



Leadership



**Leading From
Where You Are**



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ISBN: 978-0-9978967-2-5

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Published and Distributed by:



of the Council for Exceptional Children

E-mail: dec@dec-sped.org

Website: <http://www.dec-sped.org/>

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC), a division of the Council for Exceptional Children, is an international membership organization for individuals who work with or on behalf of young children with disabilities and other special needs. Founded in 1973, DEC's mission is to promote policies and advance evidence-based practices that support families and enhance the optimal development of young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays and disabilities. Information about membership and other resources available can be found at www.dec-sped.org

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Note: Editor order is alphabetical; equal contributions were made by each editor

Copy editing and cover and interior design: Kevin Dolan

Indexer: Jean Jesensky, *Endswell Indexing*

Typeset in Warnock Pro, Myriad Pro, and Calibri

All photos provided by iStock except on pages 61, 63, 64, and 67, which were provided by the authors

Suggested Citation

Batz, R., Blanchard, S. B., Rooks-Ellis, D. L., & Stegenga, S. M. (Eds.). (2023). *Leadership: Leading from where you are* (DEC Recommended Practices Monograph Series No. 9). Division for Early Childhood.

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Early Intervention Leadership Strategies and Collaborations

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“The work of practitioners on the frontline is critical to improving outcomes for young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays/disabilities and their families” (DEC, 2014, p. 6).

THE DIVISION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD’S (DEC) RECOMMENDED PRACTICES and its position statement *Leadership in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education* (EI/ECSE) define leaders as “those in positions of leadership or authority in providing services to all young children” (DEC, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, DEC emphasizes that everyone can be a leader, regardless of their role (DEC, 2014, 2015a, 2015b).

The Leadership recommended practices (DEC, 2014) call for state leaders to collaborate with higher education and practitioners such as Part C early interventionists (L11). There is also a strong impetus to develop and nurture partnerships across state and local systems “to create coordinated and inclusive systems of services and supports” (L6). Kirby et al. (2021) discuss leadership in early childhood as “a set of practices that leaders pursue or are expected to pursue that can lead to a positive work environment, strong instructional practice, healthy partnerships between leaders and staff and staff and families, and sustainable operations” (p. xi). These characteristics of leadership are integral to an equitable, high-quality early intervention (EI) delivery system. This article focuses on a multitiered leadership approach that includes faculty, state, and local administrators and EI program practitioners who mentor and supervise preservice students.

Virginia’s Part C coordinator supports implementation of the recommended

Table 1
 Consortium Action Plan Objectives Crosswalked With Selected DEC Recommended Practices

Action plan objectives	DEC Recommended Practices
Objective 1: Improve the availability of high-quality student placements by building a strong relationship between universities and local EI systems.	L6, L9, L11
Objective 2: Conduct collaborative research to develop a system of high-quality student placements and cooperation across universities and with local EI systems across Virginia.	L3, L6
Objective 3: Enhance preservice training to incorporate quantity and quality EI content in coursework by sharing resources among universities.	L9, L11
Objective 4: Increase visibility and voice of this consortium within state and national early childhood efforts and mechanisms.	L8

practices through the state Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) contract. This includes financial subsidy and contract deliverables to “collaborate with IHEs (institutes of higher education) on current EI practices and resources” and “coordinate EI Preservice Consortium meetings and activities to share practices and strategies for workforce development” (L8; Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2021).

Workforce development is a current issue and concern in the field of EI because of personnel shortages nationwide (IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association, 2020). Forty-one of 48 states (85%) surveyed report personnel shortages in EI and note the need for continuous networking with universities (IDEA Infant & Toddler Coordinators Association, 2020, p. 5). Personnel shortages in special education and EI have existed since 1975, but the demand for high-quality and diverse personnel in EI, special education, and related services has been persistently growing. In the 2020–2021 academic year, 43 states plus the District of Columbia experienced special education teacher shortages reflecting a decades-long national history of special education being a high-need field, particularly for EI and special education personnel serving low-income communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

These shortages, along with the lack of quality personnel preparation in EI/ECSE, result in three issues: (1) limited access to services needed to succeed, particularly for families of color; (2) inability to provide prevention and EI services; and (3) difficulty training and retaining a high-quality workforce (Bruder et al., 2009; Gillispie, 2021). Research shows that the development of partnerships between university faculty and practitioners can ameliorate shortages and more professional development opportunities help to enhance retention of a high-quality workforce (Newton et al., 2019). Furthermore, the complex needs of young children and families with multiple challenges require high-quality EI

and special education personnel to provide interdisciplinary services leading to children's long-term academic success and positive adjustment (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

