



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Research Highlight:

Bellwether Education Partners' *Leading by Exemplar: Lessons from Head Start Programs*



Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.



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Explore the Report

Take a look at our summary handouts:

- Curriculum and Fidelity
- Teacher Credentials and Selection
- Staff Retention
- Professional Development
- Family Engagement
- Data Utilization
- Meeting the Needs of DLLs

Then, continue the conversation on NHSA's online community, *The Block*. Ask questions of your peers about their practice and policies, let us know what you do in each of these areas, and share resources with each other.

Head Start is Leading by Exemplar

One of the unique aspects of Head Start is its commitment to continuous improvement and the collaborative nature of employees across the country. Head Start staffers are always asking questions and learning from each other. In an effort to systematically learn from top Head Start programs around the country, Ashley LiBetti and Sara Mead of Bellwether Education Partners conducted a three-year investigation into the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs.

The result of this work is a series of reports called *Leading by Exemplar: Lessons from Head Start Programs*. The series identifies the unique factors that contribute to each of the programs' success in the three areas: program policies, practices, and enabling conditions, while also identifying and analyzing common challenges across each of the exemplar programs.

Who are the exemplars? As defined by the report's authors, the exemplars are "Head Start programs with demonstrable evidence of positive effects on children's learning that are substantially larger than those of typical Head Start or other early childhood programs and, ideally, sustained beyond kindergarten entry." These are certainly not the only exemplary Head Start programs across the country, but they are the five that were analyzed here.

In an effort to make these accessible to the entire whole Head Start field and to help us all learn from each other, NSHA is developing easily-digestible handouts with key takeaways from the *Leading by Exemplar* reports. These resources are intended to spark conversation amongst programs nationwide as we continue to learn about the practices and policies that make Head Start a success for our nation's children and families.

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Leading by Exemplar: Curriculum and Fidelity

This brief focuses on the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the curriculum used by each program and how they each ensure fidelity of instruction in the classroom. Each of these programs does something different, but have proven impacts on the children they serve.

Acelero developed their own curriculum, *Ready to Shine*, and an associated fidelity tool.

Acelero designed their own curriculum because they felt that teachers creating their own lesson plans and activities created too much variability across classrooms. *Ready to Shine* includes all content, materials, and activities needed to implement. Acelero's self-developed fidelity tool, the *Teacher Success Rubric*, clearly outlines what fidelity looks like across several subdomains and includes an observational tool for coaching.

Educare Miami-Dade uses emergent curriculum and developed their own curriculum rubrics.

With emergent curriculum, teachers plan lessons around the interests and needs of children, rather than following a rigid curriculum. This allows for significant flexibility in the classroom, but Educare Miami-Dade still pushes fidelity amongst its teachers. Their curriculum rubrics outline certain behaviors and actions that should be seen in the classroom, which gives a roadmap to teachers and guidance to master teachers who provide coaching.

Fairfax County also uses a locally designed curriculum.

As part of the public school district, Fairfax County Public Schools has a self-developed curriculum that is aligned with both the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and the Virginia Early Learning Foundations. The Program of Studies is a vertically-aligned curriculum from early childhood through high school graduation. There is no specific implementation tool or rubric that their classrooms use to ensure fidelity.

CAP Tulsa supplements *Creative Curriculum* with a math curriculum, *Building Blocks*, and has their own implementation tool.

They implemented *Building Blocks* after finding that children's math scores were consistently lower than literacy scores. CAP Tulsa ensures fidelity using their own tool, the *Preschool Classroom Implementation Guide*, which includes a checklist of what classroom activities and the environment should look like. This allows teachers to self-assess and adapt their practice.

Utah Community Action uses a variety of supplementary curricula in addition to the *Creative Curriculum*.

These include *Second Step* for social-emotional development and two additional math curricula, *High Five Mathematize* and *Count on Math*. They use the standard tools created by Teaching Strategies, the fidelity tool and the classroom environment checklist, to support faithful implementation of the main curriculum.

Key takeaway

None of the programs use existing curriculum straight out-of-the-box. Instead, **they all supplement or create their own curriculum** in order to meet the needs of the children in their program. They use an implementation tool to ensure fidelity of their practice across classrooms, while also training and empowering teachers to individualize instruction.

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Leading by Exemplar: Teacher Credentials and Selection

This brief focuses on the instructional models of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the teacher credential requirements and the selection process used by each program. You'll see that each of these programs does something different and maintains a degree of flexibility while using data from previous hiring and selection efforts to inform the questions they ask, the processes they use, and the requirements they look for in candidates. NHTSA shares this brief in order to share the findings of the *Leading by Exemplar* work and to support high-quality practice in the Head Start field.

