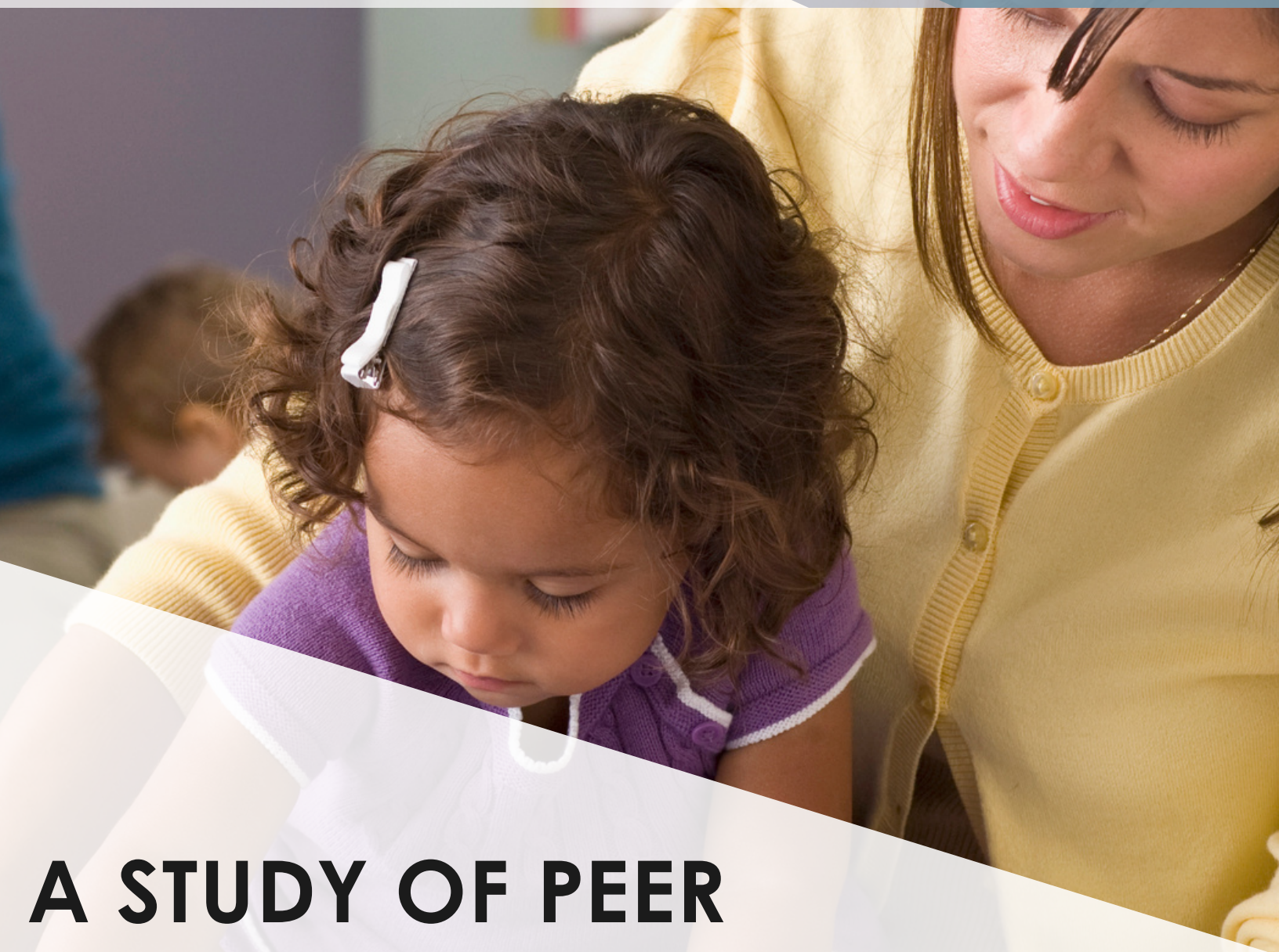

A STUDY OF PEER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CCDF GRANTEES

FINAL REPORT

NORC at the University of Chicago

Office of Child Care

OPRE

A Study of Peer Learning Opportunities for CCDF Grantees: Final Report

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In addition, we would like to thank the lead agency staff and their state collaborators for sharing their experiences with us.

Overview

Introduction

To support the skill- and capacity-building efforts of states, territories, and tribes, the Office of Child Care (OCC) and the Office of Head Start (OHS) fund nine National Centers to develop high-quality, research-based materials and to deliver training and technical assistance to their grantees. As is common in the field, these National Centers use peer learning opportunities as a technical assistance (TA) strategy. Peer learning engages groups of individuals in the exchange of knowledge and experience with each other with the potential to diffuse this learning within their organizations to ensure an impact at scale. Peer learning opportunities for Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) grantees bring together state, territory, and tribal employees who drive practice changes and policy reforms in child care.

Purpose

To date, there has been no systematic examination in the research literature on the use of peer learning as a technical assistance strategy in the field of early care and education. Little is known about what contributes to its effectiveness. This report summarizes findings from an environmental scan of 24 peer learning opportunities and in-depth case studies of four of these opportunities offered to CCDF grantees between January 2015 and December 2018. The study aimed to address the overarching research question: *What can we learn about the effectiveness of peer learning opportunities by looking across different models?*

Key Findings and Highlights

- Participants in the peer learning opportunities reported that they increased their knowledge in the respective topic areas addressed by the peer learning opportunities and disseminated this newly acquired knowledge within their jurisdiction.
- Findings suggest that peer learning is driven by effective engagement strategies, frequent participant feedback to inform ongoing tailoring of the peer learning opportunity, and evaluation to guide continuous development and quality improvement.
- Participants in the peer learning opportunities that required team participation reported that having the right mix of colleagues on a state or territory team, including members representing diverse roles, organizations, and regions within the state or territory, was essential and highlighted the importance of including a representative from the CCDF lead agency.
- However, the findings suggest that a defining challenge to the peer learning process was the lack of a clearly formulated theory of change to articulate the facilitators' vision of how the peer learning opportunity would lead to changes in practice, policy, and systems. By not defining this process, it may have been difficult for facilitators to articulate the outcomes they expected and whether participants had met the goals of the peer learning opportunity.

- While there was an expectation from facilitators that peers from different states and territories engage with each other and build relationships, participants reported a lack of concrete opportunities to do so, both during and outside of the peer learning opportunity.
- Additionally, findings suggest that CCDF lead agency staff's availability and turnover, scheduling and time constraints posed difficulties to the peer learning process, as did facilitator's experience with facilitating adult learning groups, peers' varying knowledge and experience levels, and a lack of focus on specific state contexts.
- Reported challenges to the implementation of what was learned included a lack of lead agency representation as part of a state or territory team or explicit CCDF lead agency support of the work, legislative contexts (for example, lacking the authority to pursue implementation without legislature approval), costs, and conflicting policies.
- Participants also identified state readiness or capacity for change as a significant challenge to implementation.

As a result, we developed a toolkit comprised of one tool to help facilitators plan and develop theories of change for their peer learning opportunities and a separate tool to help potential participants find an opportunity that best matches their needs and skills.

Glossary of Terms

Administration for Children and Families – The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and promotes the economic and social well-being of children, families, individuals and communities with leadership and resources for compassionate, effective delivery of human services.

Center staff – Includes peer learning facilitators and organizers/planners (often the same person/s) from the National Centers.

Child Care and Development Fund – The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a federal and state partnership program authorized under the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) that provides state, territory, and tribal governments with funds to support children and their families with paying for child care that will fit their needs and that will prepare children to succeed in school.

Child Care and Development Block Grant Act – The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) provides federal funding to states, territories, and tribes for child care subsidies for low-income working families with children under age 13. It also funds quality improvement, consumer education and engagement, and health and safety initiatives.

Community of Learners – Group of individuals who collectively learn about a new topic; term used by the National Center for Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning (NCECDTL) staff to refer to their peer learning opportunity.

Community of Practice – Groups of individuals who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly; term used by National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance /State Capacity Building Center staff to refer to their peer learning opportunity.

Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System – The Early Childhood Training & Technical Assistance System (EC T/TA System) serves Head Start grantees and delegates and CCDF grantees, including states, territories, and tribes. The system brings together resources from the Office of Child Care, the Office of Head Start (OHS), and their federal health partners to offer CCDF Administrators and their stakeholders' information, tools, training, and other supports across the national network of T/TA providers.

Element – Characteristic describing a peer learning process, such as purpose, learning approach, and tools & strategies (among others); variations in key elements indicate different peer learning opportunity types or peer learning approaches.

Facilitators – National Center staff or contractors who facilitate the peer learning opportunity.

Grantee – States, territories, or tribes receiving funds through the CCDBG.

MyPeers – A virtual learning network used by the Office of Head Start which allows early childhood professionals across states, territories, and tribes to share and exchange ideas and resources.

National Centers – The Early Childhood National Centers for Training and Technical Assistance promote excellence through high-quality, practical resources and approaches. They are designed to build early childhood and school-age program capacity and promote consistent practices across communities, states, territories, and tribes. These National Centers bring together the knowledge and skills from the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care, and their health partners across HHS.

Office of Child Care – The Office of Child Care (OCC) supports low-income working families by improving access to affordable, high-quality early care and afterschool programs. It administers the CCDF.

Peer – Used to refer to individuals at two different levels: *across* lead agencies or (state teams) and *within* state teams. At the primary level, a peer is a person or a team that represents a state, or territory (peers *across* state teams). At the secondary level, there are peers *within* state teams.

Peer Learning Group/Community – Groups of individuals exchanging knowledge and experience with each other, and potentially diffusing this learning back to their organizations to ensure an impact—at scale—on reform initiatives; terms used by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA) and the National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE) staff (respectively) to refer to their peer learning opportunities.

Peer Learning Opportunity – Specific technical assistance opportunity offered to CCDF grantees.

Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) – A systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs.

Regional Offices – The ACF Office of Regional Operations has ten regional offices that serve states, territories, tribes, and other grantees in their geographical area.

State contractors – Non-state employees.

State representatives – Both state employees and state contractors.

Theory of change – A projected path to short-term, intermediate, and long-term learning outcomes by outlining causal linkages in the TA process.

Abbreviations

ACF	Administration for Children and Families
CCDBG	Child Care and Development Block Grant Act
CCDF	Child Care and Development Fund
CoL	Community of Learners
CoP	Community of Practice
NCECDTL	National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teacher & Learning
EC T/TA System	Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System
ITSN	Infant Toddler Specialist Network
NCASE	National Center on Afterschool & Summer Enrichment
NCECQA	National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance
OCC	Office of Child Care
OHS	Office of Head Start
PLC	Peer Learning Community
PLG	Peer Learning Group
RPM	Regional Program Manager
SCBC	Child Care State Capacity Building Center
TA	Technical Assistance
TAT	Technical Assistance Tracker
T/TA	Training and Technical Assistance
QRIS	Quality Rating and Improvement System

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance (EC T/TA) System supports child care and early education through guidance, funding, and informational resources designed to share knowledge and promote best practices. At the time this study was conducted, the Office of Head Start (OHS) and the Office of Child Care (OCC) funded nine[1] National Centers within the EC T/TA System to develop high-quality, research-based materials and to deliver training and technical assistance. Training and resources are made available publicly through the web and at frequent events that target system T/TA providers, beneficiaries (grantees), or both. These resources and events aim to strengthen capacity at the regional, state/territory/tribe, and local levels to support high-quality early care and education services.

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), a federal-state partnership program authorized under the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act, provides state, territory, and Tribal governments with funds to support families with children under age 13 to pay for child care that will fit their needs and that will prepare children to succeed in school. The CCDBG Act requires CCDF grantees (i.e., states, territories, and tribes) to implement provisions regarding consumer education, equal access, and health and safety (among others) to remain eligible for child care subsidy funding.

To support the skill- and capacity-building efforts of states, territories, and tribes, the National Centers use peer learning opportunities as a technical assistance (TA) strategy. Peer learning engages groups of individuals in the exchange of knowledge and experience with each other with the potential to diffuse this learning within their organizations to ensure an impact at scale. Peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees bring together state, territory, and Tribal employees who drive practice changes and policy reforms in child care.

Peer learning opportunities are a common method for delivering technical assistance to CCDF grantees. However, to date, there has been no systematic examination in the research literature on the use of peer learning as a technical assistance strategy to advance practice, policy, or systems change in the field of early care and education. Little is known about what contributes to its effectiveness. This report summarizes findings from an environmental scan and case studies of peer learning opportunities offered to CCDF grantees in an attempt to fill this knowledge gap.

Research Questions

One overarching research question motivated an environmental scan and multiple case studies: *What can we learn about the effectiveness of peer learning opportunities by looking across different models?*

[1] This is a description of the EC T/TA System at the time the study was conducted (2018-19). The number and focus of specific National Centers can vary across funding cycles.

The motivation for this study was to learn about the effectiveness of CCDF-focused peer learning opportunities. Specific research questions (see text boxes below) explored planning, recruitment, participation, learning mechanisms, and outcomes of the selected opportunities.

What are the structures and processes of CCDF-focused peer learning opportunities?

1. How are peer learning opportunities planned and conceptualized?
2. How are participants recruited?
3. What peer learning activities and mechanisms of learning are utilized in these opportunities?
4. Who participates in the peer learning opportunities?

What outcomes did participants achieve?

1. What knowledge did participants gain from the opportunity?
2. Did participants achieve practice and/or policy changes, or changes at the system-level?

Methods

To examine the structure, process, and outcomes of peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees, we selected a case study design. This qualitative approach is well-suited to examining multi-component systems and it allowed us to focus on what works for whom and when, how and why.[2,3,4] Participants' experiences with peer learning and their perceptions of outcomes achieved helped us identify successful methods for others in a similar context. Consistency across the experiences and perceptions facilitators and participants reported allowed us to draw inferences about what might be effective for peer learning within the CCDF context.

Environmental Scan and Case Study Sample

To begin, NORC completed an environmental scan of 24 peer learning opportunities the EC T/TA system offered to CCDF grantees between 2016 and 2018. The environmental scan furthered our understanding of the key structures and processes used in peer learning opportunities and informed the case study selection process. From the examples identified by the environmental scan, OCC selected three peer learning opportunities for in-depth case studies. A fourth peer learning opportunity was then added early in the data collection phase.

The three peer learning opportunities first selected took place between 2016 and 2018. The fourth was still ongoing when NORC conducted the case studies in 2019. Exhibit ES1 provides information on the opportunities selected for the case studies.

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[2] Christ, T. W. (2014). Scientific-based research and randomized controlled trials, the "gold" standard? Alternative paradigms and mixed methodologies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(1), 72–80

[3] Lamont, T., Barber, N., Jd, P., Fulop, N., Garfield-Birkbeck, S., Lilford, R., Mear, L., Raine, R., & Fitzpatrick, R. (2016). *New approaches to evaluating complex health and care systems*. BMJ, 352:i154

[4] Busetto, L., Wick, W. & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice, 2*(14), https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z

Exhibit ES1. Peer learning opportunities selected for case studies

Title of peer learning opportunity	Outcome of interest identified through the Environmental Scan	National Center [a]	Participating States & Territories [5] *(Participant Pool)*
Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (Case Study #1)	Increased knowledge	NCECQA (joint OCC-OHS) & SCBC (OCC)	Arizona, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Hawaii, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wyoming
The Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce (Case Study #2)	Implementation of CCDF policy	NCASE (OCC)	Delaware, Florida, Indiana, New Hampshire, New York, Wisconsin
Early Childhood Workforce Registries & Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway (Case Study #3)	Support, strengthen, and sustain system-level efforts	NCECDTL (joint OHS-OCC)	Alaska, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Tennessee
Communities of Practice: Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (Case study #4)	Support, strengthen, and sustain system-level efforts	NCECQA (joint OCC-OHS) & SCBC (OCC)	Delaware, Florida, New York, Utah, Virginia, Virgin Islands

[a] NCECQA = National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance; SCBC = Child Care State Capacity Building Center; NCASE = National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment; NCECDTL = National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning

Cross-Case Framework

We developed a cross-case framework to serve as the structure for both the protocol development and the data analysis based on insights from the environmental scan. For each peer learning opportunity (i.e., case) we examined its structure, process, outcomes, and context. We then conducted a comparative analysis of these components across the peer learning opportunities. Our analyses enabled us to identify and provide insight into the links between methods and approaches participants found effective and their reported achievement of desired outcomes.

Data Sources

We collected data from the following sources:

1. Publicly-available information about each peer learning opportunity, as available at the time of the research
2. Interviews conducted with:
    a. Three National Center directors
    b. Three facilitator/s of each peer learning opportunity

[5] The selected peer learning opportunities were offered to CCDF grantees at the state and territory levels. No Tribal grantees participated.

c. Three participants and team leads representing CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations of three different states from three of the four peer learning opportunities

We developed 90-minute participant and facilitator interview protocols based on the research questions, cross-case framework, and environmental scan findings. NORC conducted cognitive interviews with two OCC staff members using the protocols to solicit feedback on the questions and timing. NORC revised the protocols based on the feedback received. The facilitator protocol focused on the peer learning opportunity's structure and process, follow-up T/TA and uptake, and outcomes; it included a closing section asking about lessons learned. The participant protocol focused on participants' contexts, experiences, and outcomes related to peer engagement, networking, and learning. The participant protocol included a closing section asking about perspectives on peer learning. For each peer learning opportunity, interviews were scheduled with the facilitators and participants from three states, except for NCECQA/SCBC's Community of Practice (CoP) which included only the facilitator. Per Paperwork Reduction Act requirements, NORC was limited to conducting no more than 9 participant interviews without undergoing further OMB review, a sample size that was sufficient to meet the study's objectives.

Findings

In this summary, we present the findings of the study in four sections. In sections one and two, we provide answers to the primary research questions. In section three, we discuss the successes and challenges associated with planning, facilitating, and participating in peer learning opportunities. Section four describes the phases of the peer learning process we identified. The cross-case analysis of four case studies showed that National Center staff and facilitators chose peer learning formats because of the value and potential benefit of learning from peers. All participants reported that they increased their knowledge in the respective topic areas addressed by the opportunities. Below we detail findings for each research question.

Research Question #1: What are the structures and processes of CCDF-focused peer learning opportunities?

How are peer learning opportunities planned and conceptualized?

- The National Centers offered all four peer learning opportunities in response to grantee-initiated requests for information and TA support in the respective topic areas.
- Facilitators developed the various peer learning opportunities as ways to connect peers both within and across states, so that they could learn with and from each other.
- Over the short-term, all facilitators aimed to increase participants' knowledge in the respective topic areas: OST workforce, infant and toddler practice and policy issues, and workforce registries.
- All four peer learning opportunities had clearly formulated goals.
- Opportunities took place over an average of five months. The average number of sessions was six, with each session lasting from one to two hours.
- Pre-session activities aimed to build relationships and provide information to set the context for peer learning and participant engagement.

- Post-peer learning opportunities were aimed at continuing TA support.

How are participants recruited?

- Facilitators used the Technical Assistance Tracker to target potential participants, i.e., CCDF lead agencies in states and territories with TA requests related to that topic.
- Facilitators worked with regional offices to reach out to CCDF lead agencies in specific states and territories which they knew were interested in the peer learning opportunity or more generally inform the regional offices of the peer learning opportunity.

Who participates in peer learning opportunities?

- Participants across the peer learning opportunities were either state/territory CCDF lead agency employees or contractors who came with wide-ranging levels of experience about the specific CCDF-focused topic.
- Participants in the peer learning opportunities that required participation by a state team reported that having the right mix of colleagues representing a CCDF grantee is essential and highlighted the importance of including a representative from the CCDF lead agency.
- Participating CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations that took part in two of the peer learning opportunities attended every webinar session. This was an expectation for these two opportunities, which may have fostered peer engagement and relationship building.

What peer learning activities and learning mechanisms are utilized in these opportunities?

Features of peer learning opportunities

- All peer learning opportunities included presentations by invited peer experts from other states who had relevant expertise on the topics addressed.
- During the peer learning opportunity, facilitators provided opportunities for discussion and reflection, as well as for participants to ask questions of the facilitators.

Peer engagement

- Facilitators gave participants guidance for participation and encouraged peer-to-peer sharing.
- Within-state, rather than across state, peer engagement emerged as a key goal and function of peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees.
- Sustained engagement across states outside or after the conclusion of the peer learning opportunity was rare and participants reported this was due to a lack of facilitated engagement opportunities and differing state contexts.
- During peer learning events, across-state peers mainly engaged with each other using chat boxes.

Virtual sessions and engagement

- All peer learning opportunities examined through the case studies were virtual to make the opportunities accessible for participants from all states and territories. Two peer learning opportunities offered an optional in-person component.

- In-person sessions were intended to build initial relationships and foster engagement, which all facilitators and participants agreed is challenging in a primarily virtual environment.

Learning approach

- Two peer learning opportunities used a team- and action-oriented approach.[6]
- Participants from two peer learning opportunities reported that participating as a team was helpful for implementing changes following the opportunity.

Tools, techniques, and strategies

- For all peer learning opportunities (including the Community of Practice),[7] facilitators shared tools and resources from the guest presenters, National Centers, and other participants by posting the materials to the virtual learning network MyPeers[8] following each online session.
- Action plans and between session "homework" were important tools used to sustain engagement and build momentum toward state goals.

Research question #2: What outcomes did participants achieve?

Knowledge participants gained

- Most participants stated that their knowledge increased as a function of their participation in the peer learning opportunity. Specifically, they reported learning about other states' approaches to and implementation of the respective topic area (OST workforce, infant and toddler practice and policy issues, workforce registries), as well as sharing experiences and discussing implementation challenges.
- Most participants disseminated their newly acquired knowledge within their CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations.

Peer networks

Within states

- Participation in peer learning opportunities brought CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations together and participants reported that it resulted in building connections between organizations within each state.
- Participants who were asked to form a state team for their peer learning opportunity reported developing relationships within their teams between staff from CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations.

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[6] *Team-oriented approach:* Establishing teams with a cross-section of members who contribute different skills and knowledge and work together towards a common end, such as an action plan or other product. *Action-oriented approach:* Participants develop a plan and engage in activities to help them solve problems within the context of their state/territory/tribe and/or organization as part of the peer learning experience. Individuals or teams select a course of action to bring about a desired change.

[7] As defined by Etienne Wenger (2014:1), "A Community of Practice is a group of individuals who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf

[8] MyPeers is a virtual learning network used by the Office of Head Start which allows early childhood professionals across states, territories, and tribes to share and exchange ideas and resources.

