with reliable and valid measurement of organizational conditions. As part of our measurement work, we spent time observing and talking with leaders, teachers and families in ECE programs whose survey responses indicated that their essential supports were either very strong or very weak. Differences in their organizational climate and conditions were stark and unmistakable. Simply put, strongly organized programs created contexts far more supportive of teaching, learning and family engagement than the contexts created by weakly organized programs. In this paper, we describe those strong organizational contexts and how they empowered leaders, teachers and families to aspire to and realize higher-quality practices and better outcomes for young children.

Strong Continuous Quality Improvement Flows From Strong Organizational Conditions

Despite years of quality improvement investments and professional development focused on improving what occurs within the classroom—how it is set up and the particular interactions that take place between teachers and children to support social, emotional, and cognitive development—research confirms that preschool instructional quality remains mediocre nationally. The majority of observed interactions in publicly funded preschool classrooms—a key measure of instructional quality—rate well below the level associated with academic or social gains for children.¹ And low instructional quality is disproportionately

found in preschool classrooms serving low-income or otherwise at-risk children who stand to benefit the most from high-quality early learning programming and experience.² **Strengthening the organizational conditions surrounding practice offers a promising pathway to lifting stagnant levels of quality.** Robust research evidence from K-12th-grade education highlights the importance of “organizational climate and conditions” for improving school performance.³ Researchers from the UChicago Consortium identified five organizational features of schools that interact with life inside classrooms and are strongly associated with growth in student achievement: Effective Leadership, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction.⁴ These researchers found that teacher and student surveys measuring these five essential supports strongly predicted which schools were most and least likely to show improvement in student attendance and achievement over time. Indeed, elementary schools strong in three or more of these essential supports were 10 times more likely than schools weak in most supports to substantially improve student achievement in reading and math. These data demonstrated that strong organizational practices support high-quality classroom practices and, thus, contribute to the growth, stagnation, or decline of a school’s outcomes over time. These researchers concluded that improving schools requires coherent, orchestrated action across these essential organizational features.

Early childhood education programs are similarly complex organizations; what occurs in ECE classrooms is influenced by the policies, practices, and relationships across the entire

organization. Research focused on particular organizational aspects of ECE programs—such as strong leadership or trusting work environments—suggests that programs with supportive climate and culture are also more likely to exhibit higher quality environments and teaching and enhance children’s social-emotional learning.⁵

Early Education Essentials Measures the Strength of Organizational Conditions

Four years ago, researchers at the Ounce of Prevention Fund (Ounce) and the UChicago Consortium combined their knowledge of ECE program implementation and school improvement to better understand the relevance of essential organizational supports to the performance of ECE programs. This work culminated in the *Early Education Essentials*—a new measurement system, which includes teacher/staff and parent surveys that measure organizational supports in school-based and community-based early education settings.

From 2014–16, our team engaged in a rigorous and iterative development and testing process to adapt the existing UChicago Consortium *5Essentials* teacher surveys for applicability in ECE, and created a new ECE parent survey in lieu of a student survey. In 2017, we conducted a validation study designed to determine if the newly adapted and designed surveys capture credible and useful information about the organizational conditions of ECE programs. Our validation study confirmed the relevancy of the UChicago Consortium’s five essentials framework in ECE settings and revealed that parents offer a unique perspective that is best captured by a distinct, sixth essential we titled Parent Voice. Quantitative findings were positive, reinforcing that the surveys are reliable across school- and community-based settings and that responses are valid because survey scores are correlated with teacher-child interaction quality and attendance outcomes. Readers interested in learning more about this work are encouraged to review our two prior publications.⁶

Here Are the Six Essentials of the *Early Education Essentials* Framework and Surveys:

- 1. EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS:** School/center leaders are strategically focused on children’s development and early achievement. They nurture trust, collective understanding and responsibility for excellence and improvement among all staff and families.
- 2. COLLABORATIVE TEACHERS:** Teachers are committed to the school/center, build strong relationships with colleagues, and work together to continuously improve teaching and children’s learning.
- 3. INVOLVED FAMILIES:** Staff develop strong, collaborative relationships with families and actively support their engagement with the program and children’s learning.
- 4. SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT:** School/center is a physically and emotionally safe and engaging environment. Staff hold high expectations for children’s social-emotional and academic learning, coupled with nurturing, individualized support for children and families.
- 5. AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTION:** Teachers and staff provide consistently engaging, effective, rigorous, and developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction.
- 6. PARENT VOICE:** Parents feel respected by all staff and included as knowledgeable partners in their children’s early learning and development, and have influence over programming.





“*The voices of families contributed substantially to our ability to describe and differentiate the organizational conditions created by strong and weak essential supports, not only for the Involved Families essential but for all of the essentials.*”

Insights Into the Organizational Practices of ECE Programs With Strong Essentials

Throughout development and testing of the *Early Education Essentials* surveys, practitioners, researchers, and systems leaders have asked us what ECE programs that score high (well-organized) and low (weakly organized) on the *Early Education Essentials* surveys look like and feel like to staff and families experiencing those conditions daily. In response, we added a qualitative component to our 2017 validation study.

Two members of our research team intentionally identified ECE sites for qualitative study from those participating in our validation study—two programs (one school-based and one community-based) in which teacher and parent responses to the *Early Education Essentials* surveys indicated that the essential supports were very strong, and two programs (one school-based and one community-based) in which teacher and parent survey responses indicated that the essential supports were very weak. Then, two other members of our research team, without knowing which programs had survey data indicating strong or weak organizational conditions, spent three consecutive days observing interactions among adults and between adults and children in the common areas; interviewing individual leaders, teachers and staff; conducting group interviews of parents; and taking photographic documentation of common area spaces and displays. For more information on our methodology, please see the Appendix. Although research team members were not aware of this at the time of the qualitative data collection, validation study

findings later demonstrated that programs with strong essential supports are also more likely to have higher teacher-child interactions (as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, CLASS-PreK) and better child-attendance outcomes than programs with very weak essential supports.

On-site observation, photo documentation, and individual and group interviewing demonstrated that ECE programs with strong versus weak essential supports have discernibly different organizational climates and practices, and that programs with strong essential supports create much more supportive contexts for teaching, learning, and family engagement than programs with weak essential supports. In addition, the voices of families contributed substantially to our ability to describe and differentiate the organizational conditions created by strong and weak essential supports, not only for the Involved Families essential but for all of the essentials.

This paper begins with a high-level contrast of programs with strong and weak essential supports, presented through leader, teacher, and parent perceptions and experiences of their ECE programs and researcher observations. Then for each essential, we describe the organizational structures and practices present in programs with strong essential supports and provide a table highlighting key differences in those structures and practices when the essentials are strong versus weak. We close with suggestions for ongoing discussion of implications of these findings and of the *Early Education Essentials* surveys for improving the performance of ECE at scale.



Contrasts in Leader, Teacher, and Family Experiences of Strong and Weak Essential Organizational Supports

Below we illustrate strong and weak essential organizational supports using leader, teacher, staff, and parent descriptions of their daily experiences, and our onsite observations. These illustrations are written from a composite of our data collection across the four ECE programs. All four programs operate in Chicago and are in low-and working-class income neighborhoods.

LEADERS

Leaders of weakly organized programs believe children's needs will be met if the program complies with standards and requirements. As a result, leaders employ a transactional leadership style and micromanage staff. Leaders remind and prompt staff toward compliant practice, often restating procedures and telling staff that staff know what to do. Teachers feel as if they are watched all the time yet still underserved by leadership. The staff, in turn, provide children a regimented, structured and, often times, emotionally unsupportive environment. Family engagement opportunities are developed to meet funder requirements rather than to cultivate genuine inclusion of families as partners in their children's education. In short, this compliance-focused vision results in negative staff-administration relations, which in turn creates an unwelcoming environment for staff and families.

Leaders of strongly organized programs have a vision for the early childhood program that is rooted in child development and early childhood pedagogy, which inspires and galvanizes staff and families through a unity of purpose.

Leaders continually clarify purpose and focus direction in ways that influence and motivate action around a shared purpose. The leader's vision extends to families through family engagement strategies that support the parent-child relationship and children's learning. Leaders understand that the cornerstone for early learning is an emotionally supportive environment that promotes quality learning for all—children and adults. Leaders view teachers as professional educators and express confidence in their staff's motivation and ability to innovate teaching and improve learning. As a result, the building has a warm, welcoming atmosphere that hums with activity and conversations among leaders, staff, and families. A clear message is communicated: all are welcome here, and we are all in

this together. Staff and parents speak passionately about the importance of early learning and how critical strong relationships are for that process. In short, this is a site where both children and adults develop and want to be.

TEACHERS

Teachers in weakly organized programs do not engage in routine peer learning or sharing of practice.

