

How Do We Define Director Competence?

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Anyone who has chased a director's shadow for even a brief time knows that being an effective administrator means wearing many hats — from budget analyst to nutritionist to fundraiser. The list is long and varied. Defining competence as it relates to the multiplicity of roles the director assumes each day is a thorny task. It is thorny because as a field we have not defined precisely what we mean by the terms *competence*, *competent*, and *competency*. These terms are overused and misused in our well-intentioned attempts to improve educational practice.

Many educators embrace a definition of competence similar to the one put forth by Fenichel and Eggbeer (1990). They believe that competence is "the ability to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons." Fenichel and Eggbeer go on to say, "Competence involves the capacity to analyze a situation, consider alternative approaches . . . evaluate the outcome, and articulate the rationale for each step of the process" (p. 13). Though appealing, the problem with such definitions is that they rest on qualitative judgments that are value-laden. *The*

right thing or *the right reasons* are highly subjective terms open to multiple interpretations. How does one begin to measure competence using this kind of yardstick?

Competence is clearly context-specific. The repertoire of competencies needed to effectively carry out the director's role varies by the age and background of the children enrolled, the range of services provided, the philosophical orientation of the program, and the legal sponsorship of the center. The size

of the program, as well, certainly affects the scope and complexity of the administrative role. Directors of small programs may have few administrative tasks and serve as classroom teacher for part of the day whereas directors of large programs may have multiple sites, multiple funding sources, and a large diverse staff to coordinate. Thus, directing different types of programs requires varying levels of administrative sophistication.

Another problem with current discussions of director competence is that they tend to frame the issue in dichotomous terms. But competency isn't like the chicken pox — either you have it or you don't. Rather, proficiency of different competencies needs to be viewed on a continuum. A director may be highly proficient in one competency but only moderately so in another.

A conceptualization of competence needs to include three components:

- **Knowledge competency** — includes knowledge in such areas as group

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dynamics, organizational theories, child development, teaching strategies, and family systems

- **Skill competency** — includes the technical, human, and conceptual skills needed to perform different tasks (e.g., develop a budget, motivate staff, solve problems)
- **Attitude competency** — includes beliefs, values, dispositions, and emotional responses that support optimum performance

The Illinois Model

In developing a director credential in Illinois, we have wrestled with the issue of how to best measure administrative competence. We've come up with a blended approach where an individual documents through course work and practice a command of knowledge and skill as well as demonstrated behaviors. The model is unique in that it also rewards different levels of director competence as individuals build expertise in their administrative role.

— Competency Components —

The Illinois Director Credential is earned through validation of accomplishments in five competency components.

General education. An individual's general level of education has been shown to be a strong predictor for high quality educational practices both in teaching and in administration. The Illinois model specifies three levels of general education — the achievement of an associate's degree, baccalaureate degree, or master's degree.

Early childhood/school-age knowledge and skills. In order to be an effective administrator, directors need a strong foundation in the fundamentals of child

development and early childhood and school-age care and education. The Illinois Director Credential specifies ten early childhood/school-age knowledge and skill competencies with a different number of points required at each level of the credential. One point is equal to one semester hour of college credit. Level 3 of the Credential requires 30 points.

Management knowledge and skills. Abundant research demonstrates that effective administration of a center-based early childhood program necessitates a strong understanding of basic business and management knowledge. The Illinois Director Credential specifies ten management knowledge and skill competencies with a different number of points required at each level. Level 3 of the Credential requires 21 points. Table 1 delineates the ten management knowledge and skill competencies for this component.

Experience. Experience on the job provides a basis for evaluating effective and ineffective practices. The Illinois Director Credential recognizes that the work site can serve as a powerful laboratory for learning. The Credential specifies differential levels of experience working directly with children as well as in program administration.

Professional contributions. The Illinois Director Credential is premised on the belief that an effective administrator demonstrates leadership through active engagement in professional endeavors beyond the scope of the daily management of a center. Applicants for the Credential must provide evidence of contributions to the profession in six areas:

- Service in a leadership role in a professional organization
- Presentations/training

- Advocacy
- Program improvement
- Writing and publication
- Research and grants writing

Moving Forward

There is mounting consensus that the administration of child care centers needs to be recognized as a specialized area of expertise in early childhood education separate from teaching. This will only come about, though, by a concerted effort within the field to expand the availability and access to specialized training, increase the number of director resource networks, and promote greater recognition and rewards for the role. Continuing the discussion about how we define director competence and clarifying specific and measurable competencies as they relate to a director credential is an important step in achieving that goal.

References

Fenichel, E. S., & Eggbeer, L. (1990). *Preparing practitioners to work with infants, toddlers, and their families: Issues and recommendations for educators and trainers*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Clinical Infant Programs.

Table 1 – Management Knowledge and Skill Areas

The core competencies needed for effective early childhood/school-age program administration fall into ten knowledge and skill areas. These are not discrete categories; there is conceptual as well as practical overlap. All are based on the knowledge base and ethical standards of the early childhood field. Examples of applied tasks follow a description of each competency:

– PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SELF-AWARENESS –

Knowledge and application of adult and career development, personality typologies, dispositions, and learning styles. Knowledge of one's own beliefs, values, and philosophical stance. The ability to evaluate ethical and moral dilemmas based on a professional code of ethics. The ability to be a reflective practitioner and apply a repertoire of techniques to improve the level of personal fulfillment and professional job satisfaction.