As a response to complexities facing quality EI service delivery, Virginia developed a consortium partnership. The creation of this consortium allowed faculty, EI administrators, and EI program practitioner mentors to build relationships between IHE and EI systems in Virginia. This supports the preparation of highly qualified future early interventionists who are ready to deliver equitable, individualized, evidence-based services that support positive child and family outcomes (L8, L9, L11). We discuss the formation and purpose of the consortium, present our self-developed model, and offer strategies that will allow leaders in other states to consider how they could address EI personnel shortages through collaborative partnerships. We focus specifically on the five Leadership recommended practices indicated in Table 1.

Interagency Collaboration

"State and local leaders establish the conditions that are essential for the successful implementation of the DEC Recommended Practices by, for example, the policies and procedures they develop and implement" (DEC, 2014, p. 6).

Aaliyah is a supervisor in her local EI program. Many of the families in the program have economic barriers and limited access to community resources. Every summer she receives a call from the nearby university asking if she will take students in their early childhood special education program for EI fieldwork placements. As a graduate of the university, Aaliyah has always believed it was an important opportunity to "give back" to support future educators. Lately, however, she has felt an increasing resentment about taking these students. It is time-consuming to coordinate all of the university requirements as well as her agency's student onboarding processes.

With never-ending staff shortages, Aaliyah's schedule is very full. Finding staff members who will consider acting as students' "cooperating professionals" continues to be challenging. Additionally, she feels that over the past few years, the students seem less knowledgeable about EI when they arrive for the placement. Aaliyah is frustrated that she has to spend so much time to bring them to a baseline understanding of IDEA, Part C for them to be prepared to join visits. Aaliyah has also noted that some students demonstrate significant implicit and professional biases toward families, which makes it more difficult to build trust and work effectively with practitioners and families. Given all of these factors, Aaliyah reflects that it would be far less stressful and easier to just decline when the university fieldwork placement coordinator contacts her.

Unfortunately, stories such as Aaliyah's are far too common and perpetuate barriers for EI field placements and educator preparation. Without the support of early interventionists to accept students, faculty are frequently left scrambling to provide high-quality EI practicum and student teaching experiences. This requires leaders to make interdisciplinary and interagency collaboration a priority.

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Personnel shortages in special education and EI have existed since 1975, but the demand for high-quality and diverse personnel in EI, special education, and related services has been persistently growing.

Our Journey

Recognizing the challenges associated with EI personnel preparation, in 2013 we (faculty members and the CSPD coordinator) conducted an informal survey to address faculty concerns regarding lack of EI fieldwork placement sites (Chil-dress et al., 2013). Administrators expressed unwillingness to accept preservice students because of their lack of knowledge and skills related to most aspects of EI. Students also shared that they felt unprepared as they began their placements and frequently learned most EI knowledge and skills as they were immersed in their fieldwork. Over the next few years, we continued to meet periodically to make incremental changes to support students, including sharing resource tools for students, engaging in ongoing communication about new tools being devel-oped, leading discussion on how resources could be embedded in coursework,

and developing more coordinated ef-forts for placement opportunities.

In fall 2019, a collaborative IHE faculty institute was held, during which EI resources were shared that could support enhanced student knowledge and skills. During net-working opportunities, it was agreed that a coordinated, less competitive effort was needed across universi-ties and faculty to improve fieldwork options. In spring 2020, the EI/Pre-service Consortium was formed. Currently, consortium members include faculty from five Virginia universities and the CSPD coordina-tor. Faculty members participate in



this consortium as part of their service to the profession, with their universities indirectly supporting the work of DEC and the recommended practices through human resources and time (L8).

Trilateral communication provides opportunities for enhanced dialogue ensuring all leaders are fully informed (L6, L11). The CSPD coordinator com-municates regularly with state-level Part C staff providing consortium updates. State-level staff share concerns and needs of local-level EI administrators, which the CSPD coordinator brings back to consortium members. Consortium members meet monthly to discuss programmatic changes for in-service and pre-service preparation.