Improving practice is viewed as each teacher's individual responsibility, which results in fractured approaches and strategies for improving teacher practice. Teachers receive only formal feedback from leaders annually and are not provided time to critically look at children's data (or their own practice data collected as part of monitoring) in order to improve instruction. Although teachers may ask each other informally how to address a chronic problem of practice, they also convey mistrust of peers and do not believe others are interested in helping their peers. Consequently, teachers are not equipped to address the needs of all children, especially those with diverse learning requirements. Instead, teachers express frustration when children with special needs or who are dual-language learners are not making progress.

Teachers in strongly organized programs collaborate with each other, leaders, and families to raise performance and advance children's learning and development. Leaders allocate and protect time for and facilitate teacher collaboration to build internal capacity and address variations in children's learning and outcomes. Teacher collaboration time is structured, goal and data driven, and guided by protocols that focus discussion and track professional learning outcomes. Teachers build trust with each other, bring up problems of practice, and brainstorm and try out innovations. Leaders support teachers through failures and successes, integrating innovations as a shared body of knowledge and practice. Instructional goals prioritize social-emotional learning as the foundation for all additional learning. Teachers engage children in inquiry-based explorations that embed brief targeted skill building; this approach develops a love for learning. Instructional planning utilizes interdisciplinary teams and multiple sources of data to design meaningful learning opportunities for children.

FAMILIES

Families in weakly organized programs feel their children are safe in the program but give little other substantive

praise for the program and have few opportunities to be engaged with it. During drop-off and pick-up, families enter only briefly and rarely walk all the way to their child's classroom, instead watching from the main door as their child proceeds to the classroom alone. Limited interactions occur between staff and families. Teachers are comfortable with this, as they believe parents make the children's transitions into the classroom more difficult, which delays teaching. Families are engaged by teachers in their child's learning through homework folders that contain activity sheets to practice foundational skills in a rote way. Often, these are offered to families without context. Parents' reflections about their children's experiences are overall positive, but general. Although parents express some frustration with the lack of teachers' communication, they are quick to state that teachers are trying to do their best on the job. Since parents are not routinely invited into the classroom and receive mostly inconsistent and formal communication from staff, they have minimal details to share about the curriculum or concepts being explored in the classroom.

Families in strongly organized programs feel welcomed and engaged even before they enter the doors. During drop-off and pick-up, leaders and staff are always present outside the building and in hallways greeting families and children by name. Families are accustomed to a drop-off and pick-up routine where they walk all the way to their child's classroom, greeting each other and staff along the way. Families are also welcome in every part of the building throughout the day. Staff use multiple, ongoing strategies to build relationships and communicate with families. Teachers partner with families to extend learning opportunities at home. Leaders and teachers make intentional choices to consider the families' perspectives and appreciate and use families' knowledge about children. The program thrives with their support; parents are partners in nearly every part of program operations. Thanks to regular communication they receive from staff, families are well versed in the terminology of early childhood education, are knowledgeable about classroom activities, and know specifically where their child is developmentally. Engaging and partnering with families is understood by staff to be a critical part of the job, equally as important as the work done directly with children; teachers believe that involving families helps them do their job better. All these efforts result in lasting bonds between families and the program.

A young child with dark hair, wearing a blue and white striped shirt and green pants, is sitting on a stack of colorful books. The child is looking down at an open book held in their hands, appearing to be reading. The background is a blurred bookshelf filled with books. The overall scene is warm and focused on the child's activity.

“Our teaching philosophy in working with children—following their interests and seeing them as fully capable people—translates over into how our administrators interact with staff.”

unlimited possibilities

Descriptions of Strong Essential Organizational Support Structures and Practices in ECE Programs

In the sections that follow, we share key details and illustrations of the organizational conditions present in ECE programs that had strong essential supports, as measured by the *Early Education Essentials* surveys, and that had strong teacher-child interactions, as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS Pre-K7), and high rates of child attendance. And we provide summary tables that contrast the organizational practices present in ECE programs when each essential was strong versus weak.

Our Focus on Strong Essential Supports and Best Practices

By focusing on ECE programs with strong essential supports and strong performance, we hope to shed light on how and why these essential organizational supports enable and empower the actions of staff and families to realize higher-quality implementation and outcomes for children.

Please note a couple of things. First, because we intentionally selected and studied ECE schools and centers with either very strong or very weak essential supports, they can be considered extreme cases. We acknowledge that most

ECE schools/centers will fall somewhere in the middle. We anticipate and hope practitioners will recognize structures and practices from both extremes and take away ideas for celebrating and strengthening the essential supports in their own programs. Second, we do not present findings separately for the Parent Voice essential; rather, we integrate the parent perspective as evidence to better understand the other essentials in action and, in particular, the Involved Families essential.

On the following pages, we dive deeper into our observations of programs with strong organizational supports, sharing details and illustrative quotes.

We anticipate and hope practitioners will recognize structures and practices from both extremes and take away ideas for celebrating and strengthening the essential supports in their own programs.



Themes and Illustrations of Leader, Teacher, and Family Actions by Essential Support



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT:

Effective Instructional Leaders

When the essential support of Effective Instructional Leaders is strong, leadership positively affects teaching, children’s learning, and engagement of families through a strong, purpose-driven vision for developmentally appropriate and ambitious early childhood education. By cultivating shared leadership and excellence in teaching and learning, leaders empower teachers and families to embrace the important roles they have in making the vision for the program a reality. Teachers and families trust in the leader’s vision for their school/center and are inspired to improve teaching and learning.

Leaders' vision is purpose driven and deeply grounded in knowledge of developmental science and corresponding early childhood instructional practices. In the programs with strong organizational supports, leaders declare that early learning is essential to children's future success in school and in life, and they turn to the evidence base when visioning and designing their program. They are knowledgeable about child development and insist on applying that knowledge to all aspects of program operations.

These leaders' overarching aim for early learning is to make sure children enter kindergarten with a love of learning and foundational skills in thinking, literacy, math, and science. One leader described this vision and its impact on children:

"The voices of families contributed substantially to our ability to describe and differentiate the organizational conditions created by strong and weak essential supports, not only for the Involved Families essential but for all of the essentials."

A teacher at the same program echoed this goal, saying: *"The goals that we have this year [are] pretty much the same as every year: to make sure that the kids love school and that they love coming to school and they love the staff."*

And because of the developmental age of their students, their programs prioritize children's social-emotional development and family partnerships in order for children to feel confident and motivated for school before kindergarten and thus set up to become lifelong learners. One teacher articulated this center-wide philosophy and aims of preschool education this way:

"But that's why, mostly, they're here; for that social-emotional development. The big [goal] that I've focused on since day one is their voice. ... I quickly realized how difficult that [finding their voice] is for 3-to-5-year-olds. Voice, giving them the power to talk about their feelings, discuss with their peers, and build off their own ideas. The list [of learning goals] goes on and on from there."

Leaders' purpose-driven vision for the preschool program helps staff connect to the reasons they became early educators. This purpose-driven vision has positive, cascading effects.

First, the leaders' vision is inspiring to people. It resonates with the hopes of families and the mission teachers feel about the importance, values, and methods of early childhood education. As one teacher at a strongly organized site shared:

"Honestly, it feels like it's more of a passion here for early childhood education ... a real true passion for teaching kids at this level and a desire to constantly want to improve that education."

Second, the leaders' knowledge and respect for the early years means that staff and families believe their leaders are motivated by the right values and thus committed to doing what's right for young children regardless of externally imposed pressures. As a result, staff and families trust the direction the leaders are charting and are strongly committed to the programs' goals for young children and to the school or center. One teacher explained what she believed teachers needed from leaders to be successful:

"I think having open-mindedness. I think pretty much what we have here already, it's working. It's nice to have administration that has a background in the field that you are working in because they get it. It's like, let's do this, I think it's really important not just to pull everyone along, but to go with you and to be right there with you."

One parent shared how she saw the leader and staff upholding the vision: *"I think she [the leader] sets expectations for the rest of the teachers and administrators to live up to. I think that they all seem to be compassionate about what they do, you know what I mean. It's not like, them posing; they're all wanting to do what's best for the kids".*

Another parent echoed the importance and positive impact of the vision:

"I really love how they communicate well with the parents. They have monthly meetings that involve what they're doing at school ... [and] different things to teach the parents. Ways to deal with stress or ways to feed your family, different things. Then I also really enjoy the fact that each child has their teachers, but then they have their primary care provider who gets to tell you this is where they're at, this is where we want them to go, or where we expect them to be and so forth."

Third, for teachers in particular, this combination of a leader's purpose-driven vision with knowledge to back it up means they are open to leaders shaping and guiding their work. A teacher at a strongly organized site shared her appreciation for the support she routinely got from her leaders and the way the program supported continuous learning for children and adults:

“I feel like our teaching philosophy in working with children and following their interests and seeing them as fully capable people kind of translates over into how our administrators interact with staff.”

Throughout the program and across all levels, staff in these strongly organized programs can describe with consistency and specificity the preschool programs’ aims, goals and priorities, strategies and practices, progress and results, and next steps. The leaders’ active work to set the direction cultivates a deeply understood sense of what needs to be done and of each person’s role in achieving that purpose.

