Executive Summary

This study presented in this report describes the objectives, activities, approaches, strategies, and other aspects of the the Office of Head Start (OHS)'s *Early Learning Mentor Coach (ELMC)* initiative from the perspectives of HS grantees, coaches, and staff. In 2010, the Office of Head Start (OHS), within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), announced the availability of funds to initiate coaching programs in a select number of HS grantees.[1] Grantees were to use the funds to hire coaches who would then provide on-the-job guidance, training, and technical assistance to HS staff. This study was guided by three key goals:

- **Goal #1.** Describe the implementation of the ELMC grants in HS programs.
- **Goal #2.** Examine the implementation factors of the ELMC efforts.
- **Goal #3.** Examine the factors that appear to be related to perceptions of successful coaching.

The original goal of the ELMC initiative was to improve practices in HS programs. OHS received more than 280 grantee applications for the ELMC initiative, from which 130 grantees were chosen for funding for a 17-month project period. In October 2010, the funds to support the ELMC initiative were distributed in 42 states and the District of Columbia. The grant recipients reflected the diversity of HS programs, including Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and American Indian and Alaskan Native Head Start grantees. The grant awards ranged from $87,409 to the ceiling amount of $225,000; the average grant award was $215,513.[2]

Study Purpose and Design

In March 2011, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) of ACF awarded the research contract to describe the coaching that occurred at HS grantees as a result of the ELMC initiative. The study team was also charged with developing a conceptual model that would help guide the study and that could be modified after the study to serve as a guide for both HS programs and researchers. We describe the resulting logic model in this report.[3]

This descriptive study did not directly observe the coaching programs within ELMC grantees or draw conclusions about the impacts or effects of coaching on classroom, program, staff, or child and family outcomes. However, the findings of this study do provide rich descriptive

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[1] Although the ELMC initiative used the term *mentor coach,* for simplicity in this report, we use the term *coach,* except when referring to the data collection protocols, where the full name is used.
[2] Originally, 131 grantees were awarded funds, but 1 grantee could not be included in the sample because it was unable to complete its project. By the end of the ELMC initiative, after data collection for the study was concluded, three additional grantees were unable to complete their ELMC projects. The list of the original 131 HS/EHS grantees that were originally awarded an ELMC grant in 2010 is in Volume 2: Appendixes, Appendix A.
[3] A more in-depth description of the model and its components is in *Putting the Pieces Together: A Program Logic Model for Coaching in Head Start. From the Descriptive Study of the Head Start Early Learning Mentor Coach Initiative* (McGroder, Howard, Fishman, Rankin, & Helsel, 2013).

information, from both survey and interview sources, about coaching in HS programs.

Achieving the three primary goals of this study required the quick design of an effective, comprehensive strategy to collect information across every level involved in the initiative: administrators, coaches, and staff members. To do this, the study employed a mixed-methods design using both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data collection and descriptive analysis methods. Data were collected from grantees, coaches, and staff during the last four months of the ELMC initiative. There were four data collection instruments in this study:

- **grantee census survey** to collect information on a final respondent pool of 121 grantees (93 percent response rate);
- **coach census survey** to collect information on a final respondent pool of 384 coaches (84 percent response rate);
- **coach telephone interview** with 54 coaches (83 percent response rate); and
- **staff telephone interview** with 80 staff members who received coaching (73 percent response rate).

Throughout the final report, univariate summary statistics from the grantee and coach surveys are presented in text, tables, bar charts, and pie charts. Thematic analyses from the coach and staff telephone interviews are presented in tables of major themes and illustrative quotes.

Selected Findings

The findings reported here are a brief selection from the overall report.

Organization of report. The study findings are presented according to seven aspects of coaching that are aligned to the conceptual framework:

- context of coaching (e.g., size of grantee, population served, professional development resources);
- basic dimensions (e.g., goals of coaching, whom to coach, whom to hire as coaches, and how long to provide coaching));
- structural dimensions (e.g., logistics relating to where coaching will take place, coach and staff travel demands, scheduling, workload, and supervision of coaches);
- procedural dimensions (e.g., identifying staff needs, establishing staff goals, engaging in focused observation, providing feedback);
- outputs of coaching (e.g., staff openness, coach-staff relationship);
- perceived outcomes of coaching; implementation successes and challenges; and
- sustainability of coaching program after the end of ELMC funding.