Action Planning

We started the EI/Preservice Consortium by brainstorming the vision of this self-facilitated organization. Recognizing the shared challenge for EI fieldwork placements and partnership across the state as discussed during the aforemen-tioned faculty institute, we developed our vision of collaboration with the goal

to increase the availability and improve the quality of EI field placements and preparation for preservice students. Based on this vision, we developed our mission statement to highlight the values of intentional collaboration, support, and communication between EI administrators and IHE faculty preparing future EI personnel.

The EI/Preservice Consortium addresses mutually identified needs for a well-prepared EI workforce, focusing on our shared goal of improving outcomes of young children with disabilities or developmental delays and their families. We brainstormed many actions we would like to take and, using the mission statement as the guiding principle, we created an action plan (L7) and prioritized the following four objectives:

1. Improve the availability of high-quality student placements by building a strong relationship between universities and local EI systems.
2. Conduct collaborative research to develop a system of high-quality student placements and cooperation across universities and with local EI systems throughout Virginia.
3. Enhance preservice training to incorporate quantity and quality EI content in coursework by sharing resources among universities.
4. Increase visibility and voice of this consortium within state and national early childhood efforts and mechanisms.

See Table 1 for alignment between the Leadership recommended practices and these objectives.

Enhancing Preservice Training: Our Model

“These challenges may require sustained advocacy from a variety of groups to create the systems change needed to establish more conducive policies and procedures” (DEC, 2014, p. 6).

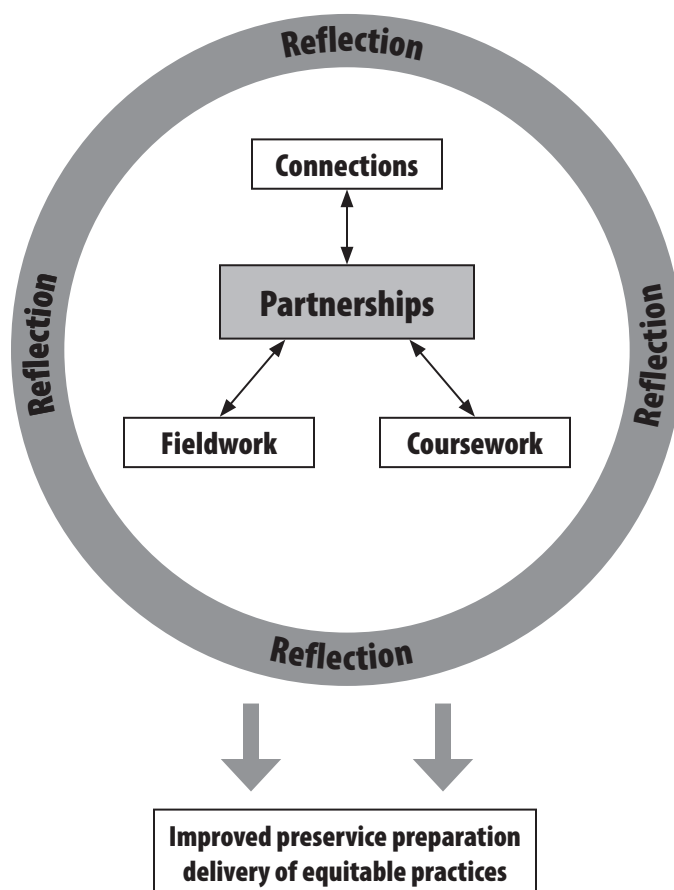
To further guide our work, we developed a model framework that aligns our vision, mission, objectives, and the Leadership recommended practices. As depicted in Figure 1, this model centers *partnerships* within a system of *reflection* for building *connections* through our consortium and enhancing EI-related *coursework* and *fieldwork* at each participating institution. Here we focus on both strengthening existing partnerships and developing new ones to nurture cohesive and collaborative efforts across state and local levels, between and among key stakeholders (L6). In this model we strive to make intentional connections between state EI agencies and IHEs. This allows for partnerships that focus on outcomes of improved preservice preparation and delivery of equitable practices through coursework and fieldwork.

Ongoing reflection and action are integral parts of this entire process. As faculty, we use the strategy of reflection to consider our biases and practices and how that may show up in our instruction and teaching. By being explicit about our reflective process, we model for students how to also engage in reflection and consider their biases. Consortium members informally and formally seek perspectives and input from agencies to better understand and collectively reflect on the assets and needs within diverse cultures and communities in our

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By being explicit about our reflective process, we model for students how to also engage in reflection and consider their biases.

