New Jersey Early Childhood Director and Administrator COMPETENCIES

Rowan University
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

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Introduction

The *NJ Director & Administrator Competencies* focus on what program directors and administrators, across the field of early childhood, need to know and be able to do in order to demonstrate that they are well-prepared to lead the programs and professionals who care for young children. Administering an early childhood program is a complex job that requires a variety of diverse knowledge and skill sets, including: an understanding of child development, program administration and fiscal management, effective leadership, and job-related experience.

A competency is a "measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully. Competencies specify the 'how' of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully." (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, n.d.).[1]

In the field of early childhood and educator preparation, it is widely accepted that competencies should be based on a combination of three factors:

- **Knowledge of the field**: reflecting foundational knowledge of how young children learn and grow and the critical nature of the experiences and settings in which young children spend their time.

- **Skills and abilities**: or the technical or practical expertise with which one applies their knowledge of the field to their interactions with children, families, and colleagues.

- **Dispositions**: which refers to professional beliefs and attitudes, and the actions demonstrated in interactions with others, including those behaviors and leadership characteristics that set oneself apart from others.

Background

In 2020, a group of stakeholders who worked within the field of early childhood throughout the state and who made up the New Jersey Higher Education Workgroup worked closely with project leadership from the New Jersey Division of Family Development (NJ DFD) to create the first draft of the *NJ Director & Administrator Competencies*. An outside vendor (PCG) partnered with DFD and did extensive research of national models of administrator competencies and other program leadership and administrator trainings including the Whole Leadership Framework from the McCormick Center (see current framework below). This framework aligned with the needs of the NJ workforce and served as a basis for the adopted competencies.

Since this initial draft, progress has been made to professionalize the field. States across the country continue to develop and enhance early childhood workforce competencies, professional development systems, and registries; with standards and competencies seen as a cornerstone of assuring professionalism and promoting the achievements of the ECE workforce (Early Childhood Workforce Index 2024[2], NAEYC's Professional Standards and Competencies 2019/2020[3], and the National Workforce Registry Alliance (NWRA) Landscape Report (2023)[4]. In addition, the Whole Leadership Framework was updated in 2023, as part of the Building Leaders Project, funded by the Foundation for Child Development, to align with current research, needs of the profession and feedback from early childhood leaders participating in the project[5] (Materson, et al., 2023).

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1 https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/assessment-and-selection/competencies/
2 https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/
3 https://www.naeyc.org/resources/professional-standards
4 https://www.registryalliance.org/
5 https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/whole-leadership-a-framework-for-early-childhood-programs-2023/

These initiatives and other related efforts that New Jersey has achieved have been supported by federal grants such as CCDBG and PDG, as well as state government initiatives. In 2025, DFD launched the revised Grow NJ Kids Quality Standards for Early Care and Education Programs, which includes a new *Workforce Development and Supports* standard in program leaders' professional development. The *NJ Career Lattice for Early Care and Education* and *Professional Development (PD) Plan* are two additional advancements to New Jersey's early care and education workforce and are now accessible within the state's online workforce registry; providing clearer pathways for career growth and stronger alignment across statewide systems. Finally, *NJ Leadership and Management Standards* were also created since the initial draft of the Director & Administrator Competencies, addressing the foundational knowledge, skills and dispositions within the Leadership Essential domain in the updated McCormick Whole Leadership Framework.

All of these updates and new supports created an opportunity for the Higher Education Workgroup to revisit the original competencies as part of the state's continuous quality improvement efforts. The group identified items needing updated, based on research, effective practices and the needs and current context in the field. This document is a result of all of these efforts. Competencies will be evaluated and updated on a five year revision cycle to ensure continued applicability n workforce practices, leadership training and coaching and higher education coursework and clinical settings.

MCCORMICK CENTER FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP: WHOLE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS (BIRTH TO AGE EIGHT)

McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. (2023). Whole Leadership: A framework for early childhood programs-2023. *National Louis University.*

Who these competencies are for

The *NJ Director & Administrator Competencies* are for early care and education professionals responsible for leading organizations and teams. They detail what adults, working as childcare and early childhood program administrators, need to know, understand, and be able to do in order to effectively administer high quality early learning experiences and programs for young children. This encompasses directors and administrators in any setting, including center based, family childcare, HeadStart, or school aged/afterschool care settings. The competencies take a leadership focus, identifying the following domains of leadership: pedagogical leadership, administrative leadership, and leadership essentials.

