

Importance of Strong Site Leadership in Head Start

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Welcome to this special vlog, dedicated to site leadership. We are going to talk today about the value of having local leadership at the site level for Head Start and Early Head Start. I always start my vlogs with a love note, and I'm going to start this one with the love notes, a little different than I typically do, because it's not really related to Head Start.

I'm going to send a love note to Mr. Apt. Mr. Apt was the principal at my own kid's school when they were in elementary school, and at the time, I knew I loved the school. I knew that he was a great leader. I could — I could sense how much he loved my kids, and I just — it was just so much fun to be part of that community, but it wasn't until I stepped into a position as an administrator that I had appreciation for what he was really doing through his solid leadership there in the building.

He was creating an environment where teachers, good teachers, really effective teachers wanted to stay, and he had very little turnover. He hired the best people and he kept them and it was because the school ran so well and that his leadership was so inspiring. And what that did for me as a parent is it — it gave me that sense of stability. I couldn't see it that way at the time, but in hindsight, that's definitely what was happening.

So, as we talk about site leadership, I'm kind of pulling both from my experience as an educator, but also my experience as a parent. And then, also my experience around traveling around the country to visit Head Start programs initially, and really noticing, in some programs, I'd see really strong local leadership, but as a consistency, it wasn't consistent. And in — in another programs, I would see like shared leadership where one person was in charge of one thing and someone else was in charge of something else, and sometimes, the person who was called the director, or the site leader, or the manager, I didn't feel really was given the authority or the responsibility to carry out the kind of leadership that I'm going to talk about today.

So, I embarked on a new adventure with my friends here at Central Office, who were always so excited to support a new idea. And I said, let's dig into site leadership. Let's figure out, first of all, can we come up with a name for it? Nobody seemed to have the same name, I think principal in a school; and two, can we come up with a definition for that word? What does it mean? What's the responsibility?

And then finally, can we come up with the professional development to back up saying that we think this is important? Because you can't just give someone a title and maybe give them a little more money, and then think somehow they're going to know how to do a new job. There has to be professional development and specific skill training that goes along with it. So, I'm going to cover all of that today, and I hope it's going to support a lot of the work that we're doing outside of this vlog related to site leadership.

First, let's talk about the name. OK. I wanted there to be a title that I could use. I was having such a hard time with the different words people were using to describe the person that they thought was the leader in the building. Sometimes, I thought it matched, sometimes I wasn't so

sure. And so, we came together and we really embarked on that. We had that goal; we're going to come up with a name and we didn't, sorry.

Here's the thing: What I learned through that process was that if this is such a local thing to people and the word director, manager, leader, has different definitions, and even in different states based on some of the words the states use. So, we decided to step back from that and not come up with some words so people felt like they had to make a big change and it felt disruptive.

And instead, at Central Office in OHS, we are going to call the person who leads a building similar to a principal in an elementary school, the site leader. So, that for the purposes of our training of our moving forward on this, the word "site leader" is what represents that leadership. If you care to change that at the local level, it's fine. If you choose not to, it's fine. I think we can make this work.

The goal here really is to create an expectation of site leadership, to define it, and to support it so that we feel like every single location that has Head Start classrooms has somebody in it that owns that space, is responsible for the outcomes, and we feel like nationally, we have this leadership cohort that if we want to make a change or we need to put a focus on something, we can do that really easily just by flipping that local leadership lever. So, I'm super excited about this.

So, let's talk. We've been talked about name, we're kind of over that. Site leader for this purpose. Let's talk about roles and responsibilities and how do we define what this person does? It's so many things. So, I'm going to go through some of the biggies. Primarily, we're talking about somebody who, as I said before, feels like they own the building. They have a vision for that space, for that program, for that Head Start location, for that site; and that vision that they have is clear. It's defined. It's something that has buy-in from the whole staff and they keep that vision in everybody's sight line. So, that as things happen throughout the day and throughout the week that are easily — easily can be distractors, people are still staying in that lane and keeping an eye on the vision.

They're present, and when I say that, I mean that literally they are present in the building. This isn't someone who weaves in and out one day a week, or maybe two days a week. It isn't someone who drops in; it's really someone who again, owns the space, and so if you're going to own the space, you need to be present, and present isn't just being in the building. It's being in the mix of what's happening, being in classrooms, being on playgrounds, being in the kitchen sometimes, being in the front office, being present throughout that space so that — that again, that ownership comes back to there's just no question who really feels the responsibility for the space.

