LEARNING FROM THE FIELD: LESSONS FROM CLASS PK LISTENING CALLS WITH HIGH PERFORMING GRANTEES

OFFICE OF HEAD START

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In October of 2019, the Office of Head Start facilitated individual listening calls with nine programs that scored a 3.5 or higher in the instructional support domain of CLASS during their most recent monitoring observations. This paper provides information about the programs interviewed as well as a summary of themes that emerged from these discussions. The report also includes specific resources mentioned by the nine programs that helped them achieve the high scores.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

The following figure provides aggregated information about the characteristics of the programs included in the listening calls.

FIGURE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAMS INTERVIEWED
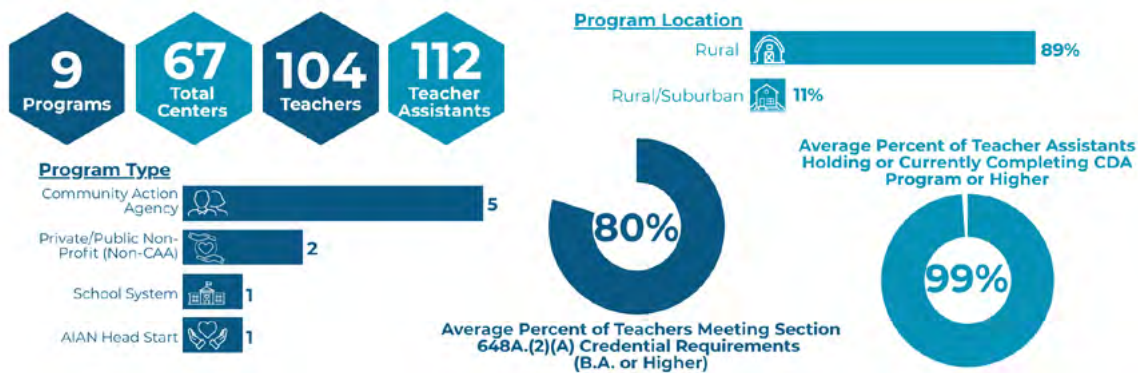
ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF NOTE INCLUDE:

PROGRAM SIZE

Program size ranged from small to medium with the number of centers ranging from 1 to 14 and the number of children enrolled ranging from 80 to 500.

STAFF QUALIFICATIONS

100% of teachers met the minimum teacher qualification of an associate degree. Qualifications for teachers ranged from an associate to a bachelor's in early childhood education or higher, and teacher assistants mostly have a minimum of a CDA.

CURRICULA USED

Creative Curriculum, Frog Street, and the Catawba Curriculum were some of the curricula used by programs.

THEMES ACROSS PROGRAMS

Several themes emerged from our conversations with programs about how they successfully raised their instructional support scores above a 3.5 on the CLASS PK observation measure. These include: 1) coaching and other professional development strategies, including training; 2) curriculum strategies where programs relied on their research-based curriculum to enhance teachers' instructional interactions and supports; 3) staff qualifications and workplace conditions (hiring staff with the knowledge and competencies needed to provide strong instructional support, as well as cultivating workplace conditions in which staff could continue to grow and productively develop these skills); and, 4) instructional leadership strategies whereby program leaders harness management systems, program-wide plans, and resources that support high-quality school readiness instruction as an integral value across agency culture. These themes are outlined below.

COACHING AND OTHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Coaching and other professional development strategies in programs scoring high in instructional support were intentionally focused on helping teachers understand what supportive instruction means in a preschool setting. This included the types of interactions and activities that help children deepen their understanding of concepts and expand language skills. Programs were also intentional about sharing what effective and intentional instructional supports look like in early learning settings through video or digital resources. Programs described the purposeful combination of training and other more traditional professional development events with job-embedded supports (environmental props; peer, coach, and supervisor feedback; etc.) to ensure that teaching staff understood how to provide strong instructional supports in developmentally appropriate ways. Some highlights across conversations included the use of video with supportive feedback, opportunities for peer observation and debrief, and specifically scaffolding teachers' instructional interactions and activities with questions they could ask to promote higher-order thinking. Additional highlights are included below.