How to use the competencies

The *NJ Director and Administrator Competencies* serve as a standard to measure and validate the knowledge and abilities of directors and administrators to effectively manage high quality early childhood programs. Program leaders can use them to self-assess current knowledge, skills and dispositions across the three Leadership Domains to:

- Identify competencies for specific professional development offerings to support growth and learning (and meet WDS1 Standard within GNJK, if applicable)

- Create SMART goals to include in an individual professional development plan and for informing quality improvement efforts

- Identify areas of strength, personal and professional accomplishments, professional contributions to the field through demonstrated leadership, and active engagement in promoting the profession beyond the scope of the daily operation of a program.

- Share with staff to provide opportunities for both formal and informal feedback that informs goal setting and CQI efforts.

The following supplemental resources, along with the *NJ Director and Administrator Competencies* can be found on the Early Childhood Leadership Institute (ECLI) website at Rowan University by visiting: **www.eclinj.org**. They are designed to promote self-reflection, specifically in standards within the Leadership Essentials Domain, and guide your thoughts in creating actionable steps for improving yourself, your program and achieving your fullest potential.

- *Leadership and Management Self-Assessment*
- *Leadership Reflection Tool*

In addition, information regarding ECLI professional development opportunities currently offered to support key characteristics and skills of high impact leaders can also be found on the website. Some of these opportunities include:

- Online, self-paced modules
- The HEART of Leadership Series
- Certificate of Graduate Studies in Early Childhood Coaching and Technical Assistance

Acknowledgements

New Jersey Director and Administrator Competencies

DOMAIN: Pedagogical Leadership

Ethical Foundation: To ensure that children's needs are the first priority in administrative decision making and demonstrating a commitment to provide a high-quality program based on current knowledge of child development and best practices in early care and education. (Aligned with *NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct, Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators*).

Competency	Indicator
Children's Development and Learning	• Has a strong understanding of child development and learning and the evolving nature of growth and learning for children, adults, and organizations. • Promotes Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) across all program services, policies and procedures, ensuring that children are engaged and enriched by program activities, and the unique learning and social- emotional needs of children are accommodated. • Implements inclusive practices for all children by considering individual needs, cultural and linguistic strengths and ensures appropriate accommodations are provided for all children in collaboration with staff, families, and other professionals. • Assesses child development using appropriate tools, communicates child progress and information to parents/caregivers and makes referrals for further evaluations when challenges are identified. • Stays current in the field by providing opportunities for staff training and development, coaching and supporting staff with use of program curriculum, and adopting evidence-based practices. • Promotes the principles of positive guidance and classroom management and creates a program culture that promotes positive and supportive relationships with all children, making accommodations as needed to support the developmental needs of children, including those with special needs. • Understands that a child develops within the context of their home, family and community environment as well as through their relationships with caregivers and ensures program activities are culturally responsive and respectful of all children and families. • Effectively frames and communicates quality expectations for EC program curricula, teaching and interactions.
Family and Community Engagement	• Views parents and guardians as experts in their child's development and collaborates with families to create a shared vision for child and family goals and outcomes. • Builds and maintains healthy relationships and true partnerships with families by demonstrating respect and support for each family within the diverse structures of families. • Actively engages parents/ families in the program and at home through respectful and responsive communication, and by seeking, valuing and utilizing parent input. • Effectively uses and appropriately manages external communication by obtaining necessary parental and staff consent, considering privacy needs, and using public channels to positively represent and promote the program and the profession. • Offers inclusive opportunities for all families across the program to connect, build community, benefit from peer support and grow their leadership and advocacy through a variety of family engagement methods. • Offers training/ education and parent orientation sessions both at a child's enrollment as well as throughout attendance. • Provides program and parent resources for supporting learning and development. • Understands, promotes, and applies principles of strengthening families/protective factors. • Provides opportunities for families to volunteer, share traditions, culture, skills/trades, etc. as part of the curriculum. • Conducts annual family surveys and exit interviews as parents leave the program, utilizing feedback to strengthen and improve program practices.