The leaders’ vision permeates staff descriptions of how they think about their work; what they do on a daily basis with children, families and colleagues; and why it is important. That vision is also observable throughout the buildings’ common areas, in the form of bulletin boards displaying program values and goals alongside children’s work and family activities that exemplify those aims. Family members who participated in focus groups for the study also affirmed their knowledge of the programs’ values and goals and their sense that the programs live up to that vision. A teacher shared how the school/center’s vision is important to her: *“I love how they make us feel like we’re the experts. It’s said to us [and] also I believe it. So this year I feel like we’ve...really shared more as a staff.”*

Leaders continually employ their vision to clarify strategy and to influence and motivate staff’s action toward the shared vision. Leaders use formal and informal opportunities and individual and collective conversations to reaffirm what is important, inform staff of areas that need strengthening across the program, encourage staff, and reinforce commitment to action.

Even when mandates that leaders received from central/grantee office administrators are inconsistent with leaders’ vision, leaders in strong sites maneuver around them. Leaders in strongly and weakly organized programs described these mandates as frequent. But leaders in the strongly organized programs also told us that some mandates are at times incompatible with their program vision and strategy. In those circumstances, these leaders again set about focusing direction by reframing and linking mandates, where possible, to their shared purpose and clarifying what actions they want staff to take, whether they fully adhere to the mandate or not.

Regardless of what mandates are placed on the program, leaders stay focused on their purpose-driven, pedagogically-based vision and ensure that teachers and staff are able to continue working effectively toward that vision. One teacher shared how she learns about mandates from the central/grantee office through her administrator:

“[The principal] writes very detailed weekly announcements for us as teachers; I mean sometimes [the announcements] are very detailed. Like wow, there’s 33 things on this list for us to do this week, you know. How do you even have time to type that? But as a teacher, I appreciate that, because I could see where she’s at, what she’s thinking. She gives us the shortened version [of the central/grantee office mandates]. Every Sunday night we ... want to open up our email [because] we know that [the principal] will have that written for us and ready to roll.”

The rest of the themes under this essential further highlight how leaders in these strongly organized programs successfully champion their vision and equip their staff with needed capacities.

Leaders cultivate collaborative and reflective cultures to build capacity for consistent and effective implementation of program operations that achieve their vision.

Leaders in the strongly organized programs speak about teaching and their teachers in respectful ways. They point out the complexities of educating young children, the ever-growing diversity of needs of the preschool population, and how hard their staff work. They view their teachers as professional educators and believe that all teachers are motivated by children’s learning and are committed to growing their practice. A leader shared how she prioritized collaboration and professional learning for her staff that was also respectful of their time:

“So knowing that I think it’s essential [collaboration], it’s our first priority for the next two years. We’ve made it our first priority; that’s how essential I think it is. Knowing that, it is the hardest thing to etch out of our schedule because we’re being pulled in so many different ways. So we’ve kept the first two days at the beginning of the school year for a tremendous amount of collaboration. That last day...we’re going to chop it up into three different times throughout the school year, where there’s nobody around, there are no children around and they just sit and work in



“ I feel like it’s empowering here. I have something to share and it’s valued by our administrator. Then your colleagues buy-in and that gives you that energy, and you have that love.

professional learning groups and talk and come up with a problem of practice and we go from there.”

As a result, these leaders believe it is their responsibility to make sure staff have the competencies and emotional support to do their work well and strive for strong learning. These leaders possess a growth mindset (i.e., the belief that abilities can be developed through focused action) for themselves and their staff, and believe strongly in the power of professional community to build capacity. One leader declared, “We do everything in teams. We speak team; that’s what we speak, that’s our language.”

These leaders cultivate a collaborative culture by modeling and celebrating reflection, inquiry, discussion and learning from their practice. Leaders in these strongly organized programs reframe issues and challenges as problems of practice so they can shape and guide the work and stimulate new thinking about common issues and requirements. A teacher explained how her/his administrator facilitates a culture of collaboration:

“So really kind of pushing the more experienced teachers that have been doing this for a long time to reach out to the newer teachers. And having the newer teachers feel comfortable to go to the teachers who have a lot more experience. So not just collaboration in our classrooms but schoolwide collaboration. So just pushing us to use more interventions and strategies that you might not have thought about. Like, push yourself to try new strategies. Yesterday I videotaped a whole morning routine. I’d never done that before. Just trying new things, and you know it might not work out, but it might.”

This quote from a teacher at a strongly organized school illustrates the multiple positive impacts of a growth-minded leader and a collaborative culture on teachers’ work:

“I feel like it’s empowering [here], it’s not just from the top down. It’s right here, and we believe in this stuff, and I have something to share, and it’s valued by our administrator. Then your co-teachers and your colleagues also buy in too, and you have that energy, and you have that love. Then you have an administrator that pushes you in that way and supports you and guides you and nudges you a bit farther. I think it’s kind of what we try to do with our students too, now even when they’re only three. I think [the principal] leads by example for sure.”

To reinforce this collaborative culture, leaders build relational trust with staff to establish a safe and emotionally supportive professional environment. This in turn enables staff to create supportive environments with their peers and for children and families. Leaders believe that in order to create a caring, supportive environment for children and families, they need to ensure that their staff feel cared for, respected, and supported. Leaders not only spend time cultivating collaboration and recognizing staff as professionals but also model to staff that they are valued as people. Leaders build trust with staff by learning about their personal lives and taking that information into consideration when scheduling meetings or events after hours. One leader shared how she expresses caring, builds trust, and reinforces respect among her staff:

“I basically kill myself to make sure that people know how loved they are. I mean, I know every person in this school. I scheduled something and somebody said, ‘That’s my husband’s birthday.’ I said, ‘Is getting home at 5:30pm too late?’ It’s a late night event. I said, ‘Don’t worry about it, we’ll figure it out.’ She knows that I’ll figure it out. She knows that I’m going to respect her husband’s birthday. That’s super important to them. It would be important to you and me, and you know, that’s not a trivial thing.”

Numerous staff reflected benefiting greatly from this collaborative, reflective, and supportive culture, as demonstrated by the two quotes below:

“That’s something that I think really inspires me to not just grow, as far as a teacher, but to grow as a human being. I take this into all parts of my life, constantly. ... What am I doing, what can I do differently, how can I grow? ... The constant reflection opportunities that I’m offered here have really helped me grow as a human being, as a person.”
“I’m going to sound repetitive, but it’s because of the administration that we have now. [The leader] has pushed everybody to their farthest, she really has. I would say the majority of people are ... on top of their game now and know that they have to be reflective in their teaching.”

Under the essential Collaborative Teachers, we will discuss themes that emerged with how this collaborative culture is operationalized on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis to advance professional community and grow teaching capacity to the benefit of children and families. Then, under the Supportive Environment essential, we will describe the themes that illustrate how the environment for children and families is built from this foundation.

These leaders believe their ability to educate young children is optimized when they include families in that work.

A key element then of these leaders’ vision is cultivating an organizational climate that values and prioritizes partnerships with families and a mindset that families’ perspectives

help staff teach more effectively. As one leader stated: *“It’s so important that they [families] are a part of this early learning. We want them to be involved. We want them to be a partner. To set goals for their children and to be a partner with that.”*

A parent confirmed this leader’s vision, stating: *“They include not only parents, [but also] grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, whatever. They have a lot of special days where people can come in. It’s like they have nothing to hide.”*

Leaders emphasized that building partnerships with families took multiple and varied methods of contact. One leader described how she cultivates family partnerships and brings teachers into the work:

“Every morning [the leader] is usually at the front office and she’s greeting us [the teachers] and greeting parents as well as they walk in, and she knows everyone’s name. I think that’s a big thing. She’s not even teaching any group of children, but she knows everybody by name. ... Also, she’s really good at communicating through emails about upcoming parent activity nights, like we always know that they’re on Wednesday nights. She sends out which teacher is going to be there from the classroom, and it’s up to each classroom within their team to decide whose turn it is, or if you can both be there, great.”

Two parents shared how families were provided opportunities to be in the building and see the leader’s vision in action:

“They even have certain activities throughout the year where parents are invited into the classroom, and this year it was like a rotating schedule, so you went into different classrooms. I mean, all those teachers and the care professionals were just extremely friendly and like, again, they all knew the kids’ names. You’re like, oh my gosh, this is like the greatest place in the world.”

In the section on the Involved Families essential, we will further discuss how leaders operationalize engaging families, sharing key themes along with observed structures and practices.