Applicants with associates degrees can still be strong candidates.

At Acelero's New Jersey sites, all lead teachers are required to have a BA and a pre-K-3rd state teaching certification because they're subject to the state pre-k regulations. At their Pennsylvania locations though, only 25% of lead teachers have a BA. Acelero based this decision on data that revealed that experience, competency, and openness to receiving coaching are all factors that can make for a strong candidate even without a BA degree.

Lack of teaching experience isn't necessarily a negative.

CAP Tulsa doesn't hold lack of teaching experience against candidates. In fact, they found it might even be easier to train candidates in their program methods and culture if teachers come in with little previous experience and an openness to learning. CAP Tulsa also found that the behavioral assessment they used when interviewing and hiring teachers was not correlated with teachers' success, so they adjusted their interview process and now ask more open-ended, behavior-based questions to learn more about a candidate's skills and abilities.

An in-classroom component of the hiring process can identify potential for successfully implementing a program's specific approach.

Educare Miami-Dade uses a rigorous hiring and selection process that is tailored to the specific position that each candidate is applying for and they do not rely solely on qualifications, but also the teacher's ability to implement the school's approach. The final step in their hiring process is a two-day in-classroom interview, including observation, teaching, and receiving and implementing feedback.

Hiring pools can reduce the amount of time it takes to fill an open position.

As part of the public school system, Fairfax County is able to leverage district resources for teacher recruitment, hiring, professional development, and compensation. Fairfax County maintains an ongoing pool of candidates that have already been vetted so that they are able to fill open positions more quickly. Fairfax County also uses panel interviews and a performance task in their hiring process. The panel interview prioritizes understanding the candidate's ability to work with children who are from high-need backgrounds and their empathy for families who have experienced traumatic events.

Programs can hire strong candidates without a BA and support them in achieving this credential.

Utah Community Action's hiring process also includes initial screening, a performance task, and an in-person interview. They don't require BA degrees for candidates depending on their previous experience, success on the performance task, and their fulfillment of other hiring criteria. 85% of lead teachers have a BA, but they are striving for 100%. To reach this goal, they offer individualized credential attainment based on the individual's needs and background. Some prospective teachers receive tuition support or access to on-site community college courses through a local partnership.

Key Takeaway

Even within the bounds of the Head Start Program Performance Standards, **programs can maintain a degree of flexibility** in identifying and hiring staff members that are the best fit for an available role. The hiring and selection processes should be data-informed and revisited regularly to ensure success.

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Leading by Exemplar: Teacher Retention

This brief focuses on the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the teacher retention strategies and processes used by each program. You'll see that not all of these programs are able to provide competitive compensation and for those who have trouble with retention strive to develop creative and innovative strategies to better listen to and support their staff's needs. NHSA shares this brief in order to share the findings of the *Leading by Exemplar* work and to support high-quality practice in the Head Start field.

Acelero prioritizes upward mobility within the organization.

Along with Acelero's ability to provide competitive compensation, they develop a career pathway road map for every educator that includes an individual professional coaching plan. Acelero also prioritizes upward mobility within the organization to encourage retention.

CAP Tulsa encourages staff to communicate their career interests with their supervisors.

CAP Tulsa assesses market compensation data every year to ensure all staff salaries are comparable to the surrounding community. Along with providing each staff with a clear professional advancement trajectory, CAP Tulsa has built informal opportunities for staff to communicate their interests in leadership positions to supervisors, who then provide the staff the support they need to pursue those roles. In turn, program leadership is encouraged to proactively seek out staff for career advancement and promotion opportunities.

Because matching compensation rates is difficult, Educare Miami-Dade finds other ways to support staff.

Like many early education programs, Educare Miami-Dade has trouble with retention - mostly because of compensation. To address this, they have initiated a series of annual raises and operate on a shorter program year to give many teachers the summers off as an added benefit.

Compensation isn't the only driver of teacher turnover.

Fairfax County early childhood teachers are compensated according to the same salary schedule as all other district teachers, which is higher than other local early childhood programs. Even with competitive salaries and connection to strong district-wide resources and benefits, FCPS still struggles with retention due to circumstances outside of their control, like work commutes and military relocation. The program is currently developing strategies to address these concerns.

Utah Community Action places a strong emphasis on listening to staff's needs.

