



Coaching at Scale

A Strategy for Strengthening the Early Learning Workforce

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Executive Summary

Evidence shows that children’s early years are a crucial time for their development. Well-designed early childhood education (ECE) experiences can foster meaningful gains in school readiness, as well as long-term benefits such as lower rates of special education placement and higher graduation rates. The quality of early education is highly dependent on sufficient preparation and support for early educators to meet the needs of diverse young learners.

Research has identified high-quality coaching as an effective professional learning practice for supporting educators in the implementation of evidence-based practices. According to the research, effective coaching relies on a strong partnership between coaches and educators; reflection and individualized feedback; focused observations; intentional coaching plans to guide sessions; and job-embedded learning opportunities for active learning. Well-qualified coaches with knowledge of specific coaching models and practices, general coaching and consultation skills (e.g., an understanding of adult learning principles and how to build rapport), and knowledge of early childhood development and teaching are critical as well. Research suggests that coaching can be effective both in person and virtually. Although research has not found a specific dosage requirement necessary for effective coaching, the findings indicate that outcomes are highly sensitive to coaching quality and that more comprehensive coaching is more effective when it is continuous for a sustained period.

This report examines five early childhood coaching systems—two state systems (Alabama and Washington) and three California county systems (El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego)—that have developed systemic coaching approaches. We studied these coaching systems to understand the different ways that comprehensive coaching systems can be implemented at scale, the types of coaching approaches used, and the supports offered. Although there is no singular strategy to scale effective coaching, this research provides insights for policymakers and program administrators seeking to incorporate coaching into their efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education. In the following sections, we summarize the key findings from the report.

Approaches to Providing Early Learning Coaching

States and counties are faced with a variety of questions to answer and decisions to be made when developing early learning coaching systems. The systems we studied have answered these questions as follows:

Who will receive coaching? For nearly all the systems, the primary coaching recipients were early education lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators. San Diego prioritized site leaders as the primary recipients to maximize the reach of coaching with limited funding. The average ratio of coaches to sites was similar across the five systems, regardless of primary recipient, at approximately 1 coach for every 22 sites.

How is coaching dosage determined? There was no standardized model for the frequency and duration of coaching. Frequency was based on the perceived level of need and varied from multiple sessions per week to two sessions per year.

How is coaching delivered? Coaching was primarily delivered through face-to-face, in-person sessions. Virtual modes of coaching were also leveraged to supplement the frequency of contact and offer additional peer learning supports.

What guides the content of coaching? The content of coaching was tightly aligned with quality standards (e.g., Quality Rating and Improvement Systems [QRIS], state PreK standards) and linked to other professional development efforts, which research finds is important in order for coaching to achieve greater impacts on practice. Across all the coaching systems studied, coaches emphasized how to use classroom assessment tools and standards to inform practice, engage in continuous quality improvement, and meet the individual needs of early educators. Other common drivers of content included supporting students' social-emotional development, the use of trauma-informed practices, meeting the needs of dual- and multilingual learners, and promoting racial equity.

How is coaching effectiveness promoted? The coaching systems promoted the effectiveness of scaled coaching through three main strategies: (1) creating structures to support a qualified coaching workforce and relationship development; (2) using reflective practice to drive instruction and improvement; and (3) using individualized, strengths-based practice to engage educators in quality improvement.

How are coaches employed and funded? To provide wide access to coaching, all the coaching systems intentionally employ coaches regionally at agencies that serve multiple settings. In Alabama and Washington, coaching is funded primarily through state general funds. The three California counties rely on local First 5 funding as their primary funding source for coaching.

What qualifications do coaches have? El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties in California and the state of Alabama required coaches to have at least a bachelor's degree. Washington prefers a bachelor's degree but has allowed regions to recruit local coaches who speak early educators' home languages and offers regions a pathway for supporting these coaches to obtain their degrees while working. All systems also required coaches to have practical ECE experience, effective and developmentally appropriate pedagogy skills, and strong interpersonal skills.

How are coaches provided professional development and support? Coaching systems build coaches' technical and content expertise through onboarding and ongoing professional development. They also provide one-on-one and peer supports such as reflective supervision, peer mentors for less experienced coaches, and learning communities to support continuous learning and well-being.

Perceived Benefits of Coaching

Participants in the coaching systems studied described multiple benefits, including educator satisfaction, improved educator practice, and improved program quality. Across systems, educators consistently highlighted their positive experiences with coaching and the personal and professional support they received from their coaches. These relationships were critical in driving improvements in educators' practice and creating feelings of being more connected and less isolated.

Study participants across all the coaching systems described a perceived improvement in educator practice and, in turn, children's learning. Educators and site supervisors shared examples of improved instructional practices, such as the gathering of observational assessment evidence into learning activities (rather than as a disconnected activity) and interacting with children more effectively to support their cognitive and social-emotional development. Program administrators also connected

improvements in educator practice with higher educator ratings on observational tools used to assess the quality of teacher–child interactions (e.g., Classroom Assessment Scoring System) and the quality of the environment (e.g., Environment Rating Scales), and they attributed the high number of programs that received high ratings on those tools to coaching.

Enablers and Challenges of Implementation

Common enablers helped establish early childhood coaching systems that were scaled to the state and county levels. Political support helped ignite and sustain action around implementing coaching systems and partnerships between governmental and nongovernmental entities that then contributed to increased capacity and stronger coaching across the mixed delivery system. However, there were also multiple challenges to creating and sustaining coaching systems. Substantive partnerships require structures for sustained coordination, and the systems in this study held regular interagency meetings to facilitate this coordination. Other common challenges included insufficient funding for coaching, lack of time for early educators to participate in coaching, and restrictive policies that limited the intensity or focus of coaching. For example, policies have created challenges by mandating requirements for reaching rating targets and maintaining funding or limiting coaching sessions for sites with higher ratings. Some coaching systems also faced challenges when they were attempting to recruit qualified coaches or negotiating partnerships with other community organizations.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Strategies used in the systems we studied suggest specific actions that state and county—and, in some cases, school district and local—policymakers can initiate to support the implementation of coaching systems for the early learning workforce. These recommendations are as follows.

- 1. Provide dedicated funding for site-based coaching, with the goal of making instructional coaching accessible to all programs for quality enhancement, as well as to educators in need of more support.** Funding needs to be sufficient to allow coaches to reach all programs and have reasonable caseloads that give them time to meet with educators. For example, Alabama reserves approximately 8% of state preschool funding for coaching and instructional supports. Alabama has also incorporated paid planning and reflection time into program schedules to allow educators to participate in coaching.
- 2. Provide specialized coaching for site leaders in addition to early educators.** Coaching for site leaders—including site directors, program directors, and school principals—is a potentially high-leverage investment for ensuring greater equity in quality across sites because it can provide site leaders with common knowledge and skills in early education. Furthermore, site leaders set the professional development agenda at their sites, and site leaders can sometimes provide instructional coaching themselves. States that already have leadership academies or learning networks for principals can consider adding content about early childhood instruction.
- 3. Create coherence between coaching and quality rating and improvement systems.** States can ensure greater coherence by using quality rating criteria, standards, and assessment tools to inform the content of coaching and by ensuring that traditional forms of professional learning (e.g., training and workshops) are paired with coaching. States can also keep coaching, monitoring, and rating

roles separate within quality improvement systems to help maintain focus on coaching to improve the quality of practice. Depending on governance structures, creating coherence may require partnerships across agencies. To facilitate coordination and collaboration, the systems in this study held regular interagency meetings.

4. Set standards for the expertise and experience of coaches and provide ongoing coach support.

To perform the job well, coaches need specific skills and competencies (e.g., expertise in child development, developmentally appropriate instruction, and experience working with adult learners) and ongoing support. In Alabama and Washington, coaching qualification standards are set at the state level and include educational attainment of at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field, several years of experience working with children from birth through age 5, and strong interpersonal skills.

5. Identify regional strategies to recruit a diverse coaching workforce. Coaches need to have expertise in the settings in which they coach and familiarity with the culture of the children, families, and early learning staff. El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties and Washington have all partnered strategically with organizations to employ coaches who represent, and are trusted by, participants across ECE settings, including resource and referral agencies and local library systems that engage with home-based and family, friend, and neighbor educators. To ensure that coaches are linguistically diverse and speak early educators' home languages, some regions in Washington have created pathways to support bilingual coaches in obtaining their bachelor's degree in early childhood education while working.

6. Develop a state clearinghouse of coaching resources to enable high-quality, consistent coaching.

States play an important role in building the capacity of the coaching workforce and bringing consistency to the overall approach to coaching across the state. States can support coherence by building a clearinghouse of resources, including coaching protocols, frameworks, and rubrics that distribute consistent, evidence-based practices statewide. These resources can be developed among partners and compiled by a state department or a nonprofit organization. States and counties might also provide access to platforms that support virtual and hybrid coaching (along with investments in broadband and technology access), especially in rural areas.

7. Fund and support a regional system of professional development for coaches. States can provide funding and technical assistance to create regional systems or other networks of professional development—including communities of practice—that build from a set of statewide resources but are tailored to local contexts. Coaching systems can also prepare lead coaches who are experts in certain areas, such as inclusion or dual-language learning, to work with coaches and site leaders.

8. Collect and analyze data to scale what works. Quality data systems that collect and connect data associated with coaching effectiveness in the research (e.g., coach expertise, focused observations, reflection, feedback, coaching plans, and perceptions of the coach-educator relationship) for ongoing analysis can support informed policymaking. In Alabama, coaching logs are entered into a database that also captures assessment, monitoring, budgetary, and other programmatic information about state preschool sites to allow for an efficient review of site-level data.

Each state and community has its own needs and complexities when providing access to coaching, delivering quality coaching services, and funding and sustaining their coaching systems. However, by implementing these policies and practices, policymakers can support the creation of coaching systems that offer coaching to a variety of early childhood providers across their communities, encourage participation in quality improvement efforts, and provide early educators with structures to support their professional development and practice.

Introduction

There is overwhelming evidence that children's early years are a crucial time for their development. Research across a wide range of disciplines on the science of learning and development shows that early childhood experiences can have long-lasting effects.¹ Well-designed and well-implemented early childhood education experiences can foster meaningful gains in school readiness, as well as long-term benefits such as lower rates of special education placement, reduced grade retention, and higher graduation rates.² Early education also has the potential to narrow achievement gaps when vulnerable populations of young children, including children from low-income families and dual-language learners, attend high-quality programs.³ The quality of early education is highly dependent on early educators being fully prepared and supported with the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of a diverse population of young learners.

Thoughtfully designed, well-implemented professional development can improve educators' practices and learners' outcomes.⁴ Traditional forms of professional development, such as one-time trainings or one-size-fits-all workshops, are insufficient for meaningfully and sustainably increasing educators' skills to improve their instructional practice and the learning environment.⁵ Research has shown that effective professional learning is active and collaborative; focuses on the content that educators teach every day; and provides educators with sufficient time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect on new strategies.⁶ Coaching has been identified as one such effective professional learning practice for providing ongoing, targeted support to implement evidence-based practices in early childhood education (ECE) settings.

What Is Coaching?

The promise of coaching for improving instructional quality is broadly recognized.⁷ However, there is a wide variety of coaching models, some of which support a specific content area or intervention, while others are more comprehensive.⁸ Regardless of the specific model, there is general agreement in the field that coaching involves a collaborative relationship between an expert and a practitioner with the aim of developing specific knowledge and skills through the use of planning, observation, action (e.g., modeling), feedback, and reflection.⁹ The recipient of coaching is typically the lead educator in a classroom, but coaches may also work with teaching teams that include assistants and aides. Coaches may also work with program leaders, focusing on leadership knowledge and skills for supporting their staff's professional growth and instructional practices.¹⁰

There is general agreement in the field that coaching involves a collaborative relationship between an expert and a practitioner with the aim of developing specific knowledge and skills.

Coaching is distinct from technical assistance, mentoring, and supervision. Technical assistance typically does not involve a collaborative relationship and can focus on any topics, including noninstructional topics such as safety and compliance.¹¹ Mentorship, like coaching, is a relationship-based process, but it is typically conducted between colleagues in similar professional roles, with a more experienced educator providing guidance that focuses on the development of the less experienced educator.¹² In contrast,

in coaching, coaches and educators have different roles.¹³ Supervision involves evaluating educators' job performance and oversight to ensure that educators fulfill their job requirements.¹⁴ Although some supervisors may act as coaches, not all supervisors have the necessary expertise and skills to serve as coaches. Furthermore, in its purest form, coaching is distinct from supervisory and compliance functions.