They understand operations. Certainly, they know how to manage systems and they — they can set goals and — and they know what good instruction looks like, and they know what good nutrition looks like, and they know what good family service looks like. But overall, what they really are able to do is create a culture that aligns with all of those other things that need to happen. Bringing everybody together around a single vision and mission that — that regardless of what your job is; if your job is to — to empty the trash can, or your job is — is to teach kiddos

literacy, you're still doing it with that same culture in mind. And when you can do that, it really empowers the whole building to move in the same direction and kids win every time in that scenario.

I would hope... We won't tell you what you're, you know, culture should be in your building, but I would hope at Head Start it's going to be something around respect and kindness; a growth mindset; a willingness to make mistakes and learn; a comfortable, safe feeling, joy, curiosity — all of those things that we know make early learning spaces so, so fertile for learning and growth and opportunity. And frankly, it's not just for the kids. It's so that your staff feel like they're in that kind of space where they can make mistakes and they can grow and they feel safe and they feel inspired and appreciated. It's for everyone in that space.

They're going to oversee and evaluate staff. This is important. This was the one thing I heard very inconsistently, and when I said, "Well, I need the site leader to evaluate staff." Someone said, "Well, sometimes we have ed manager to come in and do that." OK. They don't have to be the only one who evaluate staff, but they definitely need to be part of the evaluation process. And it's possible that there'll be a building that's so big that that one site leader can't actually get to everybody. That's OK, too, that part can be shared, but they need to be seen as an evaluator, and I say that not because that makes them threatening or they somehow has something to hold over someone, it's because it makes them accountable. It gives them the responsibility and that will change the way folks see the messaging that comes from that person.

They're going to support the mission and vision of the larger institution. So, if you're a Head Start site, that's part of a larger organization, that organization has a mission and vision, and, of course, everything should align. And the organization hopefully is going to support this process. That's the idea. I kind of think of it like a school system, so the Central Office is this bigger organization, but each individual school might have their own look and feel. They like to kind of feel like they have their own identity, but it's not going to stray away from the vision and the mission of the larger institution.

They're going to be a champion for staff, give regular feedback, and that's informal feedback. It could be formal feedback. It's positive kudos, and it's also, you know, "I was in your room today, and can we sit down and talk about why you think that particular period of time gets so chaotic; let's talk about it;" and to be a real support for how you can help teachers grow, all staff grow, and everything matters — everything matters. And — and when — when they feel like that's your space as a site leader, you get the opportunity to really influence all of that.

They're going to know how to build a team that ultimately meets the goals that are set for the organization, and that's going to require collaboration, both internal collaboration between teachers, between staff; it's external collaboration with the local school system, with a local community based organizations, with government, with your overarching — your overarching organization. So, that ability to bring people together and have those conversations and collaborate, communicate, create all of those things really becomes important.

And — and they need to be somebody who can take — who can be compliant, but that's the floor. So, they aren't afraid of compliance, but they aren't going to let compliance define their

leadership or their tone or the culture in their building. So, you're going to take compliance, you're going to lay it on the floor. You're going to meet all those compliance regulations that the state requires, that we require, that maybe even the building you're in requires, whatever, there are rules for everything. So, you're going to meet those rules, and then up from there, it's building the structure up and that's where the real creativity happens. That's where the magic happens. So, that's, you know, in a nutshell what this is. It's complex, but it's also super fun, and once we can sort of mobilize this, I think we're going to see some magic happen.

At that Institute, we're going to cover a number of different things. The first is going to be kind of a leadership challenge where folks are going to learn five leadership practices, very specific skills. That's the one thing about leadership that can sometimes be a misnomer. It certainly is about being willing to get out in front of people and to take risks and do all of that. But leadership looks different depending on the person. It doesn't have to look a certain way. It doesn't have to be loud. It doesn't have to be the — the — the person who attracts all the attention.

There is skills that really go behind good leadership and they can be put on top of all kinds of personality styles and be very, very effective. So, it's learning those skills that we plan to do in that leadership challenge. It's communication, definitely communication. We'll talk about written communication, oral communication, visual communication. How you talk to people, how you hold your body, what words come out of your mouth, and how all of those things are so important.