Across states

- Participants found that connections with peers across states were difficult to maintain. While facilitators expected peers from different states to engage with each other and build relationships, there was a lack of concrete or structured opportunities to do so, both during and outside of the peer learning opportunity, and participants had significant time constraints.
- Participants mentioned they would have liked facilitators introducing them to peers from other states' CCDF lead agencies who may have something to offer them, or plan activities where they would work with other CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations directly as part of the peer learning opportunity.
- Depending on the fit with a state's context and need, facilitators also connected peers to peers from CCDF lead agencies that had not participated in the peer learning opportunity. However, approval was required from regional offices to approach a state's CCDF lead agency. It was challenging to coordinate schedules with other CCDF Lead agencies' representatives or state experts as this process could take weeks.

Effects on T/TA uptake

- All facilitators offered follow-up TA once their sessions ended, but participant uptake was limited.
- Lack of time and staff turnover within the CCDF lead agencies and partners were challenges to follow-up TA connected to the peer learning opportunity.
- Participants' TA engagement following the peer learning opportunity varied. Some participants did not take part in any follow-up TA. Others continued to work on the topic of interest to their CCDF lead agency through another peer learning opportunity offered by the Centers.

Did participants achieve practice and/or policy changes, or changes at the systems-level?

- After the conclusion of their opportunity, participants across the peer learning opportunities reported that they were motivated to apply what they learned from their peers in other states in order to: 1) address specific challenges; 2) raise the quality of services provided; and 3) move their state forward in specific areas.
- Participants of two peer learning opportunities reported practice and/or policy changes, but none reported systems-level change. In part, this may have been due to having insufficient time elapse between the completion of the opportunity and data collection for this study. The interviews for the case studies were conducted between October 2019-January 2020. Two of the peer learning opportunities had ended in March 2018, while the NCECQA/SCBC Peer Learning Group (PLG) had ended in October 2016 and the CoP was ongoing.

Successes and Challenges

The findings suggest that successful peer learning may be driven by effective engagement strategies, frequent participant feedback to inform ongoing tailoring, and evaluation to guide continuous development and quality improvement. However, the results indicate that a defining challenge to the peer learning process was the lack of a clearly formulated theory of change that articulated the facilitators' vision of how the peer learning opportunity would lead to changes in practice, policy, and at

the systems level. By not defining this process, it may have been difficult for facilitators to articulate the outcomes they expected and whether participants had met the goals of the peer learning opportunity. It may benefit facilitators and evaluators to be clear about reasonably expected outcomes given the target of the peer learning opportunity (e.g., knowledge gain, planning, implementation. etc.).

Additionally, lead agency staff availability and turnover, scheduling, and time constraints posed challenges to the peer learning process. Additional concerns were peers' varying knowledge and experience levels and a lack of focus on specific state contexts. Participants identified a range of challenges as they moved to implement learnings in their CCDF lead agencies and partnering organizations. Challenges included a lack of lead agency representation as part of a state team or lack of explicit support and buy-in from their state's CCDF lead agency leadership for action plans developed as part of the peer learning opportunities.

Additional barriers included implementation costs, conflicting policies, and states' legislative contexts (for example, lacking the authority to pursue implementation without legislative approval). Participants also identified CCDF lead agency readiness or capacity for change as a significant challenge to implementation.

Structuring the peer learning process

The cross-case analyses of four peer learning opportunities deepened our understanding of the peer learning process and its application as a technical assistance strategy. We found that National Centers varied in their planning and realization of peer learning opportunities and may benefit from a more structured process and alignment with an implementation approach, while maintaining the flexibility to tailor their efforts to states, territories, and tribes as much as possible. Across the environmental scan and the four case studies, we identified six distinct phases of the peer learning process. The six consecutive phases that emerged from the analyses are: 1) motivation, 2) exploration, 3) planning and preparation, 4) implementation, 5) outcomes, and 6) feedback and evaluation. Each peer learning opportunity followed this sequence of phases.

Limitations

Due to the time and effort involved in conducting in-depth case studies, we restricted ourselves to four case studies. Additionally, to comply with Paperwork Reduction Act requirements, we were limited in the number of participant interviews we could conduct without undergoing further OMB review.

We conducted interviews with three participants for three of the four peer learning opportunities. The extent to which we can generalize these findings is limited due to the number of case studies conducted and the number of participants interviewed.

Next steps

The four peer learning opportunities had clearly formulated goals, and there were similarities in the strategies National Centers applied to support states and territories in achieving outcomes. Over the short-term, all facilitators aimed to increase participants' knowledge in the respective topic areas: OST

workforce, infant and toddler practice and policy issues, and workforce registries. However, apart from one case, these opportunities were not rooted in concrete theories of change, which, as noted above, are ideas articulating why and how changes are expected to occur among CCDF grantees as a result of participating in the peer learning opportunity. Connected to clearly formulated goals, theories of change could provide common starting points for planning and executing peer learning opportunities.

Based on these observations, we developed a toolkit to help facilitators plan peer learning opportunities intentionally and for participants to choose opportunities that fit their needs. The toolkit was with the intention to maximize use by TA providers and ensure that peer learning is planned around the long-term goals and intended outcomes of lead agencies and matched to peers' readiness to implement CCDF requirements.

Introduction

Structure of this Report

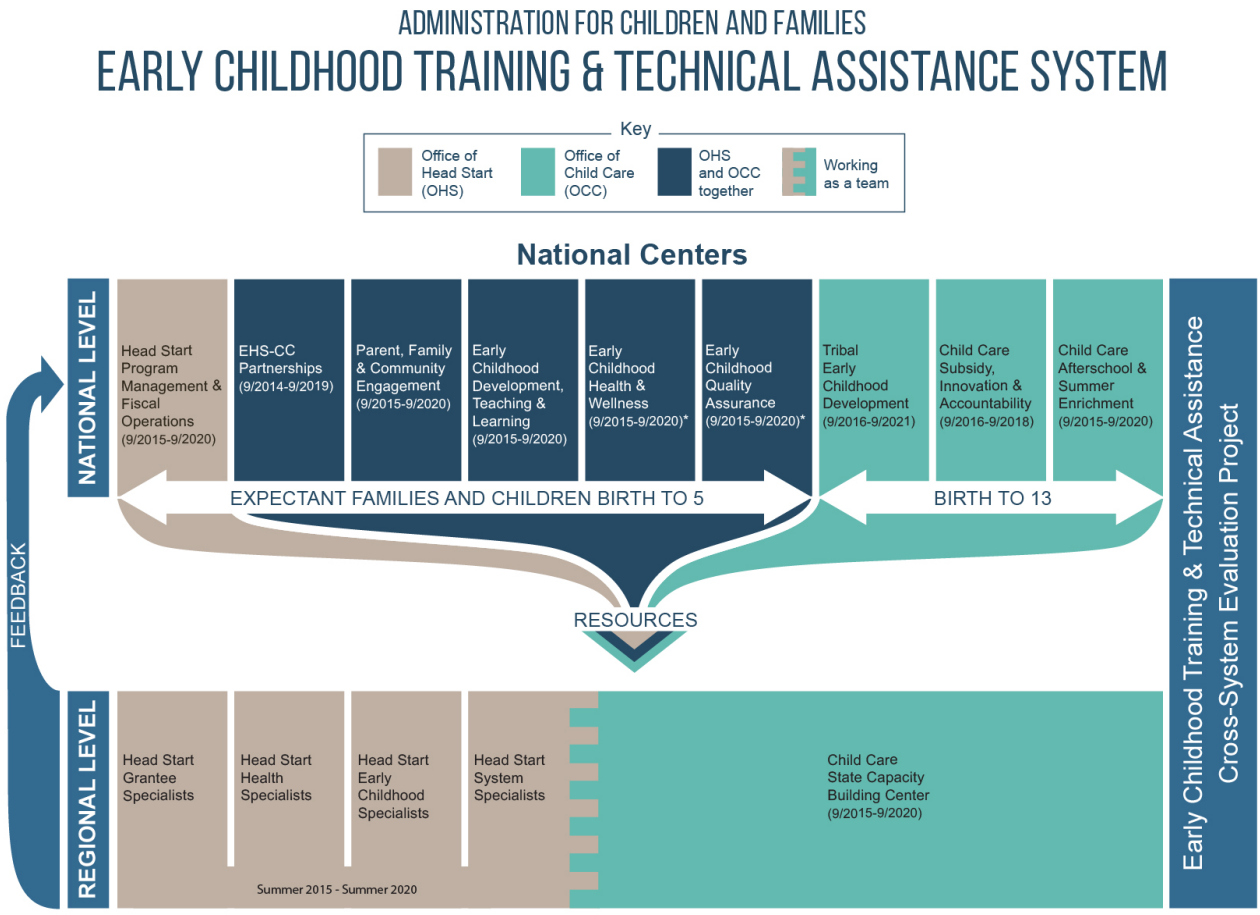
This report presents the findings of four in-depth case studies of peer learning opportunities. We begin by describing the *Study Background and Purpose*. In the next section, *Approaches to Peer Learning*, we provide a review of the literature as well as definitions of peer learning. Then, in the section *Findings from the Environmental Scan of Peer Learning Opportunities* we provide details on an environmental scan we conducted of peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees, specifically on the findings that informed the development of the case studies. Next, in the section on *Case Summaries*, we provide brief summaries of each of the four peer learning opportunities, including infographics illustrating their key features and activities. In *Research Questions and Findings*, we present our findings from the four case studies. In sub-section one and two, we answer the research questions guiding the case studies on the peer learning opportunities' structure and processes, and detail whether they achieved their intended outcomes. In the third sub-section, we describe *Peer Learning Successes and Challenges: Implications for Practice*. Here, we highlight facilitators and participant achievements as well as barriers to the peer learning process. In the fourth sub-section, *Structuring the Peer Learning Process*, we detail the phases of peer learning as National Centers operationalized them. We end our report with a section on *Next Steps*. Details about the research methodology, additional information from the environmental scan, and the four case studies can be found in Appendices I-III.

Study Background and Purpose

The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance (EC T/TA) System supports child care and early education through guidance, funding, and informational resources designed to share knowledge and promote best practices. At the time this study was conducted, the Office of Head Start (OHS) and the Office of Child Care (OCC) funded nine National Centers within the EC T/TA System to develop high-quality, research-based materials and training. Training and resources are made available publicly through the web and at frequent events that target system T/TA providers, beneficiaries (grantees), or both. These resources and events aim to strengthen capacity at the regional, state/territory/tribe, and local levels to support high-quality early care and education services.

In 2015, ACF, OHS, and OCC strengthened coordination of T/TA and alignment of T/TA resources between and across the two Offices. The goal was to build and leverage capacity at the regional, state/territory/tribe, and local levels to support high quality, early care and services for children and families. ACF established the EC T/TA Cross-System Evaluation Project to answer questions about the processes and effectiveness of the EC T/TA System and promote the use of data and evaluation for continuous quality improvement of the EC T/TA System. Insights from this evaluation project will inform optimal T/TA delivery and use, and support policy, practice, and organizational change among grantees. See Exhibit 1 for an illustration of the EC T/TA system.

Exhibit 1. Conceptual Model of ACF's Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance (EC T/TA) System



Note. From "Supporting High Quality Services for Children and Families." By Office of Early Childhood Development, November 4, 2020. *Administration for Children and Families.* Retrieved May 10, 2022, from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/interagency-projects/ecd-technical-assistance.

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a federal and state partnership program authorized under the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act that provides state, territory, and tribal governments with funds to support families with children under age 13 in paying for child care that will fit their needs and that will prepare children to succeed in school. The CCDBG Act requires states, territories, and tribes to implement provisions regarding consumer education, equal access, and health and safety (among others) to remain eligible for child care subsidy funding.

To support states, territories, and tribes with the implementation of CCDF provisions required to obtain CCDBG funding, the National Centers frequently use peer learning opportunities as a TA strategy. Peer learning engages groups of individuals in the exchange of knowledge and experience with each other with the potential to diffuse this learning within their organizations to ensure an impact at scale. Peer learning opportunities bring together state, territory, and tribal employees who drive practice changes and policy reforms in child care. These practitioners are central to driving reforms because they possess practical knowledge about reform planning and implementation, gained through dialogue,

decision-making, and working through capacity restraints.[9] It is difficult to capture this knowledge to share more broadly: in contrast to written documents or presentations, peer learning offers an innovative way of sharing knowledge between practitioners and policy makers directly. In this study, practitioners shared knowledge as they worked on planning and implementing new or revised CCDBG requirements.

As part of the EC T/TA Cross-System Evaluation Project, ACF asked NORC at the University of Chicago to examine peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees to explore how the different components of the EC T/TA System work together across the life cycle of a T/TA activity. The guiding research question was: *What can we learn about the effectiveness of peer learning opportunities by looking across different models*? To address this question, we formulated the following sub questions to glean information on the structures and processes of peer learning opportunities as well as whether and what outcomes were achieved by participants:

What are the structures and processes of CCDF-focused peer learning opportunities?

1. How are peer learning opportunities planned and conceptualized?
2. How are participants recruited?
3. What peer learning activities and mechanisms of learning are utilized in these opportunities?
4. Who participates in the peer learning opportunities?

What outcomes did participants achieve?

1. What knowledge did participants gain from the opportunity?
2. Did participants achieve practice and/or policy changes, or changes at the system-level?

To examine the structure, process, and outcomes of peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees, we selected a case study design. This qualitative approach is well-suited to examining multi-component systems and it allowed us to focus on what works for whom and when, how, and why.[10,11,12] Participants' experiences with peer learning and their perceptions of outcomes achieved helped us identify successful methods for others in a similar context. Consistency across the experiences and perceptions facilitators and participants reported allowed us to draw inferences about what might be effective for peer learning within the CCDF context.

We examined the following four peer learning opportunities:

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[9] Andrews, M. & Manning, N. (2015). A study of peer learning in the public sector: Experience, experiments and ideas to guide future practice. Prepared for the Effective Institutions Platform. Retrieved from https://www.effectiveinstitutions.org/media/Peer_learning_study_final_p5v07OO.pdf

[10] Christ, T. W. (2014). Scientific-based research and randomized controlled trials, the "gold" standard? Alternative paradigms and mixed methodologies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(1), 72–80

[11] Lamont, T., Barber, N., Jd, P., Fulop, N., Garfield-Birkbeck, S., Lilford, R., Mear, L., Raine, R., & Fitzpatrick, R. (2016). *New approaches to evaluating complex health and care systems*. BMJ, 352:i154

[12] Busetto, L., Wick, W. & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice, 2*(14), https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z

3. **Early Childhood Workforce Registries & Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway**, offered by the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning (NCECDTL).
4. **Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time Workforce**, offered by the National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE).
5. **Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Cohort 1**, offered by the National Center for Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA) and the State Capacity Building Center (SCBC).
6. **Communities of Practice on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers**, offered by NCECQA & SCBC.

The NORC research team conducted the case studies between 2019 and 2020, relying on analysis of publicly available information and interviews with National Center staff and facilitators, and participants of the peer learning opportunities. Per Paperwork Reduction Act requirements, we were limited to conducting no more than 9 participant interviews without undergoing further OMB review, a sample size that was sufficient to meet the study's objectives.

Approaches to Peer Learning

To date, no systematic review of peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees has been conducted, and little is known about what contributes to their effectiveness in the early care and education and afterschool/summer enrichment arena. Our review of the extant literature on peer learning found that most research is centered on high-school education and post-secondary education. There is limited literature on peer learning to improve public sector organizations' policy and practice.

One notable exception to this relative lack of research is the work of Andrews and Manning. Acknowledging that the existing peer learning literature has little relevance to public policy (2015),[13] these authors developed a useful approach to peer learning from a public sector perspective that identifies learning stages and tools used to support engagement and the learning process for participants. Andrews and Manning (2016) describe four stages, not necessarily sequential, that support the peer learning process: *Interaction Facilitation*, which brings individual peers together; *Knowledge Generation*, which promotes information and resources to share; *Sharing and Exchange*, which fosters knowledge sharing among peers; and *Reflection, Application and Diffusion*, which involves supporting efforts to ensure that lessons learned by individuals are reinforced and could be taken to scale.[14]

While focusing on international settings, Andrews and Manning's work on peer learning related well to the OCC context. Their work centered on public policy and systems building with peers, and teams of

[13] Andrews, M. & Manning, N. (2015). A study of peer learning in the public sector: Experience, experiments and ideas to guide future practice. Prepared for the Effective Institutions Platform. Retrieved from https://www.effectiveinstitutions.org/media/Peer_learning_study_final_p5v07OO.pdf

[14] Andrews, M. & Manning, N. (2016). A Guide to Peer-to-Peer Learning. How to make peer-to-peer support and learning effective in the public sector? Prepared for the Effective Institutions Platform. Retrieved from https://www.effectiveinstitutions.org/media/The_EIP_P_to_P_Learning_Guide.pdf

peers, at the country-level, which offered useful definitions and insights into peer learning activities between states and territories within the U.S. domestic policy context.

Definitions

Peer learning is an educational strategy that can take different formats and draws on multiple activities. It includes individuals, or teams of individuals, sharing knowledge and experience with each other with the goal of disseminating and applying this knowledge within their organizations to effect desired changes in practices, policies, and/or systems.[15] Definitions of peer learning can vary. The National Centers named their opportunities independently and used different terms to refer to their peer learning efforts. We use the term "peer learning opportunities" to refer to all types of peer learning activities that the National Centers convened.

Among the opportunities examined in the environmental scan and the case studies, we identified 1) groups, forums, communities, 2) communities of practice, and 3) open space-like sessions. More recently, CCDF-focused peer learning opportunities also included learning circles, a type of community of practice. We provide definitions of these terms based on grey and research literature below.

Peer learning groups, forums, and communities

Peer learning formats in a higher education context are the focus of most peer learning studies. While this context does not readily compare to public sector environments and learning goals, the same concept of "peer learning" used in these studies still applies: "[It] suggests a two-way, reciprocal learning activity. (…) [It] should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experience between the participants."[16] Peer learning can take many different names, reflecting various learning formats and strategies that support the mutual learning process. Terms such as peer learning "group, community, or forum," are variations on the peer learning theme without further differentiation, and they appear to be used synonymously.[17,18] Peer learning communities are sometimes referred to as Communities of Learners, which is another general term describing the practice of grouping individuals to support collective and individual learning.[19]

Peer-to-Peer

In addition to the above definitions, and with relevance to the ACF and OCC contexts, a recent report by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) – *Providing TA to Local*

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[15] Griffiths, S., Houston, K. & Lazenbatt, A. (1995) Enhancing Student Learning Through Peer Tutoring in Higher Education, Coleraine: Educational Development Unit, University of Ulster.

[16] Boud, D. (2002). *Introduction: Making the move to peer learning.* In Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (Eds.) Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning From & With Each Other. Kogan Page Limited, London: UK & Stylus Publishing Inc., VA: USA.

[17] Griffiths, S. , Houston, K. & Lazenbatt, A. (1995) Enhancing Student Learning Through Peer Tutoring in Higher Education, Coleraine: Educational Development Unit, University of Ulster.

[18] Boud, D. (2002). *Introduction: Making the move to peer learning.* In Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (Eds.) Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning From & With Each Other. Kogan Page Limited, London: UK & Stylus Publishing Inc., VA: USA.

[19] Fischer C., Pribesh S. (2012). Community of Learners. In: Seel N.M. (eds) Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_1207.

Programs and Communities[20] – provides the following understanding of peer learning. ASPE describes peer-to-peer TA as the "sharing of challenges, solutions, and resources across communities that are tackling similar issues." In peer-to-peer TA, the TA provider's role is to create opportunities for and facilitate interactions and exchanges between participants. Peer-to-peer TA can be in-person or virtual and can include active interactions and passive forms, such as a webinar. ASPE's report states that participants find in-person peer-to-peer TA encourages more dialogue and interaction than virtual formats. Additionally, peer-to-peer TA participants viewed the information gleaned from peers in these structures as more relevant and applicable than TA given directly from the federal government, as peers share their personal experiences, resources, strategies, best practices and practical advice, going beyond program compliance. Peer-to-peer and directed TA can be used in tandem to promote knowledge change. Directed TA may be useful to teach participants about federal policy changes, while peer-to-peer TA can shed light on best practices for implementing and adapting state policies and practices to comply with the federal policy change. Shared experiences become particularly important early on when there is little data and concrete guidance from which to draw.

In the EC T/TA system, the National Centers use the designation "peer-to-peer" when referring to one-off TA events during which TA providers connect representatives from one state to another to facilitate peer exchanges about specific issues. This use of peer-to-peer (often abbreviated as P2P) is documented in OCC's Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT), the database used to record technical assistance requests as well as the resources, tools, training, and other supports provided to OCC grantees in response to these requests.

Communities of practice, communities of learning, learning circles, and open space sessions

In the current study, communities of practice, learning circles, and open space-like sessions were some of the terms the National Centers used to refer to individual peer learning opportunities. The literature offers overlapping definitions for these activities. These opportunities are focused on sharing practical knowledge within the context of implementing CCDBG requirements and improving child care systems, policies, and delivery.

Communities of practice refer to groups of people who gather over a shared concern or passion and learn how to improve their work through regular interactions with each other. Communities of practice involve: 1) learning focused on a shared domain of interest; 2) joint activities and discussions to help each other, share information, and build relationships that help deepen knowledge in the domain of shared interest; and 3) the development of a shared toolbox of resources over time, including experiences, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems.[21]

[20] Baumgartner, S., Cohen, A. & Meckstroth, A. (January 2018). *Providing TA to Local Programs and Communities: Lessons from a Scan of Initiatives Offering TA to Human Services Programs.* Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

[21] Wenger-Trayner, E. & B. (2015). *Introduction to communities of practice. A brief overview of the concept and its uses.* Retrieved from https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/.

Community of Learners is a general term used to refer to the concept of grouping individuals to support collective and individual learning.

Learning Circles are a strategy used in communities of practice as interactive structures for collaborative group work. The goal of a learning circle is to "build, share, and express knowledge" through conversations and reflections on problems while maintaining a focus on outcomes. Participants take turns leading the projects of the circle. The learning circle is task-based.[22] Learning circles focus on a set of smaller intersecting group tasks, each led by one of the circle participants. Effective learning circle work involves "building a level of trust and developing shared norms of trust, openness and reciprocity."[23]

O'Connor and Cooper[24] describe open space learning as "a highly democratic consultative process." The process creates an environment where participants' expertise, experiences, and knowledge inform the meetings' agendas and result in creative outputs. Participants set their own agenda under the overarching topic of the meeting's purpose, discuss ways to address implementation barriers and create an action plan. Open Space sessions are very useful for implementing policy and practice in environments where there are many stakeholders and diverse opinions. The process also results in "community building, transformational learning, and enhanced confidence in institutions."

