

What Works to Build Skills, Knowledge, and Attitudes for Early Childhood Leadership?

BY JANE HUMPHRIES, ED. D.

Why is professional development important to you as a leader? Early childhood leaders may think they have reached the pinnacle of the field when they attain the program director position but soon discover this is when the learning really begins. No one is born with “all the right stuff” to be an early childhood leader. It is a mix of temperament, values, knowledge, skills, and lived experiences in the field that complements the program’s mission, vision, and culture. To do this effectively, a leader must commit to lifelong learning, which continually refines abilities and supports professional growth.

At the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University, we know that leadership matters. Research has shown that the early childhood workforce needs effective leaders, and much attention has been dedicated to building leadership capacity in the field. In response, the field of early childhood is moving towards requiring higher levels of competency, degrees, and credentials, which makes it even more important to invest in yourself. When doing this, you are increasing your expertise while positioning yourself to be ready for advancing in the field of early childhood. This may be done in many ways, including online college courses, facilitated cohort learning with peer support, and your own self-paced participation in learning experiences.

One way the McCormick Center supports all these efforts is through Aim4Excellence National Director Credential™, our fully-online professional development program. Launched in 2009, Aim4Excellence was one of the first recognized director credentials to support the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation. In 2020, the McCormick Center launched Aim 2.0 with completely updated, competency-based content that has been digitally enhanced to provide an engaging online learning experience that includes all required texts and resource materials.

College Credit

To meet the needs of earning a college degree, the McCormick Center has worked with several higher education institutions to support these aspirations. We partner with several institutions, including [National Louis University](#) and [Rasmussen University](#), to provide innovative pathways to support early childhood leadership growth. To assist those interested in earning an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Practice offered by National Louis University, the Aim4Excellence modules may be used for course content for three of the degree plans’ required courses. This degree was specifically created to support those already working within early childhood settings. Another innovative path is our partnership with Rasmussen University. For those interested in enrolling in the Early Childhood Education Leadership Bachelor Completer degree who hold a current Aim4Excellence Director Credential, individuals can earn college credit before starting the program by successfully applying to their course waiver program. Both universities provide grant and scholarship opportunities with more information located on their websites. To learn more about undergraduate and graduate college options, [click here](#).

Cohort Learning

Another exciting path for program leaders to earn the Aim4Excellence National Director Credential is participation in a cohort model sponsored by a state or local organization. Participants come from many different types of early childhood programs. Head Start, Early Head Start, Pre-K, center-based, and home-based child care program leaders have all benefitted from the opportunity to engage in a leadership-focused community of practice. Led by a facilitator attuned to what motivates each participant, the facilitated cohort bridges the gap between the online learning experience and the day-to-day leadership practices in the program environment. The opportunity to reflect with peers on the learning applied in real time is what makes this path so effective. The group melds and learns from and with each other, which is a very powerful experience from the adult learning perspective.

For Individuals

There are also those who do their best learning when given the opportunity to take professional development at their own pace. The benefits include having 24/7 access for times convenient to each individual and personal schedule. Many early childhood professionals are so busy during the day that evenings and weekends tend to be the best time to focus on learning. In addition, many online learners have family and other commitments for which they must be available. One experienced director shared how the commitment of her time was worth the investment.

“Aim4Excellence have been the best director courses I have ever taken. This program helped with all the aspects of operating a center, and it was far better than any of the director courses that I have taken in the past. I wish I could have taken this years ago. I would highly recommend this to anyone who has dreams and visions of operating a successful center.” –Lauren, Director, Colorado

State Systems

The McCormick Center has worked collaboratively with 16 state quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to weave in the Aim4Excellence National Director Credential. In Illinois, achieving the Aim4Excellence National Director Credential meets the training and education requirements for program administration established by the Gateways to Opportunity for the Illinois Director Credential, Level 1. In Pennsylvania, attaining the Aim4Excellence National Director Credential is recognized as meeting requirements of the PA Administrator Credential because it meets the training requirements for administrator qualifications within NAEYC program accreditation. [Click here](#) to see if your state is one of the states that recognize the Aim4Excellence National Director online professional development modules. These partnering states have invested years to build robust professional development systems that include an intense focus on quality director requirements.

Whether you are located in one of our state partnership networks or just want to learn more, we encourage you to embrace 2021 by investing in you to learn more through our engaging online learning experience, Aim4Excellence.

To view an updated list of state partnerships, click [here](#).

Resources:

Illinois Director Credential. (2017, November). Gateways to Opportunity Illinois Director Credential (IDC) Framework. Retrieved January 20, 2021, from <https://www.ilgateways.com/docman-docs/credentials/illinois-director/3-frameworks/file>

The Pennsylvania Key. (2020, February). Director Credential Requirements. Retrieved January 20, 2021, from <https://s35729.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Director-Credential-Requirements-Document-0220.pdf>

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