DOMAIN: Administrative Leadership

Ethical Foundation: Creates and promotes policies and working conditions that are physically and emotionally safe and foster mutual respect, cooperation, collaboration, competence, well-being and confidentiality, building trust and consistently enables self and staff to speak and act in the best interest of children, families, and the field of early care and education. (Aligned with *NAEYC's* Code of Ethical Conduct, Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators).

Competency	Indicator
Program Planning and Evaluation	• Conducts strategic planning by setting short-term and long-term goals and timelines for completion, identifying program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and reflecting the local needs of the community. • Conducts regular and ongoing staff and program observations to support staff in Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). • Conducts an annual program evaluation that includes an assessment of staff and program policies and procedures using a described methodology that includes collaborative decision making and shared leadership and ownership with families and staff. • Systematically invites, gathers and implements staff, family, and stakeholder feedback, embedding regular feedback loops (TAS, QIS, parent surveys, licensing and incidents reports) to clearly define and follow improvement plans. • Actively uses program evaluation data, staff performance data and observations, and knowledge and understanding of best practices in high quality early childhood care and education to inform quality improvement efforts.
Program Operations	• Sets and maintains high standards by holding self and others accountable to the field's national standards such as NAEYC's—Power to the Profession and Professional Standards. • Clearly communicates to staff and families the rationale and processes for decisions, specifically highlighting requirements from licensure, QRIS, or accreditation (if applicable) to communicate how operations align with various requirements and are reflected in written and implemented through program policies and procedures. • Is able to evaluate ethical and moral dilemmas, taking action after using a framework for reflective decision making that is grounded in professional codes of ethics and national standards such as the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct. • Creates program policies and practices that promote physical, dental, and mental health, as well as healthy nutrition, and safety for all children. • Works with staff and families to deepen their understanding of the rationale and the process of safety and licensing rules, QRIS standards, and program operating procedures. • Effectively manages day to day operations through consistent policy and procedures with plans in place for emergencies (contingency planning), removing obstacles to ensure staff and program success. • Effectively leads and manages through change with a sound decision-making structure in place, setting and following sound risk management practices, conducting Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP) and setting measures for sustainability to ensure long-term success. • Follows local regulations impacting facilities management, establishing facility opening and closing routines, ensuring both interior and exterior spaces of program facilities are accessible and maintained to present a positive program image and promote safety. • Creates a culture in which staff are engaged with and reflect the program's mission, vision and core values and where staff are encouraged to ask for help or support, offering guidance and resources when needed. • Effectively uses coaching and delegation for staff development, providing opportunities for staff growth and for staff to contribute to the overall program operations in a variety of ways. • Develops policies and practices with staff input, as appropriate, maintaining updated job descriptions & performance standards. • Builds recruitment processes, onboarding procedures, and ongoing training and coaching supports for qualified staff who reflect the diversity of the community and families served.

Competency	Indicator
Program Operations (continued)	• Understands legal guidelines for recruitment, staff leave of absence, and addressing performance issues. • Creates sound interviewing practices, including behavioral interviewing, to determine ability to accept feedback and examination of attitudes vs. skills, and selects candidates who represent a match between program and candidate philosophy/beliefs/program mission. • Ensures a high level of employee engagement, beginning with the hiring process by effectively communicating required tasks, roles, and competencies of all staff. • Provides comprehensive orientation, training, evaluation, and reflection opportunities and creates processes and strategies to support and retain staff.
Financial Management, Legal and Business Strategy	• Creates and uses a business plan that is flexible and informed to adapt and respond as the market or program needs change. • Effectively uses various technologies to create more efficient business practices. • Creates and follows a balanced budget reflecting realistic revenue streams and line items, identifying areas of financial risk by monitoring expenditures and making fiscal projections while setting and maintaining appropriate fiscal checks and balances. • Explores methods to optimize fixed expenses, regularly conducting analysis of fiscal data and accessing various sources of revenue such as subsidy, grants, and fundraising. • Creates an equitable compensation structure to attract and retain staff. • Develops competitive fee structures that are designed to support program growth and follows written policies/procedures for collecting late fees/late payments. • Stays current in local regulations and the national landscape of various potential legal risks, including: child custody regulations, reporting requirements related to child abuse and neglect, special education and inclusion laws, confidentiality, parental consent, anti-discrimination, workplace harassment, bullying, insurance liability, and labor laws as they relate to program operation.
Marketing and Public Relations	• Creates and updates marketing materials including print media, ads/flyers; attends local events to promote the program towards specific age groups and demographics. • Performs self-assessment of current external (and internal) image of the program, carefully representing self, program, and the profession in a positive manner, promoting an understanding the field of ECE, as well as its value and importance. • Actively promotes their "brand" by inspiring commitment within the program and utilizing partnerships, relationships and various avenues to market the program, maximizing resources such as no-cost opportunities to market—newspaper, pictures of events, social media, networks, etc.