A note on the definition of "Peer"

In the OCC context, participants of peer learning opportunities often consist of multiple state, territory, or tribal teams composed of various child care sector representatives (for example, the lead agency and other governmental or non-governmental organizations, such as early learning departments or afterschool networks). Therefore, "peers" may exist at two different levels, *across* state/territory teams, and *within* state/territory teams. We define peers at the across-state/territory level as a person or a team that represents a state or territory. *Within* state/territory teams, we considered the peers to be the individuals who come together to represent the lead agency or other organizations within the state. It is not clear that the same distinction readily applies to tribal CCDF contexts due to the limited availability of information on peer learning opportunities tailored to tribes.

[22] Riel, M., and Polin, L. (2004). Learning Communities: Common Ground and Critical Differences in Designing Technical Support. In S. Barab, R. Kling, & J. Gray (Eds.). *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

[23] Riel, M. (2014). *The Learning Circle Model: Collaborative Knowledge Building*. Retrieved from https://sites.google.com/site/onlinelearningcircles/Home/learning-circles-defined.

[24] O'Connor, D. and Cooper, M. (2005) 'Participatory Processes: Creating a 'Marketplace of Ideas' with Open Space Technology.' *The Innovation Journal, Vol. 10* (1):1-12, p.1.

Findings from the Environmental Scan of Peer Learning Opportunities

In preparation for the case studies, NORC conducted an environmental scan of 24 peer learning opportunities that had been offered to CCDF lead agencies during the previous three years by six National Centers: State Capacity Building Center (SCBC), National Center on Early Childhood Quality Insurance (NCECQA), National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE), National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning (NCECDTL), National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE), and National Center on Subsidy Innovation and Accountability (NCSIA). See Exhibit 2 for information about these peer learning opportunities (intended outcomes, type of TA, follow-up TA offered, numbers of lead agencies participating, and number of cohorts).

For all peer learning opportunities, we 1) reviewed publicly available information from webpages created for the peer learning groups (such as by BUILD[25]) (e.g., webinars, transcripts, participant rosters, resources made available on landing pages), 2) extracted information relevant to each research question, and 3) developed profiles for each peer learning opportunity based on all available materials. To address remaining gaps about key elements, we requested information in writing for eight of the 24 peer learning opportunities from federal staff. For four of these eight opportunities, we also conducted phone interviews with Center staff involved with planning and facilitating the peer learning opportunity. Based on the information collected in the environmental scan we identified key elements to describe all the peer learning opportunities we reviewed:

7. **Purpose**, which described the motivation behind the peer learning opportunity, its objectives, function, and whether it was a center-specific or cross-center collaboration. This element included a theory of change that informed the peer learning process or a theory of change about policy, practice, or systems-level changes, and associated outcomes.
8. **Type of T/TA,** which described the extent to which T/TA is customized to recipient needs (i.e., universal, targeted, or tailored).
9. **Structure and process**, which described the design and organization of the peer learning opportunity. This element included targeted recruitment of participants, peer learning facilitation, participation, and content and delivery mode.
10. **Learning approach**, which described strategies to facilitate learning. This element also included the type of learning, assignments, and follow-up TA.

For 19 out of the 24 peer learning opportunities, we also obtained information about which states participated. Of these, 50 states and the District of Columbia participated in at least one peer learning opportunity, during the period covered by the environmental scan (2015-2018). Seven states participated intensely, attending 8-10 different peer learning opportunities during this period Thirteen states participated in 5-7 opportunities, and 31 participated in 1-4 peer learning groups.

[25] https://buildinitiative.org/

Exhibit 2. Peer Learning Opportunities offered to CCDF Agencies between 2015-2018

Title of Peer Learning Opportunity	National Center	Intended Outcome			Type of T/TA		Follow-up T/TA Offered		# of Lead Agencies taking part	# of Cohorts
		Increase knowledge and skills	Implement CCDF policy	Support, strengthen, sustain system-level efforts	Targeted[26]	Tailored[27]	After Session	After PLG		
Preventing Expulsion and Promoting Socio-Emotional Health	SCBC & NCECHW			✓		✓			16	2
Emerging Leaders	SCBC			✓	✓		✓		24	3
Efficient and Effective Monitoring in Licensing	NCECQA		✓		✓			✓	10	1
Quality Initiatives and QRIS	NCECQA			✓	✓			✓	5	1
Financing Quality Through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems	NCECQA	✓			✓		✓	✓	8	1
Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers	NCEQA	✓			✓		✓	✓	14	2
Strengthening Family Child Care (FCC)	NCECQA			✓		✓		✓	8	1
Effective QRIS TA Systems	NCECQA			✓	✓		✓		14	2
QRIS 101 Forum	NCECQA	✓				✓	Unknown	Unknown	16	1
Child Care Licensing Community	NCECQA	✓				✓	Unknown	Unknown		1
Continuous Quality Improvement in Family Child Care	NCECQA			✓	✓		Unknown	Unknown	12	2

[26] Targeted T/TA seeks to provide support to a pre-defined target group addressing a pre-defined need.
[27] Tailored T/TA goes beyond targeted T/TA (in the PLG context) by identifying and addressing the individualized needs within the pre-defined topic.

Title of Peer Learning Opportunity	National Center	Intended Outcome			Type of T/TA		Follow-up T/TA Offered		# of Lead Agencies taking part	# of Cohorts
		Increase knowledge and skills	Implement CCDF policy	Support, strengthen, sustain system-level efforts	Targeted[26]	Tailored[27]	After Session	After PLG		
PLC #1: Licensing and License Exempt Systems	NCASE & NCECQA		✓		✓		✓	✓	34	1
PLC #2: Creating a Successful Formula to Engage School-Age Programs in Quality Improvement Systems	NCASE		✓		✓		✓	✓	23	2
PLC #3: The Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce	NCASE		✓		✓		Unknown	✓	6	1
Disability Services Coordinator	NCEDTL	✓				✓	Unknown	Ongoing	Unknown	1
State Learning Management Systems (LMS) Administrators	NCEDTL			✓	✓		Unknown	Ongoing	8	1
Infant/Toddler Credentials	NCEDTL	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	1
Practice-Based Coaching (PBC)	NCEDTL			✓	✓		Unknown	✓	9	1
Bridging the Gap	NCEDTL			✓	✓		Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	1
Compensation Initiatives E-Institute	NCEDTL			✓	✓		✓	Unknown	14	1
Early Childhood Workforce Registries & Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway	NCEDTL			✓	✓		Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	1

Title of Peer Learning Opportunity	National Center	Intended Outcome			Type of T/TA		Follow-up T/TA Offered		# of Lead Agencies taking part	# of Cohorts
		Increase knowledge and skills	Implement CCDF policy	Support, strengthen, sustain system-level efforts	Targeted[26]	Tailored[27]	After Session	After PLG		
State Systems Peer Learning Community on Family Engagement	NCPFCE			✓	✓	✓	✓	Unknown	14	1
Tribal Peer Learning Community on Family Engagement	NCPFCE			✓	✓	✓	Unknown	Unknown	4	1
Open Space Session Web-Based Meeting Series for CCDF Subsidy Policy Area	NCSIA		✓		✓		✓	✓	Unknown	1

Selecting peer learning opportunities for case studies

From the key elements identified for the Environmental Scan—purpose, type of T/TA, structure, and process, and learning approach—we established criteria for selecting peer learning opportunities for the case studies from the list of 24 peer learning opportunities identified in the scan. The following three criteria guided selection: 1) outcome of interest (purpose); 2) whether follow-up TA was offered to participants (learning approach); and 3) which Center(s) offered the opportunity (purpose). In collaboration with OCC, we then selected one opportunity to represent each outcome of interest. All three opportunities selected offered follow-up TA, either between sessions or after the conclusion of the opportunity. One of the selected opportunities was offered by an OCC-focused National Center and two opportunities were offered by Centers jointly administered by OCC and OHS.[28]

Early in the data collection process, an additional case study (Case Study #4, see Exhibit 3 below) was added to the initial list of three when NCECQA and SCBC indicated that the ongoing community of practice was more reflective of their current work in peer learning than the one that had already been selected. Case Studies #1-3 were retrospective. Case study #4 was carried out concurrently with the peer learning opportunity.[29] Exhibit 3 details the selected opportunities. Please refer to Appendix I: Methods for more details.

Exhibit 3. Case study selections

Title of peer learning opportunity	Outcome of interest	Follow-up TA	National Center
Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (Case Study #1)	Increased knowledge	Offered TA both after each session and after the conclusion of the opportunity	NCECQA (joint OHS-OCC) & SCBC (OCC)
The Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce (Case Study #2)	Implementation of CCDF policy	Offered TA both after each session and after the conclusion of the opportunity	NCASE (OCC)
Early Childhood Workforce Registries & Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway (Case Study #3)	Support, strengthen, and sustain system-level efforts	Offered TA after the conclusion of the opportunity	NCECDTL (joint OHS-OCC)
Communities of Practice Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (Case study #4)	Support, strengthen, and sustain system-level efforts	Follow-up TA offered throughout the opportunity as well as after the conclusion of the opportunity	NCECQA (joint OHS-OCC) & SCBC (OCC)

Note: The selected peer learning opportunities were geared towards state and territory CCDF grantees. tribal grantees did not participate in the selected opportunities for the case studies, but they did participate in opportunities that were included in the environmental scan (see Exhibit 2).

[28] See Exhibit 1 for an overview of OCC and joint OHS-OCC National Centers.
[29] Case Study #4 was not included the Environmental Scan.

Setting up a common framework for cross-case analyses

The peer learning elements we identified through the environmental scan further formed the basis of a structured approach to the individual case studies of peer learning opportunities. The framework allowed for exploration *within* each peer learning opportunity (a case) and comparison *across* the opportunities (cases). To this end, we developed semi-structured interview protocols with TA planners, facilitators, and participants of the peer learning opportunities. For each case, we examined the structure, process, and outcomes of interest. We also examined outcomes at the state level, as well as uptake of follow-up T/TA. We then conducted comparative analyses of these components across the selected opportunities. Further details on the methodology are provided in the Appendix.

Case Summaries

In this section, we provide short overviews of each case study, including a high-level summary and an infographic. Full descriptions of each case study can be found in the Appendix. Each infographic contains the following descriptive information at-a-glance: purpose, structure, and format, participating states' contexts and representatives (i.e., participants), approaches to support peer engagement, tools and strategies for group facilitation, methods for obtaining participant feedback and conducting evaluation, and state outcomes achieved. The infographics showcase the elements of peer learning that we will explore in depth in the next sections of this report, where we discuss *Research Questions and Findings* at the cross-case level.

Case Studies #1-3 were retrospective and included information from peer learning opportunity facilitators and participants. Case study #4 was carried out concurrently with the peer learning opportunity and included information from facilitators but not participants. More information about each case study and the methods used to sample the case studies is available in the Appendix.

A Community of Learners (Case Study #1)

The National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning (NCECDTL) developed their "*Workforce Registries and Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway* Community of Learners (CoL)" in response to TA requests related to workforce registries in OCC's TAT. The goal for the CoL was to build strong connections between state and territory leaders and their workforce registries by hearing about successes and lessons learned from other jurisdictions. The CoL had a two-tiered approach. In tier one, facilitators organized a series of webinars, and, in tier two, they provided implementation support upon request. The CoL took place between September 2017 and March 2018. The following 16 states attended at least one session out of the nine sessions: Georgia (GA), Kentucky (KY), New York (NY), New Jersey (NJ), Florida (FL), Hawaii (HI), Iowa (IA), Illinois (IL), Tennessee (TN), Oklahoma (OK), Indiana (IN), Montana (MT), Michigan (MI), Virginia (VA), Alaska (AK), Kansas (KS), and Maryland (MD). Exhibit A2, in the Appendix, provides more information on participating organizations and roles for each state. The CoL started with a kick-off meeting followed by a series of

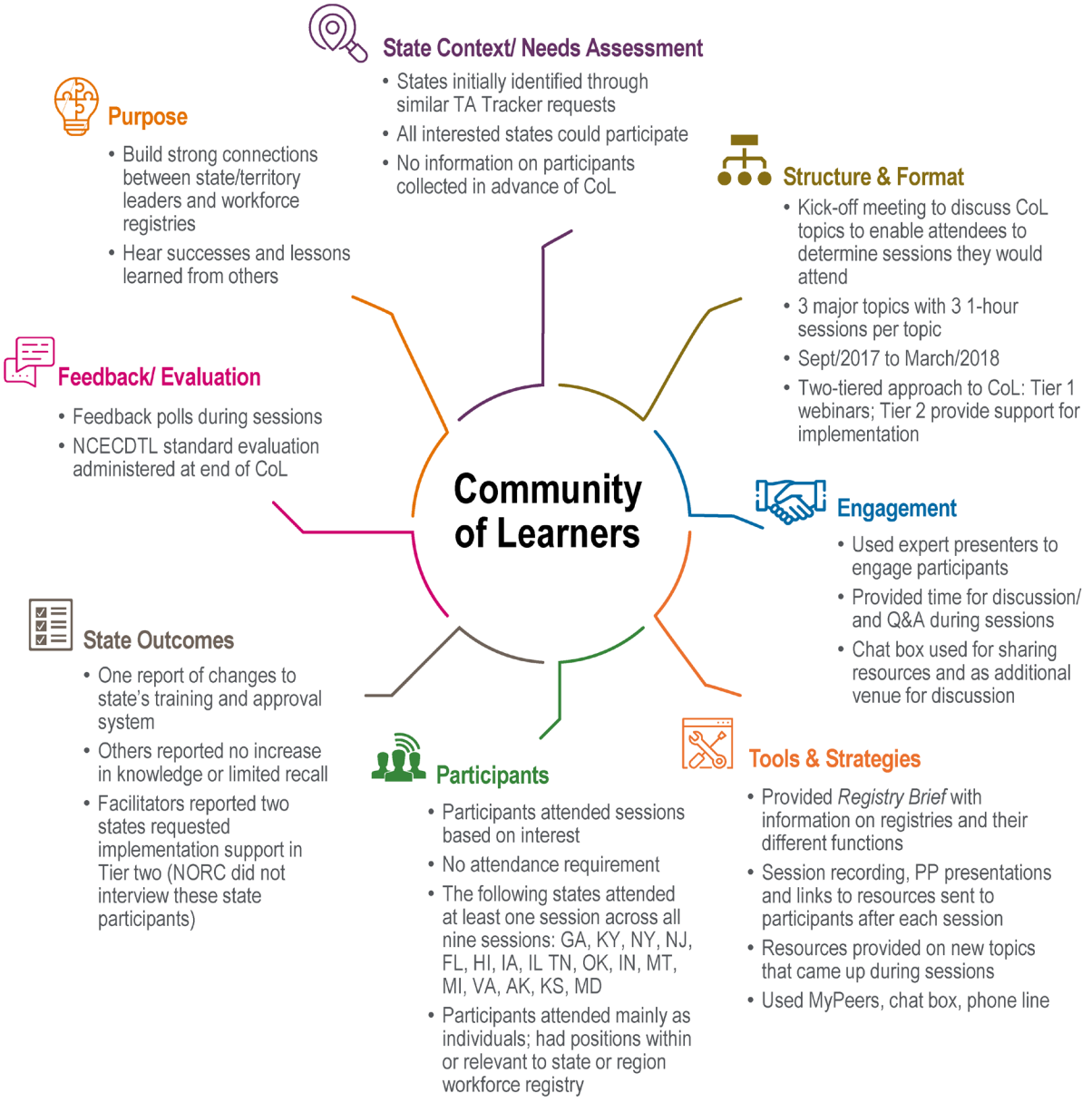
one-hour webinar sessions organized around three distinct topics. All interested participants could attend and team participation was not required. No information was collected on participants in advance of the CoL. Facilitators invited peer experts to present on the peer learning topics as the main engagement strategy, along with feedback polls and time for Q&A. Outcomes varied, with one participant reporting that competencies were built into the state's training and approval system because of participating in the CoL. Another participant reported no increase in knowledge and a third participant did not recall the specifics of the CoL. Uptake of follow-up TA was limited. More detailed information on the CoL is provided in the graphic below and in the *NCECDTL Community of Learners* Case Study in the Appendix.

Exhibit 4. A Community of Learners

National Center on Development, Teaching and Learning (NCECDTL)

Community of Learners (CoL):

Workforce Registries and Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway



Data sources:

1. Publicly available information
2. Interviews with NCECDTL CoL facilitators and three CoL participants from three different states.

A Peer Learning Community (Case Study #2)

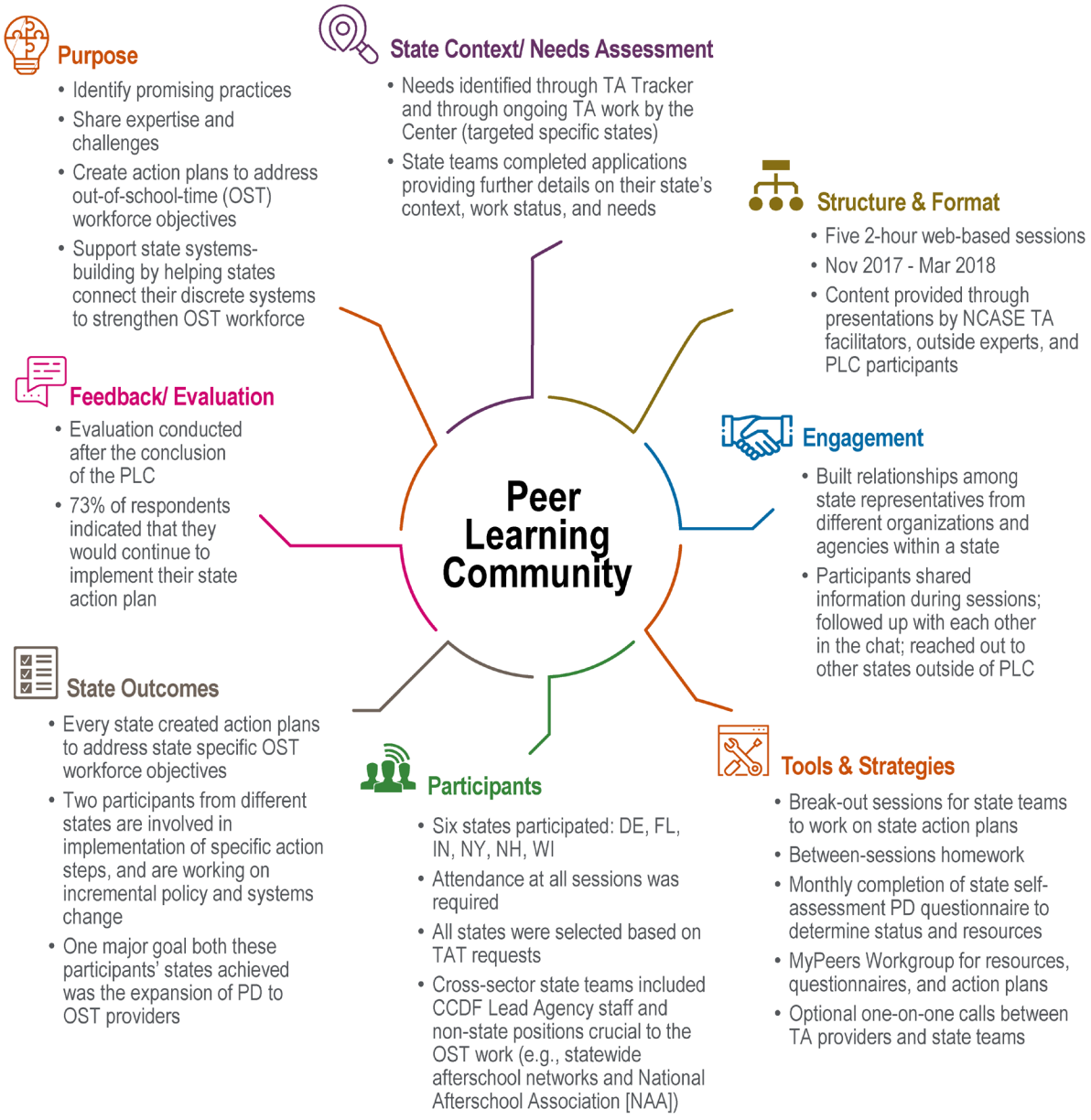
The National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE) developed their "*Peer Learning Community (PLC): Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce*" in response to TA requests related to OST workforce topics in OCC's Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT). The goals for this PLC were: 1) for states to collaborate to identify promising practices and share expertise and challenges, 2) to create action plans to address OST workforce objectives, and 3) to foster relationship-building among state representatives from organizations and agencies *within* a state. The PLC consisted of five web-based sessions between November 2017 and March 2018. Each session lasted two hours. Six states participated: Delaware (DE), Florida (FL), Indiana (IN), New York (NY), New Hampshire (NH), and Wisconsin (WI). Exhibit A2, in the Appendix, provides more information on participating organizations and roles for each state. Participation in the PLC required that participants be part of a cross-sector state team including both CCDF Lead Agency staff and non-state positions crucial to the OST work. Each state team lead completed a sign-up sheet prior to participation that was designed to identify the state's needs and topics of interest. Center facilitators used several facilitation strategies, including peer presentations, break-out sessions for state teams, a self-assessment tool, and between-session homework. All participating team leads reported an increase in knowledge and the successful creation of an action plan, and a Center evaluation showed that 73% of respondents indicated that they would continue to implement their action plan. The PLC also achieved its goal of building relationships among state representatives from organizations and agencies within a state by within-state teams. Follow-up TA was limited. More detailed information on the PLC is provided in the graphic below and in the *NCASE Peer Learning Community* Case Study in the Appendix.

Exhibit 5. NCASE Peer Learning Community

National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE)

***Peer Learning Community (PLC)*:**

Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School time (OST) Workforce



Data sources:

1. Publicly available information
2. Interviews with NCASE PLC facilitator as well as three of PLC participants; each was a team lead of a different state team.