Even though Utah Community Action is doing what they can to raise compensation, they also focus on improving working conditions and staff morale to boost retention. They use regular staff surveys and focus groups to learn more about how they can support their staff and improve morale and retention.

Key Takeaway

Competitive compensation isn't the only thing that can help Head Start programs improve staff retention. Programs should listen to their staff to **identify creative and innovative ways to address staff's needs.**

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Leading by Exemplar: Teacher Professional Development

This brief focuses on the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the teacher credential requirements and the selection process used by each program. You'll see that each of these programs uses data to better understand which professional development strategies are the most successful, which skills to focus on, and which teachers need additional support to reach their individual goals. NHSA shares this brief in order to share the findings of the *Leading by Exemplar* work and to support high-quality practice in the Head Start field.

Combine coach and supervisor for closer relationships with teachers

Acelero's professional development efforts have four components: workshop-style trainings, individual coaching, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and digital professional development. Individual coaching comprises the bulk of their professional development strategies. At Acelero, site directors serve as both coaches and supervisors, unlike many models where these roles are separate. This allows site directors to form deep relationships with teachers and improves their ability to supervise and guide the performance of their teachers.

Collect data to know which professional development strategies work

CAP Tulsa provides professional development through two main approaches. First, all teaching staff have coaches that observe their teaching, provide feedback on instructional practice, and support individual goals. The second approach uses professional learning communities to bring staff together regularly to collaborate, share best practices, and workshop specific challenges. CAP Tulsa regularly reviews data and feedback to improve professional development strategies, identify content for workshops, and topics for professional development communities.

Support teachers individually to meet their professional goals

With the help of a master teacher, teachers at Educare Miami-Dade set goals for themselves using a tool called the Performance Management Plan. Throughout the year, master teachers provide coaching sessions that cover topics based on classroom data. They also observe classrooms weekly and review their findings and specific strategies with the teacher. Master teachers use reflective supervision sessions each month to move past specific strategies and instead address each teacher's goals and performance overall.

Be flexible to meet teachers' needs

Teachers at Fairfax County have access to the district-wide professional development system. Teachers in each school often set their goals together at the beginning of each year so that they are complementary and teachers can work together to make progress. These goals are informed by child- and classroom-level data from several sources. Teachers also receive formal coaching from resource teachers, who have significant experience in the field and are seen as extremely valuable supports. Rather than establish one, rigid set of protocols, such as how often each teacher is observed, Fairfax County allows flexibility in the schedule based on each teacher's needs.

Use data to understand which topics and teachers to target for additional support

Utah Community Action has three different categories of professional development. First is full-staff trainings on critical strategies and practices. Second is targeted trainings for groups of staff. Based on performance data and observations from coaches, teachers are grouped by training needs so they experience tailored training opportunities with similar teachers. Finally, UCA provides individual professional development from program specialists and coaches, the content of which is driven by goal-setting and PD plans, data, and classroom observations.

Key Takeaway

Flexibility is key in meeting teachers' individual needs and creating a successful set of professional development opportunities. Data and feedback can identify successful professional development strategies, skills to develop in a staff, and individual teachers in need of support to reach their goals.

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Leading by Exemplar: Family Engagement

This brief focuses on the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the family engagement strategies and processes used by each program. You'll see that all programs strive to maintain a close connection between school and home and but may do so in different ways. NHTA shares this brief in order to share the findings of the *Leading by Exemplar* work and to support high-quality practice in the Head Start field.

Shine On, Families provides parents with specific activities that align with in-classroom experiences.

Acelero's family engagement curriculum, *Shine On, Families*, intentionally connects their family engagement efforts and activities with children's classroom experiences and includes activities for parents to do at home with their children. Acelero's family advocates spend significant time in the classroom with children and families to reinforce the strong connection between home and school. This allows family advocates to understand more about the classroom's curriculum and School Readiness Goals and allows the teachers to build their family engagement capacities so teachers and family advocates collaborate across a common system to support individual families' needs.

Separating staff into engagement and advancement teams can allow for a strong focus on both the home-school connection and parents' personal development.

CAP Tulsa has two teams that are focused on families: the family engagement team and the family advancement team. The family engagement team creates a connection between home and the classroom through activities like family conferences, home visits, and monthly classes for parents. The family advancement team has unique

job training and education opportunities for parents, including the CareerAdvance program, which helps parents earn qualifications to work in healthcare careers by covering tuition and fees, providing individual coaches, building peer support, providing child care, and providing transportation subsidies.

