



Strengthening Capacity of Offices of Early Learning in State Education Agencies to Achieve Results for Students, Schools and Families

Project Description

July 2016

Overview

This paper describes a new technical assistance effort to assess and build the capacity of State Offices of Early Learning (SOELs) to improve learning outcomes for children birth through third grade. CEELO has strong relationships with state early childhood administrators and deep content expertise in early childhood policy and pedagogy. We expect to work in partnership with other TA entities that work directly with senior SEA leaders (e.g. Chief State School Officers, Chiefs of Staff, Deputy Commissioners) and provide TA to SEAs to improve organizational effectiveness. We will identify 2-3 states to engage in this customized, intensive technical assistance in 2016-2017.

This approach will begin with an initial in-depth and comprehensive assessment of the SOEL capacity and based on these results engage in joint goal setting and a TA plan. Senior leaders, including the SOEL director, the SEA Chief or designee, and identified TA leads, will examine the data and determine SOEL areas of strength and areas to seek improvements; and develop a plan of action based on this analysis. TA by both partners could include research, design of new policy/procedures/protocols, strategic planning and meeting facilitation, sight visits, identification of best practice, or other support as needed to achieve goals.

Why is SOEL Capacity Important?

SOEL's have authority to establish or implement policies, administer funding and provide oversight for programs serving children birth through grade 3, depending on the state agency structure, and nationally manage over 20 billion in program funding for early childhood programs birth through 3rd grade. The primary function of SOEL's is to administer programs and funding to ensure equitable access to high quality education for all children, and to prevent or narrow achievement gaps. As noted in the CCSSO report, *Equity Starts Early*, Chief State School Officers are "redoubling their commitment to the early years as an essential mechanism for tackling inequity and underachievement."¹ The case is clear- a highly effective SOEL with strong leaders, highly capable staff, and effective and efficient functions within the SOEL are critical to achieving goals for children, schools and families.

Based on CEELO's work over the past four years, this paper presents the characteristics of high performing SOELs in three dimensions:

- Organizational Capacity: *What highly effective SOEL looks like.*
- Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency: *What highly effective SOELs seek to achieve.*
- Leadership/Staff Capabilities: *What leaders/staff members of highly effective SOELs know and are able to do.*

¹ Stark, R. (March 2016). *Equity Starts Early: How Chiefs Will Build High Quality Early Education*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Available at: <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/2016/EquityStartsEarly3242016.pdf>

This information will be used to identify SEAs that are ready to engage in the capacity building project, and will inform the structure of the policy audit, goal setting with states, and the TA Menu from which they can choose.

Organizational Capacity: What highly effective SOELs looks like.

Sustained leadership drives a coherent early childhood vision and strategic plan, bolstered by a capable team, well-managed infrastructure and external momentum generated by cross-agency collaboration, external funding and advocacy partners, and gubernatorial and/or legislative backing and funding. High performing SOELs maximize opportunities to advance their vision and, over time achieve tangible improvements in funding, program and workforce quality, equalizing access, reducing achievement gaps and improving outcomes for children.

- **Vision and Strategic Plan:** The SOEL develops an ambitious, compelling vision for providing high quality early childhood-3rd grade learning opportunities for young children and their families. This vision contributes to the state's key overall priorities, such as ensuring equal education opportunity, promoting economic development, strengthening families, or building stronger communities. The vision promotes a sense of coherence in the state's approach to managing multiple early childhood funding streams and connecting the work of early childhood programs to public schools. The SOEL team relentlessly pursues this vision internally and externally and, over time, they raise the bar in terms of goals and outcomes. The vision is bolstered by a strategic plan including concrete benchmarks for the SOEL as well as for state and local leaders, local schools/provider agencies, practitioners, and for young children, i.e. "Here's where we want our state to be in 5 years; here's our state leadership strategy; here's what it means for you".
- **Stakeholder Engagement/Strategic Communication:** The SOEL works actively with and is responsive to the field, to policy leaders and partners. At the start, they engage the early childhood and public education communities in setting priorities, shaping state initiatives and providing feedback on implementation efforts. They continue this engagement to make mid-course corrections. The SOEL also communicates and works closely with governor's office, legislative leadership, state boards, media, and local government and boards of education.
- **Performance Management, Execution/Implementation of Policies, Programs and Initiatives:** The SOEL implements effective performance management systems to support effective, accountable, cost-efficient programs for young children. SOEL leaders foster effective staff teams and establish clear lines of reporting and ongoing progress monitoring. The SOEL builds high quality systems for fiscal management; intra- and inter-agency collaboration; and regulatory, monitoring, data and reporting systems. SOELs are also timely and responsive to inquiries. The SOEL has a clear, results-focused strategic plan to carry out its work. This means a delineation of functions that are carried out directly by SOEL staff, intermediate units, higher education institutions, public/private partnerships, and private vendors. When external partners are chosen, the SOEL manages performance through strong procurement and progress monitoring mechanisms. Through a lens of customer service, highly effective SOELs reverse negative stereotypes of state bureaucracy because of their productivity, quality, speed, responsiveness and consistency.
- **Talent Management:** Leaders and staff members are proud to work for the SOEL because they believe in its mission. The culture and core values include high expectations for staff but also strong support for staff members. Decisions are driven by data but also informed by the judgment and perspectives of the team. To be high performing, the SOEL must have sufficient numbers of qualified, skillful personnel to effectively manage multiple programs, internal systems, improvement initiatives, and collaborative relationships. The SOEL has a plan for staff recruitment and development including career civil servants, political appointees, short-term assignees such as interns and fellows, and consultants. The SOEL provides time and resources to ensure that leaders and staff engage in continuous learning in key performance areas such as emerging

research, implementation science, systems thinking and change, communication, and results based leadership.