A Peer Learning Group (Case Study #3)

The National Center for Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA) together with the Infant Toddler Specialist Network (ITSN) developed their *Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Peer Learning Group* to address requests in OCC's Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT) related to access and quality for infants and toddlers. The goal of this PLG was to deliver TA to states and territories on specific topics related to infants and toddlers. Specifically, the PLG aimed to: 1) provide an overview of the essential CCDF policies related to infant and toddler care; 2) have participants explore the principles and practices that support high-quality infant/toddler care, including QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) and teacher development; 3) help participants consider strategies to build their supply and quality of infant and toddler care and address barriers to access; and 4) support participating state/territory teams to develop a plan for supporting infants and toddlers based on state/territory priorities. Eleven states and territories participated across two cohorts. Cohort 1 included Arizona (AZ), the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), DE, HI, Oregon (OR), Pennsylvania (PA), Washington (WA), and Wyoming (WY). Cohort 2 included DE, FL, NY, Utah (UT), VA, and the Virgin Islands (VI). The PLG conducted an introductory meeting for state/territory team leads in June 2016 and held four webinars for each of two cohorts between July and October 2016. Following the webinars, Cohort 1 also participated in an in-person meeting in October 2016. Each webinar lasted 1.5 hours. Participation in the PLG required participants to be part of a state/territory team of stakeholders.

Each state/territory completed an application detailing why they were interested in participating as well as their state/territory needs and areas of interest. These applications were used to create the two cohorts based on the level of experience with the topic area. During the PLG, TA providers presented on and oversaw discussions around infant and toddler topics. These topics included Infant and Toddler Care policies, Parents and Providers, Community Partnerships, Infant Toddler Workforce and Professional Development, and the Implications for State Policies and State Systems. The facilitators invited experts from NCECQA, the ITSN, and the BUILD Initiative (a national organization that partners with state/territory/tribal leaders to foster equitable, high-quality, child- and family-learning systems) to present on challenges and successful practices related to these topics. State/territory teams completed homework and worked on an action plan between sessions. All states and territories successfully created an action plan detailing next steps and took steps to implement it within their state. The PLG was successful in building lasting relationships between state/territory team members. Follow-up TA was limited. More detailed information on the PLG is provided in the graphic below and in the *NCECQA/SCBC Peer Learning Group* Case Study in the Appendix.

Exhibit 6. NCECQA/SCBC Peer Learning Group

National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (ECQA)
State Capacity Building Center (SCBC)
***Peer Learning Group (PLG)*:**
Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers

Purpose

- Explore policies and practices that support high-quality infant/toddler care
- Help states develop a plan for supporting infants/toddlers based on state priorities

State Context/ Needs Assessment

- Needs identified through TA Tracker and through CCDF administrators who responded to the OCC PLG announcement
- State teams completed an application providing information on state needs, work status, and goals for participation

Structure & Format

- Four 1.5-hour webinars
- Two cohorts based on experience levels
- July-October 2016
- Sessions comprised of presentations on content of interest, Q&A
- Content provided through presentations by Center TA facilitators

Feedback/ Evaluation

- Feedback was requested frequently through polls and chat boxes for CQI
- Midway and end of PLG evaluations were administered

Engagement

- Engagement was created and sustained by building relationships among state representatives from different organizations and agencies within each state
- Participants interacted through chat boxes and discussions
- State teams completed action plans to determine next steps

State Outcomes

- Every state created action plans that addressed state-specific infant/toddler priorities
- States disseminated information to others within their state and began implementing action plan, including exploring policy changes around infant/toddler workforce and funding

Tools & Strategies

- MyPeers Workgroup to post and share resources and action plans
- Between-sessions homework
- State teams worked on their action plans between sessions
- Facilitated discussion and sharing between states during sessions
- Optional one-on-one calls between TA providers and state teams

Participants

- Participants comprised of state/territory teams
- Attendance at all sessions was required
- Fourteen states/territories participated
- Cohort 1: AZ, CNMI, DE, HI, OR, PA, WA, WY
- Cohort 2: DE, FL, NY, UT, VA, VI
- First cohort consisted of state teams that had made some progress on systems development and had a cross-sector team
- Second cohort was for states and territories still developing a strategy to support infants and toddlers; participants mainly from lead agency
- All states selected based on TAT requests

Data sources:

1. Publicly available information
2. Interviews with ECQA/SCBC PLG facilitator and three of the PLG participants; each was a team lead of a different state team

Communities of Practice (Case Study #4)

After the conclusion of the *Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Peer Learning Group,* NCECQA and ITSN developed the Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a re-envisioned peer learning experience. The purpose of the re-envisioned CoPs was to improve relationship-building between states/territories and provide states/territories with the platform to collaborate in addressing their states' and territories' challenges with implementing policies and practices. The CoPs recognize the content expertise of participants and allow participants to set the agenda and lead the conversation. The National Centers provide the platform for hosting these discussions and the facilitators serve the dual role of both facilitating the conversations and coaching the participating states/territories on implementation issues. NCECQA and ITSN have created CoPs on a variety of topics. The CoPs meet monthly, though they can meet more or less often if the participants so desire. There is no end date for the CoPs; the CoPs are held as long as the participants would like to attend. As a result of the CoPs, NCECQA and ITSN have seen a large increase in the number of follow-up TA requests and hypothesize that this has been due to the strong relationships facilitators build with the states/territories and the trust states and territories have in the National Center to provide T/TA that is high-quality and relevant. More detailed information on the CoP is provided in the graphic below and in the *NCECQA/SCBC Communities of Practice* Case Study in the Appendix.

Exhibit 7. NCECQA/SCBC Communities of Practice

National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (ECQA)
State Capacity Building Center (SCBC)
Communities of Practice (CoP)

Data sources:
1. Publicly available information
2. Interview with ECQA/SCBC PLG facilitator

Research Questions and Findings

In this section, we first provide a high-level overview of the findings and then present findings in detail organized by research questions.

Overview of Findings

All four peer learning opportunities conducted from 2016 - 2018 were offered in response to grantee requests for TA on the respective topics, as recorded in OCC's TA Tracker. In addition to using the TA tracker to determine topics of focus for the peer learning opportunities, facilitators reviewed administrative records in the TA Tracker to identify and invite states and territories which had indicated interest in the topics and worked with their regional offices to contact states. All states and territories interested in each of the opportunities were able to attend. Most states participated as teams of peers from different organizations within the state and territory.

Revisiting our overarching research question, *"What can we learn about Peer Learning Group (PLG) effectiveness by looking across different models?,"* we learned that facilitators and participants consider peer learning opportunities an effective way to engage practitioners in deepening their knowledge and practice around topics related to changes and implementation challenges at the state level. Our analyses showed that peer learning encourages purposeful interactions, conversations, and resource sharing among peers from different states and across stakeholders within states. Learning is implementation-focused and action-oriented, with the goal of achieving outcomes associated with CCDF requirements in the state. Participants found the web-based structure helpful because it allowed them to participate in a T/TA format that was both cost-effective and easy to accommodate in their busy schedules. From our analyses we learned that peer learning may be most effective when participants are motivated to attend and participate and prioritize the experience by attending all available sessions.

Most participants across the three peer learning opportunities for which participants were interviewed disseminated their newly acquired knowledge within their states. Participants across the peer learning opportunities were motivated to apply what they learned from their peers in other states to 1) address specific challenges, 2) raise the quality of services provided, and 3) move their state forward in specific areas.

Peer learning occurred most often among peers from the same state and these within-state interactions were sustained outside of the opportunity. Participants reported that participating as a team was helpful for planning feasible action steps and then implementing these steps following the peer learning opportunity. Facilitators achieved within-state peer learning by providing a dedicated time and space, as part of the opportunity, for state teams to collaborate. State/territory team participation in peer learning opportunities not only brought key state and non-state stakeholders together, but it also resulted in building connections between organizations within the states. However, state teams reported experiencing several implementation challenges, including a lack of lead agency representation in the peer learning opportunity or explicit state support for participating, state legislative

barriers (for example, lacking the authority to pursue implementation without legislative approval), conflicting state policies, lack of a clear change agent, a dearth of financial resources, and the state's lack of readiness for or capacity for change.

Peer engagement between states occurred primarily during the peer learning opportunity. Across-state peers shared information with each other on state needs, specific efforts, challenges, and successes of the state's work on the topic. Participants also learned from peer experts – states who have successfully achieved practice, policy, or systems change in the topic area. Across-state engagement was not typically sustained outside the peer learning opportunity, because states' contexts varied. Moreover, some participants noted that facilitators could have fostered concrete opportunities for states to work together during the session.

Facilitators offered post-peer learning opportunities to continue TA support in the content area targeted by the peer learning opportunity. All peer learning opportunities offered follow-up TA once their sessions ended, but participant uptake was limited. Lack of time and staff turnover prevented states from engaging in follow-up TA connected to the peer learning opportunity.

What are structures and processes of CCDF Grantee-focused peer learning opportunities?

In this section, we present findings related to structure and process that emerged when looking across all peer learning opportunities. Research questions in this section are further organized in the following way: First, we will answer questions related to *Planning the Opportunity* as well as *Recruitment* (i.e., participant selection), then we will describe findings related to *Peer Learning Activities & Mechanisms of Learning* (i.e., facilitation and learning tools), and finally, we turn to questions associated with *Participation* in peer learning opportunities (i.e., participant characteristics).

How are peer learning opportunities planned and conceptualized?

Here, we provide information on how the peer learning opportunities originated. We look at who are the peers involved in these opportunities and what objectives facilitators set for peer learning. We also describe the frequency and duration of peer learning opportunities and the availability of follow-up TA.

Developing peer learning opportunities

The National Centers (Centers) offered all four peer learning opportunities in response to grantee-initiated requests in OCC's technical assistance data base (TA Tracker) for information and TA support in the respective topic areas. In some cases, this motivation aligned with broader Center efforts to effect state systems-building. For example, one Center aimed to help states connect their discrete Early Childhood (EC) and Out-of-School Time (OST) systems to strengthen the OST workforce and to make it more aligned with the EC workforce. In other cases, Centers sought to impact policies and state systems concerning infants and toddlers.

Center staff and facilitators chose peer learning formats because of the value and potential benefit of learning from peers. Facilitators pointed out that state participants bring a wealth of expertise and that peer learning opportunities provide a venue to facilitate learning from expert peers. Some facilitators emphasized the usefulness of peer learning for cross-sector team building specifically within states: *"One of the most valuable aspects of participation in [peer learning opportunities] is working across systems and finding out what everyone is doing, because states are complicated. People may work on the same thing but don't know about it and don't collaborate."*

Facilitators developed the various peer learning opportunities as ways to connect peers both within and across states, so that they could learn with each other and from each other. The specific names Center staff chose for each peer learning opportunity included variations using the terms *peer*, *learning*, and *community* (see Exhibit 2). Center staff did not provide definitions for these terms, nor did they offer indications of how a specific label might have determined the structure and process of the peer learning experience. All Centers acknowledged that peer learning opportunities are typically understood to be composed of a static group across multiple meetings, and most peer learning opportunities involved stable group of participants with mandatory attendance. For one of the opportunities, attendance was not mandatory because Center staff aimed to connect people based on individual topics within individual sessions.

Both Center staff/facilitators and participants had a favorable view of the web-based learning format. One facilitator noted that web-based learning *"enables participants to connect across the state as part of the national group. Both nationally and within states it's an effective way to connect people."* Another facilitator added that, due to the size of the country and travel costs, *"this is here to stay."* Participants echoed the sentiment, appreciating that web-based formats bring people across the country together, noting that web-based opportunities "*work more and more smoothly as we get comfortable with technology.*" However, facilitators also added that access to technology was not necessarily a given for all participants on state teams, especially child care providers.

Over the short-term, all facilitators aimed to increase participant knowledge in their respective topic areas: OST workforce, infant and toddler practice and policy issues, and workforce registries. None of the peer learning opportunities had a clearly formulated theory of change outlining how and what information would lead to desired outcomes in the opportunities' topic areas at the topic level, but all facilitators targeted their overall content to their intended audience based on state TA requests. Center staff saw knowledge acquisition as foundational to the achievement of medium-term policy change and long-term systems-change.

Three of the opportunities were not rooted in concrete theories of change, that is, working assumptions about why and how changes are expected to occur in the peer learning context, regardless of the specific topic of interest. Theories of change link activities to clear and measurable outcomes over the short, medium, or long-term. A theory of change enables facilitators to 1) intentionally design peer learning opportunities that will achieve desired outcomes, 2) communicate these outcomes to participants and 3) evaluate whether they were achieved during and after the opportunity. One of the four opportunities was informed by implementation research, using

implementation stages[30] to tailor their approach and content for the opportunity. However, all four peer learning opportunities had clearly formulated goals. There were similarities in the strategies applied across Centers to support states in achieving these goals. Common strategies included the use of action plans, and optional follow-up one-on-one TA, as well as facilitated peer-to-peer interactions.

Meeting frequency and duration

The three peer learning opportunities that concluded prior to the case studies took place over an average of five months. The average number of sessions across them was six, with each session lasting from one to two hours. Exhibit 8 below provides more detail across the three peer learning opportunities and includes information on pre- and post-session activities, discussed in the section below. (The fourth peer learning opportunity—NCECQA and SCBS's Communities of Practice—was ongoing at the time of the data collection and is not included here).

Exhibit 8. Frequency and Duration of Peer Learning Opportunities

Peer Learning Opportunities	
Timeframe	4 to 6 months
Number of Sessions	4 to 9 sessions
Duration of Sessions	1 to 2 hours
Pre-session Activities	In-person launch/ Virtual kick-off/ None
Post-session Activities	In-person meeting/ Peer-to-peer or one-on-one interactions/ None

Pre-session activities were used to build relationships and provide information to set the context for peer learning and participant engagement. The facilitators of two peer learning opportunities held preliminary activities with participants. In one, the facilitators held an in-person launch as part of a pre-scheduled Institute (Infant-Toddler Strategies Institute in Kansas City), where the facilitators introduced state team leads to one another and provided an overview of the topics they would cover during the peer learning opportunity. Facilitators remarked that this was helpful for establishing relationships with the team leads early on. The facilitators of the other peer learning opportunity held a virtual kick-off meeting prior to the beginning of the sessions to provide information to and learn more about potential participants.

Post-peer learning opportunities were aimed at continuing TA support. One peer learning opportunity adopted a two-tiered approach, with the webinar sessions as the first tier of TA and additional peer-to-peer or one-on-one interactions as the second tier. Two of the 17 states that registered for the CoL took advantage of the peer-to peer or one-on-one interactions following the conclusion of the webinar series due to time constraints.

At the conclusion of another peer learning opportunity, participants took part in a two-day face-to-face meeting. Facilitators organized the meeting to give state teams time to review their action plans and

[30] The National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina (n.d.). *Module 1, Framework 2: Implementation Stages | NIRN (unc.edu)*.

engage in peer conversation around financing and other pressing issues. Facilitators also provided state teams with the opportunity to receive TA on their action plans. Due to time constraints and funding limitations, only a limited number of states attended the meeting.

How are participants recruited?

In this section we describe how participants were selected and recruited to take part in the peer learning opportunities and how facilitators used the recruitment process to gather information about participants that allowed them to better tailor their opportunities.

Facilitators made use of OCC's TA Tracker first to determine the topic for the peer learning opportunity (based on states' TA requests on a given topic) and then to recruit those states with corresponding TA requests. Facilitators recruited these states either by directly reaching out to CCDF state administrators, or by contacting the Regional Program Managers (RPM) of those states that had indicated interest in the topic. RPMs helped with publicizing the peer learning opportunity within the states or directly invited state lead agency staff. State administrators sometimes further disseminated the opportunity in their lead agency or to other organizations in the states based on the topic of interest.

Facilitators worked with their respective regional offices to reach out to *specific* states which they knew were interested in the peer learning opportunity (two peer learning opportunities) or more generally inform the regional offices of the peer learning opportunity (the other two opportunities). Two of the peer learning opportunities required states to complete an application or form prior to participating. All states which completed the application or form were able to attend. More applications than anticipated were received for one of the peer learning opportunities so facilitators created two cohorts with specific criteria established to determine which states to include in each cohort. One cohort consisted of state teams that had already made some progress on systems development and had a cross-sector team. The second cohort was for states and territories that were still developing a strategy for supporting infants and toddlers with participants primarily from the lead agency.

Targeting and Connecting with Participants/States

All facilitators stressed the importance of gathering information on state/participant experiences and contexts prior to the start of the peer learning opportunities. The facilitators of two peer learning opportunities required states to complete a specific form or application prior to participation. These forms provided detailed information about the participating state that was relevant to the specific topic and on their needs, goals, topics of interest, and topics of expertise as well as reasons for wanting to participate. The information was not used to determine if a state could participate, but to allow facilitators to learn more about each state prior to the peer learning opportunity. To further understand the interests of participants and to clarify expectations for the peer learning group, two Centers held a meeting prior to the first webinar session. This also allowed the participants to meet and begin engaging with their peers.

Facilitators from the third peer learning opportunity did not require any information from participants in advance of the sessions. When reporting on the experience following the conclusion of the peer learning opportunity, these facilitators reported that such information would have been valuable to

understand the experience levels and roles of each participant. Participants in this peer learning opportunity similarly shared that it would have been beneficial for facilitators to know more about their individual situations to provide specific information and make connections between participants.

What peer learning activities and mechanisms of learning are used in these opportunities?

In this section, we detail the activities involved in peer learning as well as the learning mechanisms. Specifically, we will discuss how facilitators moderated sessions, as well as what tools, techniques, and strategies they used. We will take a closer look at how facilitators provided time for discussion/ reflection, engaged participants in the sessions as well as with each other, and utilized team-based approaches. We will also describe how facilitators made use of peer experts from other states and how they facilitated within- and across-state learning.

Features of peer learning opportunities

All the peer learning experiences included presentations by invited peer experts from other states who had relevant expertise on the topics addressed. The facilitators of one opportunity invited content experts from several organizations to present on the challenges and successful practices related to accessing resources and improving circumstances for infants and toddlers. One peer learning opportunity also selected one or two participating states with expertise in a specific area to present at a session on the challenges and successes experienced in implementing a new policy or practice relevant to the learning topic. This included a state sharing a new rubric used for approvals relevant to workforce registries and a peer presentation on the specifics of what a state had achieved related to systems building for the OST workforce. Across the peer learning opportunities, facilitators found using expert presenters was an effective strategy to engage participants in peer learning and convey important knowledge. Having a representative who understood the implications of a particular strategy or approach was a key mechanism for providing valuable information to participants and for getting conversations started.

During the peer learning opportunity, facilitators provided opportunities for discussion and reflection, as well as for participants to ask questions of the facilitators. Two of the opportunities provided breakout sessions and facilitators tried to engage participants in the online environment and encouraged them to interact with their peers and with the facilitators to share their ideas, including between sessions. One center that had no prior experience in leading a peer learning experience hired facilitators who had expertise in adult learning to facilitate each session.

Peer engagement

Facilitators gave participants guidance for participation and encouraged peer-to-peer sharing. In addition to the material prepared and presented by the facilitators, the facilitators of two peer learning opportunities noted that participants brought a wealth of expertise to the peer learning opportunity, and they encouraged participants to share examples of their experiences with the group. The facilitators alerted participants in advance as to when they would be expected to share so that they would be

prepared. A number of participants mentioned that the facilitators encouraged them to engage with each other by sharing experiences and resources and asking questions.

Within-state, rather than across-state, peer engagement emerged as a key goal and function of peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees. Participants on within-state teams, either existing or newly formed for participation in the opportunity, engaged to learn with each other about other states' approaches and continued this engagement both during the opportunity as well as outside of it to plan action steps specific to their state or to implement these steps. Peer learning in the CCDF context was less about sustained engagement between states than about within-state peers learning together and finding ways of applying other states' approaches to their own.

Sustained engagement across states outside or after the conclusion of the peer learning opportunity was rare and participants reported this was due to a lack of facilitated engagement opportunities and differing state contexts. Participants suggested that a lack of continued engagement with peer states was due to the fact that other states' specific methods of implementing new knowledge and policies may not have been applicable to their own state. However, participants also stated that there could have been more intentionally facilitated across-state peer exchanges. While there was an expectation from facilitators that peers from different states engage with each other and build relationships, there was a lack of concrete opportunities to do so, both during and outside of the peer learning opportunity. Participants mentioned they would have liked facilitators introducing them to other states who may have something to offer them, or plan activities where they would work with other states directly as part of the peer learning opportunity.

Depending on the fit with state's context and need, facilitators also connected peers to states that had not participated in the peer learning opportunity. One facilitator reported that the time required to receive approval for connecting states in this way or connecting states with experts outside of the opportunity itself was "cumbersome." Approval was required from regional offices to approach a state and it was challenging to coordinate schedules with other states or state experts. This process could take weeks.

During peer learning events, across-state peers engaged with each other using chat boxes. The webinars allowed for participant interaction through chat boxes, discussion rooms, and small groups. While all methods were used, chat boxes were the primary methods for peer-to-peer engagement across peer learning opportunities throughout the sessions. Participants shared knowledge and best practices around action planning, implementation successes and challenges as well as lessons learned and followed-up with each other about resources.

Participants who took part in the peer learning opportunities offered by two Centers attended every webinar session, which may have allowed for greater engagement between peers and relationship building. Participants reported that it was important to take full advantage of the learning experience and prioritized attendance. Facilitators observed that having regular attendance resulted in strong working relationships between state team members and some networking between states. In contrast, the other Center offered 3 separate topics with 3 webinars each, and participants were encouraged to attend the sessions that were of interest to them. As a result, attendees differed

between sessions. Participants of this peer learning opportunity noted that because the attendees differed, it was difficult to form relationships with other participants.

Virtual sessions and engagement

All peer learning opportunities were virtual to make the opportunities accessible for participants from all states and territories. A few peer learning opportunities offered an optional in-person component. If offered, an in-person session was the very first in the series, intended to kick off the peer learning experience. These sessions occurred in connection with larger regional or national meetings or conferences, with an understanding that not all participants would be able to attend. One Center did not offer any in-person TA opportunities due to size and funding level and the facilitators expressed concern that in-person opportunities posed a barrier to involving a significant portion of stakeholders, both within a state and across the country.

In-person sessions were intended to build initial relationships and foster engagement, which all stakeholders agreed is challenging in a primarily virtual environment. Some participants suggested that using "face-to-face"[31] virtual technology might have resulted in a higher level of preparedness and engagement between participants and, therefore, more relationship-building.