DOMAIN: Leadership Essentials

Ethical Foundation: Provides effective program leadership that actively pursues the best practices in early care and education and program administration, using program data to plan for and implement ongoing program improvements. Uses position and influence to advocate on behalf of children and families within the communities they serve as well as with policy makers. (Aligned with *NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct, Supplement for Early Childhood Program Administrators*. Competencies within the Leadership Essential domain are also those within the *New Jersey's Leadership and Management Standards* for NJ Early Childhood Professionals and support those leading organizations and teams and have administrative responsibilities. To learn more about the knowledge associated with each competency, refer to the *Technical Assistance Provider Standards*, with the Leadership and Management standards building off of these standards and embedded within each of the four areas.)

Competency	Indicator
Supervisory Approaches	• Builds strong relationships with staff by using trust-based principles—creating rapport, shared goals, and identifying strengths and individualized supports to encourage growth: Fosters an internal climate where there is trust and respect between staff AND between staff and parents. Understands the power dynamics between the program and the parent and focuses on building reciprocity and partnership in parent-program relationships. • Models active listening and uses different communication strategies to meet staff needs: Develops and utilizes a communication plan, including timely and relevant delivery of information about the program and children to families. • Shows respect for staff by recognizing their roles, experiences, and values in both personal and professional contexts: Advocates for culturally responsive and anti-bias practices with staff and families. Advocates for racial, socio-economic equity & promotes social justice for the local children, families and communities served. • Uses supervisory role to support strong relationships and a positive workplace culture where staff can grow and learn: Rewards innovation and high performance, celebrating staff achievements and providing an opportunity for staff to see themselves as part of the program through the contributions they make. • Chooses strategies and resources that match staff's learning style, culture, language, and preferences to provide supports that fit their needs and build on their strengths: Understands the diverse needs of program staff and leads and supports various personalities, dispositions, and technology experiences, individual career stages, diverse racial and cultural characteristics, and learning styles. • Applies coaching, mentoring and management strategies thoughtfully to meet staff and supervisory needs: Creates formal and informal methods for both staff evaluation and staff support, including coaching practices, peer mentors and models. Sets regular performance check-ins and observations with staff and offers substantial feedback for more impactful practices, working with staff to set professional goals and assess staff development needs. • Uses mentoring strategies that promote individual growth and empower staff. • Uses coaching strategies to support individual and team growth through collaborative plans and progress checks: Creates a safe culture for growth and learning, delivering job-embedded coaching with systematic and ongoing feedback, connecting employee's practices to desired competencies and performance measures. • Applies management strategies to oversee and monitor administrative tasks and resources needed to accomplish job responsibilities: Engages with local and state communities and leaders to build support for the program and inform, shape, and implement childcare and family supportive services policies. • Uses conflict resolution strategies to support a positive workplace culture, including aligning communication style with intent, active listening, and collaborating with staff to find solutions: Understands and is responsive to group dynamics and individual communication styles and facilitates individual and group dynamics for conflict resolution. • Uses strategies that encourage social learning and create a safe environment for staff to learn and grow individually and as a team: Conducts regularly scheduled staff meetings with staff contributing to the agenda and discussion.

