

# The Director's Link

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## Improving Your Program with Pedagogical Leadership

Margie Carter



Despite the shaky economic times we are living in, the early childhood field is finally being taken seriously and it feels like a significant shift is underway. I'm excited about all the opportunities before us, yet a bit uneasy at the same time. The position promoted by some seems to be that implementing more standards and quality rating systems is all that is needed to improve outcomes for children. Rarely do you hear the idea that to sustain quality, teachers must be provided with more off-the-floor time to plan and talk through the complex task of understanding the teaching and learning process.

My question is this: without such provisions, how can we genuinely professionalize our field so as to attract, retain, and support reflective teachers who understand the "why" behind any standard and are motivated to translate research and theory into practice? I resonate with Louise Stoney who says, "Documents, checklists, and rating systems are ways to ensure standards are met, so I understand they are needed. But supporting early learning is far more complex."

In my work as an independent consultant and mentor, outside of any QRIS system, I focus on developing internal support systems for this complex work of learning together with young children. One of the ways I assess quality is to look more closely at an organization's budget and program infrastructure to see if they have established a foundation for quality improvement beyond a score on a rating scale at any given moment. I look for evidence that teachers and directors have the time and motivation to maintain a focus on self-assessment, reflective practice, and continuous improvement in early learning experiences for children. Two great resources coming from the staff of the McCormick Center, *A Great Place to Work*, and the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS), can help directors assess their organizational climate and the administrative structures and systems known to enhance quality.

### Leading versus managing

The job of directing an early childhood program is overwhelming, to put it mildly.

This is because we are not only an industry, but a profession focused on teaching and learning. To achieve sustainable quality, programs need sophisticated business practices but also a leader with people skills, pedagogical understandings, and the wherewithal to develop an organizational culture that reflects their values on how to achieve quality. Rarely do you find these skills in one person and the tasks are far more than the 50 hour work week of most directors.

In *The Visionary Director*, my co-author Deb Curtis and I put forward a triangle framework for conceptualizing and organizing the different kinds of work involved in leading, not just managing, an early childhood program. In the years between the first edition of this book in 1998 and the second edition, in 2010, we came to recognize that once directors got on fire with a vision to guide their programs, they needed to systematically create structures and support systems that would steadily grow that vision. The second edition offers more ideas and stories from directors about that aspect.

One side of our triangle framework focuses on the management tasks, ensuring compliance with contracts, standards, and supervising staff. This means getting more human resources and business-savvy administrative practices in programs. But equally important is the second side of the triangle, coaching and mentoring teachers, which is quite different than supervising them. Sometimes teachers need technical assistance, and sometimes side-by-side

*Continued on page 2*

mentoring to learn to focus in on the children, not their tasks, schedules, or required paper work. A pedagogical leader keeps the organization focused on the teaching and learning process among the children, staff, and families. And finally, the third side of the triangle framework reminds us that there must be a leadership focus on creating an organizational culture and sense of community united around identified core values.

### Delegating tasks versus cultivating pedagogical leadership

Because child care programs rarely have resources for more than one administrator, smart directors typically keep their radar alert to emerging leaders on their staff to delegate some work to. Once a teacher exhibits dedication and organizational skills, she is often given some of the tasks on the director's plate. While this is understandable, more often than not, these are the tasks from the management side of the triangle not either of the other sides. Pedagogical leadership and the work of developing an organizational culture focused on the teaching and learning process continues to be neglected. The pressing deadlines for management tasks tend to obscure the possibilities for quality improvement that coaching could bring. Keeping the focus on the standards and rating scales, rather than on the teacher as a learner deserving of coaching and time for reflection, may ultimately undermine quality improvement efforts.