Because of its potential to support ongoing learning and improve early educators' knowledge and skills, coaching has become more prevalent in ECE over the last decade.¹⁵ At the federal level, the revised Head Start Performance Standards require grantees to provide coaching to support Head Start teachers,¹⁶ and the national Office of Head Start has funded the [National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning](#) to provide technical assistance and professional development on practice-based coaching. Furthermore, the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) requires states to establish training and professional development requirements for child care to promote the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of children and to improve the knowledge and skills of those in the child care workforce.¹⁷ To meet these requirements, the Child Care and Development Fund program funded by CCDBG identifies coaching as a possible strategy.¹⁸

At the state level, coaching is typically part of a state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)¹⁹ and some state-funded prekindergarten (PreK) programs that were developed as part of the federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant.²⁰ The “I” in QRIS is often operationalized as technical assistance or coaching available to center-based and home-based early educators that participate in QRIS. Based on the findings of the most recent Quality Compendium data, collected in 2021 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services–funded National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, coaching is offered to early childhood programs in 38 states.²¹ However, the Quality Compendium data do not provide insight into the national trends in the reach of the coaching for center-based and home-based sites. Older data from the National Center for Children in Poverty in 2011 found that of the 17 states with a QRIS at the time, all made coaching available to early childhood programs in the lower-quality range; 16 made it available for center-based sites at all quality levels; and 15 made it available for home-based sites at all quality levels.²²

Coaching may also be offered as part of state-funded PreK. The National Institute for Early Education Research assesses state policies for professional development for state-funded PreK programs, setting a quality benchmark that both lead and assistant teachers are required to have at least 15 hours of annual in-service professional development, some of which must be provided through coaching. As of the 2021 *State of Preschool Yearbook*, only 15 states meet this benchmark.²³

Although coaching is a promising strategy for improving educators' practices and having a positive impact on children's learning, there are clear challenges to implementing this strategy broadly in early childhood programs. Early childhood education is composed of a mixed delivery system that includes a wide variety of settings (such as center, home, and public school) and various sources and levels of funding (including state, federal, and private). Developing an early learning coaching system that (a) serves and meets the needs of this broad spectrum of providers, (b) is sufficiently funded to serve the many providers who would benefit from coaching, and (c) delivers coaching with fidelity and at a sufficient dosage to improve practice is a complicated and demanding feat.

Despite this daunting set of challenges, many coaching systems have been established throughout the United States at the state, county, and local levels. These systems vary widely in terms of governance, funding, content, and degree of implementation of the research-based features of effective coaching. In some cases, coaching is implemented based on a homegrown model that may or may not be grounded in best practices from coaching research.²⁴ For content, coaching models may be focused on building specific skills (such as Teachstone’s My Teaching Partner, which focuses on adult–child interactions) or content knowledge in a specific area (such as Reading First coaching, which focuses solely on literacy practices), whereas others may be more comprehensive and centered on a common coaching approach rather than specific content (such as practice-based coaching).

Given the proliferation of and support for coaching, the purpose of this study was to provide examples of real-world coaching systems aligned to the research base that have been implemented across the mixed delivery system at a state- or countywide scale in different contexts and with different structures. This report examines the coaching systems of two states (Alabama and Washington) and three California county systems (El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego) to understand how the coaching systems are structured, their perceived benefits, and factors that enable or challenge implementation. The report’s purpose is to provide guidance for policymakers and program administrators seeking to incorporate coaching into their efforts to improve the quality of early childhood education.

Evidence Base Related to Coaching

There is an emerging research base related to coaching in early learning settings that falls into three broad areas of exploration: (1) the relationship between coaching and educator and child outcomes, (2) features of effective coaching models, and (3) coaching implementation. Where there is not a lot of research related to coaching in early learning settings, we supplement our research review with literature from coaching in K–12.

Relationship Between Coaching and Outcomes

The existing body of research indicates that coaching has the potential to positively impact educators’ instructional practices and improve children’s learning.²⁵ Across these studies, coaching has been linked to improved educator–child interactions, less educator burnout, and increased educator retention.²⁶

Most of the studies that measure the relationship between coaching and child outcomes in ECE settings provide evidence of small, positive improvements in children’s language, literacy, and social-emotional skills when their teachers receive coaching.²⁷ Of the 35 studies examined in Aikens and Akers’s systematic review of the link between coaching and child outcomes,²⁸ most (21 studies) showed positive impacts of coaching on child outcomes, such as increases in early literacy and positive behaviors and reduced levels of negative and externalizing behaviors. However, 8 studies had mixed outcomes, finding that there were significant, positive impacts on some child outcomes but no significant impacts on others. For example, Assel and colleagues found positive effects of coaching on children’s print knowledge, but the effects on phonological awareness and vocabulary varied depending on the curriculum the site used.²⁹ Six studies did not find any significant impacts.³⁰ As such, the mixed or null findings may be due, in part, to variations in implementation or the short-term nature of some studies.

Coaching has been most extensively studied in P–12 settings, which typically include more professional development resources and paid planning time for educators than is the norm in early learning settings. Research from P–12 school settings provides a strong evidence base for the effectiveness of coaching as a strategy to positively impact educators’ instructional practices. A recent meta-analysis of 60 experimental or quasi-experimental studies found strong positive effects of coaching on educators’ instruction—with similar impacts of coaching shown for preschool, elementary, middle, and high school teachers—and modest effects of coaching on student outcomes.³¹ Findings indicate that the magnitude of the effects appears larger for content-specific coaching programs (versus comprehensive coaching), smaller coaching programs (versus larger programs), and coaching combined with traditional professional development such as workshops and trainings (versus coaching in isolation).³²

Features of Effective Coaching Models

A second area of research explores the components of coaching that are connected to improvements in teachers’ instructional practices, particularly adult–child interactions, and child outcomes. The evidence base reveals several key characteristics of effective coaching.

Strong Partnership Between the Coach and Coachee. The relationship and rapport between a coach and coachee are the foundation of the coaching and are critical to its effectiveness. Across multiple reviews of the evidence, when a productive coach–coachee relationship is lacking, educators have shown a decreased commitment to engage in coaching and implement changes in practice.³³

Reflection and Feedback. Providing feedback to educators based on observations of their practice and progress has been found to be the most frequently used coaching strategy across coaching models.³⁴ The science of adult learning has found that the combination of individualized feedback and active-learning opportunities is critical to adult learning.³⁵ Coaches also often support educators to self-reflect on their practices, or the coach and educators may collaboratively track and reflect on the educators’ progress.

Focused Observations. Individualized feedback in coaching is often based on observation of an educator in the learning environment or as they practice new skills or strategies that may have been modeled by the coach or learned through a training or workshop. Historically, coaching observations most often occur in person, but some models utilize technology-assisted distance formats for observation, such as educator videos, which allow both the coach and educator to reflect on the educator’s practices.³⁶

Intentional Coaching Plans. Intentional planning to guide coaching sessions and practice between sessions is a common strategy of effective coaching. In some cases, plans are developed after initial consultations between the coach and educator about strengths, needs, and priorities. In other cases, plans are based on an assessment of key teaching practices that are particular areas of focus for a program (e.g., practices for dual-language learners).³⁷

Job-Embedded Opportunities. Embedding coaching activities in the work setting is another critical feature of effective coaching. Job-embedded opportunities—which support active learning on the job—include modeling specific strategies by the coach and role-play.³⁸

Coach Knowledge and Skills. The success of coaching depends in large part on the people providing the coaching; however, this area has received much less research attention than the other areas. The existing research suggests that successful coaches have three major skills: knowledge of the specific coaching model and practices, general coaching and consultation skills (e.g., they understand adult learning principles and how to build rapport), and knowledge of early childhood development and teaching.³⁹

In Artman-Meeker and colleagues' review of early learning coaching, fewer than half of the studies reported on the qualifications and support given to coaches.⁴⁰ Of the coaching models with evidence of effectiveness that do provide details of their coaching workforce, the most distinguishing features are that coaches typically have prior experience as an early childhood educator, hold a bachelor's or master's degree, and have extensive training and ongoing support in their role as coaches. The content of ongoing coaching support addressed coaching strategies for specific teaching practices and how to build partnerships with coaches, how to listen and be respectful of coachees' needs, how to collaborate when setting goals, and how to conduct observations.⁴¹

Mode of Delivery. Most studies assess coaching sessions that take place in person; far fewer studies have examined coaching provided exclusively at a distance. However, based on the available research, there is promising evidence that coaching can be effective in all modes: face-to-face, distance, and a combination of face-to-face and distance.⁴²

The COVID-19 pandemic propelled many coaching systems to be implemented in a virtual format and also accelerated the technological capacity of many early learning educators and sites. Although research on the efficacy of widespread virtual coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic is still forthcoming, preliminary insights suggest that the increased technological literacy, increased availability of virtual platforms and devices, and increased motivation to maximize connections and reduce isolation using technology have made the conditions for distance coaching more favorable than they were in the past.⁴³

Dosage. The research literature does not conclusively suggest that there is a specific dosage (i.e., total number of hours, frequency, or length of sessions) necessary for effective coaching, but rather that coaching appears more sensitive to the quality of coaching rather than the dosage.⁴⁴ Studies of coaching in early childhood settings have reported a wide range of dosage varying from 3 to 32 sessions and sessions that range from as short as a few minutes to as long as 5 hours per session.⁴⁵ In cases where less intensive coaching has been found to be effective, the coaching has focused on a narrow set of practices. For example, a study by Casey and McWilliam explored the impact of coaching on educators' successful implementation of a single strategy for managing transitions in the early childhood classrooms through seven brief coaching sessions over a 2-week period.⁴⁶ However, for more comprehensive coaching, a common theme in the literature is that coaching is more effective when it is continuous over a sustained duration.⁴⁷ In practice, research suggests that coaching in early learning is implemented over an average period lasting between 5 and 7 months.⁴⁸

Challenges to Implementing Coaching

A third area of research related to coaching in early childhood settings looks at matters related to implementation. This body of research points to several challenges to implementing coaching models, particularly at a larger scale.

Recruiting and Supporting Qualified Coaches. Research has found that recruiting and supporting people to meet coaching qualifications can be difficult, especially at a large, statewide scale.⁴⁹ Coaches are usually required to meet set standards regarding level of education, expertise, and training, but they also must possess strong interpersonal skills and knowledge of the local community in order to establish trusting relationships with educators. Such individuals may not be in high supply in all areas of a state and may require a substantial investment in their training and professional development so they can cultivate and maintain their qualifications. To address this issue, some states have developed coach competency frameworks (such as New York⁵⁰ and Oregon⁵¹), and a few have created certification programs for coaching (such as Florida⁵²), but more research is needed to understand the efficacy of such frameworks and their connection to coaching quality.⁵³

Increasing Educator Participation. Although coaching may be widely available to most center- and home-based early educators through state QRIS, findings suggest that less than 25% of early educators receive coaching.⁵⁴ There are multiple barriers affecting early educators' ability to participate, including lack of paid time to participate in coaching and high educator-turnover rates due to poor compensation and burnout.⁵⁵ Unlike their K–12 counterparts, the vast majority of early educators do not have paid time for planning or professional learning, making it difficult to find time for coaching sessions without supportive site leadership.

Scaling Up Best Practices. Research on the implementation of the rapid scaling of coaching in QRIS suggests that the components of coaching models that have demonstrated efficacy in smaller-scale studies are not yet highly prevalent in QRIS-based coaching.⁵⁶ For instance, only 7 of the 17 states studied by the National Center for Children in Poverty reported creating an intentional coaching plan to inform the activities and content of coaching sessions.⁵⁷ In a set of case studies of coaching in four states' QRIS, Isner and colleagues found that it was common for coaches to come from different organizations, making consistency a challenge. They also found that coaching focused on helping educators understand the rating system and documentation process rather than helping them gain specific skills that would enable them to support children's learning and development.⁵⁸ To realize its potential to positively impact educators' instructional practices and improve children's learning at a larger scale, coaching within the context of quality improvement systems needs to focus on educational practices and skills.

About This Study

In this study, we explored five early childhood coaching systems in detail, then synthesized information across the five cases to provide a thematic overview of coaching systems scaled to the state and county levels. Collectively, this information shows different ways that comprehensive coaching systems can be implemented at scale, the types of coaching approaches used to ensure high-quality learning, the supports for coaching quality offered, perceived benefits of coaching, and common enablers and challenges associated with developing larger-scaled coaching systems.

Specifically, we studied the coaching programs in three California counties (El Dorado County, Fresno County, and San Diego County) and two states (Alabama and Washington). All five programs offer job-embedded coaching for a wide variety of early learning program staff across the mixed delivery system of early learning sites serving children from birth through age 5 (or older).

We selected these counties and states because they met the selection criteria established at the outset of this study and they provide geographic and demographic diversity across the cases. The selection criteria are outlined in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Case Study Selection Criteria

Coaching system has all or most of these features	Each of these features is present in at least one coaching program across the state or county
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple age groups served (preschool and infant/toddler) Coordinated implementation established across mixed delivery early childhood education system Support and professional learning for coaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is included as part of QRIS Includes bilingual coaches and equity lens Provides coaching for home-based educators and/or family, friend, and neighbor care providers

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2024).

We used case studies to fully explore the five coaching systems selected. The case studies draw on multiple sources of data, including:

- interviews with early learning county and state coaching program administrators and supervisors;
- focus groups with coaches, site leaders and directors, and early educators;
- observations of coaching sessions; and
- observations of professional learning opportunities for coaches.

Together, these data sources informed an analysis of different approaches to coaching program design, implementation, and implications for state policy, but they do not allow us to determine the relative effectiveness of different state approaches. ([Appendix A](#) provides a full list of study participants, and [Appendix B](#) provides additional information about the methodology.)

Note that we selected the case study sites prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but data collection occurred during the pandemic in 2020–21. In response to the unexpected circumstances, we captured information about how coaching was adapted during the pandemic, but that was not the main focus of the study. The intention of this study was to develop a broad view of state- and countywide comprehensive early childhood coaching systems.

This report first provides a brief overview of the early childhood education coaching systems included in this study. It then explores the decisions that states and counties faced when developing their coaching systems and illustrates different ways that the sites approached these decisions. The report discusses the ways in which early childhood education coaching is perceived by early educators and program administrators to benefit the early educator workforce and the communities these educators serve. The report then identifies some of the common enablers and challenges that helped and limited implementation of scaled coaching systems in the states and counties studied. The report concludes with considerations for state and local policies that can help scale and strengthen coaching for the early learning workforce.