Competency	Indicator
Process within Supervision	• Effectively applies administrative, clinical, and reflective supervision to deliver thoughtful, intentional, and goal-focused support: Demonstrates self-awareness, reflection and empathy when making decisions or setting policy, ensuring fair and equitable program policies are in place. • Communicates expected results, provides guidelines and resources, and agrees on a process for accountability and performance review: Demonstrates excellent written and verbal communication skills. Understands day to day roles/responsibilities of program staff and ensures all program policies and job descriptions are updated and aligned with staff roles and responsibilities. • Provides reflective supervision that uses core elements, promotes relationship-based practices, and includes professional development plans to help staff achieve their goals. Designs and follows individualized professional learning plans for staff, providing ongoing training, coaching and assessment to ensure staff are implementing best practices. • Partners with staff to encourage insight, risk-taking, and activities that promote growth in skills, perspectives, and knowledge: Encourages staff to take risks, thinking outside the box and openly embracing new practices or strategies. • Connects staff to appropriate resources and organizational supports as needed: Provides staff with appropriate planning time and ensures program staff have access to sufficient, developmentally appropriate learning materials.
Professionalism	• Consistently follows professional, ethical, and legal standards, including maintaining staff confidentiality: Evaluates ethical and moral dilemmas, taking action after reflection on a sound framework for decision making, grounded in a professional code of ethics and utilizing national standards such as the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct. Sets and maintains professional boundaries, standards of conduct, high standards of quality and ethical behavior for self, staff, and the profession. • Applies appropriate theories and resources to help staff adapt to continuous improvement, fosters collaboration and innovation within the team and organization, and connects staff to additional resources as needed. • Builds positive relationships with supervisors, TA Specialists, and colleagues through open communication and a strengths-based approach. • Manages supervisory tasks—such as processes, protocols, reporting, and timelines—while inspiring staff to connect with purpose and contribute individually and collectively: Implements a Parent Handbook and a Staff Program Policies and Procedures Handbook that outlines policies that are fair, accessible, and equitable to all staff. • Recognizes personal strengths and areas for growth as a supervisor, stays current with best practices, and sets professional development goals to support continuous improvement: Demonstrates personal willingness for continuous growth and learning and encourages continual staff development. • Continuously improves skills and performance through professional learning, self-reflection, journaling, participating in communities of practice, coaching, attending or presenting at conferences, joining professional organizations, and staying current with research and literature. • Applies research and trends in leadership, adult learning, coaching, mentoring, team building, positive work culture, and capacity building to supervisory practices: Understands the parallel process and how employee and staff relations directly impact staff and child/ staff and family relationships. • Promotes reflective practice by modeling it, creating opportunities for reflection, and sharing outcomes: Embeds supportive practices into staff conversations, including reflective practice, contributing to staff performance and improved employee job satisfaction. Demonstrates vulnerability by taking accountability for outcomes of the program, sharing areas for growth and professional goals for themselves and models this reflection for others. Implements relationship-based and reflective practices with staff and encourages staff to do the same in their interactions with each other, children and families. • Practices leadership as stewardship by prioritizing service over self-interest, building relationships, and creating an environment that empowers and develops people: Stays positive amidst setbacks and builds a positive culture and program identity for their organization defining how the program should look, feel and operate. Delivers focused and meaningful recognition to staff, including delivering non-monetary incentives for staff. • Builds partnerships and collaborations to strengthen teams by sharing knowledge, skills, ideas, research, and best practices. • Promotes staff well-being by supporting self-care, building healthy relationships, and creating an environment that supports their total well-being and values their unique skills and strengths.

Competency	Indicator
Systems Knowledge	• Connects staff with key stakeholders and current resources within early childhood systems to meet their needs and interests: Engages with the local community to promote awareness of the value of high quality ECE, the importance of a well-equipped workforce, and the economic impact that a high-quality early childhood program has on a community's long-term social and economic outcomes. • Analyzes data from observations, notes, reports, and other sources, and shares results confidentially with leadership and stakeholders as appropriate. • Applies data from reliable and valid assessments and other sources to inform change at team, organizational, and system levels: Conducts outreach to local businesses/cross-sector partners at least annually, building relationships and engaging with stakeholders (local community, parents, state/ public school partners), gathering stakeholder feedback for program planning and improvement and adapting program offerings to meet the unique needs of the community served.