Canadian early childhood professor and author, Carol Anne Wien, wrote a provocative book called *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Real Life*. In this engaging text she puzzles through and researches why her college students can talk the talk, but when she visits them after graduation, finds they aren't walking the talk. From her extensive observations and interviews with teachers she came to recognize that both the organizational culture and lack of support systems in most early childhood programs work against what their teachers have learned about developmentally appropriate practice. With our current emphasis on requiring degrees for our early educators, we would do well to heed Wien's conclusions:

"Those of us who hope to support the work of teachers (administrators, curriculum consultants, practicum supervisors, teacher educators, and so forth) can help in several ways, beyond simply a better understanding of the context of teacher work in early childhood. Like the support given to teachers in Reggio Emilia, we can work to change systemic constraints so that time is opened up for reflection, for review of practice, for the surfacing of incipient conflicts that the teacher senses but has not had time to address. We can encourage the reflective process by giving teachers opportunities to document children's activity and the development of their curriculum, encourage them to make changes that they themselves generate, to try out solutions to problems of teaching... Rather than appear merely as experts with authoritative knowledge, we can encourage a sense of mastery over their work, their sense of agency."

Wien's proposals remind me of stories I've heard in New Zealand, where director mentors are tasked with turning "compliance issues" into "research projects" for the program leader and educators to undertake. For instance, if there is a compliance issue around meal time, the director mentor tasks the program with some questions to guide their observations and study for the coming month. In nearly every case, they self-discover and correct or seek help to make needed changes. This is an example of what Wien describes as encouraging mastery over their work and their sense of agency.

### Growing pedagogical leadership

Designing teacher research projects is one way to grow pedagogical leadership. Turning problems into "studies" offered with the resources of time, a mentor, and professional literature, is an effective way to develop internal leadership to keep your program focused on the teaching and learning process. Consider this the next time you are developing program improvement plans to raise your score on a rating scale. Not only will your score likely improve, but you will be shifting your organizational culture from a focus on compliance to one focused on self-motivated quality improvement.

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### Our Mission

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University is dedicated to building the leadership capacity of the early childhood workforce. The activities of the Center encompass four areas: professional development, evaluation, research, and public awareness.



## Designing a staff meeting to support a culture of inquiry

Bringing pedagogical leadership to your center can shift the organizational culture. Consider a staff meeting agenda designed to implement and grow an organizational culture that is curious about children and the teaching and learning process. Being a pedagogical leader means you keep the focus on curiosity, not just compliance.

### Plan your staff meetings to begin with sharing observation stories

- Set the tone of the culture you are trying to create by starting your meetings with time to share a story or two from teachers about something a child or group did that left them curious, delighted, or aware they were learning something new. Be clear that you are looking for stories of children being competent, not a problem to be solved. Take turns until each staff member has shared at least once during the year.
- Facilitate a brief discussion of the story with some simple questions to keep everyone focused. What specific details in this story spark your curiosity? What questions does it leave you with? How could you find out more?

### Use a similar set of questions with each story so that you are developing a culture of inquiry among staff

- After sharing observation stories has become the norm, begin to take more time with each story to probe more deeply, fostering a consistent way of thinking through what their observations might mean.
- Encourage teachers to bring transcripts of conversations and close-up photos that can be studied to reflect on the teaching and learning process.
- Include questions that help teachers become more aware of influences on how they see, interpret, or respond to children's activities. Examine what the child's perspective would be, what effect the physical and socio-emotional environment of the classroom would be, and perspectives the child's family might have.

Is there anything in your background or values that influences your response to this observation?

From what you know about this child and child development theory, what might this experience be like from the child's perspective?

Is there anything about the daily schedule or room arrangement that influenced what the children did?

Do we know whether this child's family provides any experience with art at home?

### Explore how an observation reveals desired standards and learning outcomes

- As teachers become more skilled in describing the details of what is unfolding with their children, take time at the end of your discussion to inquire about any standards or learning outcomes this observation reveals. "The way those boys carefully negotiated how the cars and blocks were going to be used with so many kids in that area shows their emerging communication skills. Johnny demonstrated some particular new skills in self-regulation when he said, 'After your turn, it's mine.' We can see why our early learning standards call for an ample supply of building props in the block area. Having enough keeps the children from getting frustrated and helps expand the possibilities for more complex play."
- If the observation is related to something you have focused on trying to improve on a rating scale, be sure to acknowledge how you can now see the value of that standard.