Context. Overall, the ELMC descriptive study found that a diverse group of HS and EHS grantees participated in the initiative, encompassing both large and small programs (ranging from serving fewer than 400 children to serving more than 5,000) in urban and rural settings (ranging from sparsely populated rural areas to urban areas with over 1 million residents).

Basic Dimensions.

Goals. Grantees reported on their overarching goals for the ELMC grants and the qualifications for effective coaches. Goals commonly reported for the ELMC included improving classroom quality and staff practices, and addressing practices important for the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

Timing of hiring. The timing of hiring, ratio of part time/full time, work hours, qualifications and other hiring decisions varied across ELMC grantees. On average, grantees hired their first mentor coach 2.4 months after the start of the grant; 72 percent of grantees began hiring within 4 months from the grant start date. Perhaps one reason that many of the grantees were able to hire their coaches fairly quickly after being awarded the grant is that many used existing staff as coaches. Athough relatively few of the ELMC coaches hired (19.6 percent) were specifically coaches prior to the grant, many of the coaches hired were currently working for the grantee (57.1 percent) or had worked for the grantee in some other non-coaching capacity or had previously worked for the grantee in some non-coaching capacity (39.4 percent).

Full-time/part-time. Grantees used ELMC funding to pay for a a variety of full-time and part-time coach positions. About one-third of the grantee respondents reported only part-time coaches and approximately half of the grantee respondents reported only full-time coaches. Most of the coaches worked part-time as coaches, although about one-third worked at least 40 hours a week. Approximately 20 percent of the coaches simultaneously held another job position with the grantee in addition to the coach role, and 43.9 percent of the coaches reported spending at least some time each week doing work for the grantee that was not part of their coaching role.

Qualifications. The coaches as a whole were highly educated and had many years of ECE experience. Fifty percent of the coaches had 18 or more years of ECE experience. In contrast to their experience in ECE, most of the coaches did not have extensive experience specifically in coaching prior to ELMC initiative. Grantees ranked interpersonal skills as a key qualification for the success of coaching. Coaches themselves also rated interpersonal skills as the most important coach qualifications for success. In contrast, staff noted that a background in ECE work was the most important qualification for a coach (although interpersonal characteristics were also rated highly).

Workload. About half of the coaches worked with 10 or fewer staff, whereas about one-fourth of the coaches worked with more than 20 staff. Coaches worked with a remarkably broad array of HS staff. Teachers and assistant teachers were the most common type of staff to receive coaching, but 19 percent of staff receiving coaching were home visitors and 18 percent were supervisors or administrators. Most of the coaches who worked with teaching staff; and most of the time they worked with both lead and assistant teachers. The coaches commonly worked in multiple centers; however, about one-fourth worked in only one center, while almost 40 percent worked in two to four centers and about one-third worked in five or more centers.

Supervision role. About three-fourths of the coaches did not have supervisory responsibility for the staff they coached. However, almost all of the coaches reported to someone at the grantee level on the progress their staff was making. Almost all staff did not perceive coaches serving as supervisors or reporting to their supervisors as a problem. Some reported that it helped keep everybody "on the same page."

Coaching Practice.

Targeted topics. A key component of the coaching process is the focus of the individual coaching interactions. Coaches made decisions about topical coaching targets in varied ways. Most often, staff self-identified their coaching needs, and the coaches also identified staff needs by observing classrooms and staff, and using both formal and informal assessment methods. *Coaches* reported their top three targeted topics were (1) the general skills and strategies of the staff, (2) program and classroom operations, and (3) use of assessment and technology. *Staff* reported their own coaching goals as (1) improving the physical environment of the classroom, (2) improving teacher quality, (3) improving teaching of a school-readiness topic, (4) improving CLASS scores, and (5) providing behavior management techniques.

Coaches roles. The coaches primarily perceived their role as being a collaborative partner with the staff they supported, while many also noted that they provide emotional support and instruction. The staff perceived the coaches as assistants, advocates, and sources of emotional support. The coaches were most likely to report using on-site observation, verbal feedback, and reflection strategies with each staff member at least three times in a typical month. Very few reported using video strategies.