Approach to learning

Two peer learning opportunities used a team- and action-oriented approach.[32] Facilitators and participants in these opportunities stressed the importance of intentionality around team selection and the benefit of having CCDF administrators on the team for implementing action plans once the peer learning opportunity had ended. State team leads considered members' expertise and positions in the system and some leads received guidance on team selection from the CCDF administrator.

Participants from two peer learning opportunities reported that participating as a team was helpful to implementing changes following the opportunity. The specific composition of the team was important in this regard. State teams with members representing diverse roles, organizations, and regions within the state developed feasible action plans that considered key perspectives and different organizational structures in the state.

Tools, techniques, and strategies

For all peer learning opportunities (including the CoP), facilitators shared tools and resources following each webinar session from the guest presenters, Centers, and other participants by posting the materials to the virtual learning network MyPeers. MyPeers was used as a resource repository. National Centers hoped to use the platform to promote dialogue among participants between sessions, but the platform was used as a resource repository rather than as a site for building relationships. It was a common challenge to engage participants between sessions, but facilitators

[31] All peer learning opportunities and all study activities occurred prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw the widespread use of virtual face-to-face technology.
[32] Action-oriented approach: Participants develop a plan and engage in activities to help them solve problems within the context of their state and/or organization as part of the peer learning experience. Individuals or teams who select a course of action to bring about a desirable change. Team-oriented approach: establishing teams with a cross-section of members who contribute different skills and knowledge and work together towards a common end, such as an action plan or other product.

encouraged participants to have conversations on MyPeers. While a couple of questions were posted, the platform was not actively used in any peer learning opportunity. Facilitators stated that might have been due to a lack of functionality of MyPeers for OCC users who cannot use the chat or list-serv function.

Action plans and between session "homework" were important tools used to sustain engagement and momentum toward state goals. In two peer learning opportunities, each participating state team developed an action plan that outlined areas of need and connected its learning to post-peer learning opportunity next steps. States worked on their action plans between sessions along with other homework assignments, which the facilitators assigned to sustain engagement in the peer learning opportunity and promote ongoing within-state conversations. States with supportive leadership appreciated these activities to focus their attentions and convert their learnings to action steps, which they worked on long after the peer learning opportunity ended. In contrast, facilitators for one peer learning opportunity intentionally avoided assignments because they worried that participants would be discouraged from attending sessions if they had not been able to complete assignments.

Who participated in Peer Learning Opportunities?

Participants across the peer learning opportunities were either state employees or state contractors who came with wide-ranging levels of experience about the specific CCDF-focused topic – from no prior knowledge or experience to active involvement in their state's activities associated with the respective peer learning topic. Participant roles included managing or directing state or regional level programs or networks and working as analysts, consultants, or contractors with professional development initiatives or state or regional level Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) (see Appendix "Participant Details"). None of the participants interviewed were CCDF lead administrators. Only one participant across all opportunities was a lead administrator and that person participated in one session.

Participants in the peer learning opportunities that required team participation reported that having colleagues from diverse stakeholder groups on a state team is essential and highlighted the importance of including a representative from the CCDF lead agency. They pointed to the fact that the support of a CCDF administrator can help with "buy-in" from the state leadership.

Participants' experience with existing peer networks ranged from none to active engagement. Participants across the peer learning opportunities mentioned universities, consortiums, and initiatives, such as BUILD, as part of their peer networks. Participants in one peer learning opportunity viewed their national peer network as a key source for diffusion of information, including best practices and individual state experiences.

Participant attendance levels reflected the expectations of facilitators and state team leads. Facilitators and/or team leads for two of the peer learning opportunities expected regular attendance at all sessions. This expectation was communicated during the initial session/kick-off meeting. Attendance levels for these peer learning opportunities were high. Facilitators for the third peer learning opportunity

did not articulate expectations around attendance and attendance levels for this peer learning opportunity were sporadic.

After the conclusion of their opportunity, participants across the peer learning opportunities reported that they were motivated to apply what they learned from their peers in other states to: 1) address specific challenges; 2) raise the quality of services provided; and 3) move their state forward in specific areas. In two of the peer learning opportunities, some participants expressed the motivation to share their expertise with other states or showcase what their state had accomplished.

The time commitment necessary to participate in a peer learning opportunity was a consideration for participants. Time commitment was noted as a challenge to participation by participants in two of the peer learning opportunities, while participants in the third peer learning opportunity indicated that the time commitment was reasonable and mentioned that not needing to travel saved time and funds.

What outcomes did participants achieve?

In this section, we report the outcomes participants achieved. The following sections are once more organized by research questions, and address knowledge gains, knowledge shared, expanded peer networks, TA uptake, and in-person meetings. We were unable to analyze potential variation in outcomes as a function of variation in the implementation of individual peer learning opportunities due to the lack of formulated theories of change as well as a lack of observed variations on individual approaches that could have informed how variations led to different outcomes.

What knowledge was gained by participants?

Most participants stated that their knowledge increased as a function of their participation in the peer learning opportunity. Specifically, they reported learning about other states' approaches to and implementation of the respective topic area, as well as sharing experiences and discussing implementation challenges. Participants of two peer learning opportunities successfully developed action plans. A number of participants emphasized that a key part of their learning experience was validating their own state's approach and associated challenges. However, significant differences in participating states' levels of knowledge or status of action plans hindered peer learning. One participant found the topics covered too basic and another participant felt that their state was ahead of the others in terms of work already completed, limiting their own peer learning as well as content learning experience.

Virtually all participants that participated in the three peer learning opportunities that concluded prior to the study disseminated their newly acquired knowledge within their states. (As previously noted, the team did not interview participants from NCECQA and SCBC's Communities of Practice due to OMB restrictions.) As conduits for information, participants circulated the knowledge gained during the peer learning opportunities to lead agencies/CCDF administrators, various committees, such as one state's child care advisory committee and another state's steering committee, as well as state-wide networks and local programs/child care service providers. One state team lead

commented that knowing that other states had adopted these policies made them feel confident sharing them within their state.

One facilitator highlighted two unexpected and positive outcomes for states that did not participate in the peer learning opportunity but were asked to showcase their state's work during a session. This experience validated and affirmed what these states had accomplished, and it led to conversations and connections between the presenting states and the participating states.

Peer networks

Participation in peer learning opportunities brought key state and non-state stakeholders together and participants reported that it resulted in building connections between organizations within each state, both of which were outcomes of interest for facilitators across all peer learning opportunities. However, connections across states proved more difficult to sustain.

Participants who were asked to form a state team for their peer learning opportunity developed relationships within their state teams. Through discussions, the completion of homework assignments, and the creation of their state's action plan, state team members learned about the relevant work of other stakeholders within their states and developed lasting partnerships. This experience of participating as a state team brought together stakeholders from diverse positions within the state who all had roles relevant to the subject matter. Participants found it very useful that their team members represented different stakeholder groups, so that they could build partnerships among group members. This structure allowed everyone to help shape the state's goals and contribute to the action plan. These strengthened relationships persisted after the peer learning opportunity ended and helped the states move forward in implementing changes. Some state team members continued to work with their team members after the conclusion of the peer learning opportunity to implement their state teams' action plans and work on other pertinent issues for their states.

Peers across states engaged with one another during the peer learning opportunity but did not continue this engagement after the peer learning opportunity concluded. During the sessions, state participants in all peer learning opportunities communicated through chat boxes and shared resources on MyPeers. They also reached out to other states to learn about their work such as the T/TA they had provided or to ask about other states' experiences with data collection. Participants of the peer learning opportunities appreciated seeing other state teams' state plans and resources that were shared on MyPeers, particularly from state teams that had more experience. The resources were used in the development of state plans and in next steps. However, because states had different contexts and levels of experience, the resources often needed to be modified before they were used. The participants in the Workforce Registries[33] peer learning opportunity reported that they did not share tools or resources with each other because they operated autonomously, and another state's resources would not be applicable.

[33] Early childhood workforce registries are information systems that allow states to track professional development achievement and plan for future training.

Across the peer learning groups, facilitators wanted states to continue engaging with one another outside and after the conclusion of the opportunity. Participants reported reaching out to other states because of conferences or a listserv, but there was no continued networking as a direct result of the peer learning opportunities. In part this was because state contexts vary significantly. However, participants also wished facilitators had been more direct in facilitating relationships between state teams by creating spaces for collaboration during the peer learning opportunity or by directly connecting states with similar contexts or approached.

Effects on T/TA uptake

All the peer learning opportunities offered follow-up TA once their sessions ended, but participant uptake was limited. One peer learning opportunity explicitly included the option of follow-up TA as part of the peer learning experience. Facilitators established a two-tiered approach with tier one providing webinar sessions on the topic and tier two offering additional peer-to-peer or one-on-one engagement with states when requested. Facilitators reported that two out of 16 states reached out for one-on-one engagement as part of tier two.[34] Facilitators of another peer learning opportunity asked participants during the final session if they wanted to hold an in-person reunion. A majority responded positively but, in the end, the reunion was sparsely attended.

Time and staff turnover were challenges to follow-up TA connected to the peer learning opportunity. The facilitators of the peer learning opportunity that had the two-tiered approach indicated that both the time required for approval processes and staff turnover in the state presented challenges to follow-up TA as knowledge gained during peer learning participation was lost and subsequent action steps stalled when state employees left or moved positions. The approval time for connecting with states or connecting states with experts was reported by these facilitators as “cumbersome” and a major challenge to providing timely follow-up. State staff turnover prevented follow-up with one state that had initially requested it. For another peer learning opportunity, the National Center did not allow facilitators to extend follow-up TA offers beyond six months. Once six months had passed, these facilitators were no longer able to reach out to the states that had participated. These facilitators suggested that doing more outreach between sessions might encourage more timely follow-up TA requests.

Participants’ TA engagement following the peer learning opportunity varied in type and amount of TA. Participants from two of the peer learning opportunities reported engaging in TA related to the topics of their peer learning opportunities following its conclusion. Participants across three peer learning opportunities reported engaging in follow-up TA with other providers on topics not related to the focus of their specific peer learning opportunity**.** (As noted previously, the team did not interview participants from NCECQA and SCBC’s Communities of Practice.)

[34] These states were not originally selected for interviews. Therefore, we do not have direct reports about follow-up TA from participants.

Peer Learning Successes and Challenges: Implications for Practice

Building on the findings presented in the previous section, we next describe the successes and challenges National Center staff and participants experienced while implementing or participating in the peer learning opportunity and their implications for practice. We take a closer look at the challenges associated with implementing concrete peer learning opportunities (from a facilitator perspective) and with achieving learning outcomes and applying what was learned from a peer learning opportunity to state-level policy, practice, and systems change (from a participant perspective).

Successes

Our findings suggest that successful peer learning may be driven by effective engagement strategies, frequent participant feedback to inform ongoing tailoring, and evaluation to guide continuous development and quality improvement.

Facilitators and participants noted that particularly successful engagement strategies included presentations by invited content experts, chat boxes, and assignments. Assignments between sessions helped extend learning and maintain investment in the learning experience. Assignments included readings that complemented webinar sessions or a resource repository in which participants could access resources provided by facilitators and participants. More involved assignments included the requirement that participants create action plans that articulate next steps the state will take to translate the learning from the peer learning experience into implementable actions.

All Center staff and facilitators viewed evaluation efforts as key in identifying what works and what does not and to make informed changes to planning and facilitation based on participant feedback. Centers conducted evaluations both midway through and a few months after the conclusion of the peer learning opportunity. One Center also included the peer learning opportunity in their periodic, broader evaluation focused on the Center's work. The information gathered in the evaluations led another Center to offer a different type of peer learning experience altogether. However, one facilitator expressed concerns about having to use the Center's standard evaluation form, which prevented them from tailoring questions, the responses to which could have helped improve the outcomes for peer learning experiences moving forward: "*There are a lot of questions on your mind as you go through the sessions and 90% are not on the final evaluation form. It wouldn't be used for formal data analysis and evaluation, but it would be formative information as we go along.*"

Facilitators emphasized being flexible enough to accommodate participant requests while the peer learning opportunity was ongoing. Most facilitators have found ways to solicit feedback through polls or chat box questions during or after individual sessions, which enabled them to immediately incorporate participants' suggestions, especially about specific topics.

Challenges

Peer Learning Challenges

Results suggest that a defining challenge to the peer learning process was the lack of a clearly formulated theory of change. Additionally, staff availability and turnover, scheduling and time constraints posed challenges to the peer learning process. Additional concerns noted were facilitator capability, peers' varying knowledge and experience levels, and a lack of focus on specific state contexts.

The lack of theories of change during the planning phase of the opportunity, and the resulting underspecified short- and long-term outcomes, may have constrained the facilitators' ability to optimize activities of the PLG to achieve desired goals. Peer learning opportunities were focused on different outcomes, such as providing participants with new content or knowledge, helping participants apply knowledge to new policies/practices, or supporting the implementation of policy/practice/systems change, but these goals were not explicitly rooted in a theory of change. A theory of change may have allowed facilitators to tailor the content more intentionally and to establish clear and measurable goals. For example, an opportunity aimed at primarily providing knowledge should not be evaluated for its ability to affect systems change. Additionally, participants' level of prior knowledge as well as their motivation for participation should align with the peer learning opportunity's overall theory of change to maximize learning and to help ensure that both the goals of peer learning as well as the states' or territories' long-term goals are met. By not defining this process, it may have been difficult for facilitators to articulate the outcomes they expected and whether participants had met the goals of the peer learning opportunity. Facilitators and evaluators should be clear about reasonably expected outcomes given the target of the peer learning opportunity (e.g., knowledge gain, planning, implementation. etc.).

Time, approvals, and agendas constrained the extent to which facilitators could tailor the webinars in real-time. Throughout the peer learning opportunity, participant needs, and interests changed, and facilitators across three of the four peer learning opportunities attempted to make adjustments based on feedback within the constraints of the pre-set agenda. (In contrast, NCECQA and SCBC's Communities of Practice allowed participants to set the agenda and lead the conversation.) Finding time to address emerging needs and interests during each session was a challenge, as each webinar had a full schedule. Facilitators reported that there was often not enough time to increase the amount of discussion or to address additional topics that participants requested. In addition, the process of getting approvals for guest speakers and presentation content made it difficult for the facilitators to be nimble and responsive to participants, as all PowerPoints and materials must be pre-approved by OCC. One Center also reported challenges in the timeliness for receiving approvals from the regional offices and state administrators to connect participants from different states with each other and for connecting states with experts for follow-up TA.

A lack of facilitator experience with peer learning opportunities posed challenges, specifically regarding effective planning and scheduling and participant engagement. One facilitator described her relative inexperience with peer learning opportunities. She waited to schedule final sessions until closer to the end of the opportunity and left six weeks between some sessions. She

concluded that this negatively impacted both participant attendance and engagement for these sessions. She also pointed to a lack of familiarity with the National Center regulations around inviting guest presenters as resulting in missed opportunities for specific speakers to present.

Center staff and facilitators accepted all who applied to a peer learning opportunity, which resulted in wide-ranging levels of knowledge, experience, and goals among participants. Findings suggest that this diversity made it challenging for facilitators to meet all participants' needs, and it may have limited the learning experience for some participants. While facilitators aimed to tailor peer learning opportunities to individual state/participant needs as much as possible, one facilitator noted the difficulty in being nimble and responsive in the context of pre-planned sessions. A related barrier noted by both participants and facilitators was getting participants to a place where they "*feel comfortable to be vulnerable and ask questions*," which is a pre-requisite to continued tailoring the peer learning opportunity.

It may be challenging to focus on state-specific needs in a peer learning format, which lowers participants' ability to directly apply learnings to their states' contexts. In a peer learning setting, there is a limited focus on a state's specific needs, resulting in the need to adapt general learnings or inability to apply them to the state's context. One participant stressed that the time it took to tailor what was learned in peer learning opportunities could also be a burden: "*Sometimes you had so much good help that it caused extra work or committee meetings, and everyone's stretched to capacity. It's great when the TA's perfect, but if you have to spend time to tailor it, it's a hindrance to participating in TA opportunities.*"

Sustained peer engagement across states was rare. While state teams shared knowledge with each other, the varied nature of state-specific contexts may have limited the development of sustained relationships. However, some participants noted that facilitators could have fostered concrete opportunities for states to work together during the sessions, as well as provided opportunities for the states to connect outside of the opportunity.

Challenges to Implementing the Knowledge Gained During Peer Learning Opportunities

Participants experienced a range of challenges as they moved to implement learnings in their state. Challenges included a lack of lead agency representation as part of a state team or explicit state support of the work, states' legislative contexts (for example, lacking the authority to pursue implementation without legislature approval), costs, and conflicting state policies. Additionally, participants called out state readiness or capacity for change as a significant challenge to implementation. We describe these challenges in more detail below.

The lack of lead agency involvement in, or lack of explicit support and buy-in from state leadership for action plans developed as part of the peer learning opportunities posed implementation barriers for participants in two different peer learning opportunities. Both participants were non-state employees who contracted with the states. One of the participants submitted the state team's action plan to the lead agency and had no knowledge of its implementation status. The other participant stated that the state administrator rejected the action plan the state team developed. The participant strongly felt that to prevent such a situation in the future, a representative

from the lead agency should be involved or that the lead agency should officially sign off on the work at the outset.

Costs were another barrier to implementation. Two participants mentioned that while they were aware of the need for changes to their state's policies and systems, the lack of financial resources presented a major challenge. For instance, it was not possible to reallocate the necessary state funds needed to implement salary increases or change training requirements.

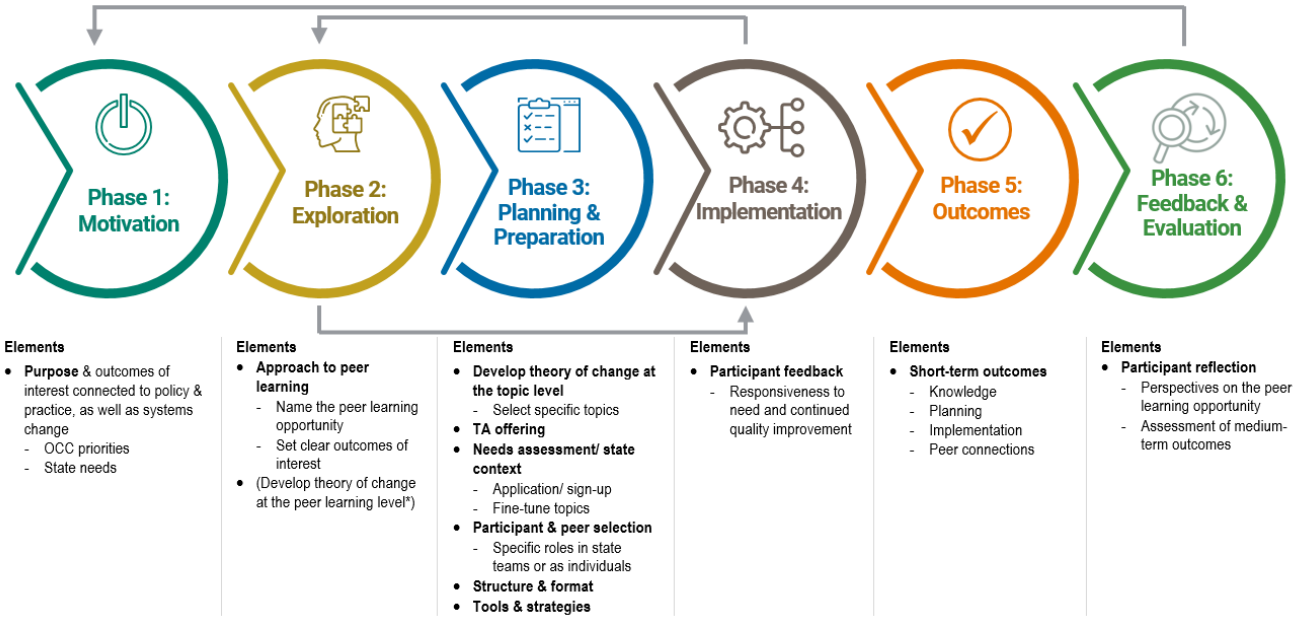
One participant reported that planned changes conflicted with other existing state policies and practices. For example, differences between state-run and non-state-run OST programs hindered alignment and the development of cross-system PD efforts. Additionally, differences stemming from licensing requirements affected workforce registries, resulting in fewer PD opportunities for non-licensed OST providers.

Several participants across all peer learning opportunities noted that states' readiness or capacity for change can be a significant challenge. One participant was aware that there were several topics of interest the state could not (yet) act on because of a lack of relevant information. The participant acknowledged that getting information was a primary goal for them. Another participant recognized that every state has a different capacity, and that state-level change is challenging to achieve: *"I admire and commend those who take on providing TA and help you implement programs in your state. I appreciate the help, but it's hard to take the information and do something with that, speaking as a former program administrator. It takes a lot of effort to make a small change."*

Structuring the Peer Learning Process

Through the cross-case analyses of four peer learning opportunities, we deepened our understanding of the peer learning process, which we began documenting through the environmental scan. We found that National Centers varied in their planning and realization of peer learning opportunities and may benefit from a more structured approach while maintaining the flexibility to tailor their efforts to states, territories, and tribes as much as possible. In addition to the elements of peer learning we described as part of the environmental scan, we were able to inductively identify other peer learning elements, which clustered into distinct phases of the peer learning process. The six consecutive phases that emerged from the analyses are motivation, exploration, planning and preparation, implementation, outcomes, and feedback and evaluation. All peer learning opportunities occurred in these phases. In Exhibit 9, we illustrate the phases and elements of the peer learning process we observed the Centers operationalize.

Exhibit 9. Peer Learning Process as operationalized by the National Centers



(*)While center staff did not intentionally formulate theories of change for peer learning during this phase, much of their explorative work contained elements of a theory of change.

In phase 1, *Motivation*, OCC priorities (i.e., CCDF requirements) and grantee needs (about child care and CCDF implementation) gave purpose to the peer learning opportunity. Broadly aimed at practice/policy and/or systems change, opportunities for peer learning were prompted by grantee needs that were documented in OCC's TA tracker.

In phase 2, *Exploration*, Center staff explored approaches to peer learning and closely defined the specific peer learning experience in alignment with OCC's and the Centers' desired goals and outcomes of interest. Staff also named their peer learning opportunities to reflect the nature or structure and process of the learning experience (e.g., Community of Learners, Peer Learning Group/Community, or Community of Practice). During this phase, staff considered specific states with documented needs in the topic area to help shape the peer learning approach and content. With an eye towards intended outcomes, Center staff also decided whether participation would be at the individual level or as part of a state team and what state and non-state roles would ideally be represented on the team.