Overview of Coaching Systems Studied

Alabama, Washington, and three California counties (El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego) have each implemented scaled comprehensive early childhood coaching systems that seek to offer coaching across the mixed delivery system. The five coaching systems in this study illustrate that there are a number of different ways that state- and countywide coaching systems can be structured and funded. No two systems are exactly the same because each one must be developed and tailored to meet the specific context and needs of the community it serves. In this section, we provide a brief description of each of these states and counties, along with a summary of the structure, programs served, and funding sources for each coaching system. We also provide a summary of the key characteristics of each of the coaching systems in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Overview of Studied Coaching Systems

Characteristics	California			Alabama	Washington
	El Dorado County	Fresno County	San Diego County		
Year launched	2012	2011	2012	2013	2012
Key players and partnerships	Cross-departmental coordination within the El Dorado County Office of Education	Fresno County Superintendent of Schools' Early Care and Education Department partnerships with Central Valley Children's Services Network (the local child care R&R agency), Fresno Unified School District (the county's largest school district), Fresno County Department of Public Health, and WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC)	San Diego County Office of Education's Early Education program partnership with local child care R&R agency	Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education partnerships with Alabama Department of Human Resources and Alabama State Department of Education	Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Family partnerships with Child Care Aware of Washington (through a regional model) and Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington
Coach employment structure	Coaches are employed by the county office of education and supervised through intra-agency coordination.	Coaches are employed by a local nonprofit and county-wide infrastructure that supports coaches across different programs.	Coaches are employed by the county office of education and a local nonprofit and are supported through interagency coordination.	Coaches are employed as state employees but are dispersed and supervised through a regional structure.	Coaches are employed by regional nonprofit organizations and are coordinated by a state-level resource and referral agency.

Characteristics	California			Alabama	Washington
	El Dorado County	Fresno County	San Diego County		
Programs that receive coaching support ^a	91 sites participating in voluntary QRIS, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • community-based centers • HS/state preschool-blended sites • stand-alone state preschool sites • home-based sites 	323 sites participating in voluntary QRIS, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • state-funded preschool and community-based child care centers • home-based and FFN care • HS, EHS, and Migrant HS centers • district-based infant/toddler, preschool, and TK sites 	555 sites participating in voluntary QRIS, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • center-based child care, state preschool program, and HS sites • home-based and FFN care 	State-funded PreK (1,248 classrooms) P-3 initiative schools Child care and family child care programs participating in the voluntary QRIS enhancement or challenging behavior coaching, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership sites, or Birth-5 Foundation sites	3,410 center- and home-based sites that receive public funding participating in mandatory QRIS and non-subsidy programs participating voluntarily
Coaches and site ratios ^b	4 QRIS coaches for 91 sites Ratio: 1 coach for 23 sites	6 QRIS coaches and 13 Fresno Unified School District early childhood coaches for 323 sites Ratio: 1 coach for 17 sites	21 QRIS coaches for 555 sites Ratio: 1 coach for 25 sites	70 state PreK coaches for 1,248 sites Ratio: 1 coach for 19 sites	120 QRIS coaches for 3,410 sites Ratio: 1 coach for 29 sites
Primary budget and funding source	\$331,313/year Local: First 5 El Dorado grant	\$695,000/year Local: First 5 Fresno grant	\$6.05 million/year (for all QRIS, including coaching) Local: First 5 San Diego grant	\$10.1 million/year (for all state PreK quality improvement, including coaching; 8% of state PreK funding) State: state general funds as part of state PreK funding	\$1.7 million/year (for all QRIS, including coaching) State: state general funds as part of QRIS

Characteristics	California			Alabama	Washington
	El Dorado County	Fresno County	San Diego County		
Secondary funding sources	Federal: Head Start grantee funds to El Dorado County Office of Education State: QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant; QRIS Regional Hub grant; state preschool program funding	Federal: Title I funds to district State: QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant Local: Fresno County Superintendent of Schools general funding; district general funds	State: QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant; QRIS Regional Hub grant funds	Federal: Preschool Development Grant State: Alabama Department of Human Resources holds the Child Care and Development Fund and Head Start–Child Care Partnership through intra-agency agreements. The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education supports the implementation of coaching systems.	Federal: Child Care and Development Fund

^a Based on data collected in 2020–21.

^b Ratios are based on averages.

Notes: EHS = Early Head Start; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System; R&R = resource and referral; TK = transitional kindergarten.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews and coaching documents. (2022).

California Counties

California is the most populous state in the country, with more than 2.1 million children between ages 0 and 4.⁵⁹ The state does not yet have a comprehensive statewide coaching system but has taken some steps to encourage and support coaching.⁶⁰ Several of the states’ 58 counties are implementing countywide coaching programs through their QRIS, including El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego.

The state’s QRIS (known as Quality Counts California) was developed in 2014 and has increasingly served as the primary vehicle for quality improvement for the early learning workforce in the state and the means through which the early learning workforce has access to coaching. California’s QRIS is voluntary and implemented in a partnership between First 5 California, the California Department of Education, and the California Department of Social Services (see [Figure 1](#)), funded primarily through the state’s annual budget, the federal Child Care and Development Fund Block Grant, the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five renewal, and First 5 California budget funds. This three-layered system has state-level coordination, oversight, and data collection; regional coordination and training and technical

assistance hubs; and county-level operations run by local consortia or, in rural areas, several consortia operating as multicounty partnerships.⁶¹ As a result, California's QRIS has a statewide rating system that rates programs into one of five tiers with Tier 5 being the highest, but the quality improvement supports for the early learning workforce are determined locally by each consortium.

Due to the locally determined nature of California's QRIS, not all counties provide coaching. Some provide monitoring and technical assistance; others lack a coherent structure and approach to coaching and consider coaching to be synonymous with mentoring, communities of practice, or other professional development offerings.⁶² Each county that does provide coaching has developed its own approach, but state QRIS funding limits coaching for sites rated Tier 4 or 5 to twice per year.⁶³ Although some counties maintain this limit, others use non-state funds to provide more coaching to these sites.

As California continues to build its high-quality early learning system, the state has developed a set of coach competencies and is piloting a statewide voluntary coach certification process. These tools are intended to increase coaching capacity and improve the quality and consistency of coaching throughout the state.

El Dorado County

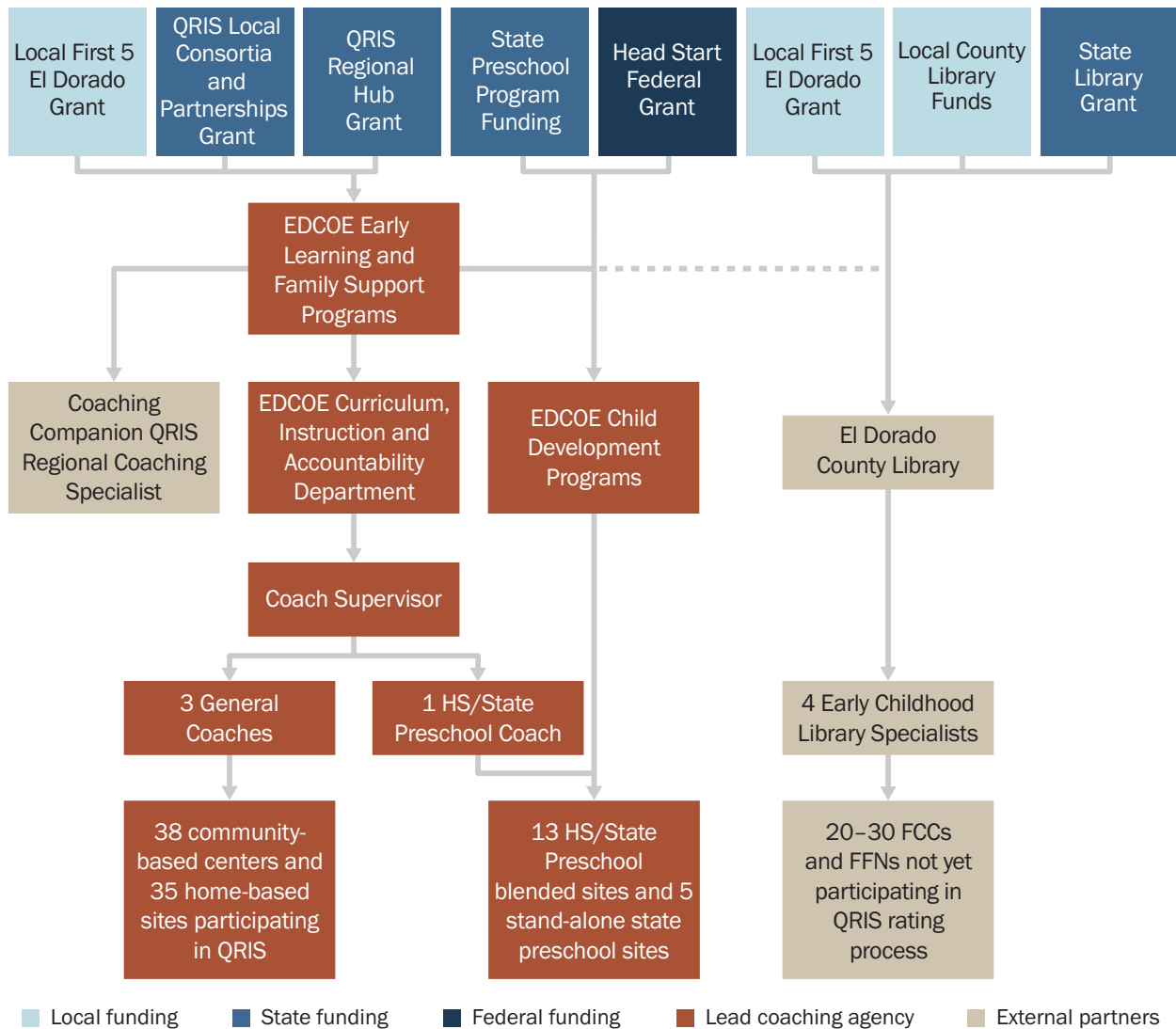
El Dorado County is a small, rural community located in Northern California between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe. Covering about 1,700 square miles, El Dorado County has a population of approximately 193,000 people, with 8,600 children under the age of 5,⁶⁴ which puts it near the middle of California's 58 counties in terms of population size. The majority of El Dorado's population identifies as White (77%); about 13% identify as Hispanic or Latino; and less than 11% identify as Asian or American Indian and Alaska Native.⁶⁵ The median household income is about \$83,000, and census data estimate that a little more than 8% of the county's residents live in poverty.⁶⁶

In 2012, El Dorado launched its countywide early learning coaching system that is implemented through the coordination of multiple departments in the El Dorado County Office of Education and in collaboration with the county library system and organizations that provide regional QRIS support ([Figure 1](#)). The interdepartmental partnership includes the Early Learning and Family Support programs; the Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability department; and Child Development Services department. The coaching system involves 91 sites voluntarily participating in QRIS, including Head Start and state-funded preschool sites; community-based child care centers; home-based sites; and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers. Additionally, the El Dorado County Library employs four early childhood library specialists who provide coaching and professional development support for home-based child care centers and FFN providers who are enrolled in QRIS but not yet participating in the QRIS rating process (see [Appendix C](#) for a more detailed profile of El Dorado County's coaching system). The El Dorado County Early Learning and Family Support programs also serve as the lead for California's Region 3 QRIS Hub and work regionally to fund and offer professional development opportunities, certification training, and technical assistance to coaches in the 14 counties in the region.

El Dorado blends federal, state, and local funding to support its coaching system. El Dorado County's annual early learning coaching budget was \$331,313 in 2020–21, with an additional \$16,900 in in-kind contributions from the El Dorado County Office of Education to provide coaching to lead or assistant

teachers and home-based early educators participating in QRIS across 91 sites.⁶⁷ The largest funding source is a Local First 5 El Dorado grant that makes up 70% of El Dorado County’s coaching budget.⁶⁸ The coaching budget is also supplemented by the state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant, the California State Preschool Program, and federal Head Start grant funding. The county library also has funding for coaching and other professional development supports through its own local First 5 grant, local county library funds, and a state library grant.⁶⁹

Figure 1. El Dorado County Coaching Infrastructure



Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year. CDE = California Department of Education; EDCOE = El Dorado County Office of Education; FCC = family child care; TK = transitional kindergarten; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of El Dorado County coaching participant interviews from 2022 and El Dorado’s Quality Counts California Local Consortia and Partnerships 2020–21 grant report. (2022).