TABLE 1
Comparison of Organizational Structures and Practices of
EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders communicate a vision that is purpose driven and rooted in developmental science and developmentally appropriate practice.	1. Leaders communicate a vision that is compliance driven to the myriad program standards and funder requirements.
2. Leaders establish a small number of actionable goals tied to program standards and their vision for the program. They problem-solve implementation issues with staff.	2. Leaders pass along written program guidance they receive with the expectation that staff will figure out how to change their practice to implement new requirements properly.
3. Leaders create a warm and professional work environment , expecting staff to focus on practice and cultivating children's love of learning.	3. Leaders create a rigid work environment , expecting staff to comply in highly procedural ways with program standards.
4. Leaders help staff connect to a moral purpose and the reasons they became early educators through their purpose-driven vision and actions.	4. Leaders make it difficult for staff to prioritize time to focus on practice by overloading them with a compliance-driven vision and actions.
5. Leaders maintain regular communication with staff , sending weekly updates to help staff prioritize time and to promote open dialogue about successes and challenges.	5. Leaders communicate only sporadically with staff , as needed to ensure staff compliance with standards and requirements.
6. Leaders use a facilitative and relational leadership style to build trust, shared understanding, and collective responsibility.	6. Leaders use micromanagement and a transactional leadership style to hold individuals accountable for meeting standards.
7. Leaders prioritize their time to provide teachers with guidance on teaching and encouragement to critically examine and improve practice and children's learning.	7. Leaders prioritize their time to monitor compliance with funder requirements and respond to teacher requests for assistance by referencing program standards.
8. Leaders create a culture and supportive policies to welcome family partnerships, supporting staff to ensure that families are involved, included, and influential in the program.	8. Leaders interact minimally with families and do not expect staff to reach out to families beyond formal family involvement activities that meet minimum program standards.
9. Leaders observe classroom practice routinely and provide performance feedback that is strengths based . Staff all receive regular feedback.	9. Leaders observe classroom practice sporadically and provide feedback that is compliance focused and often deficit based . Nonteaching staff may not receive any structured feedback.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT:

Collaborative Teachers

When the essential support of Collaborative Teachers is strong, leaders champion professional collaboration as the pathway to excellent early childhood education. In these schools/centers, teachers have routine and multiple opportunities to work together with their colleagues that are scheduled, protected, and attended frequently by their leaders. Teachers are devoted to a professionalized teaching practice that includes innovation, collaboration, and a continual focus on improving children's learning outcomes. Teachers detail how they collaborated with their colleagues, the positive impacts of that collaboration on their ability to meet the diverse learning needs of their young students, and some of the struggles of using this time productively

Leaders champion and depend on teacher collaboration to build internal professional capacity. Leaders have confidence that with ongoing professional learning, staff will innovate practice to better meet the needs of all children in their classrooms and the school/center. Leaders expect staff to take on leadership roles that support their own continuous practice improvement and that of their peers. As one leader told us:

“I think the staff helps train, but I really have a philosophy that the first year I stay away from asking them to do things [organizationally] and adding to their burden of learning to be an educator. I let them just swim in the ocean with everybody and not have a tremendous amount of extra responsibilities other than the classroom responsibilities, because that’s really what’s important. I want them to learn the children in front of them, their families, and then they’ll also learn sort of the atmosphere and the attitude of the school and the steps in order to do their job well. Then the second year, I kind of lean on them a little bit more, and then the third year we’re looking for some leadership [from them] and they know that.”

As a result, leaders ensure teachers have routine protected time, weekly and monthly, to meet together to discuss children’s learning, raise problems of practice, receive encouragement in the face of practice challenges, share ideas, and co-plan instructional improvements. One teacher shared an example how she and her teaching team routinely use this time to improve their ability to meet the needs of diverse learners:

“We have a team meeting weekly. ... I’ll talk about two kids, and then I’ll have each teacher talk about one. Then we put in our individualized plan, and we talk about goals in different areas. So whether it’s social-emotional that we need to be working on, or cognitive, language, literacy, whatever it is, we bring that up with the whole team so everybody shares what they’ve seen and the steps that we need to take with that child moving forward.”

Teacher collaboration is protected, predictable, and focused on real and relevant problems of practice related to improving children’s learning. When this essential is strong, the leader’s vision is that on-the-job, continual professional learning is the path for building capacity and improving outcomes. Leaders make sure collaboration opportunities

have a clear purpose, structured processes, and the intended outcomes of deepening knowledge, capacity, and persistence toward improving teaching and learning. In turn, teachers shared sense-making builds collective understanding and commitments to best practices. A teacher in a strongly organized school shared with us:

“We have our monthly head teacher meeting where we can discuss ideas and collaborate on ideas. Those are the main avenues where we get to talk and collaborate. We have them all the time. And like I said, now since I’ve been here for a while, I understand the importance of it and how it enriches my classroom and the things I do in my classroom. It’s one of those things where it’s a lot of work, you have to be really multitask oriented to work here, but you see the reasoning behind it.”

Teachers use peer collaboration to improve their teaching effectiveness. Teachers recognize the many benefits of collaborating with their peers—from the high levels of professional trust and respect they hold for their colleagues to the pervading sense of collective responsibility they feel for supporting the growth of all children and families, not just those directly enrolled in their classroom.

“[Supports] that come to mind automatically [are] our PLGs, peer learning groups. A couple times through the quarter during our staff meetings we break out and we go into each other’s classrooms. And you can just snoop—“I see you’re doing this, what are you doing here?” I looked through their bins and I saw that [the room] had a bunch of different math manipulatives that I jotted down and we were then able to order for our classroom. They were doing their daily schedule a little bit different than us and I was, like, “Oh, that’s so much more exciting.” [We’re now] bringing that in. Those peer learning groups are great.”

As a result, teachers in these programs have strong commitments to raising the school/center’s performance overall and to supporting one another’s professional learning and achievements. Two teachers at strongly organized programs shared how collaborating across classroom and observing other teachers’ classrooms has been helpful:

“For the school as a whole it’s always collaboration; just how to be better teachers. ... So what helps me is all the opportunities that I am presented with to reflect

on what I do and to constantly set goals for myself professionally, in the classroom, and not just set goals, but ... be accountable for how I'm going to reach those goals. So the accountability and the reflection are things that facilitate me staying on top of what I do in the classroom."

Another teacher reflected on how she appreciates and benefits from interdisciplinary collaboration as well as collaboration in specialized groups.

"Biweekly we sit with ... the whole classroom team. And really that's when I'm able to share as special ed teacher what I'm using, and then other people can throw in their ideas. So that's always great. [Then] a couple times a quarter, after staff meetings, the special ed teachers stay, and we kind of discuss some trends we're seeing. We are able to just sit down and discuss. What can we bring in to make it a better experience? Do we need more sensory? Do we need a bigger space outside to run in an enclosed space?"



TABLE 2
Comparison of Organizational Structures and Practices of
COLLABORATIVE TEACHERS

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders view collaboration as the key to building professional capacity and achieving their vision.	1. Leaders do not view collaboration as key to improving children's outcomes.
2. Leaders cultivate a culture of collaboration , model reflective practice, and discuss teaching and learning regularly with staff.	2. Leaders cultivate a culture of individual accountability , and remind staff verbally and in writing of what constitutes compliant practice.
3. Teachers bring up problems of practice, and are committed to raising the performance of the school/center overall , in their own work and in that of their peers.	3. Teachers, in response to the culture set by leaders, assume responsibility for their own practice improvement. They seek and receive little to no ongoing performance feedback from leaders.
4. Teachers have scheduled and protected time weekly and monthly for peer collaboration and learning , including time weekly for teaching teams to lesson plan together.	4. Teachers do not engage in routine collaboration and rarely have structured time for practice discussions or peer learning.
5. Collaborative time has a clear purpose and is structured by goals, data, and protocols that allow teachers to demonstrate expertise and to learn from each other.	5. Teachers receive minimal active instructional guidance from leaders ; rather, leaders forward memos with program guidance or practice requirements teachers are expected to follow.
6. Teachers use collaborative time to address variations in children's learning and outcomes by focusing on pedagogical issues, using data to examine practice, and designing innovations.	6. Teachers rarely use children's data to critically examine instruction . When they do, it is usually done independently and focused only on their own practice.
7. Teachers observe each other's instruction several times a year to learn about creative approaches.	7. Teachers do not observe each other's classrooms ; rather they are directed to go to leaders when they are having a problem in their classroom.
8. Interactions and conversations among staff and between staff and leaders are frequent , warm, and focused on offering one another encouragement around professional and personal endeavors.	8. Teachers keep to individual classrooms, interacting minimally in the common areas with colleagues, leaders, or families through brief, perfunctory exchanges.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT: Involved Families

When the essential support of Involved Families is strong, work in the school/center is undergirded by the belief that partnerships with families and being influenced by families' knowledge and opinions are critical to their teaching effectiveness and children's success. Families articulate these as core beliefs of the program and detail actions taken by leaders and staff that embodied that vision.

* The themes and examples for the essential Involved Families draw as much from the perspectives of parents as they do from those of leaders and staff. Although our initial study design was not informed by the knowledge that the Early Education Essentials framework would include a sixth essential, Parent Voice, our group interviews with parents surfaced distinct themes that in strongly organized sites complemented and confirmed the information shared by teachers and leaders. Consequently, quotes from parents feature prominently in this section.

Leaders' purpose-driven vision for high-quality early education extends to the engagement and partnership of families.

Leaders and staff describe the importance of partnering with families, especially in the early years as children are initially adjusting to a school setting and forming foundational approaches to learning. A deep sense of responsibility is shared about helping families understand the importance of preschool, the developmental trajectory children are traversing, and how much children benefit when staff and parents are aligned and partnering.