The focus of phase 3, *Planning & Preparation*, was on planning the peer learning opportunity. During this phase, Center staff made potential participants aware of the opportunity, either by directly targeting specific states with the respective Regional Office's approval or by announcing the opportunity to a more general ACF/OCC audience. Center staff decided the structure of the opportunity, including mode, frequency, duration, and attendance requirements. They selected specific topics of interest, which were informed, or adjusted by, prospective state participants' current needs. Center staff asked participants to communicate their needs and interest through sign-up sheets or applications to support the planning process. These applications were not typically used to select participants. Instead, center

staff used the information provided to understand state context to better target the peer learning opportunity to participants or match peers in different cohorts. The information was also used to align content and outcomes, akin to a theory of change at the topic level. Center staff decided how to present topical content, including presentations by Center staff (including from other Centers), outside experts, or peers themselves. Staff also prepared various tools and strategies to support peer learning experiences, such as web platforms for storing resources and facilitating ongoing conversations among peers, “homework” assignments, or small group breakout sessions. Depending on their background and experience, some Center staff decided to engage a facilitator to lead the peer learning opportunity, or Center staff facilitated the opportunity themselves.

Phase 4, *Implementation*, saw the implementation of the peer learning opportunity. During this phase, some Center staff requested feedback after individual sessions, which was then used to adjust content and strategies for upcoming sessions and more generally informed the planning and implementation of subsequent peer learning experiences.

Phase 5, *Outcomes*, described outcomes that were achieved. Outcomes were related to knowledge increases, planning, and/or implementation of practice and policy changes. Peer connections and systems change were outcomes as well.

Phase 6, *Feedback and Evaluation*, which began at the end of the peer learning opportunity and could continue for up to six months after that, involved evaluation efforts. During this phase, Center staff evaluated their participants' peer learning experience, either directly tied to the peer learning opportunity or as part of more general Center evaluation efforts. The insights gathered via evaluation were then used to inform subsequent peer learning experiences.

Next Steps

The four peer learning opportunities had clearly formulated goals, and there were similarities in the strategies applied across Centers to support states in achieving outcomes. Over the short-term, all facilitators aimed to increase knowledge in their respective topic areas: OST workforce, infant and toddler practice and policy issues, and workforce registries. However, apart from one case, these opportunities were not rooted in concrete theories of change, that is, theories about why and how changes are expected to occur within the peer learning context. A theory of change may have provided the peer learning opportunities with a framework with which to determine the desired short and long-term goals of offering the learning opportunity and then backward plan to determine the best content and structure for the group to achieve the goals. Connected to clearly formulated goals, theories of change may therefore provide common starting points for planning and executing peer learning opportunities.

There were many similarities in the structure and processes of the four peer learning opportunities we examined. Yet there were also differences in intended goals for offering peer learning opportunities. We found that Centers varied in their planning and implementation and may benefit from more standardization in their approach while still being flexible to target the particular needs of their participants.

Based on these observations, we developed a toolkit to help facilitators more intentionally plan peer learning opportunities and for participants to choose opportunities that fit their needs. The toolkit was designed with the intention to maximize use by TA providers and ensure that peer learning is planned around the long-term goals and intended outcomes of lead agencies and matched to peers' readiness to implement CCDF requirements.

Appendices

Appendix I. Methods

Appendix II. Additional Information from the Environmental Scan

Appendix III. Case Studies

Appendix I. Methods

Background and Data Collection

Preparation

Before conducting the environmental scan of Office of Child Care (OCC) supported peer learning opportunities, we developed a set of descriptive research questions to guide our search and organize the information we collected. We created two sets of questions, one focused on the peer learning opportunity itself and the other focused on the intended outcomes.

To begin the environmental scan, we reached out to OCC to request names and descriptions of all peer learning opportunities held to date. OCC provided us with the names of 24 peer learning opportunities that had been or were currently being conducted (from 2015-2018) and shared available information. In some cases, we had names but little information, so we conducted Google searches and downloaded publicly available materials and cached webpages. Materials included online webinar PowerPoints, transcripts, participant rosters, and handouts distributed to participants.

Our activity began with an initial review of publicly available information on four peer learning opportunities to test the feasibility of the approach. Once we determined that the process yielded relevant and useful information, we then reviewed four more, followed by the 15 remaining learning opportunities. This work occurred on a rolling basis as we received information from OCC Contracting Officer's Representatives (CORs) and Federal Project Officers (FPOs). We note that this effort was not an exhaustive scan of the breadth of peer learning activity that has occurred to date by the National Centers. It did not include the tribal-focused peer learning opportunities conducted by the National Center on Tribal Early Childhood Development; we look forward to expanding this initial scan to include these efforts.

Initial Interviews

For the first eight peer learning opportunities reviewed in-depth, we requested missing information in writing from the CORs and FPOs of the National Centers. We gathered and reviewed additional information such as application forms and planning documents. Following the review of available materials, for the four initial peer learning opportunities, we also conducted phone interviews in June 2018 with facilitators and/or members of the planning team, clarifying the planning, peer learning, and evaluation processes, and gathering information to fill in gaps in our knowledge about them.

Peer Learning Opportunity Profiles and Literature Review

From these data sources we extracted information pertinent to each research question and prepared individual profiles for the 24 peer learning opportunities we examined. In an Excel matrix, we summarized the components and characteristics of all peer learning opportunities for comparison.

We then conducted a literature review on peer learning, focusing our scan on peer learning in the United States workplace context. While literature in this area was limited, we found the work of

Andrews and Manning (2016), focused on the use of peer learning to foster systems-level change in the public sector (in international development), to be relevant to our work, particularly about their description of peer learning stages and effective tools and resources used.

Based on the findings from the environmental scan and informed by the work of Andrews and Manning, we conducted initial analyses on the tools and techniques used in each peer learning opportunity and how they were used to support engagement and the peer learning process for participants.

We prepared a memo about what we learned from the environmental scan and presented the findings to the OCC leadership team in December 2018.

Case Study Sample Selection & Recruitment

Informed by the central elements identified in the environmental scan, we established criteria for the selection of individual peer learning opportunities for case studies from the list of 24 that were included in the scan. The three criteria for selection were as follows:

1. The peer learning opportunity had one of the following outcomes of interest:
    a. Increase of knowledge and skills
    b. Implementation of CCDF policy
    c. Support, strengthen, sustain system-level efforts
2. The peer learning opportunity offered follow-up TA, either:
    a. Between sessions; or
    b. After the conclusion of the session
3. The peer learning opportunity was offered by a National Center[35] funded by either:
    a. OCC; or
    b. Jointly between OCC and OHS

These criteria were informed by the information gleaned through the environmental scan and represented our understanding of the opportunities at that point in time.

We first selected opportunities representing the three different outcomes of interest and for each outcome, we proposed candidates that varied on the provision of follow-up TA and were offered either by OCC-focused National Centers only, or through collaboration between OCC- and OHS-focused National Centers.

In collaboration with OCC, we then selected the peer learning opportunities for the case studies. The selected peer learning opportunities were geared towards state and territory CCDF grantees. No tribal grantees were represented in these opportunities.

We then worked closely with OCC CORs and FPOs to reach out to the relevant National Center directors to invite them to participate in the case studies. In March and April of 2019, we met with the

[35] See Exhibit 1 for an overview of OCC and joint OHS-OCC National Centers.

directors. We informed them about the environmental scan and the specific peer learning opportunities for case studies and requested permission to speak with the lead facilitators to collect further data. We also answered questions and addressed concerns regarding data collection or the case studies in general. We organized these initial conversations around the following questions:

1. Do you have any questions regarding the purpose and intentions of the case studies?
2. What are your thoughts on using peer learning opportunities as a learning tool? Do you find them to be helpful? Challenging?
3. Do you have concerns we should be aware of before we begin the data collection process?
4. Are there certain states/participants who you would recommend us talking to regarding this peer learning opportunity?
5. Does your Center have any information on outcomes/post- peer learning opportunity implementation?

It was during these meetings with the directors that we learned of new Communities of Practice that evolved from NCECQA and SCBC's Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers. To fully understand the evolution of our peer learning opportunities, we added this fourth peer learning experience with approval from ACF. Due to Paper Work Reduction Act requirements, we limited our sample size and were not able to interview participants from those Communities of Practice.

After these meetings, we contacted the lead facilitators for the peer learning opportunities. All subsequent email exchanges and interviews continued with these facilitators and their co-facilitators.

For each of the three peer learning opportunities for which we could interview participants, we selected three participating states, with one respondent per state, for a total of nine participant interviews. Per OCC requests, CCDF administrators were excluded from the study to ensure that we were not burdening the states with our data collection. The recruited participant sample (recruitment described below) represented the following administrative offices across the three peer learning opportunities:

- Out of School Network
- School Age Program Support
- Division of Early Learning
- Regional Quality Rating, and Improvement System
- Children with Special Needs Branch, Department of Health
- I/T Set-Aside Funds for Quality and Availability of Care for Infants and Toddlers
- Professional Development Initiatives
- Workforce Registry

Peer Learning Participants: States, Organizations, Roles

Exhibit A1 details who participated in each peer learning opportunity by state. Based on the information available, we list relevant state departments and other state-based organizations, as well as position titles or roles. Note that not all participants attended all sessions. Across all opportunities, only one CCDF lead agency administrator attended, and that individual only attended one session.

Exhibit A1. Participating states and organizations across peer learning opportunities

Peer learning opportunity	State	Participating Organizations
NCECQA: Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Cohort 1	Arizona	Department of Education, Child Care Administration, Human Development organization, Literacy organization, Community organization
	Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands	Department of Community and Cultural Affairs, Head Start and Early Head Start, Northern Marianas College, Educational Services Organization
	Hawaii	Hawaii Department of Health, Hawaii Department of Health/Early Intervention Section, Hawaii Department of Human Services, Head Start State Collaboration Office, Maternity Care Coalition, non-profit child care organization, University of Hawaii Maui College, Community Pediatrics Institute, State Executive Office on Early Learning
	Oregon	Western Oregon University, Portland State University, Southwest Oregon Community College, Early Learning division, Community Action Agency
	Pennsylvania	Workforce Development, Home Visiting, State Office of Child Development and Early Learning, American Indian Center, Commonwealth Health Corporation
	Washington	Department of Early Learning, Western Washington University, County Children's Center, Children's Home Society, Children's Institute, Child Care Aware
	Wyoming	Department of Family Services, Early Childhood State Advisory Council, University of Wyoming
NCECQA: Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Cohort 2	Delaware	Delaware Health and Social Services, University of Delaware, Department of Education, Children and Family First
	Florida	Florida Office of Early Learning
	New York	NY Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, Early Care and Learning Council, Office of Children and Family Services, Nonprofit children's organization, Council of Children and Families
	Utah	Office of Child Care, state organization on early childhood training
	Virginia	Department of Social Services, State ITSN, Virginia Commonwealth University, Child Care Aware, statewide network of local early childhood systems

Peer learning opportunity	State	Participating Organizations
	Virgin Islands	Department of Human Services, Early Head Start, Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities
NCASE: Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining Out of Schooltime Workforce	Delaware	State CCDF Lead Agency, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, School-age Network/National Afterschool Association affiliate, United Way, Boys & Girls Club, 4-H, nonprofit organization, SEL organization, management consultant
	Florida	State CCDF Lead Agency, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, School-age Network/National Afterschool Association affiliate, CCR&R, State Association of Early Learning Coalitions, Department of Children and Families
	Indiana	State CCDF Lead Agency, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, School-age Network/National Afterschool Association affiliate, Indiana Early Learning, YMCA, County Commission on Youth
	New Hampshire	State CCDF Lead Agency, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, School-age Network/National Afterschool Association affiliate, State Licensing Agency, YMCA
	New York	State CCDF Lead Agency, School-age Network/National Afterschool Association Affiliate, School-Based Services for state non-profit organization, out of school time curriculum developer
	Wisconsin	State CCDF Lead Agency, School-age Network/National Afterschool Association Affiliate, statewide non-profit organization
NCECDTL: Early Childcare Workforce Registries and Training Career Pathway	Alaska	State Registry
	Florida	Head Start, FL Office of Early Learning, FL Dept of Education, Early Care and Education, Office of Early Learning
	Georgia	Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
	Hawaii	Hawaii Department of Human Services
	Illinois	Illinois Child Care Network
	Indiana	Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning
	Iowa	Department of Human Services, Iowa Registry
	Kansas	Department of Children and Families, The Family Conservancy
	Kentucky	University of Kentucky
	Maryland	Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Division of Early Childhood
	Missouri	Missouri Department of Social Services
	Montana	Early Childhood Services Bureau
	New Jersey	NJ Department of Human Services, NJ Registry, NJ Public Consulting Group

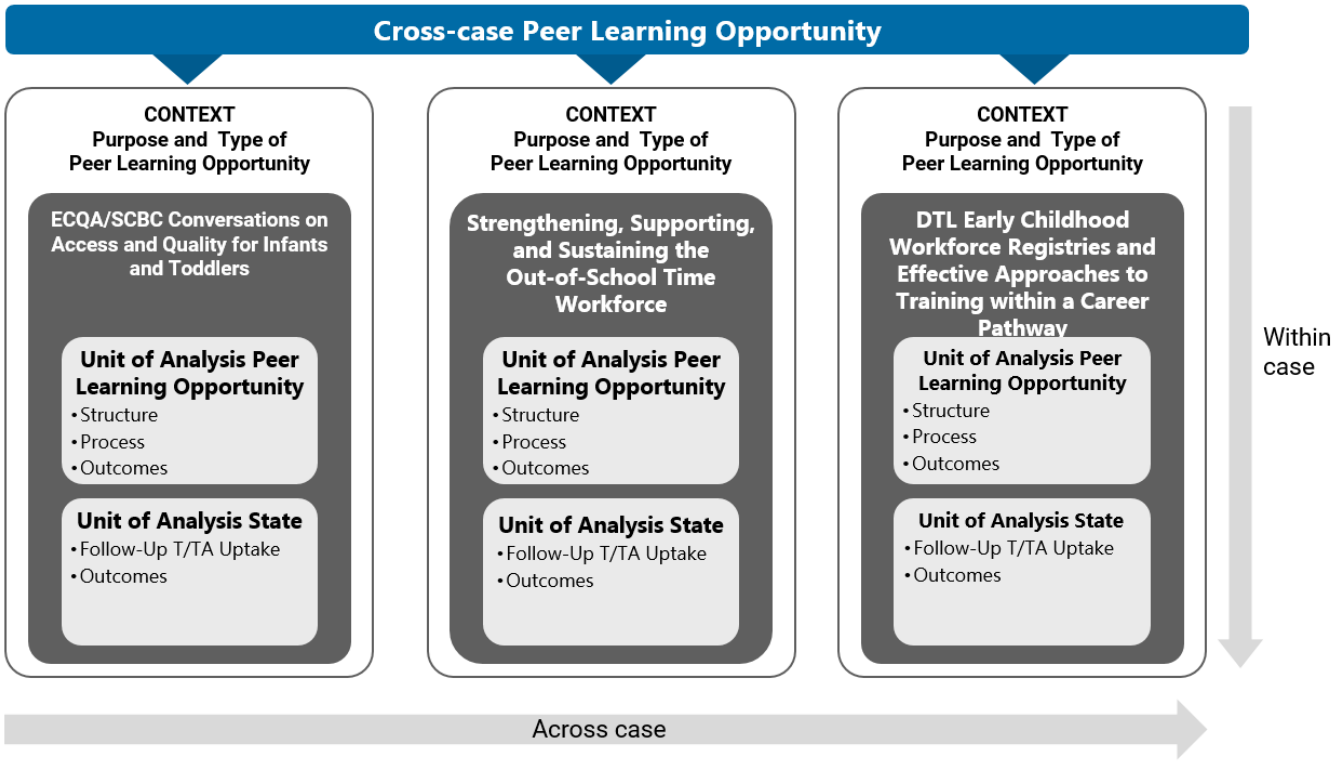
Peer learning opportunity	State	Participating Organizations
	New York	Office of Children and Family Services, NY Early Childcare Registry, New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, Educational Incentive Program, CUNY, Albany University, NY Association for the Education of Young Children
	Oklahoma	Department of Human Services
	Tennessee	Unknown
	Virginia	Virginia Department of Social Services

Case Study Design

Cross-Case Framework

In March 2019, we developed a cross-case framework, shown in Exhibit A2, to serve as the structure for both the protocol development and the data analysis based on insights from the environmental scan. The matrix below displays the major components and characteristics NORC analyzed both within and across each of the peer learning opportunities in the case studies. Our analyses enabled us to identify and provide insight into the links between effective methods and approaches used and the achievement of desired outcomes.

Exhibit A2. Cross-case framework



Data Sources: Interview Protocols for Center Staff and Participants

In the summer of 2019, we worked closely with OCC to develop the participant and facilitator protocols. The interview protocols were based on the research questions, the cross-case framework, and the environmental scan findings. Both protocols aimed to understand the connections between the different contexts, structures, and outcomes of the peer learning opportunities.

The facilitator protocol focused on structure and process, follow-up T/TA and uptake, and outcomes; it included a closing section asking about lessons learned. The participant protocol collected information on participants' contexts, experiences, and outcomes related to peer engagement, networking, and learning. The participant protocol included a closing section asking about perspectives on peer learning. Facilitator and participant protocols differed only in minor instances where specific aspects of the peer learning opportunity needed to be addressed. Both protocols were written for a 90-minute interview.

Before reaching out to facilitators and participants, we conducted cognitive interviews in late 2019 to solicit feedback on the questions and timing for each protocol. Given their knowledge and involvement in the peer learning opportunities, two OCC staff served as proxies for the facilitator and participant. The goal was to see if the questions were clear and easily answered. We made revisions based on the feedback received.

Procedures

Participant Recruitment

As noted above, team members first reached out to the relevant Center directors or facilitator to set up a time to discuss the case studies, including suggested states or participants to recruit for the interviews. Based on suggestions received from Center directors and a facilitator, and the information collected from the data sources described above, we proposed a group of potential participants to interview. We initiated outreach to participants in the fall of 2019. We reached out to other participants within a state when the sampled participants declined to take part in the interviews or did not respond to our request.

Data Collection

Facilitator and participant interviews were conducted concurrently. We conducted interviews with nine participants (three interviews per three of the four peer learning opportunities) and the facilitator (one interview per peer learning opportunity) between October 2019 and January 2020. Participants gave informed consent. For each interview, a NORC team member from the case study team served as a note-taker to record the detailed information collected. We informed participants and introduced them to the other team member on the call.

Analysis Plan

Coding Scheme

Once data collection was complete, we created a codebook for coding and analyzing qualitative data. We based the codebook on the cross-case framework and the facilitator and participant interview protocols with some distinct codes and sub-codes for participants and facilitators. To reduce intra-interviewer variability, more than one person read and coded each interview. Each team member began by coding the protocol of another team member's interviews to ensure coding was as objective as possible. After this first round of coding, the team met as a group to discuss and resolve any questions that emerged during the coding process. This process was repeated for the second round of coding, with each set of interviews coded by a second team member who had not previously engaged with that case study. As a result of this process, we established a unified understanding of each code, and minimized coding error rates.

Coding Procedure

We used Dedoose qualitative software to support coding and analysis. Its data management features provide the ability to excerpt, code, and analyze text. Dedoose provides a collaborative environment in which several researchers can simultaneously work together in this effort.

Limitations

Due to the time and effort involved in conducting in-depth case studies, we restricted ourselves to four case studies. Additionally, to comply with Paperwork Reduction Act requirements, we were limited in the number of participant interviews we could conduct without undergoing further OMB review. We conducted interviews with three participants for three of the four peer learning opportunities. The extent to which we can generalize these findings is limited due to the number of case studies conducted and the number of participants interviewed.

Participant recall was another limitation of the study. We contacted participants from three different states who participated in the NCECDTL PLG, but they did not recall participating in the PLG, and were thus unable to be interviewed. We conducted the interviews 2-3 years after the conclusion of the peer learning opportunities, and though the overall recall was strong, participants were at times unable to recall specifics of the experience.

Appendix II. Additional Information from the Environmental Scan

Exhibit A3 summarizes the information from the Environmental Scan. We note the title of each peer learning opportunity, the Centers that served as the facilitators, and the specific term used by the Centers to refer to the peer learning process. Exhibit A3 also summarizes the data sources consulted for each peer learning opportunity.

Exhibit A3. Topic and Data Sources for Peer Learning Opportunities [36]

Title of Peer Learning Opportunity (# of cohorts)	National Center	Term used by National Centers for the Peer Learning Opportunity*	Data Source		
			Publicly Available Information	Written follow-up from National Center	National Center Interview
Preventing Expulsion and Promoting Socio-Emotional Health (2 Cohorts)	SCBC & ECHW	PLF	X	X	X
Emerging Leaders (3 Cohorts)	SCBC	PLF	X	X	X
Efficient and Effective Monitoring in Licensing	NCECQA	PLG	X	X	X
Quality Initiatives and QRIS	NCECQA	PLG	X	X	X
Financing Quality Through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems	NCECQA	PLG	X	X	
Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (2 Cohorts)	NCECQA	PLG	X	X	
Strengthening Family Child Care	NCECQA	PLG	X	X	
Effective QRIS TA Systems (2 Cohorts)	NCECQA	PLG	X	X	
QRIS 101 Forum	NCECQA	PLG	X		
Child Care Licensing Community	NCECQA	Quarterly calls and online community	X		
Continuous Quality Improvement in Family Child Care (2 Cohorts)	NCECQA	PLG	X		
PLC #1: Licensing and License Exempt Systems	NCASE & NCECQA	PLC	X		

[36] The table lists the peer learning opportunities in the order in which the research team received them from OCC.