Perceptions of success. Grantees, coaches, and staff were asked about their perceptions of the coaching. Overall, the grantee administrators were very positive about the success of the coaching effort. Most of the coaches reported success in increasing staff openness to learning and improving the quality of practices. The staff reported changes in both instructional and behavioral management practices. Both the coaches and the staff reported that their relationships were supportive and open.

Virtually all staff receiving coaching provided positive feedback on their experience. The staff noted that coaching was very effective, and reported overwhelmingly positive perceptions. Most of the staff were willing to continue coaching. Staff identified emotional support, availability, responsiveness, and constructive feedback as the most effective components of the coaching. The majority of the grantee administrators indicated that it was very likely they would continue to provide coaching after the ELMC grant ended.

Challenges. There were implementation challenges reported by many grantee administrators. Both grantees and coaches reported that scheduling challenges as one of the biggest challenges to the success of the ELMC initiative: including demands on staff time and availability of substitutes. The grantee also included staff openness to improvement and staff level of engagement or interest as challenges. Of the potential challenges identified, the grantees were least likely to endorse challenges with coach turnover or the qualifications and abilities of the coaches.

The majority of the coaches felt that the level of openness, the level of effort, the ability to engage in self-reflection and use feedback, and the ability of the staff to share mistakes were sometimes or often challenging to the coaches' success. About one-third of coaches noted that at least sometimes, the level of support from the HS director could also be challenging. Coaches

were least likely to report challenges related to the relationship quality with staff.

Limitations.

This study has several limitations. It is not representative of all Head Start programs because the ELMC grants were awarded competitively to a small pool of Head Start programs. In addition, data collection started in the final months of the official grant period, so the study was limited in both the type of data it could collect and the research questions it could address. Given the design limitations, any findings in this report should not be interpreted as causal links, and caution should be taken when considering the applicability of the findings to Head Start more generally.

Conclusion

Program implications. The study provided a large amount of information about how coaching was structured and implemented in the OHS ELMC initiative. HS coaching programs can be initiated quickly, with highly educated coaching staff, and generally receive a positive reception by staff and administrators. Coaching can address both grantee-level goals and individual staff needs, and can contribute to an early childhood program's quality improvement efforts. While coaching processes and approaches vary and also can be individualized for staff, this study found that the basic structure was remarkably similar across grantees. Coaching usually involved observation, modeling, and feedback strategies. Reports of the implementation challenges of the ELMC initiative were more varied across grantees. It would be important for a grantee to consider the logistical, administrative, and financial resources needed for any coaching effort. For more information about the important dimensions of coaching, see the more in-depth description of the HS coaching program logic model in *Putting the Pieces Together: A Program Logic Model for Coaching in Head Start. From the Descriptive Study of the Head Start Early Learning Mentor Coach Initiative* (McGroder, Howard, Fishman, Rankin, & Helsel, 2013).

Research implications. The descriptive study of the ELMC initiative sought to describe the various aspects of coaching adopted by the ELMC grantees. The study findings raise additional questions and suggest fruitful areas for additional research. For example, it would be helpful to learn which coaching strategies tend to go together and whether these can be considered discernible models. Such information could inform future efforts to design and evaluate coaching in HS programs or other ECE settings. It would also be helpful to have a better sense of the range of expenses and costs to develop and implement a coaching program. This study did not gather any information about the costs of the program, the sources of money HS grantees may have been using in addition to their ELMC grant, resources for sustaining it, or any other cost information.

It would also be useful in future studies of coaching to examine the coaching session more directly—to understand the experience of coaching; learn more about the process of coaching; and address questions about how coaching works, for whom it works, and under what circumstances it works. In addition, future research could use the program logic model from this study to inform empirical questions regarding the causal links between coaching and important outcomes. Within that logic model framework, examining the unique effects of different coaching dimensions on outcomes have not been not systematically examined to determine their

independent, additive effects or interactions. Little evidence exists on the effects of specific coaching dimensions on program, teacher, and child outcomes.