> "Each teacher in Head Start has a one-on-one training with the education coordinator or the mentor coach during the first few weeks of school."
>
> – Region VI Ozark Opportunities

- Implementing the practice-based coaching model with expert coaching and Together Learning and Collaborating groups (TLCs)
- Planning professional development focused and building on education staff strengths (observing other teachers on staff or using peers to brainstorm around instructional supports)
- Using different approaches to simplify CLASS PK language and help teachers understand and implement practices measured by CLASS PK (i.e., the "Four Pillars of a Successful Classroom" and "Interaction, Communication, Engagement, Environment" (I.C.E.E.) versus just focusing on CLASS PK scores)
- Showing teaching staff how to ask higher-order questions (i.e., Bloom's Taxonomy)
- Recording video of teachers in classrooms, having teaching teams review the recordings, and asking education management to have discussions with teaching teams so they can see their approaches

TRAINING

> *We have one day per month for intensive training for teachers—based on needs they identified, those in their PD plans, and just from talking with them.*
>
> *– Region V Renewal Unlimited*

- Curriculum training—both initial and ongoing refresher training. Training is tailored to areas where teachers are struggling (e.g., math or science components of the program's chosen curriculum).
  - Regional T/TA providing CLASS PK trainings—overviews and/or trainings focusing on specific CLASS PK components.
  - Education management providing CLASS PK component mini-training for teachers and setting up scenarios for teachers to have the opportunity to practice.
  - Collaborating with universities to provide training.
  - Collaborating with LEAs to participate in joint trainings.

CURRICULUM STRATEGIES

Each of the programs we talked with indicated that they use their curriculum to augment their work around instructional interactions, activities, and learning environments. Programs identified global strategies related to the curriculum, like initial and follow-up training on the program's curriculum, as well as training on specific areas of the curriculum that teachers struggle to implement. Programs mentioned bringing in outside trainers from curriculum publishers or others who had Training of Trainers (ToT) level curriculum training to ensure accurate and comprehensive trainings for their staff. Programs also shared more individualized strategies, such as having education managers regularly review curriculum plans and provide suggestions to enhance the planned curriculum activity with open-ended questions related to the topic of the lesson or suggest extensions to children's prior learning experiences. In this way, education managers front-load supports for teachers to help them implement effective instruction related to their planned activities and learning experiences. Additional strategies related to the curriculum are listed below.

- Having lesson plans that are flexible and follow children's interests
  - Using curricula activities (and managers offering feedback on lesson plans/front-loading the plans for implementing a curriculum activity)
  - Placing critical thinking questions around the classrooms to remind staff to ask open-ended questions that promote inquiry skills
  - Building teaching teams' classroom communities and creating environments where children feel important and know that their thoughts and ideas are valued

> "Curriculum supports planning, intentional teaching, and individualization which aligns with instructional leadership."
>
> – Region I Tri-County Community Action Agency

> "Fidelity in the curriculum is met through observations as well as reviewing weekly lesson plans to ensure that the teachers are teaching what we ask them to teach."
>
> – Region VI Ozark Opportunities

STAFF QUALIFICATIONS AND WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

Several programs talked about recruiting and retaining staff with the knowledge, skills, and ability to provide high-quality instruction in their programs. All of the programs indicated that they hire teachers with a bachelor's degree or support teachers as they achieve that degree once they are hired. Some programs shared their efforts using TEACH or other financial incentives to support staff on a degree pathway. Programs also shared their thoughts about why instructional support, as measured by the CLASS PK, is hard for teaching staff. These barriers included staff turnover and a lack of training for new staff, a lack of buy-in [for all that teaching in a Head Start program and being observed using CLASS PK entails], and the pressure of CLASS PK causing teachers to feel overwhelmed and freeze up during observations. Programs also shared their efforts to create workplace conditions in which teachers felt supported in their instructional efforts. These conditions included supporting teachers as they learn and grow individually, allotting time and space for reflection and collaboration across teaching and program teams, and implementing smaller group sizes and teacher–child ratios to maximize staff capacity to provide effective instruction. Specific strategies mentioned in this area are listed below.