Having engagement staff spend time in the classroom allows for valuable coordination between engagement efforts and the classroom experience.

Educare Miami-Dade bases their family engagement efforts on two models: the Educare model and the Brazleton Touchpoints model. Educare Miami-Dade's family engagement staff, who are all required to have bachelor's degrees, are in classrooms observing children daily, which allows for a strong connection between the classroom and family experience. Family engagement staff and teachers meet regularly and rely heavily on data to strengthen the connection and progress of children and families both in the classroom and at home.

Even within a school system, it is possible to create a strong connection between family service staff and classroom teachers.

Fairfax County also splits their family engagement efforts: Family service partners focus on families and children outside of the classroom, and teachers focus on communicating with families

about their child's development within the classroom. Family service partners hold monthly meetings with the families to discuss the child's development and the family's role, which teachers are encouraged to join. Family service partners and teachers work closely together to maintain the connection between home and school.

A half-day model can offer a unique opportunity to have the classroom experience and family engagement driven by the same staff member, making these activities inseparable.

For several years, Utah Community Action ran a unique model for family engagement: In half-day classrooms, teachers played the lead role in both the classroom and family engagement. This maximized the continuity in a child and family's experience between the classroom and the home. Now that UCA has transitioned to full-day classrooms, they are back to having teachers and family advocates be separate roles, but they work hard to maintain a tight link between them.

Key Takeaway

Maintaining a close connection between school and home is essential, but different staff roles can execute this effort successfully.

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Leading by Exemplar: Data Utilization

This brief focuses on the instructional models of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the way that each program incorporates data into its program practice. The programs demonstrate that there are many things data can inform, from assessing specific program practices to measuring children's outcomes.

Don't keep data a secret—work together to find solutions

A unique component of Acelero Learning's data work is the way they bring teachers together to solve problems using data. In addition to training and empowering staff to look at data themselves, Acelero encourages staff to share and discuss data. In one of their professional learning communities, teachers share a problem (and relevant data) with colleagues, who ask questions, offer ideas, and eventually help identify a possible solution. At the programmatic level, when Acelero identifies opportunities for improvement, they use data to constantly assess the success of pilot projects as they move through their "pencil-pen-Sharpie" innovation process.

Data-use can be conducted both internally and externally

CAP Tulsa has an in-house team responsible for data and research. They use data from multiple sources, often tied together, to produce customized reports and to evaluate individual program practices. They also hold regular meetings to share data with different levels of staff in the program. CAP Tulsa also partners with researchers from local universities who conduct independent evaluations of the program's impact.

Customize everything from classroom assignments to professional development

Educare Miami-Dade uses both internal data analysis and external evaluation to assess their implementation and outcomes. Within the program, Educare uses data about children and families to inform everything from classroom assignments to family goals to coaching. With their external research partners, they regularly assess different parts of their program practice to identify opportunities to improve their implementation and their impact on child outcomes.

Program staff can be leaders in data analysis and utilization

In Fairfax County, data analysis is conducted by the program managers. The district is hiring a data analyst to increase their capacity and turnaround time through the use of dashboards, but it's these program leaders who analyze data from multiple sources and who slice and dice the data to determine how children are progressing towards school readiness. Fairfax County program managers also use this information to make decisions about professional development and inform program practice.

Data doesn't happen in a silo—involve leadership and staff

While Utah Community Action has a full-time staff position dedicated to data, the research analyst isn't the only one in the organization responsible for this work. The analyst works with leadership to monitor the program's effectiveness and progress towards their stated goals, as well as to identify strengths and weaknesses and to plan professional development needs. Coaches use data every week to inform their work with teachers, and teachers use data every week to inform their lesson plans for children.

Key takeaway

Success depends on a program-wide commitment to data so that it is used regularly by staff at every level. Different data is useful for different roles within a Head Start program. Leadership staff will need different information than frontline staff, who need different information from board members—but all of these roles should regularly incorporate data into their practice.

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Leading by Exemplar: Meeting the Needs of DLLs

This brief focuses on the practices of five exemplary Head Start programs from the *Leading by Exemplar* research project. Below you'll find details on the strategies used by each program to best meet the needs of their dual language learners. Each of these programs does something different, but have proven impacts on the children they serve.