Organizational Effectiveness: What highly effective SOELs seek to achieve.

1. **Continuous improvement in program quality, teaching and learning, and child outcomes.** Over time the state can document progress in program, classroom, workforce quality, compliance with standards, outcomes for children through ongoing data systems and periodic process and impact evaluations. Standards are internalized by front-line staff, which means that teachers and administrators have a shared and concrete image of what high quality teaching and genuine family engagement looks like, as well as what progress for children on learning and developmental progressions. Periodic 3rd party evaluations complement ongoing program monitoring and tracking of data on children and families.
2. **Unified data system.** The SOEL links data on young children, early childhood program and workforce quality, and funding/investments across funding sources/state and federal agencies and across birth through 3rd grade. Data is tied to geo-mapping to show availability of high quality programs for children of different ages in neighborhoods/communities. K-3 teachers can access and use data on their children from early childhood programs and early childhood agencies can receive feedback on the progress of their children in K-3 and beyond.
3. **Guidance on curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and technology.** The SOEL builds capacity of local early childhood agencies and elementary schools to help teachers improve their work with children. They help local administrators make informed decisions on curricula, assessment tools, materials and professional development including evaluating whether these resources are aligned to state standards and have adequate evidence of effectiveness.
4. **Family and community engagement.** The SOEL develops and implements policy and guidance to engage families in children's learning, and ensure effective transitions from early childhood programs into the primary years and beyond. The SOEL directs resources to serve specific populations of families, including children experiencing homelessness, children with special needs, and migrant children inclusively. A highly effective SOEL ensures that family engagement policy is embedded in standards for programs, children's learning, and workforce preparation and improvement.
5. **High performing early childhood workforce.** The SOEL develops policy and guidance to support the recruitment, preparation, hiring, induction, and compensation of high quality teachers and administrators. This includes ensuring good working conditions that support effective practice and implementing a fair and coherent evaluation systems for the EC workforce. SOELs set the policy and resources to implement a professional learning for all staff, including, teachers, instructional leaders, administrators, family engagement staff, professional development providers, and higher education faculty.
6. **Systems Alignment.** The SOEL links programs together so that access for families to services is simplified, administrative burdens on local agencies are minimized and children enjoy a smooth pathway of birth-through 3rd grade teaching and learning.
7. **Fiscal Management.** The SOEL manages funding in a way that supports quality standards and a quality workforce, assuring funding formulae are responsive to the needs of higher risk children for more intensive, sustained, comprehensive supports within a community context. It deploys and supports

mechanisms for blending/braiding funding, and over time, garners increased public and private investment to expand access to high quality programs.

8. **Innovation.** The SOEL makes programs and teachers aware of new research, tools and resources including curricula, assessments, opportunities to use technology and professional development strategies. They sponsor local efforts to innovate to serve diverse groups of young learners inclusively. SOELs work collaboratively to build a more concrete, detailed, shared vision of what excellence looks like in early childhood environments. They re-examine and re-tool state standards, assessment tools and accountability strategies on a regular basis.

Leadership/Staff Capabilities: What leaders/staff of highly effective SOELs know and are able to do.

The SOEL relies upon sustained and recognized leadership, management and early childhood expertise. Staff are well-trained in early childhood education and include individuals with in-depth experience as teachers and administrators in the range of early learning settings, content, and programs. They know, are known by, and respected by their state's early childhood and public education communities.

1. SOEL leaders demonstrate perseverance, fortitude, creativity and courage. They take a long term/big picture perspective. They are creative and nimble in identifying and pursuing next steps. They are accepting of the reality of having to live with tension and have a tolerance for ambiguity. They understand the political, social and economic context of their state, as well as values regarding children and families, particularly in what policymakers may be willing to invest.
2. SOEL professionals are well-trained in research-based child development and early childhood pedagogy, curriculum, observation, and assessment. They are fluent in early childhood policy and systems, funding mechanisms, program models, and varied federal/state relationships.
3. Staff who oversee programs and projects, and effectively monitor and evaluate their implementation have mastered the necessary management and operations systems of state and federal government as appropriate to their assignments. They are able to work creatively and seek new tools and solutions when needed to get things done.
4. SOEL leaders and other staff members are excellent communicators and facilitators. They effectively present verbally and in writing, and are adept at responding to questions. They communicate effectively with higher level and lower level state officials, employees and partner agencies; to early childhood and public education communities; and political/policy/business/civic leaders and media representatives.
5. Staff and leaders are well-versed in systems thinking and analytical skills (i.e., understanding research and evaluation methods, ability to analyze data and synthesize research, particularly contradictory research).
6. Staff exercise leadership and view themselves as responsible for change and improvement. They are self-aware, recognizing their roles, strengths and weaknesses. They seek opportunities for personal learning and improvement, and are able to address challenges with creative solutions.

About CEELO

CEELO's mission is to strengthen the capacity of SEAs to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO accomplishes this goal by providing customized technical assistance to states, state convenings, research and policy reports and sponsoring a year-long leadership academy for early education leaders in state departments of education (SEAs) and early learning agencies.