



# The ECE Competencies Training and Technical Assistance Project

*A Successful Collaborative Professional Development Approach*



## CHILDCARE IS THE ENGINE

The COVID-19 health pandemic has exposed that without childcare, the U.S. economy could have come to a complete halt. Since March 2020, essential workers in the health, food, service, and other industries have had to make difficult decisions about how and who might care for their children as they were expected to continue reporting to work. Without early childhood education (ECE) providers, these decisions would have been more difficult for families across the country and our economic system as a whole.

Yet, even as the need for childcare became more imperative, the country's underlying challenges in the childcare system, such as the lack of living wages for providers, communities without access to affordable care, and the need for greater investments in professional development have become increasingly apparent.

As leaders and advocates across the country know, investments in ECE must include a focus on the need for higher compensation for childcare providers, administrators, advocates and other support staff, racial equity, professionalizing the field, and providing high-quality care. As described by Donoghue, et. al, "When care is consistent, developmentally appropriate, and emotionally supportive, and the environment is healthy and safe, there is a positive effect on children and families."<sup>1</sup>

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS KEY

While the value of high-quality ECE is now being touted at all levels of government, greater investments in professional development for family-based and center-based providers are essential. The California Early Childhood Educator Competencies are an important tool in helping to achieve a universal, high-quality, and equitable ECE system.

In 2011, the Competencies were released to the public. This 224-page titan of knowledge, skills, and dispositions serves as a unifying set of standards and shared knowledge that has the potential to professionalize the ECE workforce.

Yet, despite their potential, the Competencies have not been universally "taught" in an accessible way across California's professional development system. But, innovative and dynamic practices where the Competencies are central to effective professional development exist across the state. One such practice was piloted between 2018-2020 in Los Angeles, CA.



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<sup>1</sup> 2017 policy statement *Quality Early Education and Child Care from Birth to Kindergarten*.



## INNOVATION IS NEEDED

The Childcare Alliance of Los Angeles (CCALA), in partnership with First 5 LA, launched a replicable model designed to align, embed, and expand the use of the ECE Competencies across Los Angeles-based ECE organizations interested in strengthening their organization's training programs. CCALA recognized that in order to transform the workforce, the systems that prepare and support that workforce must also be transformed and made sustainable. This project's twin goals were to impart knowledge and advance a systems-change strategy for the organizations providing professional development opportunities to ECE providers and the broader ECE system in Los Angeles.

### The Early Childhood Educator Competencies Training and Technical Assistance project consisted of four key components:

- 1 Multi-Day ECE Learning Institute:** The four full-day Learning Institutes were focused on helping participants learn about the Competencies and break them down into manageable components that participants could more easily work with and integrate into professional development workshops. A guiding value in the design of the Institute was an unwavering commitment to creating opportunities for participants to interact as peers and to learn from one another.

*"During those first four training days, we were able to acquire different strategies, ways of processing the information. I think that was something that we were able to take back and integrate into our training and use it as guides... for creating our own processes."*

- 2 Quarterly Peer Learning Exchanges:** Following the Learning Institutes participants were convened for a series of six quarterly Peer Learning Exchanges (PLE's). In addition to supporting participant-led peer/group learning, the PLE's also allowed participants to deepen relationships with one another.

*"The structure of the Peer Learning Exchanges gave us a lot of activities and ice breakers, just different things that were very simple that we could take back and even implement in our training. They were a good resource."*

- 3 Customized Technical Assistance and Coaching:** Throughout the project period, facilitators offered Technical Assistance to participating agencies to support them in meeting their project deliverables.

*"If we ever needed something, we were able to reach out. The TA gave us the ability to get a clearer picture of where we needed to go forward."*

- 4 Process Evaluation:** An evaluation of the project was conducted throughout the project period to assess the effectiveness of this approach and to assist participating agencies with the development of their own training evaluation tools.

*"Different resources such as the evaluation tool, competency tool, mapping presentation, and the visual guides were helpful for us to refine our trainings."*

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# Lessons Learned for Embedding the Competencies in Training Programs



ECE leaders, organizations, trainers, funders and elected officials who are passionate about professionalizing the field can enhance and/or support training that embeds the ECE Competencies into their programs. By intentionally integrating the Competencies into training, California can create a shared knowledge base and consistent practice across the ECE field.

Below are 5 lessons learned that can help any organization sustainably expand their use of the competencies and/or scale existing efforts.



## MAKE THE COMPETENCIES COME ALIVE.

**Integrating the content is key.** The competencies cover the breadth and depth of the many skills and the knowledge of competent ECE professionals. Providing participants opportunities to engage in the content in enjoyable and interesting ways makes the organizational structure and overlapping content more approachable. Participants immerse themselves in interactive activities that are designed to enhance how the competencies directly apply to their professional development activities and how they can promote continuing professional growth.



## HELP PARTICIPANTS SEE THE BIG PICTURE.

**The ECE PD System is large, complex, and multi-faceted.** Occasionally training providers are called upon to participate in multiple parts of the system and advocate for positive changes. By intentionally taking the time and space to explain the various components of the PD System, training participants can improve their knowledge of the ECE PD System, find their place in that complexity, and understand how different parts of the system affect one another.



## OFFER MORE THAN STAND-ALONE TRAINING.

**Training alone is not enough!** Research and experience show that learners need additional support to change behavior and integrate new practices. Offering a menu of options that includes technical assistance, coaching, mentorship, and peer-based support will make the ECE Competencies concrete and actionable. As we saw throughout the project—a multi-pronged approach helps participants build a strong knowledge base of the Competencies and approaches for integrating the Competencies into their own training.



## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE.

**Collaboration can lead to systems change.** Providing opportunities for multiple agencies to collaborate to achieve shared goals can transform how organizations work. Building a cross-agency approach allows participants to work together towards system-wide change. Consciously and intentionally creating opportunities to build community is critical to fostering a shared knowledge base and consistent practice. Indeed, long after the training is over, those relationships will be relied upon for mutual support, innovation, and partnership.



## PROVIDE A TOOLKIT FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERTS.

**Beyond providing a copy of the ECE Competencies, every participant needs an additional set of tools to help them intentionally design future trainings that embed the ECE Competencies.** For example, most trainers already skillfully create and use participant PowerPoints. However, a useful tool developed for this project was a trainer facilitation guide template. Other useful tools included Sustainability and Action Planning worksheets, Evaluation/Training Feedback handouts, and experiential facilitation/training exercises and activities.



## KEY EVALUATION RESULTS

# 89%

of participants report that they developed strategies and approaches that support incorporating the ECE Competencies into trainings.



# 93%

of participants report that their new/refined ECE PD trainings are extremely or well aligned with the ECE Competencies.



Participants reported a **SIGNIFICANT INCREASE** on their knowledge and understanding of the different aspects of the ECE Competencies after completing the Learning Institute.

## THE ECE COMPETENCIES PROJECT



is shown to effectively increase a participant's ability to develop/refine ECE trainings and to align them with the ECE Competencies.

# 100%

of participants reported a positive experience with the structure of the project.



## Conclusion

This project has demonstrated that an intentional, collaborative approach to integrating the California ECE Competencies into professional development is possible and can lead towards systemic change. A small investment can have a **BIG IMPACT** not only for participating training organizations but for all those ECE providers participating in professional development. Ultimately, Competency-based training will help professionalize the field and benefit children and families at a larger scale. This project model effectively provides the resources and support needed to increase training organizations capacity to fully integrate the California ECE Competencies into professional development.

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