Leaders and staff detail specific actions they take to welcome families at all times into the building and into the work of the program and to show themselves as trustworthy, reliable, and responsive to parent's opinions, concerns and needs. One leader emphasized communicating clear expectations to families and building strong partnerships with families, stating:

"Then [after those structured orientations at the beginning of the year] we continue and perpetuate those expectations and ... mood and our goals and vision through weekly newsletters, through ongoing meetings with parents in the afternoon or the evening, just through greeting parents and having hallway conversations outside. ... The other thing we have is that the ... second-year parents also help us set the tone with new parents coming in, so it's ... a peer-to-peer learning there as well."

Parents at this site receive communication from the teacher through a variety of methods that are not limited to formal communications like progress reports. One school parent described the ways teachers communicated with parents:

"Each classroom has a webpage, and the teachers upload photos of different units that they've worked on throughout the month. Some teachers post what you could be working on at home, a home connection. That usually comes in a newsletter as well. You know, things like, "This is what we're doing at school," and, "This is how you can connect with your child at home."

Parents comment on how aligned and collaborative the relationships seem among the staff, such that a parent can make a comment or request to one teacher at the beginning of the day and have confidence that the information will get to the relevant staff members. One parent remarked, "I love the fact

that you tell one teacher what's going on with your kid, and all of them know in there!"

Indeed, when the essential support of Involved Families is strong, teachers and leaders consider it a failure if they have been unable to engage parents at deep levels in their child's early learning experiences.

Leaders and staff interact intentionally and structure opportunities to ensure parents' inclusion and influence on their child's early learning experience and the program.

Parents are physically welcome throughout the school/center building at all times of the day, which reflects a high level of program transparency and willingness to be open to parent input. The regularity of interaction between staff and parents builds relational trust and paves the way for substantive collaboration at every level. Teachers seek out parents' perspectives not only about the child's experiences, but also on higher-level instructional decisions. A parent described how teachers leveraged her child's needs into a learning opportunity for the entire class:

"One of the classrooms was doing a lesson on same and different. So I was approached and asked if I would do a presentation on inclusion and just, you know, the differences that children have, but how they're also the same. I brought [an] Elmo doll and dressed him up to have—I mean you could imagine what kind of special needs that Elmo had. He was wearing orthotics and braces on his legs and he had a chewy tube around his neck. ... You know, just trying to show the children something that they can relate to.... So instead of children being singled out, now the typically developing children know sometimes people need a little extra help."

And teachers at programs with strong essentials communicate routinely, both informally and formally, about children's developmental milestones and suggest meaningful activities to advance children's learning while also strengthening the parent-child bond. One parent expressed how important this partnership was to her as she worked with center staff to secure additional supports to address her son's special needs:

"My son has an IEP [individualized education program] and a speech delay. [The teachers] identified [this delay] very early on when he started here. I think something that they did very well is that I had support [with] ..."



“They’re willing to try and pull your child in different directions just to see what works...and then will tell you all the data that they collected and why this works or why it doesn’t work, so that’s really helpful.”

the IEP system. We made a plan, kept that going and never really stopped. We’re a team in his learning process, in his development. They did that. They never made me feel as if he was excluded from anything. If anything, he had the support he needed and more—the communication was always there.”

Parents also have concrete, formal and informal opportunities to serve in leadership roles and guide program-level decisions. They are invested in the strength of the program not just for the sake of their own child but for the whole community. One parent shared: *“I am the vice president ... of the Parent Policy council ... so I’ve been heavily involved in that, [which] is not just about the early learning for kids, but it’s about the safety of the community and about what parents also need.”*

Parents and teachers have strong relationships built on trust and mutual positive regard for the child. Leaders and teachers communicate to parents how much they care for and like the children in their classrooms. Parents know teachers care for their child in particular and have their child’s best interests at heart. Parents feel well-informed by their child’s teacher about classroom activities, their child’s reactions to those experiences, and their child’s learning progress. Parents share stories about how the caring and extra efforts of their child’s teacher has enriched parents’ relationships with their children, including one parent whose child had special needs:

“My son has cerebral palsy. I’ve seen him enter the school being nonverbal, and now he’s talking. When he was nonverbal, it made me uncomfortable to not know anything. I would ask him [about his day] and he wouldn’t be able to tell me anything. So the teachers would...tell me who he played with so I can talk to him about it at home. They would write it down on a piece of paper [and]...I would ask him, “Did you play with so and so?” He would sign to me, “Yes, yes, how do you know?” That was really helpful in opening communication between my son and I.”

From the vantage point of such strong relationships, parents are empowered to offer their input and insights to teachers who in turn acknowledge the value of the information and use it to tailor future learning activities. As a result, parents express appreciation, trust, and confidence in their child’s teachers. One parent shared how a teacher addressed their child’s separation issue by teaching the whole class about separation anxiety, thus normalizing it:

“My daughter has separation issues. I brought it up to the teacher, and [she] created an activity for all the kids to learn about separation issues, because if it’s an issue for [my daughter], it might be an issue for other kids. It’s not a big deal then ... it’s not just one-on-one for her. They can work on it with everyone, and my daughter can learn.”



TABLE 3
Comparison of Organizational Structures and Practices of
INVOLVED FAMILIES

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders champion the importance of involving and engaging families and link it to their vision for program success.	1. Leaders do not describe substantial engagement of families as part of their guiding vision for program success.
2. Teachers and staff actively involve families , recognizing that families are integral to the work they do to support children’s adjustment and early learning in the school/center.	2. Teachers and staff do not prioritize family involvement ; rather, teachers are told to let leaders handle “issues” that families bring up about their child or the program.
3. Leaders and staff amplify teachers’ efforts to build partnerships with families , including helping to design activities to engage parents within the classroom and school/center-wide.	3. Teachers receive little, if any, support from leaders and staff to amplify their efforts to involve families.
4. Leaders provide families a variety of formats and times of the day to be involved.	4. Leaders recruit families to attend monthly meetings as required by funders and express frustration at low participation rates .
5. Leaders and teachers use multiple strategies for communicating with families about their children’s learning and development.	5. Teachers and leaders communicate with families almost exclusively through written memos and newsletters , which parents often find to be impersonal and minimally useful.
6. Families learn ECE terminology and child development through regular conversations with teachers and at school/center family nights.	6. Teachers and leaders do not intentionally use ECE terminology or talk with families in ways that build their knowledge of child development.
7. Families learn about the curriculum and the concepts being explored with their child in the classroom and are asked to provide their input and feedback on their child’s experiences .	7. Families may learn about the curriculum or the concepts being explored with their child in the classroom but are not asked specifically to provide input or feedback .
8. Leaders and teachers ensure families are welcome and invited everywhere in the building.	8. Leaders and teachers do not welcome families into classrooms or encourage them to be a part of daily activities in the building.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT:

Supportive Environment

When the essential support of **Supportive Environment** is strong, all staff work together to create the most emotionally supportive and developmentally appropriate learning **environment** they can for young children and their families. Staff intentionally use children's and families' growing sense of security, trust, and calm to expose children to new ideas and tasks, an ambitious and engaging pedagogy that affords young children active learning opportunities.

Leaders and teachers work diligently to provide all children with emotional supports that smooth their adjustment into a school setting and maintain their love for learning.

Teachers form strong relationships with each child and adjust their interactions to better fit individual temperaments. One teacher discussed building trust with children by teaching them that they can count on positive regard and support from teachers. They elaborated that this is the most important thing teachers can do to prepare children for kindergarten, saying:

“[Children learn] that they have the support. That they feel comfortable in the classroom. That they feel they can trust us [the teachers] and we can trust them, and so they know that they can come to you. ... I understand some kids have different ways of learning. ... That’s why we are there, to support them and to sit down with them and to show them that this is the way we do it or if you don’t like that way, we can find another way, and they know they [are] going to have our support and we trust them. We trust them ... [to] talk to each other [and] get ideas.”

Leaders and teachers actively support children every day to transition from their families to teachers and into the classroom environment using relationship- and empathy-based strategies. Teachers implement a daily schedule that optimizes children’s time in small groupings and one-on-one over whole group. This individualized approach is employed to foster a strong love of school and learning in children and was present in both ECE settings with strong organizational conditions. As a leader describes below, this approach requires intensive planning by teachers aimed at developing a love for learning from an early age:

“You know it’s really individual. So we really look at the individual children, no matter if they’re typically developed or special needs, and we try to expose them to as many opportunities to learn as possible because that light switch flips in different parts and different times of their life.”