Title of Peer Learning Opportunity (# of cohorts)	National Center	Term used by National Centers for the Peer Learning Opportunity*	Data Source		
			Publicly Available Information	Written follow-up from National Center	National Center Interview
PLC #2: Creating a Successful Formula to Engage School-Age Programs in Quality Improvement Systems (2 Cohorts)	NCASE	PLC	X		
PLC #3: The Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce	NCASE	PLC	X		
Disabilities Service Coordinator	NCEDTL	COP	X		
State Learning Management Systems (LMS) Administrators	NCECDTL	CoP	X		
Infant/Toddler Credentials	NCECDTL	CoP	X		
Practice-Based Coaching (PBC)	NCECDTL	PLC	X		
Bridging the Gap	NCECDTL	CoP	X		
Compensation Initiatives E-Institute	NCECDTL	CoP	X		
Early Childhood Workforce Registries & Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway	NCECDTL	CoP	X		
State Systems Peer Learning Community on Family Engagement	PFCE	PLC	X		
Tribal Peer Learning Community on Family Engagement	PFCE	PLC	X		
Open Space Session Web-Based Meeting Series for CCDF Subsidy Policy Area	NCSIA	Open Space Session	X		

*PLF: Peer Learning Forum; PLG: Peer Learning Group; PLC: Peer Learning Community; CoP: Community of Practice

Appendix III. Case Studies

1. Community of Learners: Workforce Registries and Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway (NCECDTL)
2. Peer Learning Community: Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce (NCASE)
3. Peer Learning Group Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (NCECQA /SCBC)
4. Communities of Practice on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (NCECQA /SCBC)

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Community of Learners: Workforce Registries and Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway (NCECDTL)

Summary

The National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning (NCECDTL) developed their "*Workforce Registries and Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway* Community of Learners (CoL)" in response to TA requests related to workforce registries in the Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT). The goal for the CoL was to build strong connections between state and territory leaders with their workforce registries by hearing about successes and lessons learned from others. This peer learning opportunity took place during the 2015-2020 contract period.

The CoL had a two-tiered approach. In tier one, facilitators organized three webinar series with three sessions held for each webinar. Participants were not expected to attend all three webinar series, only the series and sessions of interest to them. In tier two, facilitators provided implementation support upon request. The CoL took place between September 2017 and March 2018. It started with a kick-off meeting followed by the three webinar series. Each webinar series was organized around a specific topic. All interested participants could attend and team participation was not required. No information was collected on participants in advance of the CoL. Facilitators used expert guest presenters as the main engagement strategy, along with feedback polls and time for Q&A. Participant feedback was sought regarding the webinar series they attended. Outcomes varied with one participant reporting that competencies were built into the state's training and approval system as a result of participating in the CoL. Another participant reported no increase in knowledge and a third participant did not recall the specifics of the CoL. State requests for follow-up TA was limited. The CoL facilitators addressed all follow-up TA requests.

Creating a Community of Learners

PURPOSE & TYPE

The impetus for the *Workforce Registries and Effective Approaches to Training within a Career Pathway* Community of Learners (CoL) was to "**build strong connections between state and territory leaders with their workforce registries by hearing about successes and lessons learned from others**." CoL sessions were intended to provide information on specific topics related to workforce registries, have invited states present on successful practices related to these topics, and offer a venue for discussion. Facilitators envisioned the CoL as the first tier of technical assistance (TA) to help states develop their workforce registries, with peer-to-peer or one-on-one interactions provided, if requested, as the second tier. Facilitators envisioned the COL as a series of webinars for the participants to learn what other Workforce Registries were doing and identify what might work for them.

STRUCTURE

Facilitators noted that **as a shared topic of interest across states, workforce registries present specific challenges**. Workforce registries have a common purpose of serving as a hub for data collection, reporting, and analyses on state professional development systems. In practice, however, they vary widely across states in terms of content and the types of data they collect. Due to these varying levels of development and content, facilitators chose presentations for the CoL that were high-level, rather than detail-focused, as a way to maximize each session's relevance across participating states.

The CoL started with a virtual kick-off meeting, followed by a series of webinars organized around three distinct topics, which were examining TA requests

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in state plans. Each topic included three webinars, for a total of nine sessions. For the kick-off meeting, facilitators prepared a Registry Brief, which provided an overview of existing registries. Due to the significant variations in state registries, the kick-off helped to further understand where individual registries were regarding specific functionalities. Those who attended the kick-off were not automatically expected to attend the topical sessions since, as noted by one of the NCECDTL facilitators, "some of those who participated in the kick-off were with registries that had existed for a while and would not require the information provided in the more focused topical series."

> **"Having a representative who understands the implications, including the unexpected implications, of a registry-related strategy is key to getting the conversation started."**

Table 1. Kick-off Meeting & Webinar Series

Topics	Number of Webinars	Duration	Dates
Kick-off Webinar	1	1 hour	September 2017
Trainer/Training Approval	3	1 hour each	October 2017 - January 2018
Professional Development Planning and Advising	3	1 hour each	November 2017
Career Pathways and Professional Development	3	1 hour each	January - March 2018

The three webinar series were conducted by three different teams within NCECDTL. The Training/Trainer Approval series was conducted by NCECDTL, the Career Advising & Planning was conducted by CCAoA (Child Care Aware of America), and the Career Pathways was conducted by AEM Early Childhood Services. Session one for each webinar series was an overview of the topic. The two subsequent sessions provided examples of best practices, often by invited state experts. Alternatively, an invited state expert conducted each of the three sessions for Career Pathways and Professional Development Registries.

PARTICIPATION

Facilitators initially selected potential state participants by identifying similar TA requests related to workforce registries in the Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT). Following approval by Regional Program Managers, facilitators sent invitations to state administrators who had requested the TA.[37] Each state administrator determined where information about the CoL would be sent. Facilitators decided that **any state administrator who registered could attend**, including states not initially identified through the TAT requests.

Participants were not required to attend as a team. There was **no application or form to complete** prior to attending. Facilitators intentionally decided against assignments to avoid participants choosing not to participate in a session because they had not read or completed an assignment. Two of the three CoL participants interviewed for the case study attended at least two sessions in a webinar series. One of these participants also attended a session in another webinar series.

FACILITATION

Facilitators expected states would "pop in and out for topics of interest" rather than consistently attend all topic areas or sessions. Therefore, while the three sessions in each series focused on the topic at hand, **content across the three sessions was not strongly linked** to allow learning to occur independent of attending the prior or subsequent session. For example, following the first session overview for the series on Trainer and Training Approval, the second session addressed national trends and best practices, while an invited state presented its approach to trainer and training approval during session three. The next series on Professional Development Planning and Advising also included an overview session with different states presenting at each of the next two sessions on a distinct component of their workforce registry related to PD planning and advising. Topic 3 on Career Planning and Professional Development Registries did not include an overview session. Each session focused on a separate national policy initiative related to the topic.

Participant feedback pointed to the need for more meaningful webinars with targeted objectives and outcomes and the need to target the states for which these objectives were relevant.

[37] No specifics were provided on which state administrators were invited.

FEEDBACK ON PROCESS

In reflecting on the state selection process, facilitators stressed the importance of understanding the workforce registry context of each participating state. Participants reinforced that it was important to know each state's context in advance to break down groups in meaningful ways. One participant indicated that the selection process resulted in "missed opportunities." This participant heard about the CoL by chance after it had started and felt states that should have been invited were not. The participant suggested that "having a better understanding at the national level of what's happening on the ground" could have improved knowing which states to invite.

EVALUATION & REFLECTION/PERSPECTIVES

Facilitators used surveys during the CoL to determine if participant needs were being met. They viewed evaluation as a crucial source of data for improving peer learning opportunities.

The NCECDTL standard evaluation form was used at the end of each Webinar series. Facilitators were required to use the standard NCECDTL evaluation form and were not able to "tweak" any of the questions to get more detailed feedback about *the content of* this specific CoL. Facilitators were frustrated by the absence of any other evaluation options. Facilitators noted that an evaluation providing more detailed feedback on the CoL would have helped improve the outcomes for other peer learning experiences moving forward.

Facilitators reflected on the importance of understanding participants' state contexts. They also pointed to scheduling challenges since not all sessions were scheduled prior to the start of the CoL. This resulted in longer breaks between sessions than was originally intended by the facilitators. Facilitators noted that: "It is important to establish a tighter timeframe to better sustain engagement."

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS OUTCOMES

Figure 1. CoL outcomes

Knowledge Change	
A central goal of facilitators was to inform participants of best practices for workforce registries across different states. Participants reported that the high level focus of each session limited their ability to gather information relevant to~~o~~n their state's specific needs.	One participant learned about other states' workforce registry practices and the challenges they faced in developing their registries. Another participant indicated that the information provided in the CoL was too basic and that no new learnings or increase in knowledge resulted from attending the CoL.
Peer Engagement & Networking	
Facilitators identified using expert state presenters to conduct webinars as the most successful engagement strategy.	A key engagement challenge identified by the facilitators was finding a way to get participants to a place where they felt comfortable to be vulnerable and ask questions. Facilitators also used feedback polls and time for Q&A as engagement strategies. Engagement platforms included a chat box (most used), a phone line, and My Peers (both minimally used).

Building State Capacity

MOTIVATION FOR PARTICIPATION

Participants' reasons for joining the CoL differed, and reflected states' interest and expertise in workforce registries:

- Inform the CoL participants about her state's registry and provide expertise
- Develop a state-wide registry
- Improve the education and experience of the state's workforce at the time.

FOLLOW-UP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA)

No participants interviewed requested follow-up TA. Facilitators reported that tier-two follow-up TA was provided to two states (not interviewed) following the CoL. A thorough analysis of a workforce registry was conducted for one state, and subsequent recommendations were used by the state. The facilitator had recently learned that the state was moving to implement phase two of the recommendations. A second state requested help with the wording of a survey questionnaire, and the facilitator was informed that the TA provided improved the quality of the information received. Interviews were not conducted with the states that received

follow-up TA, so feedback from these states is not available.

OUTCOMES

Figure 2. State-level outcomes

Learning applied to create change at scale	
Outcomes varied.	One participant reported that, as a result of participating in the CoL, competencies were built into the state's training and approval system. Another participant reported no increase in knowledge or, therefore, outcomes achieved, and the third participant did not recall the specifics of this CoL.

Conclusion

The CoL was designed as a series of independent webinars divided into three major topic areas. Within each webinar series, participants were not expected to attend each session. Facilitators were very knowledgeable about the workings of workforce registries and understood the importance of framing learning within a state's context. Facilitators did not collect information from participants about the context of their state's workforce registries in advance of the sessions, which both facilitators and participants acknowledged may have limited the ability to learn from each other. Facilitators highlighted the importance of better understanding "the culture of the audience" and emphasized the importance of framing learning within each state's context. Participants emphasized the importance of facilitators knowing each state's context to promote interactions in meaningful ways.

The CoL facilitators understood that providing a two-tiered approach, with tier two focused on offering more individualized TA, was important to supporting the individual needs of participants around the topics addressed and the implementation of what had been learned. Participant interview feedback supported this even though we did not interview the states that requested TA.

State-level outcomes varied significantly across participants, with one of the three participants interviewed reporting a change relevant to the state's workforce registry and the other two reporting no increase in knowledge or limited recall of the CoL.

The interplay of several factors could explain these outcomes and the limited recall on the part of the participants contacted and interviewed.

- First, states' varying levels of registry development necessitated more high-level, rather than detail-focused, presentations to maximize the relevance of the information presented across states. This might explain the limited change in policy or practice indicated by participants.
- By design, participants were expected to attend only sessions of interest to them. Therefore, the content of each CoL session was not strongly linked to prior sessions or following sessions.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

NORC thanks the NCECDTL facilitators and participants who shared their experiences and lessons learned with us and the Office of Child Care for supporting this research.

Peer Learning Community: Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce (NCASE)

Summary

The National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE) developed their "*Peer Learning Community (PLC): Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce*" in response to TA requests related to OST workforce topics in OCC's Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT). The goals for this PLC were for states to 1) collaborate to identify promising practices and share expertise and challenges, 2) create action plans to address OST workforce objectives, and 3) foster relationship-building among state representatives from organizations and agencies *within* a state.

The PLC consisted of five web-based sessions between November 2017 and March 2018. Each session lasted two hours. Participation in the PLC required that participants be part of a cross-sector state team including both CCDF Lead Agency staff and non-state positions crucial to the OST work. Each state team lead completed an application prior to participation that was designed to identify the state's needs and topics of interest. Center facilitators used several facilitation strategies, including peer presentations, break-out sessions for state teams, a self-assessment tool, and between-session homework. All participating team leads reported an increase in knowledge and the successful creation of an action plan, and a Center evaluation showed that 73% of respondents indicated that they would continue to implement their action plan. The PLC also achieved its goal of building relationships among state representatives from organizations and agencies within a state. Take-up of follow-up TA was limited.

Creating a Peer Learning Community

PURPOSE & TYPE

In a unique position within ACF's Early Childhood T/TA System, the National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE) focuses on serving school-aged children (ages 5-12). The Center's overall purpose is to connect early childhood and school-age systems within states. Due to its resource level, the Center does not offer in-person TA. However, the Center's remote TA formats allow for the inclusion of all stakeholders, who might be in various places within a state and across the country.

The Center developed their "Peer Learning Community (PLC): Strengthening, Supporting, and Sustaining the Out-of-School Time (OST) Workforce" in response to TA requests related to OST workforce topics in OCC's Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT). The facilitators of NCASE's PLC stated that their goal for this peer learning opportunity was for states to collaborate to identify promising practices, share expertise and challenges, and create action plans to address out-of-school-time (OST) workforce objectives. In line with the Center's overall purpose, the facilitators intended to support state systems-building with this peer learning community (PLC) by helping states connect their discrete systems to strengthen the OST workforce and strengthen alignment with the early childhood (EC) workforce.

Facilitators used an active implementation[38] approach via the work of cross-sector state teams. The cross-sector focus expanded team building beyond CCDF office staff to include OST staff statewide. The intended short-term outcome was to build within-state cross-sector teams that create action plans to address their states' OST workforce goals. The broader, long-term goal was to create

[38] The National Implementation Research Network, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina (n.d.). *Module 1, Framework 2: Implementation Stages | NIRN (unc.edu)*.

systems change by helping states connect their discrete OST systems. Investment in building state teams occurred upfront. "The heart of PLC was to get people who don't otherwise connect in the state to set time aside for them to connect."

> **"The heart of PLC was to get people who don't otherwise connect in the state to set time aside for them to connect."**

NCASE's facilitators worked with the respective OCC Regional Offices to reach out to six CCDF state administrators to let them know their state was a good candidate for participation in the PLC. All six states opted to participate: Delaware, Florida, Indiana, New Hampshire, New York, and Wisconsin.[39]

STRUCTURE

The PLC consisted of five web-based sessions between November 2017 and March 2018. Each session lasted two hours. Each state team lead completed a sign-up sheet prior to participation that was designed to identify each state's needs and topics of interest. On the sign-up sheet, state team members also indicated their expertise in select topic areas which helped facilitators determine potential states to present to other state peers participating in the PLC. This information was used by facilitators to develop the PLC curriculum. Additional topics were included based on the facilitator's knowledge and the status of the OST field.

The five sessions addressed:

1. Introductions to Teams and Active Implementation
2. Data and Access
3. Leadership Support, Technical Assistance, and Turnover
4. Partnerships and Strategies
5. Support for Family Childcare (FCC) Providers

Each session followed a standard agenda outlined in Table 1 . After each session, PLC facilitators disseminated a summary for people who had missed the session or needed a refresher, as well as a homework assignment for the next session to facilitate continued within-state team conversations between sessions.

Table 1. Standard Agenda for each Session

Topics	
Team sharing	A facilitated conversation where the state team leads shared their progress
Topic & goal setting	Content sharing by NCASE and participating states on topics identified by participants
Information sharing	Large group discussions/sharing of expertise and resources on the topic
State team breakouts	State teams continue discussion of day's topic and develop their state's action plan
Debrief and next steps	State teams came back together as a PLC to debrief and to determine next steps

PARTICIPATION

Participation in the PLC required that participants be part of a within-state cross-sector state team as a strategy to support team building. The facilitators suggested that the team include CCDF Lead Agency staff and non-state positions crucial to the OST work, such as representatives from statewide afterschool networks and the National Afterschool Association (NAA). The participant roles were intentional to foster a connection between statewide afterschool networks and state staff because "these people are never at the same meeting in person." Team leads came from an afterschool agency or from the state agency.

All three state participants represented in this case study were team leads of their respective state teams. Participants included a Manager of School-Age Program Support with the state's Office of Early and Out of School Learning, the director of a state out of school network, and a program and policy analyst working with the state's Division of Early Learning. All three participants received information about the PLC from their state's lead agency; however, only two participants had explicit support and buy-in from their state's leadership. One participant was in a contract position with the state and described being unsuccessful in bringing a lead agency representative onto the state team.

The three participants attended all five PLC sessions. As team leads, they expected everyone on their teams to participate in each session. All team members saw participating as a priority in the pursuit of state goals. Teams held follow-up meetings in between sessions and continued their work outside of the PLC.

[39] The information presented here is based on interviews with three state representatives and National Center facilitators, as well as publicly available materials.

FACILITATION

In addition to state teams' completion of sign-up forms, facilitators used six facilitation strategies. First, to facilitate a collaborative assets-based approach, NCASE staff asked team leads to provide them with a list of topics of interest and indicate topics in which each state team had expertise. This approach served to help facilitators target PLC activities to participants to the greatest extent possible and support peer learning. It also helped facilitators identify topics and presenters and honor the (peer) expertise that individual participants brought to the PLC.

> **"We're not the experts. We have the knowledge, but we are here to facilitate learning between expert peers. This helps to set up learning and engage participants."**

Second, NCASE facilitators offered optional one-on-one calls between TA providers and state teams.

Third, during the PLC, the facilitators compiled a list of resources shared by NCASE and participants. These resources were then made available to each participant as well as to the Regional Offices.

Fourth, during breakout sessions, each state team worked on a Center-provided state self-assessment PD questionnaire and state action plan. On a monthly basis, facilitators asked state teams to continue completing their self-assessment as way to determine the state's current status on the ongoing OST work, and what resources they had so they could continue developing their action plan.

As a fifth strategy, facilitators assigned homework between sessions to facilitate ongoing within-state team conversations.

Finally, the PLC facilitators made use of MyPeers, through a workgroup, allowing facilitators and participants to post and share resources, questionnaires, and action plans.

FEEDBACK ON PROCESS

The facilitators intended to use MyPeers to foster sharing and peer engagement. They acknowledged that it was challenging to engage busy people in online communications between sessions. The facilitators were optimistic that participants would use MyPeers to have conversations, but they observed that MyPeers was not designed for easy interaction. For the PLC, MyPeers worked more as a document repository for resources, questionnaires, and action plans – "*a place where people could go find stuff rather than an interactive community.*"

The facilitators indicated some of the challenges with MyPeers could be attributed to the limitation of OCC-funded Center use of MyPeers as a workgroup feature, which is less user-friendly than the communities feature (only available to OHS-funded Centers) and which allows users to post content.

To improve PLC facilitation and better meet participant needs, the facilitators recognized it would have been valuable to have had individual conversations with each team lead before the sessions started, as a way to build relationships and discuss their state's strengths and needs. They also would have liked more contact with participants throughout the PLC, for example, via team lead meetings.

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS OUTCOMES

Table 2. PLC outcomes

Knowledge Gains	
All participating team leads reported an increase in knowledge and the successful creation of an action plan.	The facilitators learned the PD questionnaire was revelatory for participants. Facilitators reported that in Center evaluations of PLC efforts, many participants indicated they were planning to implement their completed action plan and use what they learned in their state.
Peer Engagement & Networking	
A central goal of the PLC was building relationships among state representatives from organizations and agencies *within* a state. The facilitators' impression was that the PLC format was successful in achieving that goal and that many state teams continued to work together after the conclusion of the PLC.	Regarding peer engagement across states, the PLC facilitators acknowledged that despite having the information state teams provided prior to participating, it was a challenge to match state teams at diverse levels of development in terms of the state's OST work.

An additional challenge was matching participants who had existing team structures with teams that were newly formed. However, the facilitators noted that participants from different states shared information during the debrief sessions and followed up with each other in the chat.

From their evaluation efforts, facilitators knew participants reached out to other states outside of PLC but had no information on what prompted the follow-up. Facilitators guessed that follow-up might have been based on state expertise, or content that was discussed in sessions.

EVALUATION & REFLECTION/PERSPECTIVES

The NCASE evaluation team evaluated the PLC. The facilitators reported that *"people were fairly positive. Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that they would continue to implement the state action plan."*

Facilitators noted that break out rooms for within-state work will be a cornerstone of this PLC going forward because it worked well, and participants loved it. "*Carving out time for people* [from the same state] *to get together and talk – the structure was well received. We underestimate the power of that.*"

Participant reflections included an emphasis on the need for state leadership buy-in to make the most of peer learning opportunities, and "*to get something done*". The lack of lead agency buy-in was a major barrier for the participant who worked as a state contractor. She recognized that someone at the state-level should have been involved but was not sure how to make that happen.

Another participant indicated that facilitators needed to have a better understanding of "*where everyone* [was] *on the continuum* [of development] *and be prepared to support those on all edges of the continuum.*" She stressed the importance of states needing to be at the same level for peer learning to be beneficial. She added that if states were at various levels of planning or implementation, it created an imbalance in the learning process.

Building State Capacity

FOLLOW-UP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA)

The facilitators mentioned that action plans provide good structures for follow up; however, only one state responded to the Center's multiple offers of follow-up TA. The facilitators wondered why the states did not participate in follow-up TA. NCASE held a PLC "reunion" in June 2018 that was sparsely attended. However, according to facilitators, the few teams that participated were engaged and interested in talking about where they were and about their remaining challenges. NCASE now typically offers monthly team lead meetings for all PLCs during the 6 months following their completion for interested parties.

No participants interviewed requested follow-up TA. The participant in the contractor role explained that her team did not pursue follow-up with the Center or on that topic because the CCDF administrator had rejected the action plan. Another participant was considering participating in another related NCASE opportunity, which would bring together states that have been making progress towards goals.

The facilitators described the biggest challenge to follow up, and potentially providing follow-up TA, is that they are not supposed to follow-up with states due to concern around TA evaluation fatigue. This limits the Center's ability to provide continued TA or understand the effects of the TA they provided.

OUTCOMES

Table 3. State-level outcomes

Learning applied to create change at scale	
One major goal that two participating states had achieved was the expansion of PD to OST providers.	Two participants are actively involved in implementing specific action steps, working on incremental policy and systems change. One participant in a contractor role explained that her team's action plan was rejected by the CCDF administrator, which is why no changes resulted from their participation and team work

Conclusion

NCASE's PLC resulted in knowledge gain for all three participants in this case study. Participants learned from the experiences of and discussions with their peers in other states. They used the information and insights to build state action plans outlining concrete steps to be taken towards practice and policy changes and system changes.

