Organizational Supports Essential to Improving Early Education Settings

The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) and the Ounce of Prevention Fund (the Ounce) are in a research partnership to create the Five Essentials for Early Education (Five Essentials-Early Ed), a survey tool that will measure organizational supports found critical to continuous improvement in early educational settings. The Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys will be administered directly to teachers and parents of children enrolled in school- and center-based early learning programs. These surveys will give voice to the experiences and perspectives of staff and parents that will inform how leaders conceptualize, plan, and generate continuous quality improvement.

What Are the Five Essentials-Early Ed Surveys Measuring?

The Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys draw strongly from CCSR’s existing framework of organizational supports and corresponding surveys that measure five critical components of school organization linked to improvement in K-12 settings. The CCSR-Ounce research team is carefully adapting and piloting the surveys to ensure relevance and fit in early education settings. The Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys will measure the following leadership and organizational conditions in early education settings:

1. Effective Instructional Leaders: The school or program leadership is strategically focused on children’s early achievement and nurtures trust and collective understanding and responsibility for excellence and improvement among staff and parents.
2. Ambitious Instruction: Teachers and staff provide consistently engaging, effective, and rigorous curriculum and instruction.
3. Collaborative Teachers: Teachers are committed to the school or program, build strong relationships with their colleagues, and work together continuously to improve teaching and learning by engaging in collaborative, data-informed cycles of professional development.
4. Supportive Environments: Schools or programs are physically and emotionally safe and engaging environments, wherein staff hold high expectations for children’s social-emotional and academic learning, coupled with nurturing, individualized support for children and families.
5. Involved Families: All staff develop strong relationships with parents and support active parent involvement in children’s learning.

Background and Need
Decades of evidence proves that high-quality, well-implemented early education can positively impact the learning trajectories of vulnerable, high-needs children. Yet, the majority of programs nationwide struggle to implement these quality standards and fail to significantly advance children’s early achievement. In attempts to improve quality, state quality rating and improvement systems, the federal Office of Head Start Monitoring Protocol, and other accountability structures hold program leaders responsible for particular elements of classroom quality—including learning environments and teacher-child interactions. By definition, these accountability measures incentivize program leaders to focus their quality improvement efforts on these particular classroom elements. Despite these efforts, as a field we are underwhelmed by both the pace and impact of these efforts. Instructional supports remain too low to impact learning and vulnerable children continue entering kindergarten too far behind to catch up.
Education research has greatly advanced our understanding about the complexity of teaching and the levers of improvement beyond these classroom-level elements of quality. Longitudinal research conducted by CCSR and documented in the book Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago identified five critical components of school organization related to continuous improvement: leadership; school-community ties; instructional guidance; supportive environment; and professional capacity building. Indeed, elementary schools strong in three or more of these essential supports were 10 times more likely than schools weak in most supports to substantially improve student math and reading achievement. Furthermore, a weakness in just one of these five supports over time significantly undermined the success of improvement efforts.

Research and Development Activities
Research in early education settings likewise indicates that programs more successfully promote children’s learning and development when they have strong leadership and organizational structures in place to support educator’s continuous professional learning and effective practice. The development of the Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys is based strongly on this existing framework and set of surveys used to measure these organizational conditions in K-12 education settings. In 2014, CCSR and the Ounce began developing, testing, and refining the Five Essentials-Early Ed teacher and parent surveys in Chicago and across the country. During 2015-2016, the research team will conduct a study with Chicago school- and community-based preschool programs to validate the surveys. The study will test whether these surveys measure elements of a preschool program that are related to positive classroom and child outcomes. Ultimately, the purpose of the Five Essentials-Early Ed is to provide reliable and valid survey data that will guide early educators to generate continuous quality improvements in teaching and learning by strengthening the organizational conditions in which teachers work every day with children and families.

Contributions of the Five Essentials-Early Ed Surveys
At the early education program level, responses to the Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys will provide leaders and staff with actionable information about where to focus improvement efforts that will strengthen the leadership and organizational conditions essential to continuous improvement of teaching and children’s learning.

For the early education field, the Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys will transform how quality improvement is defined, promoted, improved, and researched. Effective teaching and ongoing school or program improvement is generated by leaders who strategically and continuously cultivate the leadership and organizational conditions that support teachers’ complex work with children and families.

For alignment efforts between early and elementary educators, the Five Essentials-Early Ed surveys will provide information on early education programs that is consistent with what the SEssentials K-12 surveys currently measure in elementary schools. Together, these surveys will provide a common lens, language, and metric to focus conversations on the alignment of essential organizational supports that better generate and improve effective teaching and learning across the educational continuum.

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References:
3 Ibid
5 Bryk et al. (2010)
6 Burchinal et al. (2010).
8 See http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/surveys