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A Window on Early Childhood Administrative Practices

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Research Notes

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A Window on Early Childhood Administrative Practices

There is strong consensus among early childhood professionals that sound administrative practices in center-based programs help ensure high-quality learning opportunities for young children. Since its publication in 2004, the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS) has been used across the country to reliably measure and improve center-based leadership and management practices.¹ Data from these initiatives have been compiled to provide a window into the administrative practices of a large, national sample of center-based programs.

Sample and Methodology

The sample consisted of 564 centers in 25 states. The PAS includes 25 items, organized into 10 subscales. Each item is scored on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing inadequate quality, 3 representing minimal quality, 5 representing good quality, and 7 representing excellent quality in administrative practices. The assessments included in this analysis were conducted by certified PAS assessors who had received extensive training on the tool.

Findings

The average PAS score for this sample was calculated at 3.40 with a standard deviation of 1.04. Mean subscale scores ranged from 2.52 to 4.54; mean item scores ranged from 1.08 to 6.08. Overall, the results of the data analysis suggest that most programs do not have well-developed administrative practices in place to support program sustainability and long-term quality. As can be seen in Table 1, most programs scored between the minimal and good range on Technology and Child Assessment, but appeared to have lower quality organizational practices in the areas of Personnel and Cost Allocation and Staff Qualifications.

What are the strengths of programs?

To gain a more detailed understanding of the specific aspects of administrative quality that were strong in programs, data were examined to see where at least 75% of the programs scored a 5 or higher. Program strengths are summarized below.

- Directors understand the importance of professional development and support staff by allocating time and resources annually to in-service training. Fully 93% of programs provide some form of staff development for all their teaching, support, and administrative staff. Of this group, 82% provide job-specific training.
- Most programs now have the technological tools necessary to support operating a small business. Fully 84% of programs have multiple computers and printers available to teaching and administrative staff. Of these programs, however, only 33% have a system for updating software and hardware.
- Directors utilize a wide range of strategies to communicate important information about the program to staff, families, and the public. Ninety-two percent use three or more methods (e.g., meetings, e-mail, memos, bulletin board, message book) to communicate with staff and 90% use at least five methods to communicate with families (e.g., newsletters, family meetings, e-mail, phone calls, parent conferences).
- Programs are committed to enhancing families' knowledge of child development and communicating about children's developmental needs. Eighty-four percent of programs offer at least five types of family supports such as home visits, transportation to and from the center, family seminars, social functions, and a toy-lending library. Eighty-four percent of programs provide families with referrals to specialists if needed, and 81% provide developmental screening and inform families of the results if a developmental delay or disability is identified.

Subscale	M	S.D.
Human Resources Development	3.43	1.62
Personnel & Cost Allocation	2.60	1.32
Center Operations	3.28	1.40
Child Assessment	4.54	2.12
Fiscal Management	3.49	2.21
Program Planning & Evaluation	3.21	1.98
Family Partnerships	3.95	1.72
Marketing & Public Relations	3.78	1.53
Technology	4.29	1.67
Staff Qualification	2.52	1.31
Overall PAS	3.40	1.04

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What are the areas in need of improvement?

To understand where programs would benefit from increased resources, an additional analysis was undertaken to examine specific PAS criteria where programs scored low. Areas for improvement are summarized below.

- Less than one-half of programs (41%) have a written business or strategic plan that includes a needs assessment, plan for services, short- and long-term goals, and strategies to achieve goals.
 - Only one-third of centers (32%) have staffing plans in place that provide sufficient classroom coverage so that children are not regrouped at the beginning or end of the day.
 - Less than one-half of programs (44%) have a comprehensive written risk management plan that includes emergency procedures, guidelines to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect, and measures for ensuring the safety of people, facilities, equipment, and materials.
 - While more than one-half of programs (57%) provide the option of contributing to a retirement plan, less than one-third provide a 3% or more match of the employee's salary.
 - Only 36% of directors have 9 semester hours or more of management coursework and only 38% of lead teachers have 21 semester hours or more of specialized training in early childhood or child development.
 - More than one-half of programs (59%) do not have performance appraisal criteria linked by role to specific job responsibilities or use data from staff and parent evaluations to develop a written improvement plan for the center.
 - While two-thirds of programs have a written salary scale, less than one-half of programs (43%) make this information available to all center staff.
 - Less than one-half of programs (49%) provide their staff with six or more personal or sick days annually.
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Not surprisingly, many programs appear to be struggling with organizational practices that require financial resources, like providing retirement benefits, implementing staffing patterns that ensure consistency for young children, providing enough sick and vacation days to prevent staff burnout, or hiring staff with sufficient specialized training in early childhood education.

However, there are also other administrative practices that many programs do not have in place that require little financial investment, but do require specialized knowledge in organizational management. These include undertaking strategic planning and program evaluation with key stakeholders to assure program sustainability and long-term quality, creating transparent and equitable salary scales, implementing thorough performance reviews, developing sound budgeting practices, and creating comprehensive risk management plans to reduce the center's liability. While many programs do provide annual in-service training for staff, few programs take a systemic view and provide support for career development by providing salary increases linked to credit-bearing professional development.

Discussion

Increasingly, policymakers are recognizing the important link between effective organizational practices and high-quality classroom learning environments. Unfortunately, most pre-service education programs do not adequately prepare directors for running businesses and leading organizations. As a consequence, many early childhood programs do not have the administrative practices in place to ensure sustained quality.

States have the opportunity to respond to this gap in training by creating professional development systems and director credentials that intentionally include content and technical assistance focused on fiscal management, program planning, and human resources development. This may be an area where early childhood leaders can partner with and draw from the knowledge of the business community and organizational developmental professionals to create comprehensive training and support for early childhood programs.

References

1. Talan, T. N., & Bloom, P. J. (2004). *Program Administration Scale: Measuring early childhood leadership and management*. New York: Teachers College Press.
For more information on the PAS see <http://cecl.nl.edu/evaluation/pas.htm>.
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For further information about research conducted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 5060. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.