The focus of the PLC work was on peers from *within* a state – on learning to be a team, on learning from each other, and on learning together. As a state team, members from different sectors within a state set a joint goal, created an action plan, and left the PLC with the intention of implementing this goal in their state. Accordingly, all participants emphasized the role of their state teams in plan development and, for some of them, subsequent implementation in the state.

Learning from state peers may have depended on how well-matched participating states were. If a central goal of the PLC is to create cross-sector system alignment, then a participating state that already (at least partially) achieved this goal might not benefit from participation. NCASE facilitators recognized this challenge. While they aimed to tailor the PLC to participants as much as possible, they acknowledged it would be beneficial to have in-depth conversations with teams prior to the first session and to have regular check-in with team leads while the PLC is ongoing to make sure all participant needs are met.

All PLCs following this one now include individual team planning calls before the sessions begin

Whether or not participants achieve outcomes at the state level through implementing their action plan appears to be related to buy-in from the state lead agency. One participant who held a contracted position and received the information about the PLC from the CCDF administrator, found her team's work voided when the administrator rejected their action plan. The team lost the cross-sector momentum they had gained from participating in this PLC.

In contrast, two other participants received explicit support from the state CCDF leadership. They worked on behalf of the state leadership on clearly identified state priorities. As such, these state teams continued to work together on implementing their action plan.

Acknowledgements

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Peer Learning Group - Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers (NCECQA/ SCBC)

Summary

The *National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance* (NCECQA) together with the State Capacity Building Center Infant Toddler Specialist Network (SCBC/ITSN) developed their *Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Peer Learning Group* as a way to address the OCC priority on infants and toddlers and requests in OCC's Technical Assistance Tracker (TAT). The goal of the PLG was to deliver TA to states on specific topics related to infants and toddlers. Specifically, the PLG aimed to (1) provide an overview of the essential policies of infant and toddler care; (2) have participants explore the principles and practices that support high-quality infant/toddler care, including QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) and teacher development; (3) help participants consider strategies to build their supply and quality of infant/toddler care and address barriers to access; and (4) support participating state teams to develop a plan for supporting and infants and toddlers based on state priorities.

The PLG conducted an introductory meeting for state team leads in June 2016 and held 4 webinars for each of two cohorts between July and October 2016. Following the webinars, Cohort 1 participated in an in-person meeting in October 2016. Each webinar lasted 1.5 hours.

Participation in the PLG required participants to be part of a state team of stakeholders. Each state completed an application detailing why they were interested in participating as well as their state needs and areas of interest. These applications were used to create the two cohorts.

During the PLG, TA providers presented on and oversaw discussions around infant/toddler topics. These topics included Infant and Toddler Care policies, Parents and Providers, Community Partnerships, Infant Toddler Workforce and Professional Development, and the Implications for State Policies and State Systems. The facilitators invited experts from NCECQA, the ITSN, and BUILD to present on challenges and successful practices related to these topics. State teams completed homework and worked on an action plan between sessions. All states successfully created an action plan detailing next steps and took steps to implement it within their state. The PLG was successful in building lasting relationships between state team members. Take-up of follow-up TA was limited.

Creating a Peer Learning Group

PURPOSE & TYPE

This PLG explored the principles and practices that support high-quality infant/toddler care, how quality rating and improvement system standards can target infant/toddler quality, and teacher development. *The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance* (NCECQA) and the State Capacity Building Center's Infant Toddler Specialist Network (ITSN) (created and led two cohorts of the *Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Peer Learning Group* in the summer and fall of 2016. Infant and toddler policy was both an OCC priority and a frequently requested T/TA topic in the TAT. The peer learning group (PLG) was developed in response to this need. Facilitators intended the PLG to be a starting-off point for more intense follow-up T/TA requests on infants and toddlers.

The *Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers* PLG had the following goals:

- Provide an overview of the essential policies of infant and toddler care
- Have participants explore the principles and practices that support high-quality infant/toddler

care, including QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) and teacher development

- Help participants consider strategies to build their supply and quality of infant/toddler care and address barriers to access
- Support participating state teams to develop a plan for supporting and infants and toddlers based on state priorities.

STRUCTURE

The PLG used a team and action-oriented approach. States participated as part of state teams, whose members supported multiple infant/toddler settings (such as state TA providers, CCDF lead agency staff, and staff of infant/toddler and family child care networks). Each state team had a "lead" who was required to attend every session and was in charge of leading their state teams in the development of state action plans and the completion of homework assignments.

Table 1. Topics Addressed

	PLG Topics
1.	Infant and Toddler Care policies
2.	Parents and Providers
3.	Community Partnerships
4.	Infant Toddler Workforce and Professional Development
5.	Implications for State Policies and State Systems

The PLG presented state teams with a State Team Planning Tool, an Action Plan Template, and an assessment framework to help them identify state needs and develop their action plan.

Between sessions, teams completed homework assignments and worked on their action plans. This allowed them to outline areas of need and connect their learning to post-PLG next steps. This approach helped sustain engagement in the PLG, even though sessions were only held once a month.

PARTICIPATION

Prior to the PLG there was a launch discussion for state team leads from both cohorts (held June 1-3, 2016, at the Infant Toddler Strategies Institute in Kansas City). Facilitators introduced the state team leads to one another and provided an overview of the topics that they would cover and the structure of the webinars. The discussion was helpful in establishing relationships between facilitators and participants early on and provided an opportunity for representatives from the two cohorts to meet in person. Based on this meeting and the initial goals of the PLG, facilitators finalized the agendas for each of the 4 webinar sessions.

There were four monthly online sessions, each of which lasted an hour and a half. Cohort 1 took place from June to September 2016. An in-person meeting took place October 2016, where participants attended sessions on additional topics of interest. States also shared action plans with one another to receive feedback from the facilitators and peer states.

Cohort 2 began one month later than Cohort 1, with four online sessions from July-October 2016. Cohort 2 did not have an in-person meeting following the PLG.

FACILITATION

Facilitators planned the PLG agendas and topics far in advance, based on state requests in the TA tracker, reading the applications submitted by interested states, and by consulting subject matter experts at NCECQA, the ITSN, and the BUILD initiative. Prior to the PLG, facilitators also asked content experts from BUILD and the ITSN to present to the group. OCC provided feedback on preferred presentation topics and materials and worked in partnership with the ITSN and NCECQA on developing curriculum.

The structure was the same for all sessions. Across sessions, presenters welcomed participants, presented session objectives and content, provided an opportunity for team discussion of the practical impact of content, and gave opportunities for state team reflection following the presentation. Facilitators built in time for questions and discussion during the presentation portion of a webinar. Facilitators let state teams know ahead of time if they wanted them to share an experience or knowledge relevant to the topic, so that they would be prepared to share.

> **According to participants, the facilitators made a "big effort to make sure what was presented was what participants found most useful."**

FEEDBACK ON PROCESS

The PLG facilitators welcomed feedback. They gathered feedback during each session through polls and chat boxes, as they wanted to improve the experience for the current and future PLGs. Facilitators attempted to adjust based on participant needs within the constraints of the pre-set agenda. Halfway through the PLG, facilitators

learned through feedback surveys that participants wanted to slow down and engage more deeply on certain topics. Participants also wanted more time for discussion and to process the new resources they were receiving. Facilitators tried to be responsive, however, because session topics were set beforehand, there was little room to make changes to the content or provide more time for discussion. Participants reported that the content was tailored as much as possible to the needs of the group.

PEER LEARNING GROUP OUTCOMES

Table 2. PLG outcomes

Knowledge Change	
Case study participants found the PLG to be a positive learning experience.	State participants believed that the PLG provided a good structure in which to learn from others, including those in their state. The virtual community allowed them to listen to other state team members, while also having discussions within their state teams on how to apply the relevant learning to their own state and create an action plan of next steps. The PLG also helped the state teams hear from other state team members and determine whether their state was on the right track regarding infant/toddler policies.
Peer Engagement & Networking	
A central goal of the PLG was building relationships among state representatives from organizations and agencies within a state. The facilitators' impression was that the PLG format was successful in achieving that goal and that many state team members continued to work together after the conclusion of the PLG.	Skilled facilitators and technology were utilized to engage peers in the peer learning experience. NCECQA utilized facilitators from BUILD to support the PLGs. BUILD facilitators encouraged participants to interact and share their ideas. The webinars allowed for participant interaction through chat boxes, discussion rooms, and small groups, and in this way, the technology provided a connection between teams across PLG activities. MyPeers was used as a resource repository to share tools and resources from the presenters as well as from participants.
No participants sustained relationships with peer states in the PLG.	Cohorts were large and there was a lot of content to deliver, which made it challenging at times for state team members to converse and connect with one another. There was less time for discussions amongst participants, and the large number of participants on each call meant that it was harder to have in-depth discussions on their specific state context and discover similarities amongst the other states. Participants would have liked to use a webinar platform that would have allowed them to see each other face-to-face, such as zoom or WebEx. They thought this would have helped them better engage and build relationships with other states.

EVALUATION & REFLECTION/PERSPECTIVES

In addition to the informal feedback collected for continuous quality improvement (CQI) throughout the PLG, the PLG had formal midway and end of PLG evaluations. A survey was given to all participants after the PLG ended. Structured interviews were conducted with a random sample of participants both midway and a few months after the conclusion of the PLG. These evaluations helped the facilitators know what was working and where to make changes to improve future TA delivery.

This was the first PLG that the study participants had been a part of. **In reflecting on this first experience, participants noted that there were no barriers to participating in the PLG, as the webinar format was easy and accessible.** Not needing to travel was cost-saving and the time commitment was reasonable. State team members were eager to learn and participate and found time to attend every session. Turnover and time commitments were not barriers for the state teams, as participants were enthusiastic to participate and learn to move the state forward.

There were also definite areas for improvement. Study participants noted state structures and systems differ widely, and the content being presented in the PLG did not always align with their state's context. Study participants would have liked more guidance on how to translate the PLG resources so that they made sense for their state. However, participating in the PLG helped the participants gauge their states' progress in comparison to that of other participating states, and helped them determine good next steps.

Building State Capacity

The three PLG participants who participated in the case study were team leads of their respective state teams. Team leads were appointed by their state's CCDF administrators.

- Participant 1 worked with her state's set-aside funds to improve the quality and availability of care for infants and toddlers.
- Participant 2 was the state team lead but did not work for the state. No one from State 2 was able to participate, but the state did not want to lose out on the learning opportunity. The representative from the state who had been tapped to lead the PLG did not have time to participate and asked Participant 2 to be the lead instead. The state team ended up consisting of two contractors who worked regionally. The

contractor was personally interested in the topic and motivated to raise expectations for Infant and Toddler care. However, the contractor's lack of knowledge of state priorities and experience with statewide systems made it difficult to interact with other state teams on behalf of the state and implement any action plan or next steps.

- Participant 3 was a government operations consultant working directly for the state on professional development initiatives. She coordinated PD initiatives and state registry activities in the state Office of Early Learning.
- Participant 1 was a member of Cohort 2 and Participants 2 and 3 were part of Cohort 1.

FOLLOW-UP TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (TA)

Because the second cohort included states and territories still developing a strategy for supporting infants and toddlers, the ITSN facilitators offered them individualized coaching to help build their internal capacity. However, only one or two state teams took the National Center up on this offer. The National Centers hypothesized that this was because the PLG was too big and there was not enough time to build trust between state teams and the facilitator. States may have been more likely to seek out coaching from an entity with whom they had an existing relationship or had the time to build. Similarly, the facilitators received no requests for targeted TA following either cohort of the PLG. Instead, state team members reported attending conferences and webinars from a variety of sources on infants and toddlers following the PLG.

OUTCOMES

Table 3. State-level outcomes

Learning applied to create change at scale	
The goal of the PLG was for states to identify areas of need and develop a plan for supporting infants and toddlers based on state priorities. While all states developed action plans, states reported a varying degree of success in implementing their action plans post-PLG.	Participant 1 and her state team members built strong working relationships as a result of participating in the PLG. After the conclusion of the PLG, they passed on information from the PLG to relevant teams within their state who were doing relevant work. The state improved coordination between stakeholders to better disseminate resources and training. This has prevented duplication of training and allows for small groups to participate in more trainings and then share what they learn with others. Participant 2 noted that because of her position, to her knowledge, there had been no state policy changes as a result of the PLG. However, she disseminated the resources and tools from the PLG to the state's regional Infant Toddler Specialists to improve how they related to teachers and Center directors. Knowing that other states had adopted these policies made the state team lead feel confident sharing them with the Infant Toddler Specialists in her region. Participant 3 shared information from the PLG with the child care advisory committee, CCBDG group, and CCDF administrator as well as at the Infant Toddler Specialist meeting. As a result of the PLG and the strong relationships built between the state team members, the state explored policies around infant and toddler workforce salaries and childcare ratios. They also began working on a flexible child care subsidy program for families.

Conclusion

While the participants interviewed reported learning from other states as an outcome at the PLG level, they did not form any relationships with other states. However, Participant 1 and Participant 3 reported that the PLG enabled them to build strong relationships within their state teams. Participants expressed that these connections resulted in continued collaboration, which was crucial for implementation of their action plan and achieving other state-level outcomes. While Participant 1 and Participant 3 were still working on implementing the goals and next steps outlined in the action plan, their deepened connections with others in the state had been critical to their progress. Participant 2 was not an employee of the state and was at the time working as a contractor at the regional level. As a result, she found it difficult to represent

the state during PLG discussions and was unable to disseminate the action plan and resources at the state level.

This was the first PLG in which any of the three study participants had participated. Participants from different states were able to share tools and resources with each other, and through the PLG discussions, they realized that they experienced similar challenges and approached policy issues in similar manners and went back to their state with this information to begin working on next steps. However, participants reported that they would have liked more time for discussions and exploring resources during the learning experience, more help from facilitators in forming connections, and an opportunity to use webinar software with a video component so that they could see each other and form better connections with other states

This was the first PLG for both NCECQA and the ITSN. They were excited to offer this type of TA to promote learning and interactions between states on infant and toddler issues. However, because this was their first PLG experience, the facilitators walked away with lessons learned. NCECQA and the ITSN realized that although they had spent a lot of time and effort on planning the PLG curriculum, the planning made the sessions inflexible and less responsive to requests participants made during the PLG. As a result, NCECQA and the ITSN transitioned to using less structured peer learning formats, specifically Communities of Practice, instead of PLGs. For more information on this approach, see Case Study #4.

Acknowledgements

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Communities of Practice (NCECQA/SCBC)

Summary

After the conclusion of the *Conversations on Access and Quality for Infants and Toddlers Peer Learning Group,* the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA) and the State Capacity Building Center Infant Toddler Specialist Network (SCBC/ITSN) developed the Communities of Practice as a re-envisioned peer learning experience. The purpose of the CoP was to improve relationship-building between states and provide states with the platform to collaborate in addressing their states' challenges with implementing policies and practices.

The CoPs recognize the content expertise of participants and allow participants to set the agenda and lead the conversation. The National Centers provide the platform for hosting these discussions and the facilitators serve the roles of both facilitating the conversations, coaching the participating states on implementation issues, and providing requested resources including subject matter experts.

NCECQA and SCBC/ITSN have created CoPs on a variety of topics. The CoPs meet monthly, though they can meet more or less often if the participants so desire. There is no end date for the CoPs; the CoPs are held as long as the participants would like to attend. As a result of the CoPs, NCECQA and SCBC/ITSN have seen a large increase in the number of follow-up TA requests and hypothesize that this has been due to the strong relationships facilitators build with the states and the trust states have in the National Center to provide T/TA that is high-quality and relevant.

Creating a Community of Practice

PURPOSE & TYPE

NCECQA and SCBC/ITSN created Communities of Practice (CoPs) as a more responsive peer learning format to engage states. After receiving participants' feedback from their first PLG (see Case Study #3), NCECQA and the ITSN wanted to be responsive to participants' needs and requests by offering peer learning experiences that allowed the participants' to be the experts in the group and lead the discussions. The National Centers realized that state participants already had content knowledge but needed more support in applying that knowledge. Like with the original PLG, NCECQA and the SCBC/ITSN formed a CoP in response to several states TA requests on a particular topic. However, they required no advanced planning or materials, relying instead on the participating states to select topics, create session objectives, and lead the discussion. CoP facilitators are skilled in adult learning principles and are often chosen based on their expertise in the subject matter. They wear two hats, both facilitating discussions between the states and coaching states in addressing barriers to implementation. This strengths-based approach empowers knowledgeable state participants as content experts. This helps build strong rapport among the states and the facilitators, where the role of the facilitator is to help states achieve their policy goals. Feedback and evaluations indicate that participants respond very positively to this structure and found the experience valuable. In turn, this builds trust between the state and the National Center, leading to more engagement with the Centers' TA overall. By recognizing the strengths and capabilities of states, CoPs have become a preferred format that enables states to engage with and learn from each other as they work towards attaining their goals over an extended period.

As the facilitators of the original PLG explained about their more recent use of CoPs, "initially we came from a deficiency perspective, not from a strength-based perspective. We shifted now from 'we have so much knowledge to share' to what the states really need is application and implementation support." The CoPs build on the strengths that the participants bring to the group and recognize and value them.

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> **"Strength-based support takes you a long way with the states. States know a lot of the things, but they are under-resourced, and need help implementing."**

STRUCTURE

After the first year of offering PLGs, NCECQA and SCBC/ITSN began offering a few CoPs in addition to the PLGs. Then, after realizing the popularity of the CoPs, and the strengths of this peer learning opportunity, NCECQA increased the number of CoPs they offered. Over the next few years, they phased out their offering of the more structured PLGs, and currently only host CoPs.

Time Requirement

CoPs are long-term in duration (some have lasted for 1.5-4+ years). They do not have an end date because there are benefits for participants to continue engaging with their peers and over a longer period. Some participants may leave the COP when they have gotten what they needed from it, but the sustained learning opportunity allows participants to build trusting relationships and engage fully.

CoPs involve a call every month or every other month. Participants may request more calls and meetings as needed, so lack of time is not as much of an issue as it is for more structured, limited duration PLGs. CoPs allow for less structure and more flexibility to pursue the interests of participants—the group takes time when needed to explore an area or to have a longer discussion.

Initial Engagement

There is no application for the CoP; participants are invited to participate based on TA requests or based on their interest. CoPs are created because several states have requested TA on the topic. Topic selection for CoPs are based on state requests or OCC priorities. This shared topical interest creates the initial engagement. State participants then come up with the topics for each session and are provided time to share updates on their work and learn about what other states are doing. Participants see that every state is doing something valuable, and that they can all contribute to the conversation in a way that will benefit others.

Meeting Structure

Each meeting has an objective, and at the end of the call, participants set the objective for the next meeting. CoPs require participants to set the group's agenda because there is no structured content. There is time included in CoP sessions to receive coaching on implementing strategies and policies. The PLG facilitators shifted from a focus on providing content towards being participant-driven and helping with implementation. From this process, facilitators learned to "be humble enough to realize that the way you thought something works isn't actually what works the best."

PARTICIPATION & FACILITATION

Our findings suggest that active engagement in CoPs happens because of well-trained TA facilitators who are skilled at facilitating discussions and fostering connections between participants. Facilitators mentioned that they pull participants in and make them comfortable, recognizing that it is challenging to translate in-person engagement into the virtual realm. Facilitators stated that they make sure people are engaged and not multitasking and create the desire for participants to share their motivation and ideas. "COP facilitation needs skills and knowledge; not everyone can run COPs. Content expertise doesn't always make you a great facilitator. Always follow the lead of [the] participant."

Facilitators noted they had to learn to shift from direct teaching with PowerPoints and agendas to facilitating and supporting a more free-flowing conversation. CoP facilitators follow the lead of the participants and focus on participants' goals and help them achieve them. They both facilitate conversations and coach during the CoP, depending on state needs. They use implementation science to support the implementation of new initiatives and to help participants realize their policy and practice goals.

The facilitators all have backgrounds in adult learning and have a framework for relationship-building. Staff are highly self-reflective and do research on how they can improve their facilitation and how CoPs can best work. They share their research with each other and model best practices. The National Centers prioritize facilitator time "to reflect and take the time for evaluation; it can't be 'well, I think people are happy'".

> **"In our first year it was hard to get requests – through our CoP relationship building, people began to think 'we trust you to come in and help our state.' National Centers only become accessible through relationship building with the client – that's the key, the one thing everything boils down to."**

PEER LEARNING GROUP OUTCOMES

Table 1. CoP Outcomes

Peer Engagement & Networking	
To facilitate the development and continuation of relationships, CoP facilitators have proactively set up peer-to-peer calls between state teams who have knowledge and resources to offer each other.	Follow-up TA requests doubled after the CoPs were started and CoP attendance has grown. NCECQA and the SCBC/ITSN attribute this to having better relationships with state participants through the CoPs and because the CoPs are better able to meet state needs. As a result of participating in the CoPs, NCECQA and the SCBC/ITSN have observed states rewriting licensing requirements, changing practices around continuity of care, and making other policy changes.

EVALUATION & REFLECTION/PERSPECTIVES

CoPs are formally evaluated twice a year, with embedded informal feedback loops between evaluations. Facilitators do quarterly CQI of their CoPs. They try to spend equal time on delivering TA and reflecting on how well it went and how the delivery could be improved. Facilitators have internal CQI calls with each other and have an internal evaluator who leads conversations on what was learned and what changes to structure and facilitation should be made to the CoPs.

Conclusion

Communities of Practice (CoPs) may solve many of the challenges facilitators and participants encountered during the NCECQA/SCBC/ITSN PLG. The findings suggest, for example, CoPs do not require materials be produced ahead of time and are thus not subject to time constraints associated with the approval process. In addition, constraining the CoP to smaller groups of participants may have opened up space for more conversation between participants, and led to better relationships between participants and facilitators. Valuing the strengths of the state participants by putting them in charge of their learning may ensure that the CoPs address topics that are timely and relevant to state needs.

Our findings suggest that CoPs allow state participants to learn from each other about policy implementation, as well as how to use research and evaluation to improve their work. Participants may also learn about and implement reflective practices. As a result, participants have the tools with which to make policy and practice changes within their state. Facilitators are more intentional about helping participants form relationships in the CoP, and this has made it easier for participants to follow-up with other states on topics of interest. This has helped participants learn about different approaches to challenges they are facing, as well as gain knowledge and resources from other participating states.

With facilitators serving in the dual role as facilitators and coaches, participants can simultaneously learn and implement new policies and practices to improve child care in their state.

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