Teachers and leaders forge positive relationships with families in order to build a foundation for a strong supportive environment in the school/center. Teachers and leaders believe their ability to create supportive environments in the classroom is boosted by positive relationships and communication between families and staff; in other words, they act

on the belief that environments in the early years must be supportive of both the child and the family. In both settings, families are welcome and expected to be everywhere in the building. Staff members, from teachers to janitors, personally interact with families using their names and the names of their children. Displays of family-led projects that were connected to the classroom’s lesson plan are scattered throughout the buildings. In addition, there are materials for children, including visual displays at child level and child-appropriate furniture in the common areas of the building. A parent at a strongly organized site described what this looks and feels like from the families’ perspective:

“Supportive environment? Definitely. It’s not only from the teachers and the staff [to the kids], or from the director down. I think it funnels all the way up from the children to the parents. ... There’s a push to develop parents to be leaders, to be able to facilitate things on their own. They started a teacher assistant program, and there are a couple parents who are participating in that. ... So you see it’s a very encouraging environment to continue development for everyone and it never stops.”

When asked about the program’s goals, one leader immediately reflected on the importance of building a supportive environment for families:

“Maintaining good relationships with kids, family and staff. [As] far as on the staff end, just ... responding to emails immediately, and with family, that means for teachers ... engaging and parent-activity nights monthly; also, going to other monthly parent meetings and then just providing a welcoming environment for them, like greeting parents daily and just building those relationships from the beginning of the year so that you can support learning and development of their children throughout the year.”

The strong relationships staff have with families support their ability to continuously provide emotional supports for children. Leaders and teachers rely on partnerships with families to create, maintain, and innovate strong emotional supports for young children. They believe they can provide better emotional supports for children when they partner with families. One important way teachers create an environment that is as welcoming to children as possible is to focus on

routines of transition into the classroom at the start of the day. For many young children, the transition of saying hello to their teacher and classmates and goodbye to their family at the start of each day is difficult. Teachers develop transition routines with families to support children’s adjustment to the school day and set the tone for all children that their classroom is a safe, caring place to learn and play. One parent shared how a teacher helped her daughter adjust to the classroom routine and how reassuring the teacher’s competence was:

“First day I brought my daughter to school, I’m like, “Oh my gosh, what is this place?” I had no clue. She sits in a circle [with all the other children] and she’s hunched over and that’s not a good thing, but I don’t want to bring it up because, whatever. The teacher saw it and she put a little wedge pillow for her to sit on and all of a sudden she sat up. I’m like, wow, you know, this lady really knows what she’s doing. So I walked out the very first day and I’m like, this is the place to be.”

A teacher described how children benefited when the program environment was supportive for parents as well as children:

“When we [parents and teachers] are on the same page and they [parents] understand and they can communicate about their child’s learning and, as well, understand when I communicate about it, I think it empowers the children because then [children] see that we are a united front, and that we’re on the same page. Also, what [children] are experiencing in the classroom doesn’t stop there. They [children] take it home, and at home they’re getting that same kind of passion that [their teachers] offer them, from their parents and from their family. I think that really empowers the children to want to see, to want to learn, to feel like that there’s a lot of people who really want them to succeed and are on their side. So I think they feel well-loved and they feel empowered.”



TABLE 4
Comparison of Organizational Structures and Practices of
SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders and teachers make the physical space of the school/center embody the leader’s vision.	1. Leaders and teachers do not use the physical space to connect the work to their program vision.
2. Common areas are outfitted with child-friendly materials and visual displays of children’s work.	2. Common areas have few to no child-friendly materials or displays of children’s work.
3. Leaders model and create the expectation that positive, emotionally supportive interactions will occur between teachers and children and families and teachers.	3. Leaders do not model or create the expectation that emotionally supportive interactions will occur with staff and families.
4. Teachers provide students with emotional supports to increase their self-regulation skills and ability to engage and persist in learning experiences.	4. Leaders and teachers express frustration with children’s impulsiveness and social-emotional “issues,” stating that the lack of self-regulation makes it harder for them to prepare children for kindergarten.



ESSENTIAL SUPPORT:

Ambitious Instruction

When the essential support of **Ambitious Instruction** is strong, leaders and staff hold strong practice commitments to crafting inquiry-based and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences that help children achieve comprehensive development and learning goals. Social-emotional learning is prioritized and understood as the foundation upon which all other learning goals can be achieved. Families are knowledgeable and able to speak in detail about the nature of their children’s classroom experiences and how teachers persist in helping their children develop and learn to their fullest potential.

Informed by child developmental science and comprehensive early learning standards, teachers in programs where this essential is strong emphasize social-emotional learning as the foundation from which all additional early learning is made possible for all children of all abilities. When the essential support of Ambitious Instruction is strong, staff believe that early childhood education should build children's confidence and success with being in a classroom setting, and importantly reinforce their curiosity, exploration, and love of learning. As a result, commitments to developmentally appropriate practices and prioritizing social-emotional learning is uniformly expressed. A teacher described her approach to developing children's social-emotional skills:

"I think the biggest [learning goal] is social-emotional, teaching my kids how to interact with one another. I have kids coming from different backgrounds. They had siblings or no siblings and those were like big factors that make a difference inside of the classroom. So [it's] a big goal for our classroom this year. In the beginning of the year, kids were communicating through physical contact rather than language. So at this point of the year [spring] it's dropped down significantly, but we've done so many activities and teaching kids simple phrases like how to tell somebody, "I don't like that when you pull the back of my shirt," and teaching them an understanding of accident versus on purpose and how to interact with their peers after those things happen and setting up strategies also for kids that are at different levels of that understanding."

A leader shared her school's inquiry-based approach to children's learning and how she and her staff include families to extend that learning at home:

"I mean, if you look at the skills that we're teaching here ... it's just like us sitting here now. We're listening and asking questions, and clarifying questions, and being able to articulate our thoughts and our wonderings. So I think that it's essential that you put things into place and the parents understand what you're putting in place so that they can carry it home every night and then every summer and then throughout school."

Similarly, a teacher reflected an inquiry-based approach at the core of her teaching philosophy and strategies:

"Inquiry—I feel like if a child has curiosity and a spark to want to know things ... that leads to being life-long learners...that want to know. If I embrace that, they'll constantly want to learn and know things and embrace that. ... So, in the classroom we go off of studies and inspirations [that are] usually based on things that the kids are interested in."

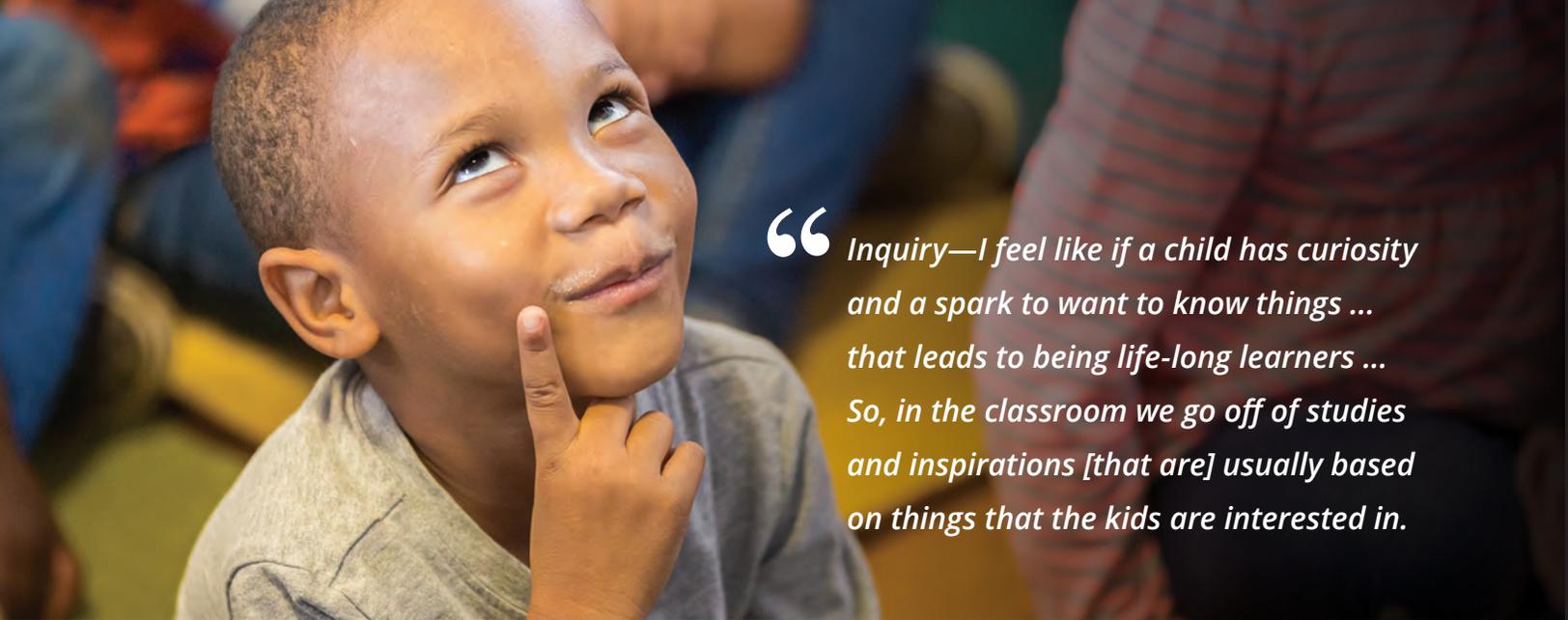
Teachers and leaders create a culture of ambitious practice, with an emphasis on early learning standards, formative assessment, and inquiry-based learning opportunities.