- Developing personal goals to reduce stress and avoid burnout
- Conceptualizing and articulating a philosophy of management
- Seeking out professional resources to improve leadership effectiveness
- Developing strategies to achieve a balance between personal and professional obligations

– LEGAL AND FISCAL MANAGEMENT –

Knowledge and application of the advantages and disadvantages of different legal structures. Knowledge of different codes and regulations — Department of Children and Family Services Licensing Standards, building, zoning, fire, occupational, safety, health, sanitation, and Americans with Disabilities Act — as they relate to the delivery of early childhood/school-age program services. Knowledge of child custody, child abuse, special education, confidentiality, anti-discrimination, insurance liability, contract, and labor laws pertaining to program management. Knowledge of different federal, state, and local revenue sources. Knowledge of bookkeeping methods and accounting terminology. Skill in budgeting, cash flow management, grants writing, and fundraising.

- Developing an annual budget that reflects program goals and objectives
- Preparing a financial report
- Developing a salary scale that reflects education, experience, and level of performance
- Developing short- and long-range fundraising goals that support a program's mission
- Writing a grant proposal
- Evaluating the cost effectiveness and appropriateness of different fundraising options

– STAFF MANAGEMENT AND HUMAN RELATIONS –

Knowledge and application of group dynamics, communication styles, and techniques for conflict resolution. Knowledge of different supervisory and group facilitation styles. The ability to relate to staff and board members of diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. The ability to hire, supervise, and motivate staff to high levels of performance. Skill in consensus building, team development, and staff performance appraisal.

- Interviewing and hiring a new teacher
- Implementing an orientation program for new personnel
- Developing a staffing plan to reflect enrollment patterns
- Conducting a staff meeting that promotes active involvement of staff
- Mentoring, supervising, and evaluating staff

- Implementing an individualized model of staff development
- Implementing appropriate supervision strategies based on adult development and learning styles

– EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING –

Knowledge and application of different curriculum models, standards for high quality programming, and child assessment practices. The ability to develop and implement a program to meet the needs of young children at different ages and developmental levels (infant/toddler, preschool, school-age). Knowledge of administrative practices that promote the inclusion of children with special needs.

- Planning and implementing a child-centered curriculum
- Implementing grouping practices that promote continuity and stability
- Implementing assessment procedures that include a developmental profile of each child
- Designing instructional practices to meet the mandate for full inclusion
- Implementing an anti-bias curriculum

– PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND FACILITIES MANAGEMENT –

Knowledge and application of policies and procedures that meet state/local regulations and professional standards pertaining to the health and safety of young children. Knowledge of nutritional and health requirements for food service. The ability to design and plan the effective use of space based on principles of environmental psychology and child development. Knowledge of playground safety design and practice.

- Designing, arranging, and equipping space to meet children’s needs at different ages
- Designing and arranging space to meet staff’s and parents’ needs
- Developing a system to maintain accurate student and family records
- Developing an inventory control system
- Implementing a nutritious food service plan
- Implementing emergency and risk management procedures

– FAMILY SUPPORT –

Knowledge and application of family systems and different parenting styles. Knowledge of community resources to support family wellness. The ability to implement program practices that support families of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The ability to support parents as valued partners in the educational process.

- Conducting a family friendly audit of program practices
- Planning educational experiences that meet the needs of diverse families
- Maintaining an active system of parent-school relations
- Implementing a program of parent involvement
- Connecting parents to community resources

– MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS –

Knowledge of the fundamentals of effective marketing, public relations, and community outreach. The ability to evaluate the cost benefit of different marketing and promotional strategies. The ability to communicate the program’s philosophy and promote a positive public image to parents, business leaders, public officials, and prospective funders. The ability to promote linkages with local schools. Skill in developing a business plan and effective promotional literature, handbooks, newsletters, and press releases.

- Conducting an assessment to determine community needs
- Developing a short- and long-range marketing/business plan to ensure full enrollment
- Designing promotional literature
- Giving a media interview
- Writing a press release about a newsworthy event

– LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY –

Knowledge of organizational theory and leadership styles as they relate to early childhood/school-age work environments. Knowledge of the legislative process, social issues, and public policy affecting young children and their families. The ability to articulate a vision, clarify and affirm values, and create a culture built on norms of continuous improvement and ethical conduct. The ability to evaluate program effectiveness. The ability to define organizational problems, gather data to generate alternative solutions, and effectively apply analytical skills in its solution. The ability to advocate on behalf of young children, their families, and the profession.

- Guiding the board and staff in developing the center’s philosophy and mission statement
- Conducting organizational climate assessment to improve the quality of work life for staff
- Evaluating center practices and implementing a program improvement plan
- Pursuing center accreditation
- Mobilizing others to advocate for better child and family services
- Initiating community collaborations for more efficient and cost effective service delivery

– ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION –

Knowledge of the mechanics of writing including organizing ideas, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The ability to use written communication to effectively express one’s thoughts. Knowledge of oral communication techniques including establishing rapport, preparing the environment, active listening, and voice control. The ability to communicate ideas effectively in a formal presentation.

- Writing informal and formal business correspondence
- Making a formal presentation at a board meeting or community forum
- Presenting a workshop at a professional conference

– TECHNOLOGY –

Knowledge of basic computer hardware and software applications. The ability to use the computer for child care administrative functions.

- Developing criteria for choosing hardware, software, and peripherals
- Composing and editing a memo on the computer
- Using graphics software to design and edit a newsletter or brochure
- Using a spreadsheet to construct a budget or summarize data
- Communicating by electronic mail
- Accessing early childhood resources via the Internet
- Linking to advocacy and professional development resources