Adapted from Curtis, D., Lebo, D., Cividanes, W., & Carter, M. *Reflecting with a thinking lens. A workbook for early childhood educators*, Mechanicsburg, PA: Harvest Resources Associates. Ordering information: [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).

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Sign up for monthly ebulletins at <http://cecl.nl.edu/public/ebulletin.htm>

## Professional Development Opportunities - March 2012

### Business Administration Scale (BAS) Assessor Reliability Training

Monday – Wednesday, March 5–7, 2012

The Assessor Reliability Training provides an in-depth analysis of the items and quality indicators in the BAS. This training is designed for individuals who want to ensure that the BAS assessments used for quality rating and improvement systems, program evaluations, or pre/post intervention studies are valid, reliable, and administered consistently across programs.

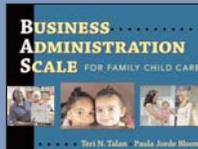
**Location:** McCormick Center for  
Early Childhood Leadership

**Fee:** \$750, includes texts,  
materials, and meals

**Register:** <http://cecl.nl.edu/training/bas.htm>

For an additional fee, participants may take the BAS Assessor Reliability Training for graduate credit (ECE582C, Early Childhood Program Evaluation).

Certification scholarships available from the FDC Foundation.



### Family Child Care Institute

#### The Business of Family Child Care in Financial Hard Times

Saturday, March 24, 2012

and

Saturday, May 19, 2012



Even in these difficult financial times, your business can thrive. This two-part institute will be filled with valuable information to help you grow and sustain your family child care business.

**Presenter:** Tom Copeland, a leading expert on the business of family child care

**Location: Part I:** March 24, 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.  
McCormick Center, Wheeling, IL

**Part II:** May 19, 8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.  
Leadership Connections Conference  
Westin Hotel, Wheeling, IL

**Fee:** \$125 for one day or \$200 for both days

**Register:** <http://cecl.nl.edu/training/institutes.htm>

For more information, contact Debra Trude-Suter at [debra.trudesuter@nl.edu](mailto:debra.trudesuter@nl.edu) or 847-947-5056.

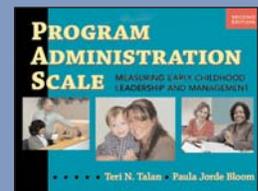
### Getting Ready for the PAS Live webinar for Illinois early childhood administrators

March 13 (1:00 – 3:00 p.m.) AND March 16 (1:00 – 3:00 p.m.)

This training is designed for child care center administrators in Illinois who are interested in applying for Star Level 3 or 4 of Quality Counts, the Illinois Quality Rating System. Registration is limited to ten participants. Attendance at both sessions is required to receive credit.

**Fee:** \$15, includes materials

**Register:** Contact Carmen at [carmen.adamczyk@nl.edu](mailto:carmen.adamczyk@nl.edu) or call 847-947-5133.



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Our cover story was written by Margie Carter, co-author of *The Visionary Director*, and six other books. Margie will present a skill-building clinic, *Pedagogical Leadership Can Transform Your Program*, at the May 2012 Leadership Connections conference, expanding on the ideas in this article. She will also lead the preconference study tour, *From Administrator to Innovator*, with Kristie Norwood, education coordinator for Chicago Commons. This study tour will explore how leaders of early childhood programs can transform their organizations into learning communities for children, families, and teachers.

For more information about Margie's work, visit Harvest Resources Associates, [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com). To learn more about the Leadership Connections conference, go to: <http://cecl.nl.edu/training/lc.htm>



# Putting Best Practice into Practice

## Kelley Giesing, a local Jamie Oliver, shares her own personal Food Revolution

October 11, 2010 was my first day as the executive director of Cheerful Home Child Care and Early Learning Center. I had so much to learn! My first goal was to learn the names of children and staff as quickly as possible.

To accomplish this goal, I spent a lot of time roaming through the building. As I did this, I began to take notice of what the children were eating. This led me to the kitchen where I examined the menus closely. Four days each week for breakfast the children were served sugary cereal, juice, and milk. On Mondays children were served a hot breakfast item. That sounded better until I saw what looked like corn dogs for breakfast. Well, they weren't corn dogs, they were flapsticks...a sausage link on a stick with a pancake-like thing wrapped around it. From freezer to oven to children—oh dear!