In programs with strong Ambitious Instruction, staff use early learning standards and assessment data to track children's learning progress, identify gaps in children's learning, and brainstorm and innovate instructional approaches to better meet the diversity of children's learning and development needs. One teacher explained that her teaching team used assessment and observational data to attend to the learning levels of all children and then adjust weekly lesson plans accordingly:

"I'd say we probably have two social-emotional [goals], two language, two literacy, two math, a science, and a social studies [goal] roughly that we choose to focus on. Then from there we develop learning objectives based on those standards, so students will X, Y and Z. Then we kind of break it down even further into taking those literacy and math standards and making group goals."

Teachers at strong schools/centers integrate social-emotional learning with academic goals. A teacher from a strongly organized school illustrates how teachers there prepare lesson plans that articulate comprehensive goals and clear learning objectives that are directly tied to early learning standards:

"We can run a [data] report, and I'll usually bring that to our meeting. It's literally bar graphs and percentages, and so it's easy to visualize ... like we have two to three kids actually below developmental expectations in math and literacy so we need to be working toward these. Or we have three or four that are way above, what are ways that we can still support them and push them with their learning?"



“*Inquiry—I feel like if a child has curiosity and a spark to want to know things ... that leads to being life-long learners ... So, in the classroom we go off of studies and inspirations [that are] usually based on things that the kids are interested in.*”

Teams create plans that are informed by children’s progress data and family input and focus on innovating and differentiating instruction. Staff rely on collaboration in interdisciplinary teams that include lead and assistant teachers, special education teachers, social workers, and other support staff, as well as partnerships with families to meet children’s diverse learning needs and behavioral challenges.

Teachers and leaders work in a highly professional and supportive culture that strives for excellence in teaching and is intensely focused on figuring out where learning is and is not happening. Families have specific and detailed knowledge of classroom learning experiences, even when they have not been present for the activity, and teachers frequently incorporate families’ input into lesson plans. Because staff are intensely focused on welcoming and including families’ perspectives in their work, families are able to speak in detail about the ambitiousness of teaching and learning. One parent shared how teachers and support staff work with her child:

“They’re willing to try and pull your child in different directions just to see what works. Nothing is concrete. It’s like, “Let’s try it. Let’s see how he does. We’ll take data. We’ll get back to you.” You know, that type of thing. Parent-teacher conference comes, and then they will tell you all the data that they collected and why this works or why it doesn’t work, so that’s really helpful. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Teachers partner with families to deepen background knowledge and extend learning beyond the classroom.

Teachers provide parents with activities and suggestions that

link children’s classroom and home experiences, strengthen children’s background knowledge and allow parents to see their child’s love of learning. One leader shared the program’s approach to homework and how it helps families support their children’s learning inside and outside of the classroom:

“Our homework is hands-on things. It’s not, sit down and do a ditto sheet. It’s, get out in your community and look at the bugs, look at the worms. We had a worm study going on. Well, they brought in worms and they dug up worms and the kids came back in so excited about worms. Really, the lesson is not at all about worms, the lesson is about social communication. It’s about all those, sort of, soft skills of learning.”

A teacher shared how she uses child assessment reports to engage families and extend learning beyond the classroom in strategic ways, focused on the needs of the individual child:

“Each child has their own individual report. Then I also have a parent-teacher conference, and I share what those goals are for the child, and I make sure the parent understands those goals too, and then I give them some activities that they could do at home that’s going to also help them meet that goal in the classroom. Then the following assessment period, I assess where they were, what goals I set, and if they have made any improvement.... Sometimes they might not necessarily have, within an assessment period, met that goal, but I can see a slight increase in their percentage, and that’s still good. I can share that with the parent.”



TABLE 5
Comparison of Organizational Structures and Practices of
AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTION

WHEN ESSENTIAL IS STRONG	WHEN ESSENTIAL IS WEAK
1. Leaders communicate that social-emotional learning is the priority of the program and foundational to all other learning and development for all students of all abilities.	1. Leaders communicate that discreet skill development is the focus of the program and the curriculum for all students of all abilities.
2. Teachers emphasize inquiry-based learning approaches and the integration of early literacy and math skills development into ongoing investigations that build background knowledge and experience prior to kindergarten.	2. Teachers emphasize rote learning approaches (e.g., number and letter identification, writing name, holding pencil and scissors) to make sure children meet kindergarten readiness goals.
3. Teachers use assessment data to design meaningful learning opportunities that address diverse learning needs.	3. Teachers rarely, if ever, use assessment data while lesson planning; rather, they rely on activities in prepackaged curriculum.
4. Teachers partner with families to develop meaningful learning opportunities at home.	4. Teachers give families homework folders to complete with their child that practice writing letters, numbers, and their name.
5. Leaders prioritize their time to provide teachers with guidance on teaching and encouragement to critically examine and improve practice and children’s learning.	5. Leaders prioritize their time to monitor compliance with funder requirements and respond to teacher requests for assistance by referencing program standards.
6. Leaders establish and staff maintain a regular process to review data on teaching, learning, and family engagement.	6. Leaders check that lesson plans are submitted on time and contain all required information.
7. Teaching teams use multiple sources of data on children’s learning to identify children’s learning needs and staff’s professional learning needs.	7. Leaders and staff examine data on teaching and learning only sporadically and rarely collaboratively.

A program leader's pedagogically-based vision and facilitative approach define the level of motivation, action, persistence, and happiness of all adults in the site.

trusted relationships

Summary of Organizational Contexts Created by Strong and Weak Essential Support Practices

In programs with very strong essential supports, staff share a common understanding of the purpose and goals for the program that are guided by their leaders' strong, pedagogically-driven vision for early childhood education. Leaders in these programs establish only a few strategic priorities, build emotionally encouraging and trusting relationships with staff, and set up structures that protect time for within- and across-classroom collaboration. Teachers highlight these routine opportunities to reflect on and discuss their teaching and to share challenges and innovative approaches as a rare occurrence in ECE and a vital part of their happiness and commitment to the school/center.

These programs have a positive ambiance: interactions and conversations among staff and between staff and families in the common areas are frequent, warm, and focused on offering one another encouragement around endeavors both professional and personal. All staff work together diligently to maintain a supportive learning environment for children and their families, to prioritize children's social-emotional learning and needs, and to continuously craft and improve an ambitious yet developmentally appropriate early learning experience for each child. Undergirding all of this is the belief that partnerships with families are critical to their teaching effectiveness and children's success. Families articulate these as core beliefs of their child's program and detail actions taken by leaders and staff that embody that vision.

In contrast, staff in programs with very weak essential supports articulate their primary aim as complying with the myriad program regulations consuming the focus of their leaders. Leaders in these programs prioritize smooth operations and generally do not articulate an educational

and comprehensive vision for the program or the importance of relationships and opportunities for staff to work together on their craft. Teachers describe how leaders interact with them in highly transactional ways, assigning tasks and prescribing classroom schedules, goals for children, and teaching strategies. Teachers express minimal confidence in their leaders and low levels of trust with peers. Staff keep to individual classrooms, interacting minimally in the common areas with colleagues or with families, who tend not to venture far beyond the front entrance. Poor curriculum alignment across the program is coupled with heavy emphasis on rote learning approaches and fatigue with the ever-widening range of children's needs and behavioral problems. These instructional weaknesses combine with tepid commitments to the school/center, to their colleagues, to innovation, to partnering with families, and to persisting in meeting the needs of all children. Teachers feel isolated, uninspired by their peers, and aggravated by what they judge as ineffective parenting.

A woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a black top with a lace-like pattern, is smiling and looking down at her hands. She is holding a small piece of green clay. To her right, a young child with curly hair is also looking down, focused on shaping a larger piece of green clay on a light-colored table. There are some red tools and small pieces of clay scattered on the table. The background is slightly blurred, showing some colorful items.

We have found that internal social and organizational conditions matter greatly to the actions of leaders, teachers, and families.

leading performance

Conclusions and Implications

Stark differences were evident in the on-the-ground organizational structures and practices of ECE programs with very strong and very weak essential organizational supports. These differences observed qualitatively reinforce the quantitative findings from the *Early Education Essentials* validation study and are consistent with the decades of research on the five essential framework in K-12 settings.

THE KEY TAKEAWAY FROM THE FINDINGS presented in this paper is that these internal social and organizational conditions matter greatly to the actions of leaders, teachers, and families because they affect what teachers do, what parents do, and how staff and families feel about the school/center. Programs with strong essentials create an organizational context far more supportive of teaching, learning, and family engagement than programs with weak essential supports. Strong organizational essential supports enable and encourage the work that staff engage in daily with each other and with children and families. Conversely, weak essential supports disable and discourage that work. And for families, leaders and staff in programs with strong essentials pave the way for partnership and influence in their child's early education, whereas leaders and staff in programs with weak essential supports relegate families to the periphery.