Another piece of this Institute is going to be retaining quality staff, and that kind of goes back to what I was talking about in the beginning. The best outcome of strong leadership isn't the person leading, the best outcome of strong leadership are all of those people who are willing to buy in and do the hard work for that vision based on the leader's charge. And that's really where you get staff retention.

So, that's a big, big, important thing here, at Head Start; I hear it all the time about turnover being really high, and we want to focus on how much money people are making and while that's really important, that is not really the sticking point behind attracting and retaining really solid people. It's at least not the only one.

And then finally, we're going to do an implementation plan so folks can go back with action and really feel like they learned something that's going to change the way they — they — they work. We hope we'll influence the actual organizations, and what we're hoping is if one person comes from an organization from one site, that they can take this information back, do some, "train the trainer" kind of things, and spread that around so that you — so that we really change the face of what these buildings look like.

When I walk into a Head Start and I meet a site leader that I know fits this definition, that really, I mean, the best parallel is an elementary school principal. It's so exciting to me because I know that they — they've just got it. They know every nook and cranny of the building. People come in and out, and you can see how they respect and revere this person and are willing to work hard to meet that mission and vision that the organization is standing behind.

We're going to throw out a hashtag #HSSiteLeaders, and we want you to share your stories on Twitter, pictures of your site leaders, pictures of your training, any kind of information you find that you think would be valuable. Let's really connect online around this because that's a great way to spread the word and to really influence other people.

And what I'm hoping is, you know, over the next year, we really change the face of what — of what a Head Start site looks like, and once we know we have site leaders in just about all of our locations, it's a game changer for us.

Now, I do want — do want to give you one caveat: I know that Head Starts look different in every community, or at least fairly different. They come in all shapes and sizes. They come in all different needs. We've got migrant programs that follow children, and — and rural programs that struggle with being — being small and resources are tight. I know that budgets are tight. I know all of these things are true.

So, when I — when we push this out, when I share with you what the definition is, when we do the Site Leader Institute, when we share more resources, is that a cookie cutter that you need to fit exactly that mold? No, it's not. These are tenets. These are things that are at the core of good leadership and then you take them and you apply them to your — to your organization. What is that going to look like? It might look a little different. I said earlier, being present matters, being in the building, not just every — not just twice a week, not just once a week; but if you have a program that has one classroom here, and one classroom here, you might share the leader between those two spaces. The key is, is that he or she feels like they own both, and the people who work there and maybe together, they come up with a shared vision so that it isn't siloed.

So, there are ways of making this happen, and I have full confidence that given the support, the information, the framework, you all are good enough critical thinkers and good enough creative thinkers to say, "OK, I can take these pieces and make them work pretty much spot on; these two we're going to have to tweak a little because this doesn't quite work with my organization." That's fine. This is not about meeting some — some template and there's no — there's no test at the end; this is really just about providing you with opportunity to grow your program in a really, really special way.

So, I always end my vlog with, "In Case You Didn't Know" and so what I thought I would use today: In case you didn't know, principals lead schools all over the country. There are 14,000 school systems in this country, many, many, many, many schools. And there's a common expectation from building principal, that they have the responsibility for the building, that they understand good instruction, that they're going to be responsible for discipline and classroom management and — and parent outreach.

But at the same time, schools look very different all over the country. We've got huge urban school systems. We've got suburban school systems with huge schools of 4,000 — 4,000 kids in one high school, not unusual at all in — in suburban school systems. We've got rural schools that are very small and that, and so they had the same differential — differences as Head Start does across the country. So, you've got that tenet.

But there are principals who drive the bus. There are principals who coach the football team. There are principals who — who direct the play. I did that when I was a principal. We didn't have a theater teacher, but we had kids who wanted to do a play, and I love theater, so I directed a play.

So, the idea is that – that this isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, and you can see this example in public schools, it's the same way. So, I don't want you to feel overwhelmed by this as if we're trying to fit something that doesn't quite fit Head Start. Be open to the learning, let yourself learn, and then figure out how it's going to fit your organization. I have full confidence that you guys are going to just... This is going to be fantastic, and I can't wait to see the outcome.

And just remember: Head Start is access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.