Figure 1
Virginia EI/Preservice Consortium Model



state. These actions are specific examples of how strong leaders adapt to changing circumstances by identifying gaps and developing solutions through the use of a racial equity lens, “the ongoing process and practice of increasing capacity to see, understand, and relate to other racial and cultural realities, worldviews, values, and norms that are different from one’s own and to be willing to work to create equity and justice” (Hill & Curry-Stevens, 2017, p. 25). As we sought to increase visibility and voice of the consortium (Objective 4; L8), members of our group presented this model at DEC’s annual conference (Hill et al., 2021).

Improving Availability of Student Placements: Innovative Leadership Strategies

Aaliyah decided that the next time a university contacted her about supervising a student’s fieldwork placement, she would ask specific questions about the student’s knowledge and the goals of the placement before making a decision. When Maria contacted Aaliyah to request placements for two students, Aaliyah asked if she could meet with her first to have a conversation. During this discussion, Aaliyah was able to ask questions, learn what information students had already covered in classes, and work with Maria to refine the goals and define the expectations of

the placement. Maria learned about barriers that impacted previous placements, and they were able to determine potential solutions. Through this conversation and mutual reflection, Aaliyah and Maria recognized they shared the same goal of preparing high-quality EI personnel. Feeling that she had a voice in the process, Aaliyah was much more comfortable saying “yes” to accepting students for field-work placements at her agency.

From our model we collaboratively formed innovative strategies for leadership to address our objectives. The innovative strategies for leadership encompassed connections, coursework, and fieldwork. The connections made across faculty at five state IHEs and with the CSPD coordinator facilitated a reciprocal partnership in which both preparation and practice needs could be shared. Specifically, faculty learned about preparation essentials from the CSPD coordinator’s perspective, and faculty also shared what they thought was needed for quality preparation. Two topics that emerged from these discussions were coursework and fieldwork.

Together, we identified coursework and activities within the preparation program that provide opportunities to develop well-prepared EI personnel to meet the diverse needs of infants, toddlers, and families (Objective 3; L9, L11). For example, university programs leading to licensure in early childhood special education have embedded the state Part C statutory EI certification modules as required elements of courses or as a program requirement (L9). We also collaborated to further enhance these opportunities by sharing resources with one another. As part of these collaborations, the CSPD coordinator worked with other state professional development consultants to develop model case studies and learning resources, based on recommended practices, which could be embedded within coursework (L9). By uniting on such efforts, preservice students would be able to engage with quality resources relative to current state needs before being placed in real-life practicum situations.

Another element that was identified as essential, yet diverse across IHEs, was fieldwork. Consortium members agreed that fieldwork provides the opportunity to observe and apply practices that are being taught in the IHE setting. It became clear, however, that implementing fieldwork was a challenge for both IHE faculty and for EI administrators given limited placement options paired with ambiguity about needs, roles, and responsibilities. We worked together to articulate needs and challenges related to fieldwork and developed resources for potential placements. This also led to partnering with EI administrators to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives about fieldwork for future EI personnel.

Conducting Collaborative Research: Data-Driven Decision-making

Aaliyah was invited to participate in a discussion with other EI supervisors and university faculty about EI placements. Hearing from colleagues across the state validated her feelings of hesitancy to take students. She also learned some strategies that others used to make field placements more manageable. One discussion participant even commented that it was nice to be asked for input as a first step toward better collaboration between universities and EI practitioners. Aaliyah agreed.

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Faculty learned about preparation essentials from the CSPD coordinator’s perspective, and faculty also shared what they thought was needed for quality preparation.

To gather data to inform practice improvement related to fieldwork needs, we conducted focus groups with EI administrators (Objective 2; L3, L6; Hill et al., 2021). EI administrators from across Virginia participated in one of three focus groups. Administrators represented all of the six EI regions across the state, which included large urban systems as well as small rural areas.

The importance of relationships, communication, and explicit expectations was clearly stated by all administrators. Discussion focused on the overall impact of field experiences, foundational student knowledge, and ideas related to logistics of the different placements. All participants agreed that field experiences have an impact on the future success of preservice students in EI. Administrators stressed the importance of preservice students having foundational knowledge about EI and expressed appreciation for communication from IHEs of what is being taught in class and what needs to be covered during the field experience. Discussion participants also noted the importance of students' professionalism, desire to learn, curiosity, internal motivation, and ability to transfer knowl-

edge from coursework to EI service implementation.