Leadership Is the Driver of Change, Collaboration Is the Vehicle

Amid the patchwork of funding streams and regulatory systems that characterize early education, the key to driving performance is how leaders bring coherence to the program and buffer staff from fragmented thinking and task-based approaches. Our findings illustrate that a program leader's pedagogically-based vision and facilitative approach define the level of motivation, action, persistence, and happiness of all adults in the site. Staff believe in their leader's vision; trust the direction, guidance, and feedback they receive; and come into work feeling respected and supported by leaders, peers, and the majority of, if not all, parents. These leaders collaborate to build the capacity of their staff for meeting the diverse learning needs of their young students. Routine discussions of practice and continually reflecting on where learning is and

is not happening ignites collective understanding, responsibility, and, most critically, persistent action aimed at excellent practice and continual striving to improve children's early learning.

Our findings illustrate that quality is achieved at the local level through program leaders continually focusing direction and working collaboratively with teachers, staff, and family members across the school/center community. In programs with strong instructional leadership and strong collaboration, leaders and staff raise problems of practice, listen to the insights of their peers and children's parents, craft more-supportive learning environments, care for and trust one another, and persist with innovating and implementing ever-more-effective teaching strategies. Conversely, our findings surfaced how leaders and organizations that are overly compliance-driven disconnect staff from a motivating purpose and vision for their complex work. This undermines individual autonomy and collective responsibility for the quality of their work and children's outcomes.

As mentioned, we purposely selected programs that had a combination of either very strong essential supports or the opposite. These extreme cases provided us with the clearest demonstrations of each essential and the interconnected influence of the essentials on the actions of staff and parents. We anticipate that most ECE schools/centers will fall somewhere in the middle, being more and less organized to each essential. Schools/centers strongly organized to these essentials will certainly have structures and practices that are imperfect, and schools/centers weakly organized to most essentials will still have strengths to build on. In other words, improvement is about continually taking the temperature on these organizational practices and determining together what might be done differently.

Changing the Focus of Policy and Practice

These findings make important contributions to the field. They offer rich descriptions of what the essentials look like in preschool settings. They illuminate how strong essential supports influence the actions of staff and families in their own words. They concretely describe and differentiate the organizational structures and practices in ECE programs that were realizing higher-quality teacher-child interactions and attendance outcomes for young children, or struggling to do so. And, perhaps most importantly, these data strongly indicate that strengthening the essential supports of effective instructional leadership and teacher collaboration in particular sets up ECE programs to achieve better performance.

Our findings call into question the effectiveness of compliance-oriented, top-down organizational structures in early education institutions. Policymakers seeking to raise the performance of ECE schools/centers should consider how these essential organizational support structures and practices supplant other program standards that have not been linked to staff commitment and higher-quality implementation and outcomes. In addition, it would be wise to conceptualize professional development investments to specifically empower site-based instructional leadership and routine job-embedded teacher collaboration.

Finally, it is evident that early education must incorporate these organization-level constructs into definitions of quality and consider how the processes supporting them contribute to improvements in program quality overall, and specifically instructional quality. ECE program leaders need to build greater awareness and focus on these organizational conditions that surround practice to either support or hinder it. Without a simultaneous focus on strengthening classroom practices and the organizational contexts enabling effective implementation of high-quality programming, it is unlikely

schools and centers will realize meaningful and sustained improvements in the quality of ECE teaching and learning.⁸

What's Next?

Through ongoing collaboration, the Ounce, the UChicago Consortium, and UChicago Impact continue to bring this research, the framework of organizational conditions, and the *Early Education Essentials* measurement system to the field. Our aim is to empower programs to create organizational contexts that focus, empower, and support teachers and staff with aspiring to and realizing higher-quality practices and better outcomes for young children. A growing number of ECE state and program leaders in Illinois and beyond are using the *Early Education Essentials* and *5Essentials* frameworks and surveys to assess the health of their organizational conditions and to use that information to focus attention on strengthening their organizations for positive change. When the *Early Education Essentials* and the *5Essentials* surveys are used together they can provide the field with a common lens and metric for understanding these conditions across the education continuum, ECE through K-12th grade.

Simultaneously, we are using the experiences of early adopters and ongoing research on the *Early Education Essentials* to strengthen our knowledge, the measurement system, and our understanding of how policies and systems can support programs to be strongly-organized and poised for improvement. School districts, community-based organizations, and all ECE programs stand to benefit from a greater focus on strengthening these essentials and a recognition that quality is about much more than what happens inside classrooms; we need systems and programs structured to support leaders, teachers, and families with learning and working together daily in the important work of educating young children.

Appendix: Methodology

We purposely sampled four ECE programs from our larger pool of validation study sites—two schools and two community-based centers—using their responses to the Early Education Essentials surveys: two programs (one school and one center) with very strong essential support scores, and two programs (one school and one center) with very weak essential support scores. Purposeful sampling is aimed at obtaining insight about a phenomenon with a small number of cases selected because they can be decisive in explaining the phenomenon of interest.

We conducted preliminary Rasch analyses, a form of mathematical analysis that can be used to document and evaluate a measurement's functioning, on Early Education Essentials teacher and parent survey responses from 36 of the 81 validation study sites that had completed the surveys by April 2016. Using measure scores from the teacher and parent surveys, we rank ordered the sites by each measure and identified schools and centers that ranked in the top and bottom quartile of each measure. We then summed a count of the number of times each school or center fell within the top or bottom quartile across measures.

Schools and centers with the greatest number of occurrences of being in the top or bottom quartiles were rank ordered and used to create site recruitment lists. Qualitative data collectors were given two lists from which to recruit four sites. List A contained the top eight ECE sites (four schools and four community-based centers) that were most frequently ranked in the top quartile across all measures. List B contained the bottom eight ECE sites (four schools and four community-based centers) that were ranked most frequently in the bottom quartile across all measures.

A recruitment email was sent to the school principal/center director inviting participation in the qualitative study. Ultimately, two programs from each list agreed to participate in the study.

We conducted four site visits that lasted three consecutive days each. Data collectors were blind to which programs had

been categorized as “strongly organized” or “weakly organized” to the essentials based on their survey responses. During each site visit, we employed three data-collection methods: (1) individual interviews of leaders and teachers, and group interviews of family members, (2) observations of common area environments, activities, and interactions and (3) photo documentation of common area spaces and displays. We designed protocols for each data-collection method (i.e., individual interviews, group interviews, and observations) to capture in-depth information about what the essential supports look like and feel like in the schools'/centers' ECE programs.

In total, we conducted 33 individual interviews with staff, including six leaders (one to two per site), 26 teachers and assistant teachers (six to eight per site), and one guidance counselor. We also conducted group interviews with 33 family members (6 to 10 per site) who had preschool-age children enrolled in the schools'/centers' early childhood programs. All individual and group interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately one hour each. A native Spanish speaker facilitated communication during parent group interviews when indicated.

We observed common areas for an average of seven hours (range 6 to 12 hours) and collected an average of 39 photographs per site across the three-day visit. Common areas were defined as drop-off and pick-up areas, indoor and outdoor spaces, hallways, gymnasium, outdoor play areas, and administrative offices. An observation protocol structured documentation of interactions occurring among adults and between adults and children, as well as the photographs to be taken of displays and information in the common areas.

For additional information on our methodology and details on our analytic approach, please refer to our validation study technical report *Organizing Early Education for Improvement: Testing a New Survey Tool*.



igniting passion

Endnotes

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- 6 **Ehrlich, S.B., Pacchiano, D., Stein, A.G., Wagner, M.R., Park, S., Frank, E., Young, C. (Forthcoming).** Early Education Essentials: Validation of surveys measuring early education organizational conditions. *Early Education and Development*. DOI:10.1080/10409289.2018.1556969

For details on our survey development approach, please see: **Ehrlich, S.B., Pacchiano, D.M., Stein, A.G., & Luppescu, S. (2016).** *Essential organizational supports for early education: The development of a new survey tool to measure organizational conditions.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

For top-line qualitative findings and reflections on the implications of our findings for policy, practice, and future research, see: **Ehrlich, S.B., Pacchiano, D.P., Stein, A.G., Wagner, M.R., Luppescu, S., Park, S., Frank, E., Lewandowski, H., & Young, C. (2018).** *Organizing early education for improvement: Testing a new survey tool.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and the Ounce of Prevention Fund.
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EARLY EDUCATION ESSENTIALS™

The Ounce of Prevention Fund (Ounce) gives children in poverty the best chance for success in school and in life by advocating for and providing the highest-quality care and education from birth to age five. The Ounce envisions a world in which high-quality early learning opportunities beginning at birth are an integral part of our nation's education system. With commitment to quality as our guiding principle, the Ounce works at the intersection of practice, policy and research and forges public-private partnerships. Over the last 30 years, the Ounce has developed an effective approach to advancing knowledge, testing ideas in real-world settings, advocating for policy change, engaging champions and training practitioners and leaders.

UCHICAGO Consortium on School Research

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.



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