



A Different Approach to Leadership: Let your Knowledge Do the Talking

In the summer and fall of 2008, members of the Mentor Program state office studied the book titled Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education and heard co-author Stacie Goffin talk about the book. The book is packed with challenges and issues, but if there could be one rallying cry that comes from it, it would be:

***Let the people who know how young children learn
determine Early Childhood Education policies!***

We knew that if anyone could answer the Call to Action, it would be Mentor Teachers and Director Mentors. Every single one has been selected for her or his role using strict, research-based criteria linked to high quality ECE. The Mentor Program provides ongoing professional development support, activities, and materials, as well as requiring re-certification on a regular basis. Collectively, they have *thousands of years* of experience supporting the development of *hundreds of thousands of children*, guiding *thousands of student teachers* in linking child development theory and practice, or supporting *hundreds of ECE directors* as they enhance their confidence and skills in order to create and maintain high quality programs. They are over 800 strong. No other group in the country, or literally in the world, could speak with more authority in numbers anywhere near as large.



But how do we tap into this huge depth of knowledge when all Mentor Teachers and most Director Mentors spend their days practicing their expertise with children, families, and staff? It is precisely *because* they know how children learn that they

understand the importance of consistent relationships with children, families, and fellow teachers. They don't want to break that consistency by leaving their programs to attend hearings, conferences, roundtables, water coolers, etc . . . Since people can't be in two places at once, they can't share their knowledge with policy makers.

. . . or can they? What if we could find a way to bring their knowledge to policy makers in the form of a set of recommendations formed by the reflection, debate, and compromise of **all** Mentors and/or Director Mentors?

We have begun the journey to do just that. The first year was spent developing a plan. This second year (2009-2010) we have introduced a discussion format to Mentor Teachers. We began with Mentor Teachers because of two characteristics that separate them from Director Mentors: First, in almost every community where there are Mentors, there is a **group** of Mentors. Director Mentors, at this stage, are often alone or in very small numbers in their communities. Second: Mentor Teachers **meet** with one another in monthly or bi-monthly seminars to discuss challenging issues in a safe, supportive setting. Director Mentors meet with other administrators in their community, but participation and frequency vary.

We challenged ourselves and co-author Stacie Goffin to figure how to tap into Mentors' insights to respond to the book's Call to Action. Together, we came up with a process, tested it out at a June 2009 gathering of 110 Mentors, and introduced it in the Fall of 2009 to faculty members who facilitate Mentor Seminars. The key components of the discussion format are:

- Maximize opportunities for Mentors to tap into their knowledge and expertise.
- Minimize the interference of present-day constraints and politics on the discussions.
- Use this process to help Mentors develop or enhance their "peace treaty" skills- - verbalize their values, listen to the foundations behind others' values, adapt their opinions, and accept compromise.
- Maximize the Mentor Program's ability to synthesize the Mentors' wisdom by using a shared note-taking template.

The notes that have been submitted to date (April 2010) confirm Mentors' breadth of reflection on and knowledge of child development, teaching strategies, and family

support. For a more detailed description of our process and updates on our progress, go to www.ecementor.org and click on **NEW: Leadership through Knowledge**.