Logistical concerns included knowing who to contact to discuss placement availability, the length of placement, who can serve as a cooperating professional, university expectations for placements, roles and responsibilities, structure of observations, and placement documentation (i.e., evaluations). Additionally, EI system logistics were discussed as a factor impacting placements. Examples included a shortage of special instruction/developmental service providers, limited availability of cooperating professionals, time



commitment required for cooperating professionals paired with lack of incentive to do so at the system level, varying onboarding requirements across different regions, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that needed to be completed or updated by both the university and local lead agencies. Because these focus groups occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators also discussed how placements were impacted. Because teleintervention was new for most providers and families, it provided the opportunity for a new approach to service delivery. While a few regions increased the number of students they supported since students did not need to physically be onsite, most were not able to support students at all. Participants also discussed logistical issues related to COVID-19 protocols, such as access to files for students and social distancing once in-person visits resumed.

We share this focus group feedback as an example of how collaborative leadership infrastructure and shared responsibility can be leveraged to improve EI preservice preparation (DEC, 2015; Hebbeler, 2015). The focus groups enhanced

the communication pathways between universities and EI administrators and decentered university needs in favor of understanding agency and community priorities. Field experiences are critical learning opportunities for students (DEC, 2020) and require coordination with local EI entities. The dialogue and data from the focus groups have led to further action steps. We have incorporated this information into our IHE processes for identifying field placement opportunities (Objective 1; L6, L9, L11). Future planning includes changes to curricula or timing of EI placements based on the knowledge gained. Data garnered from focus groups was shared with state Part C staff and local EI administrators at their monthly meeting. Additionally, we will continue to collaborate with EI administrators to identify when and where change is needed. Specifically, a state Part C staff member has been attending our consortium meetings. We also will serve as “champions to try to bring it about” (Hebbeler, 2015, p. 28) through use of a racial equity lens to ensure equitable, high-quality EI services and supports. Ongoing efforts will continue to strengthen the collaborative partnerships between faculty and EI administrators to enhance diverse leadership opportunities (L3).

Conclusion

Aaliyah attended a statewide EI meeting where results from the discussions were shared. It was exciting to recognize that EI administrators were truly heard and that the conversations led to reflection about the barriers that were in place. She learned about new strategies and plans being considered that reflected a much stronger partnership between university faculty and EI practitioners. She also was able to contribute more ideas to ensure students are prepared to work with all families and consider ways to explore their implicit biases before meeting with families. As part of the collaborative team, Aaliyah felt a renewed sense of anticipation and eagerness to support and mentor students to become future early interventionists.

Our goal is to further develop the EI/Preservice Consortium and our partnership model, creating a network where more EI administrators feel the sense of renewed anticipation and eagerness that Aaliyah describes above. As leaders, we recognize that EI systems and IHEs are interrelated and feel motivated by our shared responsibility to ensure high-quality services and good outcomes for all young children and their families (DEC, 2014). The Leadership recommended practices make it clear that administrative leaders have “authority and responsibility” but not “control” (Hebbeler, 2015, p. 28), which is why we focused our consortium on creating a culture of reflection and partnership. Our vision, mission, and objectives have led to stronger coordinated efforts (L6) as we advocate for the DEC Recommended Practices in our state at both the preservice and in-service levels. However, we also know that strong leaders must adapt to changing circumstances and set new directions (DEC, 2014). Other states may also consider how a commitment of finances and human resources can lead to collaborative efforts across higher education, professional development, and practitioners for the ultimate goal of services focused on equity, best available evidence, and recommended practices for families in Part C early intervention.

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Our goal is to further develop the EI/Preservice Consortium and our partnership model, creating a network where more EI administrators feel the sense of renewed anticipation and eagerness.

Our next steps for this consortium include the development of a speaker's bureau that will center the voices and expertise of EI personnel and families in preservice preparation courses. We plan to enhance our interdisciplinary collaboration by inviting occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and other related-service providers to our partnership. We also plan to apply for grant funding to further our leadership endeavors in creating strong, equitable outcomes for young children and their families. We envision a coordinated and collaborative statewide system of high-quality EI preservice education, including ample fieldwork experiences to allow potential EI personnel to hone their skills.

Through national conversations, we know that Virginia is not alone in the challenges presented here. We invite you to consider how our model could be adapted to your state's unique context, allowing you to strengthen leadership capacity between EI agencies and IHEs through partnerships, reflection, and connections.

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