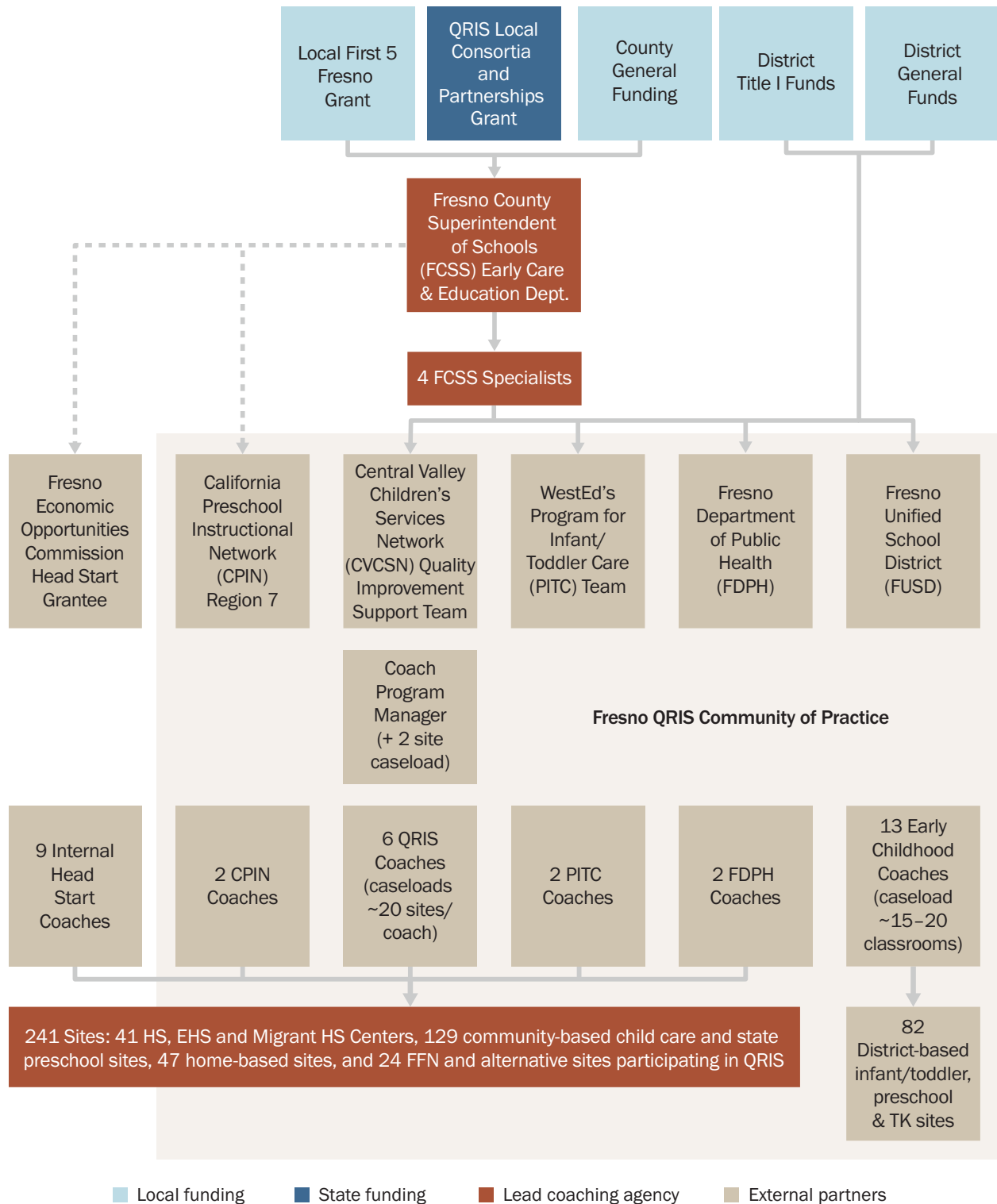
Fresno County

Located in California's Central Valley, Fresno County covers about 6,000 square miles, much of which is rural, agricultural land. Home to about 1 million people, including more than 70,000 children under age 5, Fresno County is one of California's largest counties in terms of both population and land area.⁷⁰ About half of the population is concentrated in the city of Fresno, the state's fifth-most-populous city.⁷¹ More than half of the county's population is from Hispanic or Latino backgrounds. The median household income is about \$54,000, and based on census data estimates, 17% of county residents live in poverty.⁷²

Fresno began its countywide early childhood coaching system in 2011. It is led by the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools' Early Care and Education department, which coordinates coaching with Central Valley Children's Services Network—the local child care resource and referral agency—and the Fresno Unified School District, WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC), and other non-funded coaching efforts with other school districts and non-local education agencies such as Head Start grantees. (See [Figure 2](#).) A wide variety of programs (323 total sites as of the 2020–21 school year) voluntarily participating in the county QRIS receive coaching support, including state-funded preschool sites; community-based child care centers; licensed home-based child care sites; Head Start centers; district-based infant/toddler, preschool, and transitional kindergarten classrooms; and FFN caregivers. (See [Appendix C](#) for a more detailed profile of Fresno County's coaching.)

Fresno County blended funding from federal, state, and local sources to cover the coaching program's self-reported annual coaching budget of about \$695,000, with 70% of the budget being funded through a grant from First 5 Fresno, 22% coming from the state's QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant, and 8% provided through general Fresno County funding.⁷³ This budget accounts for the coaching provided to the lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators at 241 center- and home-based sites participating in QRIS. It does not include the additional 82 district-based sites that receive coaching from Fresno Unified School District.

Figure 2. Fresno County Coaching Infrastructure



Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year. EHS = Early Head Start; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System; TK = transitional kindergarten.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews with Fresno County coaching participants from 2022 and Fresno’s Quality Counts California Consortia and Partnerships 2020–21 grant report. (2022).

San Diego County

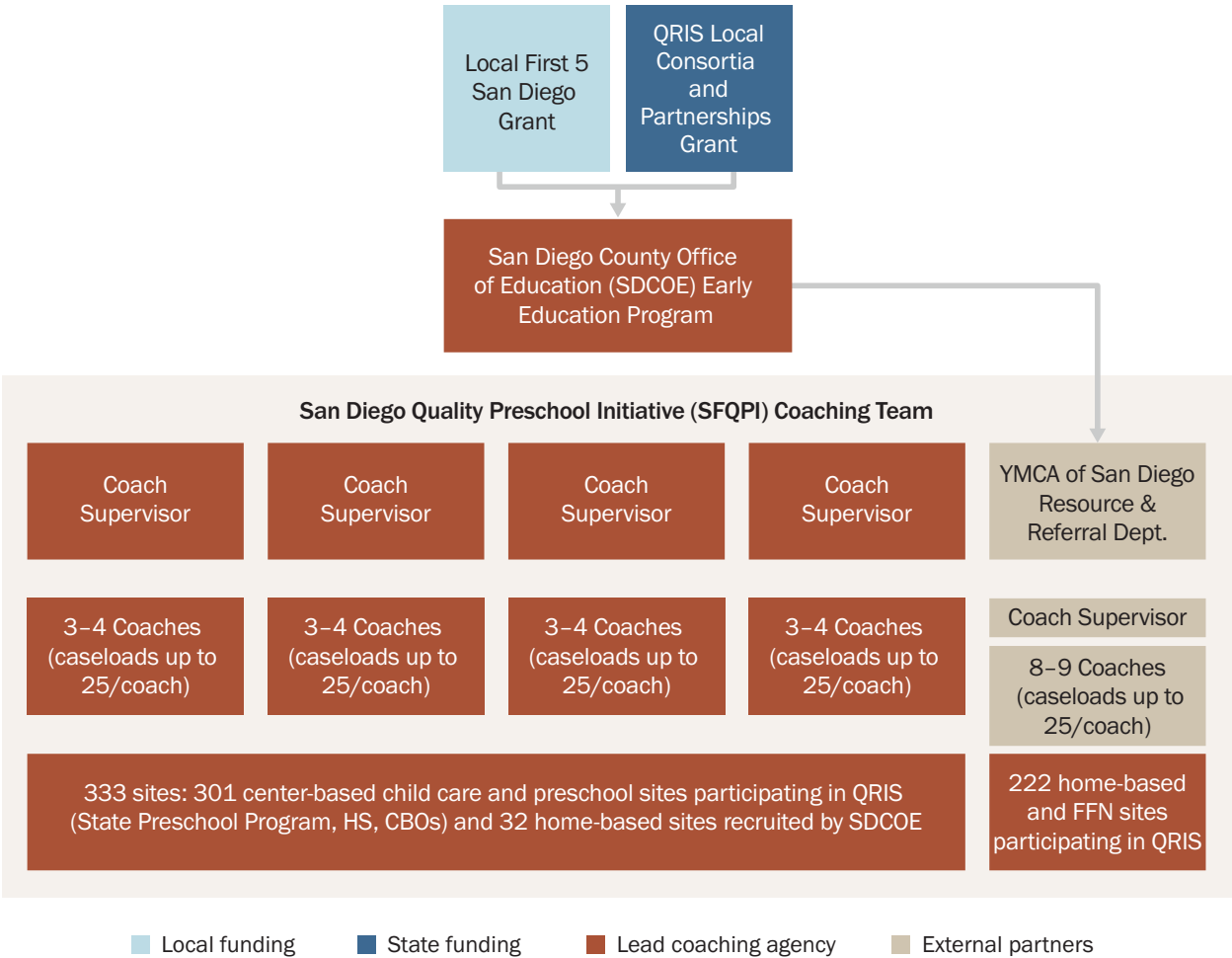
Located in Southern California, adjacent to Mexico, San Diego County covers about 4,200 square miles and includes nine military bases. With more than 3.3 million people, including more than 180,000 children under age 5, San Diego County is the second-most-populous county in California.⁷⁴ About 34% of San Diego's population is from Hispanic or Latino backgrounds, and about 45% of residents identify as White. The median household income is close to \$79,000, and census data show that a little less than 10% of the population lives in poverty.⁷⁵

San Diego County began providing quality improvement technical assistance in 2008. The county's QRIS program, the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative, was launched in 2012, at which time the technical assistance evolved into a coaching program for educators in preschool settings. Between 2012 and 2019, coaching expanded to include settings for children from birth to age 5 and home-based sites. In 2020, San Diego County modified its coaching approach and began directly coaching site leaders and certifying job-embedded coaches who provide coaching to the educators in their respective centers and programs.

The San Diego County Office of Education partners with the YMCA of San Diego County—the county's child care resource and referral agency—to implement the countywide coaching system. (See [Figure 3](#).) Covering a total of 555 sites and centers participating in QRIS, coaching is offered to center-based child care and state preschool programs; Head Start sites; home-based sites; and FFN sites. (See [Appendix C](#) for a more detailed profile of San Diego County's coaching system.)

The county has an annual budget of about \$6,054,500 for its coaching program (including coaching materials and supplies or data management support) to provide coaching to site leaders (e.g., center directors, site supervisors, and home-based leads) across 555 sites participating in QRIS.⁷⁶ The vast majority of the coaching (84%) is funded through the local First 5 San Diego, and the remaining 16% is funded through state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant funds.⁷⁷ The county also leverages administrative and clerical positions supported by other sources, thanks to integrated funding across early childhood activities at the department level.

Figure 3. San Diego County Coaching Infrastructure



Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020-21 coaching year. CBO = community-based organization; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of San Diego County coaching participant interviews from 2022 and San Diego’s Quality Counts California Local Consortia and Partnerships 2020-21 grant report. (2022).

Alabama

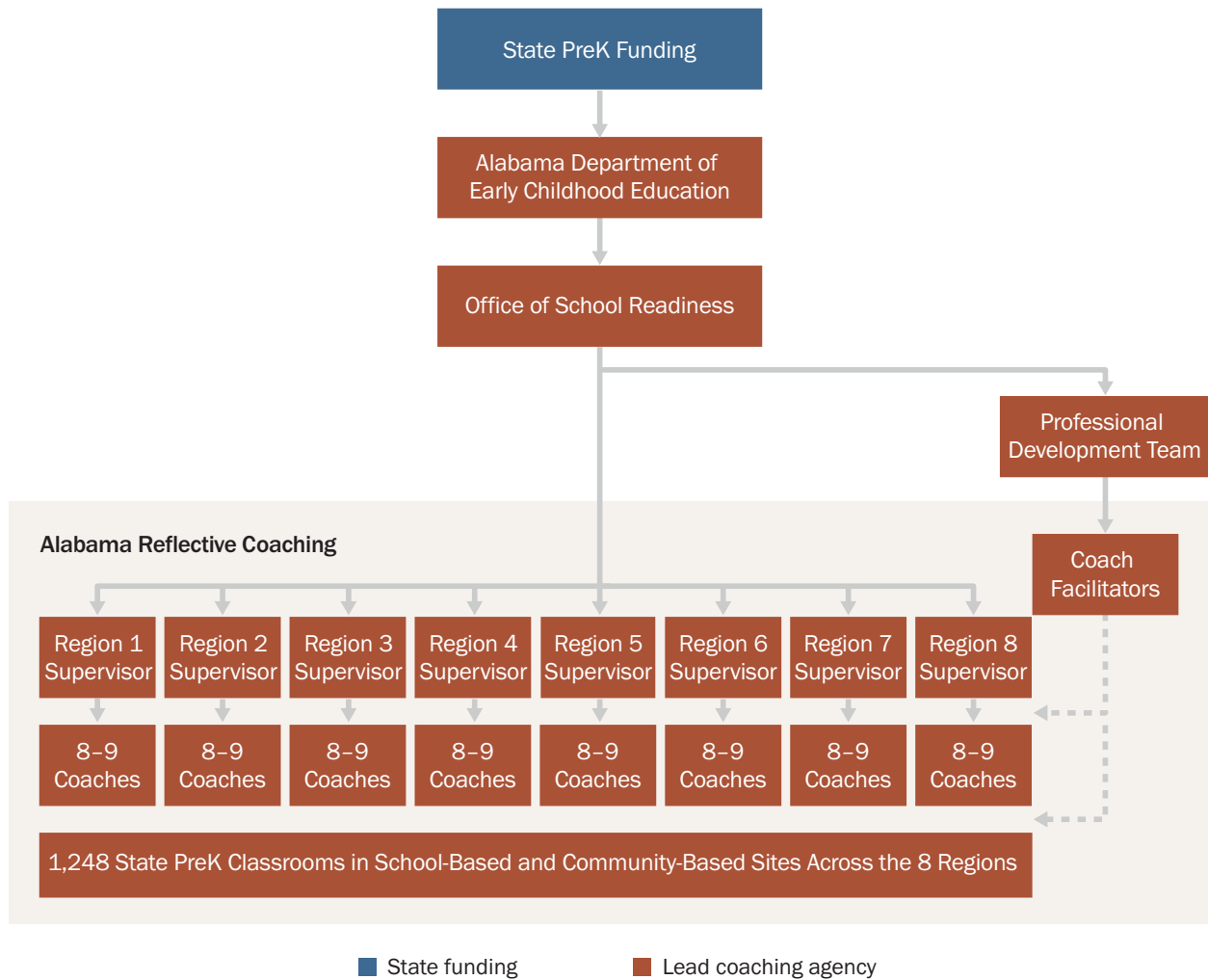
Alabama is a midsize state in terms of population, with approximately 290,000 children under age 5.⁷⁸ According to the National Institute for Early Education Research,⁷⁹ Alabama has one of the highest-quality state preschool programs in the nation. In 2019–20, 20,574 children across 1,203 classrooms participated in Alabama’s public preschool program.⁸⁰ More than half of the state’s children under age 5 are White (56%), 29% are Black, 9% are Hispanic or Latino/a, and 2% are Asian,⁸¹ and 7% speak a language other than English at home.⁸² Alabama has one of the nation’s highest rates of child poverty, with 26% of children under age 6 coming from families with incomes below the federal poverty level.⁸³ Alabama’s population is also more rural than the average, with just 59% of its population living in urban areas, compared with the U.S. average of 80%.⁸⁴