- Creating a culture where all staff feel supported, part of a team, and encouraged to share thoughts and ideas
- Reducing class size
- Increasing teacher salary to help with retention
- Having three teaching staff in classrooms
- Making time for teachers to self-reflect and talk about what worked well and how to make improvements

> "Some staff enrolled in an education program, and a few staff have enrolled in a university that is 3 hours away. People are enrolling in programs although they are far away."
>
> – Region I United Children's Services

> *Teachers need to feel supported and not overwhelmed. Being overwhelmed impacts morale, which impacts teaching. We do a teacher and staff survey to stay on top of staff satisfaction and feelings about their work.*
>
> – Region I United Children's Services

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Programs talked about a need for strong leadership to ensure that there was agency-wide understanding, support, and buy-in for effective instruction as measured by the CLASS PK. This included training program leaders alongside education staff on the importance of instructional interactions and developing program-wide improvement plans in response to monitoring visits or other continuous quality improvement efforts. Education managers, coaches, outside consultants, CLASS PK observers, and master teachers were all mentioned as specific positions or roles that were charged with leaning in and establishing a culture focused on instructional supports. These staff ensured ongoing and timely processes and supports meant to improve teacher–child interactions and instructional supports. Additional details on this theme are listed below.

- Supporting all staff, including Head Start directors, that support management to understand CLASS PK, instructional support, and the connection to positive outcomes for children

- Having a CLASS PK reliable consultant or internal education management meet with teachers to discuss strengths and areas for improvement

- Having a CLASS PK reliable consultant or internal education management meet with teachers within 24-48 hours after an observation to discuss CLASS PK results

- Ensuring CLASS PK observers are well-trained in CLASS PK and participate in dual coding in classrooms (reliability)

- Ongoing meetings between education management and teachers

- Having education management and/or coaches model teaching practices, provide specific teaching strategies, and give meaningful feedback on lesson plans, as well as observed instructional practices

> *The managers [education and mental health] are coaching, planning, reflecting, and modeling.*
>
> – Region IV Darlington County Community Action

OTHER MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS MENTIONED

A few programs mentioned other management systems, namely program planning and technology supports, as integral to their ability to focus on and improve their CLASS PK instructional supports score. One program talked about developing and executing a CLASS PK strategic plan (after identifying lower scores as an issue). They felt this solidified their overall commitment to securing resources and supports needed at every level of the organization to support their goal of improving CLASS PK scores. Several programs mentioned existing technology sites that they used—some of these were for purchase by the program (Teachstone or other fee-based video libraries), while others mentioned the Head Start Coaching Companion and ECLKC as places where they found free online resources. One program created its own online CLASS PK portal where education staff could receive and share ideas.

SPECIFIC RESOURCES

Programs also mentioned specific resources they used to enhance the quality of interactions in instructional support. These included the following:

- Resources on ECLKC (i.e., 15-minute In-service Suites)
- H.O.T. Cards: "Higher Order Thinking" cards created by staff to increase questioning and looping abilities
- Small-group activities related to STEAM
- Coaching videos using teachers skilled at engaging children
- Books: Small and big books
- Roleplay at trainings focused on increasing instructional support
- Lakeshore STEM kits
- Teachstone website and online media library
- Regional T/TA, Office of Head Start, and the national centers (see Appendix A)

> "The resources given to us from the OHS and the national centers are essential for us."
>
> – Region VI ISWA Development Corporation

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Talking with these nine grantees about their approach to ensuring effective instructional interactions and supports in their preschool programs offered valuable and specific information about the ways in which programs support effective teaching and learning. Knowledge about program and staff characteristics and the strategies programs felt were most beneficial in their efforts to improve instructional supports will inform the work of the Office of Head Start and its national and regional technical assistance network. The information derived from the grantees will help to shape resources and supports developed by the Office of Head Start and the T/TA system to ensure programs have the tools needed to optimize the learning and development of all Head Start children. It also provides other Head Start grantees with real examples of the analyzing, planning, and improving processes that seemed to produce measurable results for the nine programs that provided interviews.