Chicken nuggets and french fries were served weekly for lunch as well as a ham patty on a bun. That didn't sound too bad. Then I looked more closely. Ham patties were compacted pork parts formed into a tube and sliced to make a patty shape. In investigating further, I found that mashed potatoes were flakes to which you just add water. Biscuits, sausage, gravy, and tri-tators were staples on the lunch menu. There were no fresh vegetables and very few fresh fruits included.

Name brand, individually wrapped items were served for snacks and in offering enough to meet nutritional requirements of the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the cost was nearly equal to the amount of a lunch reimbursement. Between the expense of these convenience food items and

the fact that we should be serving children healthier foods, it was definitely time for a change.

Informal discussions with parents provided positive feedback. I also met formally with the finance committee and the board of directors to elicit their support. With everyone on board, I then researched the available options.

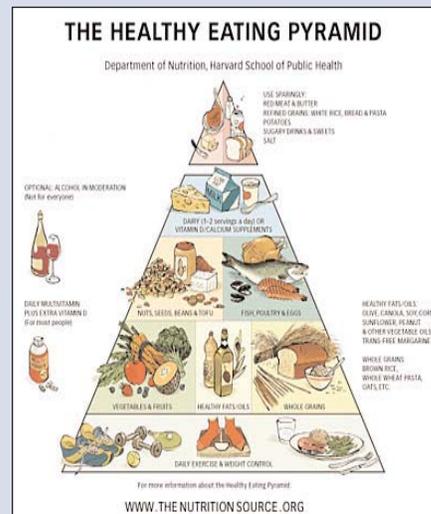
I learned there are many resources available and signed on with the Healthy Schools Campaign and Let's Move! Child Care. Our local food wholesaler had nutritionists and dieticians who met with us at no charge to discuss healthier eating choices. They helped us develop a six-week rotating lunch menu.

Kitchen staff were still a little apprehensive about the changes. They had to re-learn how to use our commercial grade meat slicer, stand mixer, and grill that had not been used for quite a while. Our head cook was still concerned about disappointing the children if she replaced their french fries with choices like steamed fresh broccoli.

In January 2011 we implemented our new menus. It took several months for everyone to adjust. Gone are the just-add-water mashed potatoes and sugary cereal. We now have boneless, skinless chicken tenders on the grill instead of ham patties and we serve seasonal fresh vegetables and fruits, and whole grains regularly.

The staff is doing well with the the new plan and the parents are pleased that their children have healthier food choices each day.

And, guess what? The children didn't complain once!



*Kelley Giesing is the executive director at Cheerful Home, in Quincy, IL. She has over 25 years experience in early childhood education, including working as a family child care provider and Head Start teacher.*

### References

Healthy Schools Campaign  
[www.healthyschoolscampaign.org](http://www.healthyschoolscampaign.org)

Let's Move! Child Care  
[www.letsmove.org](http://www.letsmove.org)

### Link to the PAS

The program improvement steps described in this article reflect best practices as measured by the *Program Administration Scale (PAS)*. Kelley's solicitation of feedback from parents and staff aligns with Item #14 Program Evaluation. Connecting with local community organizations aligns with Item #19 Community Outreach.

# Leadership Connections Conference

May 17–19, 2012

Westin Hotel  
Wheeling, IL



*My colleagues and I were in awe of the many opportunities to network, reflect, celebrate, and develop new insights. To be surrounded with such passion and dedication was both motivating and reassuring.*

*Anne Marie Coughlin, Ontario, Canada*

**Back by popular demand!**

**Preconference Study Tour**

*From Administrator to Innovator*



Tuesday, May 15 – Thursday, May 17, 2012

This unique study tour guided by Margie Carter and Kristie Norwood will explore how leaders of early childhood programs can transform their organizations into learning communities for children, families, and teachers.

**Don't miss out on this highly acclaimed national conference!**

Leadership Connections brings together early childhood administrators, family child care providers, trainers, technical assistance specialists, and policymakers.

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