Launched in 2013, Alabama’s state PreK (First Class Pre-K) statewide coaching system is led by the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education’s Office of School Readiness and covers eight regions. (See [Figure 4](#).) Coaching is implemented statewide through the regional model for state-funded PreK classrooms, and coaching support is being scaled to a wide range of other birth to 3rd-grade programs receiving support or funding from the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Additional programs for which coaching is being scaled include those for Early Head Start, Head Start, and Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership sites; P–3 teachers at schools participating in a P–3 coaching initiative; a subset of early educators at child care centers and home-based sites who participate in quality enhancement coaching as part of the voluntary QRIS; and some birth to age 5 foundation sites, with state PreK classrooms selected to participate in additional coaching.

When designing the system, the state chose to hire coaches as employees of the state to ensure that the coaching workforce could maintain a focus on strength-based coaching (see [Appendix D](#) for a more detailed profile of Alabama state’s coaching system). All state PreK classrooms receive coaching that is primarily focused on providing strengths-based reflective coaching to the lead and assistant teachers, but coaches also engage with site leaders to address systemic needs.

Alabama’s early learning coaching system is primarily funded through the state’s general PreK funding. Approximately 8% of the money invested in state PreK goes to coaching and instructional supports.⁸⁵ In 2020–21, this equated to approximately \$10.1 million of the \$126.8 million in annual funding appropriated for state PreK to provide coaching to the state’s PreK lead or assistant teachers across 1,248 classrooms.⁸⁶ Federal funding through the Preschool Development Grant, the Child Care and Development Fund, and the Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships are being used to scale coaching to other programs. Alabama has also incorporated planning and reflection time into program schedules and funding to ensure educators have sufficient time to participate in coaching.

Figure 4. Alabama State Coaching Infrastructure



Note: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of state study participant interviews from 2022 and the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education 2019–2020 Data Snapshot. (2022).

Washington

Washington is a large state, with 454,705 children under age 5.⁸⁷ Fifty-four percent of those children are White, 23% are Hispanic or Latino/a, 8% are Asian, and 4% are Black,⁸⁸ and 22% speak a language other than English at home.⁸⁹ Relative to other states, Washington has one of the lowest rates of child poverty, with 13% of children under age 6 coming from families with incomes below the federal poverty level.⁹⁰ Washington is also relatively urban, with 84% percent of its population concentrated in urban areas, compared with the U.S. average of 80%.⁹¹

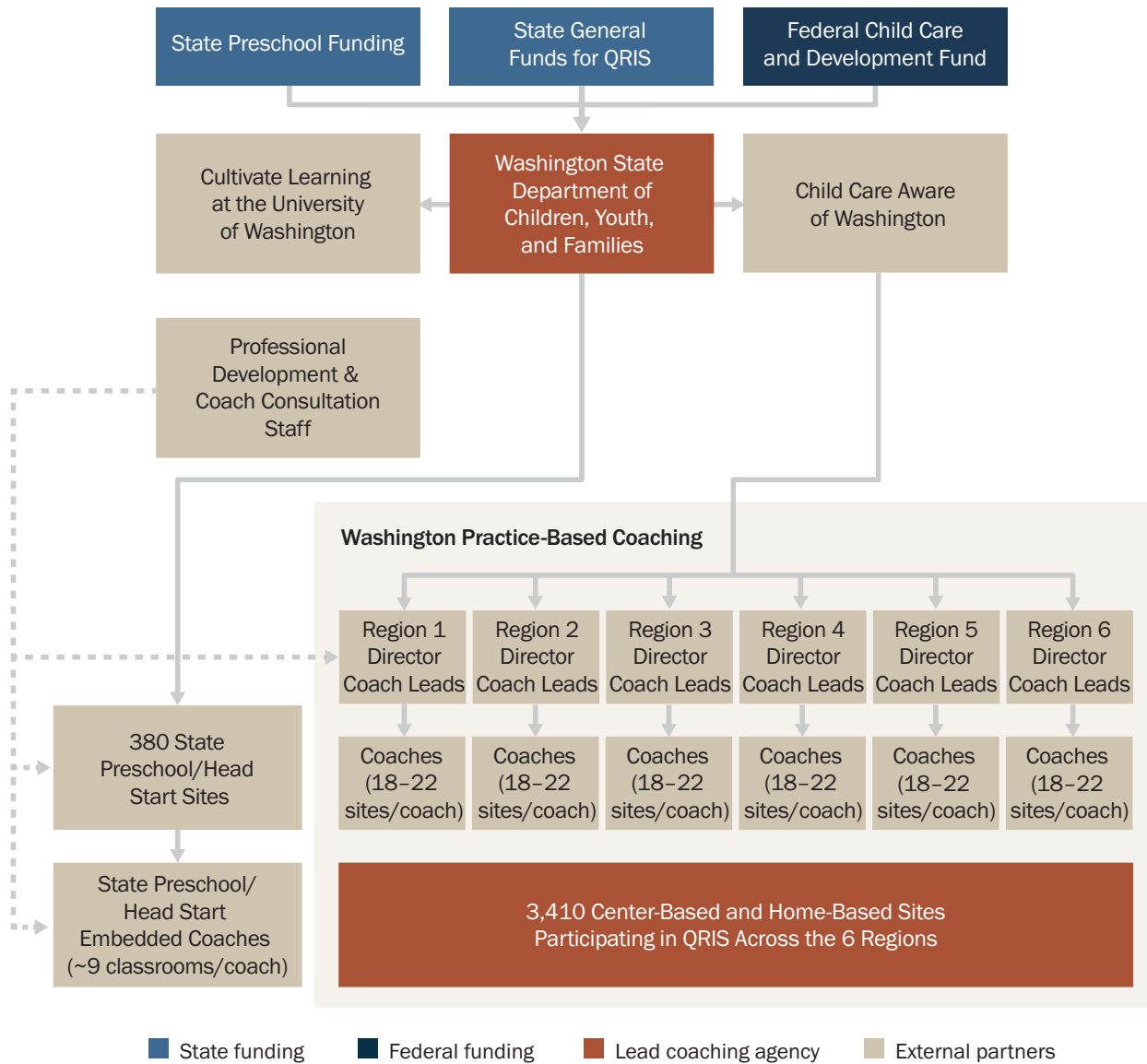
Washington's statewide coaching system was launched in 2012 and is led by the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. (See [Figure 5](#).) The department partners with Child Care Aware of Washington to implement coaching in six regions. Additionally, Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington provides research and professional development for coaches. The state of Washington is unique among the coaching systems explored in this study because it is the only system that requires all early learning child programs receiving public funds to participate in QRIS. Early learning programs that do not receive state funds may voluntarily participate in QRIS. In total, this means that 3,790 center- and home-based early learning sites receive coaching as part of mandatory QRIS. (See [Appendix D](#) for a more detailed profile of Washington state's coaching system.) Coaches primarily focus on coaching early educators but also work with site leaders to address sitewide quality if necessary.

The majority of funding for Washington's coaching system comes from state general funds as part of QRIS. In the state's 2020–2021 fiscal year, \$1.7 million was appropriated from the general operating fund for implementing QRIS overall, most of which was used to provide coaching to lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators participating in QRIS across 3,410 sites.⁹² Washington also receives federal funding from the Child Care and Development Fund.

El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties plus Alabama and Washington show that counties and states can provide scaled comprehensive coaching systems that are tailored to the resources and needs of their specific state or local context and include the wide variety, and large quantity, of early learning settings and providers within their locales.

The next two sections look across the three California counties and two states to illustrate some of the approaches and structural features within the studied early childhood coaching systems. These sections explore how the coaching systems are implemented and supported, in what ways they are perceived to be beneficial, and which challenges and enablers tend to impact their implementation. These shared components provide lessons about how states and counties might strengthen and expand coaching for the diversity of early learning programs and educators in their mixed delivery systems.

Figure 5. Washington State Coaching Infrastructure



Note: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview data from 2022 and Washington Early Achievers Data Dashboard March 2020. (2022).

Approaches to Providing Early Learning Coaching

States and counties face a variety of decisions when developing early learning coaching systems. They need to decide who will be the primary recipient of coaching among the early educators and site leaders across mixed delivery systems. They must decide on the dosage of coaching and the format in which coaching is delivered, based on the funding and policy context in which they are operating. They also must decide how to guide the content of coaching and how to promote coaching effectiveness. States and counties also face decisions on how to employ coaches, what qualifications should be required for coaches, and how to provide professional development and ongoing support to coaches themselves. The sections that follow explore these decisions and illustrate different ways that the case study sites approached them.

The five coaching systems examined in this study illustrate different ways to deliver coaching that develops practitioner knowledge and skills with the help of an expert. Although the systems vary in some of their design decisions, each aims to provide early educators and site leaders with the guidance, tools, and support they need to improve their practice through a collaborative coaching approach.

[Table 3](#) presents some of the basic components of the coaching models and how they vary across the five coaching systems studied. Specifically, the table summarizes who received coaching, how much coaching they received, what the coaching sessions covered, and in what format the sessions took place.

Table 3. Summary of Coaching Approaches Studied

Features	Alabama	Washington	California		
			El Dorado County	Fresno County	San Diego County
Primary coaching recipients	Early educators: state PreK lead or assistant teachers	Early educators: lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators participating in QRIS		Site leaders: center directors, site supervisors, and home-based leads participating in QRIS	
Secondary coaching recipients	Early educators: P-3 teachers as part of P-3 Initiative; EHS-CCP early educators; center-based lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators participating in voluntary QRIS quality enhancement or challenging behavior coaching, or at Birth-5 Foundation sites Some site leaders to address sitewide needs ^a	Early educators: birth-age 12 programs as part of the Expanded Learning Opportunities Quality Initiative Some site leaders to address sitewide needs	Early educators: Home-based and FFNs not participating in QRIS (coordinated with county library) Some site leaders to address sitewide needs	Some site leaders to address sitewide needs	Early educators: lead or assistant teachers, via affiliate embedded coaches ^b
Frequency of coaching sessions	Ranges from multiple sessions per week to 1 per month, with additional touch points (e.g., phone calls) based on goals and needs	Typically ranges from weekly to monthly based on goals and needs	Typically 2 per month, with additional visits or flexibility based on goals and needs	Monthly or bimonthly for Tiers 1-3; 2 per year for Tiers 4 and 5 (QRIS-funded); at least 1 per quarter (non-QRIS-funded)	Ranges from multiple per month to monthly based on goals and needs
Coaching approaches	State-developed Alabama Reflective Coaching	Practice-based coaching framework (developed by University of Washington)	Based on practice-based coaching framework and practice-based coaching as part of Pyramid Model coaching	Locally adapted approach characterized by relationship-based, strengths-based, reflective, and equity-driven coaching	Locally developed reflective coaching based on work with trainer and consultant Ernie Mendes

Features	Alabama	Washington	California		
			El Dorado County	Fresno County	San Diego County
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tightly aligned to quality standards: Coaches use rating criteria or quality standards and assessment tools (e.g., CLASS) to identify potential areas of focus when developing individual coaching goals and plans. • Focused on supporting best practices: Content responds to site and community needs, such as addressing challenging behaviors and trauma-informed practices; supporting dual- and multilingual learners; and promoting racial equity. • Tailored to meet early educators' individual needs: The content of specific sessions is informed by collaboratively developed coaching goals and is responsive to new issues as they arise. 				
Modes of contact	Contact is primarily via synchronous face-to-face, in-person sessions, but virtual sessions are also offered.				
Strategies for promoting effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating structures to support relationship development between coaches and coachees • Using reflective practice to drive instruction and improvement • Using individualized, strengths-based practice to engage educators in quality improvement 				

^a Sitewide needs include those related to supports for common issues across classrooms, such as addressing challenging behaviors, or sitewide resources such as curriculum and assessment.

^b Affiliate-embedded coaches are coaches who provide instructional coaching to early educators at sites not employed or funded by San Diego County but whom the county supports with resources, training, and professional development.