Acelero uses its innovation cycle to support its large proportion of dual language learners

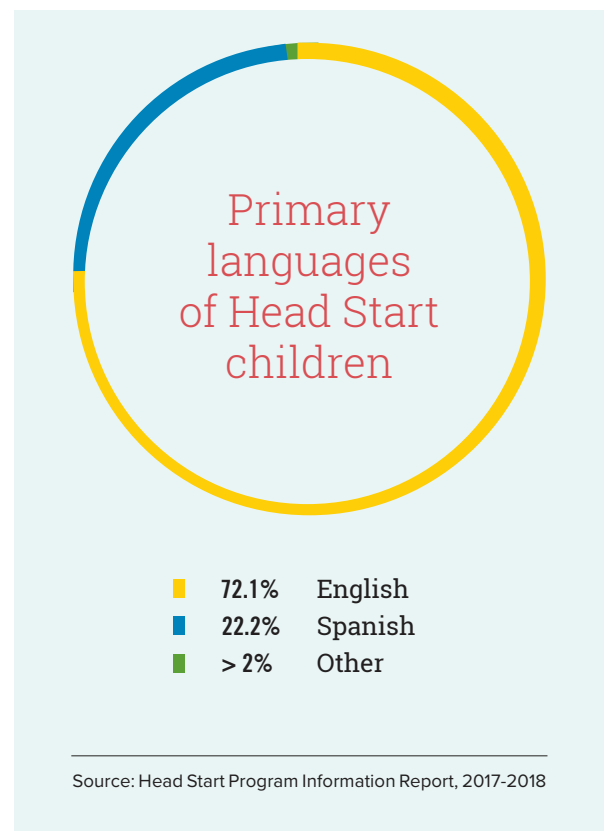
Every Acelero classroom uses a sheltered English instructional model. This model provides intentional additional support to dual language learners so they can effectively learn in the classroom while also developing proficiency in English. Through their innovation cycle, Acelero has piloted and implemented several new practices, including a training process to teach aids or volunteers how to administer screenings in a child's home language and integrate children's culture and language into the classroom.

CAP Tulsa prioritizes hiring bilingual or multilingual staff

To support the many children enrolled in the program who speak languages other than English, CAP Tulsa uses a model known as "English with home language support." Teachers provide primary content in English, while also creating opportunities for children to be exposed to their home language frequently. CAP Tulsa prioritizes recruiting Spanish-proficient staff by offering a salary bump to those who are bilingual or multilingual. They also extend the impact of their bilingual staff by having them "float" between classrooms and activities to ensure children receive home language support even when their primary teachers do not speak their home language.

Educare Miami-Dade's "One Teacher, One Language" model

Since nearly 80 percent of children enrolled are dual language learners, Educare Miami-Dade implements a fully bilingual Spanish-English program that uses a "one teacher, one language" model. In this model, each of the two teachers in the classroom is assigned a primary language and speaks only this language throughout the school day. The teachers' alternate lesson plans so that every other week children receive instruction in one of the two languages. Because mastering both languages is important to economic and civic life in Miami, Educare Miami-Dade also engages parents and crucial partners in supporting their children's home language development.





Fairfax County’s “English-only with home language acquisition” model

To support the high percentage of children who are dual language learners in their Head Start program, FCPS works to promote growth in both English and the child’s home language by using a model known as “English-only with home language acquisition.” In this model, teachers deliver instruction and monitor children’s progress in English, while engaging parents as an essential partner in supporting children’s home language development. To do this, teachers and family engagement staff work closely with parents during monthly parent meetings where they share strategies and techniques for nurturing their child’s language development at home. One strategy that has been successful in building proficiency in English and the child’s home language is using children’s books to compare and explore words and phrases in multiple languages, whether or not the parent can read in that language.

UCA includes all dual language learners in a classroom with staff skilled in their home language

Utah Community Action also uses the “English with home language support” model to support language acquisition for dual language learners. UCA requires at least one staff member in each classroom speaks one of the home languages represented in UCA’s population of dual language learners. Because UCA has a large portion of students who speak home languages other than English and Spanish, it can be a challenge to hire qualified teachers and staff who speak certain languages, like Arabic, Vietnamese, Sudanese, and Chinese. In these cases, UCA engages parents, grandparents, and volunteers who speak the children’s home languages to come into the classroom and provide support for home language development.

Key takeaway

Each of these programs provides structured and intentional support for dual language learners with slight variations to meet the individual needs of the children they serve. English is the primary language used to provide instruction in each program. However, each model engages unique strategies to ensure dual language learners are exposed to their home languages and cultures. Each program also engages parents as partners to support their child’s language development at home.