Notes: CLASS = Classroom Assessment Scoring System; EHS-CCP = Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; P-3 = preschool through 3rd grade; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview data from 2022 and Washington Early Achievers Data Dashboard March 2020. (2022).

Who Receives Coaching?

Across the five cases studied, coaching was provided for both early educators and site leaders across mixed delivery systems. However, the main audience receiving coaching varied across the cases. In El Dorado and Fresno counties and Washington, the primary recipients of coaching were early education lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators participating in QRIS. In Alabama, the state first provided coaching to early education lead or assistant teachers in state-funded PreK classrooms, then scaled coaching through other initiatives targeting other early learning coaching recipients.

Other types of early educators and some site leaders also received coaching across the cases. For example, Alabama is expanding state PreK coaching to reach a wider group of educators by including those who teach children as part of P-3 schools, and Washington is expanding coaching to programs for children from birth to age 12. Similarly, El Dorado expanded coaching to home-based and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) educators who were not participating in QRIS. Alabama, Washington, El Dorado, and Fresno also provided coaching to some site leaders.

San Diego County was unique across the five systems because it prioritized site leaders as the primary recipients of coaching. Through a “cascade” model, San Diego used county-level coaches to provide one-on-one coaching and supports for site leaders (e.g., center directors, site supervisors, and home-based site leads such as home-based owners) and embedded instructional coaches. Embedded instructional coaches are independently hired or contracted to provide instructional coaching to educators and typically work in Head Start, school district, and community college early learning settings. The site leaders and embedded instructional coaches provide support and coaching for the early educators in their respective centers and programs (including home-based sites). This coaching-of-coaches approach was intended to unify coaching across settings and to scale coaching to reach more educators, which can maximize limited funding. The content of the coaching focused on creating structures and systems to support quality learning environments as well as developing leadership and management skills. This approach, however, places a greater burden on site leaders to serve as coaches to early educators whom they typically also supervise.

Among the coaching systems studied, Washington provided the most universal access to coaching. With its universal QRIS model, any program receiving state funds, as well as non-state-funded programs that voluntarily participate, received coaching as part of QRIS participation. However, in other locales studied, the coaching systems provided coaching for a wider variety of early childhood education providers, such as those not participating in QRIS, those who did not receive state funding, or those operated by school districts. For example, in El Dorado and San Diego counties, coaching was also provided to small nonprofit, private, and faith-based centers that did not receive state funding but volunteered to participate in QRIS.

Whether the primary recipients of coaching were early educators or site leaders, the average ratio of coaches to sites was similar across systems and averaged approximately 1 coach for every 22 sites.

How Is Coaching Dosage Determined?

Consistent with the research literature, across the five coaching systems studied there was no standardized, universal model for frequency and duration of coaching. The frequency of coaching varied from multiple sessions per week to two sessions per year, and, when possible, the frequency and intensity of coaching were adjusted to respond to real-time needs.

Although the frequency of sessions varied widely, all the systems based the frequency on the perceived level of need, with different systems using different means for determining the level of need, such as:

- the site’s QRIS tier (Fresno County);
- the length of time the coachee had been receiving coaching (San Diego County); and
- the needs and skills of the coachee based on quality improvement plans and individual goal setting (Alabama, El Dorado, San Diego, and Washington).

In Fresno County, the frequency of sessions for some sites was restricted due to state regulations about the use of state QRIS funding for coaching. Specifically, Tier 3 and 4 sites are limited to two formal coaching sessions; there are no restrictions on coaching sessions for Tier 1 or 2 sites. The other two

California counties studied, El Dorado and San Diego, also are subject to this restriction but have been able to leverage local First 5 funding to provide greater flexibility in determining coaching intensity based upon individual site and coachee needs and preferences.

The length of coaching sessions also varied, typically ranging from 1 hour to 3 hours, depending on the focus of the session and a coachee's schedule. A San Diego County coach explained that the content often determined how much time each session would take. For example, sessions that focused on rearranging the learning environment in addition to specific practices might take longer (3 or more hours) than sessions that exclusively focused on specific practices (typically 1 hour). In other cases, the coachee's schedule may drive the length. For example, for some home-based educators, fewer but longer sessions were more feasible. For others, the need for coaching was greatest at the beginning of the school year, and the coaches and coachees would meet more frequently and for longer sessions (1.5 hours) every 2 or 3 weeks for the first 6 months while completing the self-assessment and developing goals for the year. These sites would then shift to 1-hour sessions 1 or 2 times per month for the remainder of the coaching cycle. (Most sites took a break in the summer between coaching cycles, even though they did not formally follow a school-year calendar.)

How Is Coaching Delivered?

All the coaching systems in this study delivered coaching primarily through synchronous, face-to-face, in-person sessions. These coaching sessions were conducted one-on-one or in a small group with teaching or site leader teams at a site. However, some systems have additionally adopted supplemental virtual modes of coaching to increase the frequency of contact and offer additional peer learning supports or to continue coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, El Dorado County and Washington used a virtual coaching platform called Coaching Companion, and San Diego County also piloted the platform. Coaching Companion is a web-based application where educators can upload videos and documentation of their real-life teaching practices. The coaches can then provide feedback within the application, including notes or reflective prompts on specific parts of the uploaded video.⁹³ The Coaching Companion platform also includes a media library with exemplar videos of effective teaching practices and training materials. Coaching Companion was developed by the University of Washington and has undergone significant customization for California. Additionally, in El Dorado and San Diego counties and Washington coaches facilitated several group or sitewide sessions to support shared learning across coachees, particularly for home-based early educators who tend to be more isolated otherwise.

Study participants in El Dorado expressed the importance of the online coaching platform in increasing touch points for their coaches and early educators. Because El Dorado's early learning providers were dispersed across a large, rural community and the coaching system had limited resources, it was sometimes logistically challenging to maximize the number of in-person, on-site coaching sessions delivered. The video-based tool allowed more opportunities for coaches to observe teaching and provide feedback, as well as for coachees to reflect on their practices and access additional resources.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, coaching systems needed to incorporate more virtual learning in order to continue supporting educators and sites. For example, coaches in San Diego worked with site leaders and early educators to help them learn to use new technology tools. However, in other systems, study

participants noted that not all early educators were comfortable using technology for coaching. To allay some of the stress and frustration that learning a new technology can cause, coaches in Alabama, Fresno County, and Washington allowed educators to use a familiar platform, or whichever platform they were most comfortable using, to meet with their coaches and continue their distance learning. Additionally, Alabama added Creative Curriculum Cloud to support virtual learning, providing access to a learning management system, virtual classrooms, and a platform for educators and parents to connect. Still, although coaches were able to see benefits to the virtual format, most expressed eagerness to return to in-person coaching so they could connect with educators and children more authentically.

What Guides the Content of Coaching?

Among the sites studied, coaching content was guided to meet individual needs and to support equity.

Focusing Coaching on Quality Improvement

In all the coaching systems studied, the content of coaching was tightly aligned with quality improvement (e.g., QRIS, state PreK standards) and linked to other professional development efforts. Coaches used quality standards as one of the key inputs (but not the only one) to guide the content of coaching sessions to meet the individual needs of early educators. Across all the coaching systems studied, coaches emphasized how to use classroom assessment tools and standards to inform practice and engage in continuous quality improvement. Quality standards and assessment tools focused on:

- results of formative assessments of children (e.g., the Desired Results Developmental Profiles, or DRDP);
- results of screening children (e.g., the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, or ASQ);
- the quality of the learning environment (e.g., the Environmental Rating Scales, or ERS) and/or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS);
- teacher qualifications and levels of experience; and
- site-based quality improvement plans.

As described by one of Fresno County’s coaches, “The lens that we use is around the four tools that are embedded in the [QRIS rating] matrix, so we coach and train on DRDP, ASQ, ERS, CLASS.” Similarly, a coach of home-based early educators in San Diego County shared that one of her goals is “working with [home-based site leaders] and helping incorporate DRDP, ASQ, CLASS, environment in general, [and] interactions between providers and the children.” Site supervisors, too, used their QRIS ratings to guide their requests for coaching. For example, an early learning site supervisor for a birth to age 5 center in Fresno County shared the following perspective:

If we received a score that we want to increase, then that’s communicated to the [QRIS] team to receive more coaching for staff or maybe have a few more observations throughout the year. It’s really looking at the scores in each area and then determining what levels of support are available for coaching to help the teachers continue growing in those areas. So, the ratings and the scores, they really drive our plans with what types of coaching and how often we need it.

Other common drivers of the content of coaching sessions included those related to supporting social-emotional development and trauma-informed practice (through supporting training and implementation of the [Pyramid Model](#), [Facilitating Attuned Interactions \[FAN\]](#) approach and [Conscious Discipline](#)); supporting dual- and multilingual learners; and addressing implicit bias and promoting racial equity. (See [Focusing Coaching on Equity](#) for additional details.)

Focusing Coaching on Equity

Across the coaching systems studied, one of the intended aims of coaching was to support early childhood educators and providers in incorporating equitable practices so that children, families, and staff from diverse backgrounds, or from underrepresented communities, can be served or supported according to their needs. This focus on equity included creating processes within coaching systems to help educators or site leaders provide support for dual-language learners and speakers, to promote social-emotional development (especially for children who have experienced trauma), and to ensure a focus on and commitment to racial equity. The relationships and coordination in place from coaching also enabled these coaching systems to support early educators and programs during times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. (See [Leveraging Coaching Infrastructure to Support Programs Through COVID](#).)

Dual-Language Learners and Educators. In El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties, coaches helped early educators use inclusive practices to support the needs of dual-language and multilingual learners. In Fresno and San Diego counties, supporting inclusive practices was an area of focus in coaches' professional development so that they could support early educators in integrating these practices into their learning environments. For example, coaches supported educators in applying culturally responsive strategies and integrating children's home cultures into instructional practice. Coaches were also able to help sites access additional resources, such as translated materials for families. Coaching programs in Washington developed and translated QRIS and coaching documents into Spanish and Somali because these were common home languages in the state. Fresno also had a strong emphasis on linguistic accessibility for providers, particularly because nearly all the home-based educators speak a language other than English as their preferred language. The administrators and coaches described a "power dynamic based on language" when services are available only in English, or even when translation is used. Matilda Soria, Senior Director of Early Care and Education, Office of the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, explained:

Many of our family child care home providers (99.9%) are monolingual Spanish. We have several staff that are bilingual English-Spanish, and we try our best to provide training and coaching in their native language, rather than having a translator, to show respect.

In El Dorado, coaching helped educators incorporate inclusive dual-language practices, such as labeling materials in both English and other languages; reading aloud in home languages, such as Spanish and Mandarin; and inviting parents to engage children in activities from their home countries, such as tortilla making or Indian tie-dyeing.

Washington's coaching system also encouraged the use of visuals, video, or icons that did not assume proficiency in English. Similarly, early educators in El Dorado had access to videos with Spanish subtitles through Coaching Companion, and San Diego offered provider orientations in both Spanish and English.

Social-Emotional Development. To support all children, coaches also focused on promoting social-emotional development and positive behaviors. For example, coaches in El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties were trained to use the Pyramid Model, a conceptual framework of evidence-based practices for supporting young children’s social-emotional development and addressing challenging behaviors.⁹⁴ San Diego coaches reported seeing a reduction in the number of suspensions and expulsions for children in early learning sites after site leaders and early educators were coached on the Pyramid Model.

Coaches and early educators across all programs also identified trauma-informed care competencies as a focus of professional development and coaching. Through coaching, many early educators learned about the relationship between trauma and children’s behavior and how to support children who were suffering. Traumatic experiences can often underly challenging behaviors, and coaches can help educators to use trauma-informed practices. These practices were especially relevant when early childhood educators needed to support children returning to out-of-home group learning environments after staying home through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some early learning sites in San Diego had included trauma-informed practices as goals in their quality improvement plans, which meant that the coachees would receive coaching in trauma-informed practices. In Fresno, QRIS coaches collaborated with another internal agency team within the county’s office of education to provide professional development related to trauma-informed care. In Washington, coaches and early educators were trained on the [Facilitating Attuned Interactions \(FAN\) approach](#) to help themselves and families develop the ability to track, regulate, and understand their own reactions with children so they can respond to children more empathically.

Racial Equity. The coaching systems studied also demonstrated a racial equity focus in their work. For example, in Fresno, racial and cultural equity are explicitly addressed as part of an all-coach community of practice that includes coaches from all the partnering organizations. (See [Addressing Coach Bias Through Communities of Practice in Fresno.](#))

Racial equity was also a key priority in Washington’s early learning system, including in its coaching, and the state recently developed and adopted a statewide racial equity theory of change and [racial equity and social justice framework](#) that guide its coaching program. In addition, the state formed a racial equity advisory group to inform equity work within QRIS. The state team is using the framework and input from the advisory group to work toward an anti-racist system.

The racial equity theory of change includes four drivers to advance racial equity:

1. Increase community voice and influence for those furthest from opportunity
2. Inform practices with diverse measures and stories
3. Design and implement systems that respond to children’s diverse situations
4. Make decisions that genuinely meet the requirements of communities of color

Based on these drivers and the guiding principles outlined in the framework, the state developed a racial equity tool that used high-level questions as a guide, but not as a checklist, to keep the focus on equity.

Washington’s racial equity work included developing a state-level quality improvement plan to specifically target areas that had been concerns for equity and social justice, including those within the QRIS and the coaching system. Some system revisions focused on making processes and resources more culturally relevant, such as by ensuring that tools, information, and scheduling are more culturally aligned to tribal communities. Washington also provided training to coaches and early educators on cultural responsiveness and on approaches to promote racial equity through Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington. (See [Appendix D](#) for additional details.)

How Is Coaching Effectiveness Promoted?

The coaching systems studied strived to promote the effectiveness of scaled coaching through strategic efforts in three areas:

1. Creating structures to support a qualified coaching workforce and relationship development
2. Using reflective practices to drive instructional improvement
3. Using individualized, strengths-based practices to engage educators in quality improvement

Creating Structures to Support a Qualified Coaching Workforce and Relationship Development

Research shows that trust is foundational to effective coaching.⁹⁵ This includes trust in the expertise of the coach as well as relationship trust in the intentions of the coach. This finding was confirmed by study participants from each of the coaching systems studied. As one coach in Fresno explained, “If you don’t have their trust, it’s not going to happen. They’re not going to grow. They’re not going to learn from you.”

With this foundational principle in mind, coaching systems intentionally set conditions that would ensure the expertise of coaches and allow trusting relationships to develop. All the coaching systems required coaches to have at least a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or a related field, several years of experience working with children from birth through age 5, and strong interpersonal skills. All the coaching systems also actively recruited coaches who spoke the language of, or lived in, the communities they served.

In San Diego, coaching staff prioritized agency requests and goodness of fit when matching coaches with sites. One coach supervisor explained that, as supervisors, they could learn the unique strengths of individual coaches and take those strengths into account when determining coaches’ caseloads. Also, in San Diego County, all coaches were certified as a trainer in one or more specialty areas, such as inclusion, trauma-informed practices, the Pyramid Model for addressing challenging behavior, and WestEd’s Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC). Early learning sites were then matched with coaches who had the expertise that best fit their needs. Matching based on goodness of fit contributes to building personal connections between coach and coachee.

Because relationships serve as the foundation of effective coaching, and because relationships take time and energy to build, some coaching systems prioritized continuity of relationships in pairing coaches and early educators. For example, in Fresno, many of the coach–coachee relationships go back many years, with coaches having provided technical assistance during the accreditation process and staying with sites as they transitioned to QRIS coaching.

Similarly, Washington made changes to its QRIS onboarding process so that the coach and early learning sites can begin to build their relationship right away and continue with each other beyond onboarding. Prior to this change, coaches did not begin working with an early learning site until after the site worked with other QRIS onboarding staff to ensure that they met licensing requirements focusing on health and safety. Sandy Maldonado, Director of Early Learning at Child Care Aware of Washington, noted that the continuity of the coach–provider relationship was especially helpful for early educators who were monolingual non-English speakers.

Using Reflective Practices to Drive Instructional Improvement

Although all the coaching systems in this study had different names for the coaching approaches implemented, all the programs rested on the foundational concept of reflective coaching—that is, encouraging and supporting reflection. Across the case studies, study participants emphasized reflection as a critical part of the quality improvement process.

As Maldonado of Child Care Aware of Washington explained, “Our role is to build capacity for reflective dialogue and practice. That’s what we’ve seen has been the biggest piece.” A site leader for a birth to age 5 center in Fresno shared that the self-reflection encouraged through coaching was more effective than a top-down directive approach because it allowed educators to feel like they were part of the process and take ownership. A San Diego coach shared that guided reflection using active-listening techniques and open-ended questions was also critical for helping coachees make more intentional decisions in their practice: “Those reflective questions are getting them to think about the why instead of just the action.”

As supported by the literature, allowing for reflection and feedback based on focused observation of practices is one of the most common strategies used across coaching systems. Coaching staff identified video recordings as an effective tool for developing educators’ reflective practice. For example, a Fresno Unified School District coach used video to provide concrete evidence of practices and to point out both strengths and areas for improvement. All coaches in Fresno used video to help educators reflect on their practices. In El Dorado and Washington, the Coaching Companion online platform facilitated video reflection and coaching cycles (see [Coaching Companion](#)). According to Juliet Taylor, Director of Strategy and Partnerships for Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington, reflection supported virtually with Coaching Companion over 10 weeks significantly improved educators’ interactions with children, as measured by the CLASS.⁹⁶

Coaching Companion

Coaching Companion is a tool for virtual, asynchronous reflective coaching. Originally developed by the University of Washington and partners for the Office of Head Start’s National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, Coaching Companion is a web-based video feedback and annotation application that supports collaboration between coaches and educators. Educators upload videos and documentation of real-life teaching practices with children, and coaches provide feedback within the application. They even have the ability to make notes or provide reflective prompts on specific parts of the uploaded video. The Coaching Companion platform also includes a media library with exemplar videos of effective teaching practices and training materials.

El Dorado County partnered with the University of Washington to develop a California-specific Coaching Companion version using federal Race to the Top funds. Coaching specialist Danielle Singley worked with coaches to develop coaching cycle sets focused on topics such as high-quality interactions with infants and toddlers, how to increase instructional supports in the preschool classrooms, growth as a professional educator, family engagement, and social-emotional development. Additionally, the platform offers the ability to create customized coaching cycles or group coaching supports.

In El Dorado, Coaching Companion is used as an optional tool in conjunction with synchronous face-to-face coaching sessions. It enables more touch points between coaches and early educators, given limited resources and the challenges of getting to remote rural sites for face-to-face coaching.

Sources: Cultivate Learning. [What we do](#). University of Washington; interview with Danielle Singley, independent contractor, Coaching Specialist for the Region 3 Quality Counts California Hub (2020, October 27); interview with Elizabeth Blakemore, Director, Family and Early Learning Programs, El Dorado County Office of Education (2020, November 12).

Alabama and San Diego County both have also developed self-assessment tools and processes to support coachees in reflecting on their strengths and identifying goals for coaching that build on those strengths. In San Diego, the self-assessment tool asked site leaders to record data and examples of evidence for 43 quality indicators; reflect on their level of implementation for each indicator; and rate each indicator as *not in place*, *partially in place*, or *in place*. The self-assessment is used to inform the development of a quality improvement plan that guides the coaching goals and any additional supportive content-specific professional development for staff at the site (e.g., related to addressing challenging behaviors with the Pyramid Model).

Using Individualized, Strengths-Based Practices to Engage Educators in Quality Improvement

As described earlier, each system’s quality improvement framework and tools provided a common foundation for coaching and a road map for developing practices. The features and assessment tools used in QRIS (e.g., CLASS, ERS) were typically used by coaches as an important, though not the sole, input to inform strengths and areas for improvement. With that as a guide, coaches developed individualized sessions and provided supports for coachees to move their practices forward. All the coaching systems studied use a semistructured, strengths-based approach to delivering the individualized coaching. Study participants expressed that they provided individualized coaching by acknowledging the strengths of individual coachees and then differentiating the content and goals based on a coachee’s needs.

Using a strengths-based approach—by focusing first on what coachees can do and what they do well—helped coaches establish a positive starting point with their coachees and encouraged coachees to actively participate in the process. As Maldonado from Child Care Aware of Washington explained, “We highlight their strengths, we build off them, we show them that they can, and we build that momentum so that they become engaged in their own quality improvement journey.”

In many cases, coaches and coachees identified strengths together by engaging in a self-assessment and quality improvement planning process at the site level, leading to the development of individualized coachee goals. Coaches then tailored the content of the coaching sessions to the early educators' individual plans.

Although early educators set long-term goals for coaching, individual sessions were also responsive to specific issues that arose. A Head Start teacher in El Dorado explained:

We start out with an action plan and the smart goal that we set up each year. ... If, halfway through the year, I find out I've got a family with certain needs that I'm trying to support, [my coach] may say, "This might be something that will work for this child or for this family," and [she] gives me access to some articles or videos or something that isn't necessarily specifically on that goal. But it's something that is a personal goal in my classroom *right now*. ... We still work toward the original goal. And sometimes if we need to, midweek, midyear, we'll go through and reevaluate. [emphasis added]

Leveraging Coaching Infrastructure to Support Programs Through COVID

In the programs we studied, coaching infrastructures enabled quick responses to meet the diverse and immediate needs of early educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because programs already had the coaching workforce on the ground ready to support early educators, coaching systems mobilized quickly to connect early childhood education programs with resources.

Once these immediate needs were being met, coaches turned to assisting early learning educators with the shift to virtual instruction and family engagement strategies. Coaches also responded to the mental health challenges that surfaced among early educators by promoting self-care, supporting early educators' social and emotional needs, and helping them build resiliency.

Coaches also helped programs comply with health and safety measures and navigate the reopening of schools. For example, Alabama created an entire framework of reopening guidance, which coaches helped early education sites implement. Coaches in Fresno County worked with early educators to incorporate social distancing into daily routines.

While offering all these additional supports, coaches continued to provide instructional coaching. Although they had to pivot from their typical coaching strategies and content, their flexibility and responsiveness were critical to ensuring that early learning sites had what they needed to continue serving their communities.

How Are Coaches Employed and Funded?

A strategy used by all the coaching systems to provide wide access to coaching across the mixed delivery system was to intentionally employ coaches regionally at agencies that served multiple settings. Coaches were employed by state-level government agencies (Alabama), county-level government agencies (El Dorado County), or community-based resource and referral agencies contracted by the state or county (Washington). In San Diego, coaches were employed either by the county office of education or the resource and referral agency. In Fresno, coaches were employed by multiple organizations, including the resource and referral agency and the largest local school district, which oversees infant/toddler- and preschool-based sites. Although these agencies include state agencies, county agencies, and nonprofit organizations, in each case, the agency served multiple types of settings. Employing coaches at agencies that serve more than one setting was intended to increase access to coaching and to ensure the inclusion of early educators across all types of settings.

The primary funding sources used to employ coaches in both Alabama and Washington were state general funds that were supplemented with federal funds from either the Preschool Development Grant or the Child Care and Development Fund. State general funds have created stable and sustainable funding sources for coaching in both states. Alabama reserves approximately 8% of state preschool funding for coaching and instructional supports. As funding is added annually to continue to expand the state's preschool program, funding for coaching is able to grow proportionally. In the absence of state general funds for coaching, the California counties relied on local First 5 grant funding as their primary funding source for coaching, but these First 5 funds are drawn from declining tobacco tax revenues. Without additional funding sources in the future, the ability to maintain and expand coaching in California is at risk.

What Qualifications Do Coaches Have?

As consistently indicated by our study participants and noted in previous research studies, an important decision point in the design of coaching systems involves determining how to provide support for coaching quality. In fact, the research base suggests that the coaching outcomes are more sensitive to the quality of coaching than the dosage.⁹⁷ Consequently, it is important to consider and explore how systems implement and ensure high-quality coaching. This process begins with identifying the relevant experience and educational qualifications of coaches.

All the coaching systems studied required coaches to be qualified for the job in terms of their educational background, practical experience, developmentally appropriate pedagogical skills, and interpersonal skills. Four of the five systems required coaches to have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, child development, or a related field (El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties and Alabama). Washington preferred for coaches to have a bachelor's degree in one of these fields but allowed for associate degrees for coaches who represented and lived in the communities they served. In fact, all the coaching systems in this study valued community representation in their coaches and actively recruited coaches who spoke the languages of and lived in the communities they served. For example, in Fresno County, coaches were required to be bilingual in English and either Spanish or Hmong, the two most common languages among early childhood educators.

Table 4 summarizes the relevant experience and educational qualifications required by each coaching system.

Table 4. Summary of Coach Qualifications and Experience Required

Coaching System	Educational degree or certification	Relevant experience	Additional requirements or assets
El Dorado County, CA	Bachelor's degree (or higher) in early childhood education (or related field); a California Site Supervisor (or above) Child Development Permit	3 or more years of recent teaching experience in early care and education programs	Preferred: knowledge of California Preschool Learning Foundations and Creative Curriculum ^a ; bilingualism in English and Spanish
Fresno County, CA	Bachelor's degree (or higher) in child development (or related field)	3 or more years of practical experience in a child care setting	Required: fluency in English and either Spanish or Hmong; fluency with Microsoft Office software
San Diego County, CA	Bachelor's degree (or higher) in child development (or related field); a California Site Supervisor (or above) Child Development Permit	5 or more years practical experience in early childhood education (with at least 2 years of classroom experience or as a home-based educator and at least 3 years in a coach, mentor, or professional development role)	Preferred: bilingualism in English and Spanish
Alabama	Master's degree in early childhood education (or related field)	Practical experience working with preschoolers or infants and toddlers	Strongly preferred: residency in the community served, but exceptions may be made to meet specific needs
Washington	Bachelor's degree in early childhood education, education, human/social services, or human/community development (though there is flexibility to hire candidates with an associate degree working toward their bachelor's degree to prioritize community representation)	Experience working in a child care/early learning setting; experience providing instruction and training	Preferred: residency in the region served

^a Unpublished Early Learning Mentor Coach job description. Personal communication with Elizabeth Blakemore, Director, Family and Early Learning Programs, El Dorado County Office of Education (2020, May 4).

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

Some coaching systems, such as in Alabama and Washington, developed specific structures to ensure that different regions were able to recruit locally. In Alabama, state PreK coaching is divided into eight regions, and region directors hired coaches within their respective regions. Similarly, Child Care Aware of Washington was contracted by the state to implement coaching across Washington, which they accomplished by subcontracting with six regional agencies, five community-based organizations, and one school district, all of which then hired local coaches. Rachael Brown-Kendall, QRIS Administrator for the Department of Children, Youth, and Families in Washington, shared:

I think one of the strongest elements of our coaching system is the diversity of the coaches, knowing that they really reflect the communities that they're serving. That has made a huge impact on our ability to support different communities across the state to be successful in [QRIS]. Additionally, we have seen that non-English-speaking providers who are engaged in coaching have performed at a rate higher than their White English-speaking peers. I think that is a great example of the power of our commitment to hire culturally and linguistically representative coaches.

All the systems studied also required coaches to have prior experience working in the early childhood field, and many of the coaches had more than the minimum number of years of experience required. In Fresno County, four of the six coaches had been providing accreditation coaching, professional development, and QRIS coaching for more than 8 years. In El Dorado County, all coaches had previously coached for 4 to 10 years in a variety of settings, including private centers, home-based sites, state preschool classrooms, infant/toddler classrooms, Head Start sites, and community-based sites. Having such experience allowed coaches to understand and relate to coachees' challenges and provide more effective coaching.

Coaches were also required to have specific content knowledge or certifications. For example, San Diego and El Dorado counties required coaches to have a valid California Site Supervisor (or above) Child Development Permit and to be certified observers in the CLASS and ERS. El Dorado required coaches to have a working knowledge of Creative Curriculum. All Fresno QRIS coaches are CLASS certified, with most also having earned certifications in the ERS, Pyramid Model, ASQ, or DRDP. Coaches were also supported in earning or maintaining certifications and engaging in ongoing professional growth.

Finally, coaching systems sought certain interpersonal skills or dispositions when hiring coaches. These included abilities and qualities such as communication skills; organization and time management; teamwork and collaboration; problem-solving and leadership; and flexibility and sensitivity when responding to changing needs. Some of the characteristics they sought in coaches included "a sense of humor," "a spirit of service," "imagination and curiosity," and "relationship-based cultural humility."

Overall, across the states and counties studied, coaching systems were committed to maintaining experienced and qualified staff. Although most systems required coaches to have a bachelor's degree and prior experience working in the early childhood or education field, they also looked for candidates who possessed the appropriate interpersonal skills and dispositions that would enable them to provide capable and supportive coaching.

Most systems also looked for candidates who possessed the appropriate interpersonal skills and dispositions that would enable them to provide capable and supportive coaching.

How Are Coaches Provided Professional Development and Support?

Given that the research literature indicates that relationships between coaches and coachees are the foundation of the coaching model, coaching system leaders face decisions on how to ensure that coaches are equipped with the abilities and attributes that are best suited to facilitating that relationship. They also need to ensure that coaches are given the means and support that will enable them to perform their jobs to a high standard and best meet the needs of the educators and communities they serve. All the coaching systems in this study provided ongoing professional development opportunities for coaches to gain technical and content expertise. They also provided a number of additional supports to help develop coaching skills, to promote and continuously improve the quality of coaching delivered, and to support coaches' well-being.

Direct Professional Development for Coaches

Coaches in this study expressed that they initially needed professional development because the work of coaching was different from their previous roles as educators, mentors, consultants, or leaders. According to a Fresno coach, “We were good trainers, we were good educators, but we were not good coaches.” She explained that coaches needed to learn specific skills, such as how to reflect, how to listen, how to facilitate conversations where reflection can happen, and how to guide and support coachees in choosing their own goals and following through on achieving them.

Onboarding programs for coaches in all the systems studied were established and developed to ensure a common set of knowledge and competencies for all coaches. Some systems used intentional protocols or curricula to ensure a common baseline of competencies. For example, San Diego developed a coaching manual and paired new coaches with a veteran coach peer mentor (referred to as a “coach buddy”), whom they shadowed and who helped guide them on specific coaching skills. The San Diego County Office of Education, the YMCA of San Diego County, and the affiliated embedded coaches receive these common resources to build and strengthen the early learning coaching workforce in the county and to ensure the consistency of coaching quality across settings and agencies. Washington’s onboarding program—delivered in partnership with Child Care Aware of Washington and Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington—was consistent across the state. Involving a combination of professional development activities staged over a coach’s first 90 days, the onboarding program included modules on observations and reflective dialogues, as well as opportunities to shadow experienced coaches.⁹⁸ Thus, all coaches in the state received the same foundational trainings that oriented them to the state’s QRIS and coaching framework.

Ongoing professional development was provided to coaches in all the coaching systems after completion of the initial onboarding. Much of the professional development that coaches received focused on developing their technical and content expertise in a variety of areas, such as:

- inclusive practices (e.g., for working with children with special needs);
- trauma-informed practices;
- ways to address challenging behaviors (e.g., Pyramid Model, Conscious Discipline);
- the Program for Infant/Toddler Care;

- strategies for working with children who are dual-language learners;
- coach-specific competencies (e.g., reflective practice, empowering leadership); and
- certifications and deeper knowledge of foundational frameworks, curricula, and assessments (e.g., learning standards, DRDP, Teaching Strategies GOLD, CLASS, and ERS).

However, the specific content offered, and the degree of specialism required, varied across the systems. In San Diego County, coaches were required to become certified as trainers in one or more specialty areas.

One-on-One and Reflective Supports for Coaches

All systems offered one-on-one support to coaches. In Alabama, San Diego County, and Washington, the coaching programs provided one-on-one reflective supports to coaches that paralleled the reflective cycles that coaches used when working with their coachees. In San Diego, coaches met with their supervisors weekly to reflect on their coaching sessions and to discuss feedback on their coaching as they worked toward their own improvement goals. Supervisors used observation, video recordings of coaching sessions, and the program’s coaching observation rubric to guide coaches through reflecting on their practices.⁹⁹ In Washington, coaches had monthly reflective sessions with their coach leads, and these occurred more often if needed.¹⁰⁰ In Alabama, coaches met regularly with their coach facilitators. Distinct and separate from coaches’ formal supervisors, the facilitators provided role-specific mentorship and reflective supervision and supported coaches in managing their time and caseloads. Using reflective coaching helped coaches improve their practice not only through engaging in reflection and receiving feedback but also by learning from mentors and supervisors who modeled effective coaching practices.

In El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties, coaching administrators sought outside consultants to provide formal professional development to assist coaches in developing reflective practices and strategies (such as through Pyramid Model coach training and reflective coaching and consultation with trainer and consultant Ernie Mendes). These consultants worked with coaches on specific aspects of coaching, such as facilitating reflection, paraphrasing, pausing, and setting goals. Elvie Atkinson, Fresno County Program Specialist, shared that working with these outside experts had been invaluable and had helped the coaching team grow and improve their practices.

Additional optional and voluntary one-on-one professional development support was offered to coaches in both Washington and Alabama to provide coaching that was specific to the needs of individual coaches. In Washington, individualized consultation sessions were provided through Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington. These sessions focused on topics tailored to the coach, such as developing a specific coaching competency, managing caseloads, practicing self-care, or addressing a field-based puzzle of practice. In Alabama, in addition to reflective supervision, the coach facilitators also provide individualized consultation and supports. When coaches were struggling with large caseloads, coach facilitators sometimes helped by providing some of the coaching.

Peer Support and Networking Among Coaches

All the coaching systems in this study also provided opportunities for peer support and networking among coaches, in addition to formal professional development workshops and as-needed field supports. These opportunities ranged from informal, spontaneous, peer-to-peer support to more formal, structured, and intentional spaces.

In all five systems, coaches regularly engaged in planned communities of practice meetings in which they learned from each other's practice. In Fresno, the meetings included all coaches, lead coaches, county specialists, and administrators to promote cohesion across the program. (See [Addressing Coach Bias Through Communities of Practice in Fresno](#).) In other programs, such as San Diego County and Washington, these communities of practice included only coaches because leaders felt that that this format reduced the possibility of uneven power dynamics that might otherwise occur. Although the meeting cadence varied across the systems, from weekly to bimonthly, all the systems intentionally incorporated opportunities for coaches to engage and connect with one another, celebrate victories, problem-solve challenges, and learn effective practices.

San Diego's "coach buddies" system was a specific structure that enabled coaches to work together and provided an additional layer of peer support for novice coaches. In the pairings of more experienced coaches with new coaches, veterans provided ongoing peer support as the novices completed their onboarding and coach competency training. The program gave coach buddies the opportunity to engage in peer reflection and learning together. In some cases, these buddy dyads continued to work together on personal growth and individual goals even after certification.

Addressing Coach Bias Through Communities of Practice in Fresno

Coaches, just like providers, can have personal biases. Fresno County specifically supported coaches in recognizing their own biases as a way to improve the coaching they provided. In an all-coach community of practice meeting in which equity-based coaching was the focus, the question for the session was "What does coaching with an equitable lens look like?" The group of 19 coaches and administrators engaged in conversation around this guiding question as they read an article¹⁰¹ and watched a video of a panel discussion.¹⁰² In small groups, participants responded to excerpts from the article, and the whole group discussed how they address equity in their roles as coaches.

The meeting was an intentional space that gave coaches the opportunity to discuss how their own biases may impact their interactions with coachees, the QRIS, learning environments, and the curriculum. It was also an opportunity to discuss the importance of recognizing the biases that they might observe while providing coaching to others.

One of the Fresno Unified School District coaches added that coaches need to "look at our own cultural experiences, which can be complicated, especially if you come from multiple cultures. We have to be aware of our own biases when we look at QRIS, classroom environment, and curriculum." Participants also discussed how bias might manifest in educators' practices and the importance of recognizing that inequitable practices are not always intentional. Coaches discussed that addressing equity and bias with educators is imperative and that it is important for coaches to use supportive strategies when doing so. Supportive strategies discussed included interpreting practices with compassion, using observations and questioning to invite dialogue to help educators be more aware, and equipping educators with tools and information or encouraging them once a bias is uncovered.

Source: Learning Policy Institute observation and analysis of the Fresno County Coaching Professional Learning Community meeting held on December 3, 2020.

Emotional and Mental Health Supports for Coaches

Because coaching sessions can be emotional experiences for both coachees and coaches, some coaching systems identified a need for emotional and mental health supports for coaches. Coaches needed to be aware of their own emotional and mental health and how to regulate these in order to best support their coachees. For example, Washington formalized emotional and mental health supports by providing coaches with the opportunity to work with mental health consultants to develop self-care plans. Study participants reported that the coaching supervisors regularly checked in with the coaches about their self-care plans. As Maldonado from Child Care Aware of Washington explained, coaches can experience compassion fatigue and “we really want to protect our coaches so that they can be there for the providers and the families.”¹⁰³

Perceived Benefits of Coaching

The intention of coaching is to improve educators' capacity and practices. In this study, participants in the five coaching systems described multiple benefits of the implementation of coaching. These benefits fell into three areas: educator satisfaction, improved educator practice, and improved program quality.

Educator Satisfaction

Across the coaching systems in this study, educators were consistent in highlighting their positive experiences with coaching. They were especially appreciative of the close bonds they formed with their coaches due to the strong, trusting relationships they built together. Coachees felt supported by coaches, both personally and professionally, and they felt that these relationships were key components that helped drive their learning and development and improve their early learning teaching and practice.

Coaches also were able to create a sense of connection for early educators in El Dorado who felt isolated living in a rural county. As one early educator described:

It's the first time in my life and being in this field that I actually feel connected to the outside world. And it's because of my coach. [My coach] has been amazing, even though she's much younger than me. She's made me feel validated. She's made me feel valued. She's made me feel important. She understands how I teach. She sees how I teach. She helps me put the words to it and just [helps] me catch up with the world today because I'm in a rural community.

The sense of connection that coaches instilled in coachees was not unique to rural sites. An educator in a more urban area of San Diego emphasized that she was better able to develop trusting relationships with the children in her program and colleagues as a result of the connected relationship her coach built with her:

These are people who have that keen way of connecting with people and connecting to a person's core. This is what makes you, you. That's fantastic, and let's move it forward. So, for me, I think that's the most valuable thing about having a coach.

Improved Educator Practices

Across all the coaching systems, study participants described their perceptions of how coaching improved educators' practices and, in turn, children's learning. For example, in Fresno County, educators and site supervisors reported multiple examples of improved instructional practices as a result of coaching, such as learning to ask open-ended questions to stimulate children's critical thinking and verbal skills, integrating the collection of observational assessment evidence into learning activities (rather than as a separate, disconnected activity), rearranging learning spaces to be more stimulating and appropriate for children's engagement, and interacting with children more effectively to support their cognitive and social-emotional development.

One educator in San Diego shared that her coach helped her improve her parallel talk to build her students' language:

My coach really helped me understand the why behind the goals I made and how this is going to help further kids in their learning. For example, I made the goal to improve my ... parallel talking because I would often forget to parallel talk and I know it's supposed to build language. I understand that. But then she helped me understand more information on the reason behind the why and that English language learners can use what I'm saying to build on their language as well.

An educator with about 15 years of experience in both state preschool and Head Start described that because her coach tailored support to her interests, she found that she improved an aspect of her practices every year:

I have found that I have the same coach every year, but I have learned something new every single year. She really caters it to my interests and what I think I need to work on in my class. Whether it's for my CLASS [Classroom Assessment Scoring System] review or for ECERS [Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale], she always works with me and does what I think is important. And I like that. I think the most important thing is that I feel I can go to her with anything and say, "I'd like to learn more about this, or behavioral strategies, or challenging children, or children with special needs." And she'll help me. And it's always good to have somebody there because she doesn't go back to our site coordinators. She is there just for us, and it's nice to have that.

A home-based educator in San Diego articulated that coaching helped her become more knowledgeable about early childhood education and improved her child and family interactions:

The coaching has helped me because I'm more knowledgeable. I know my teacher-student interactions have changed a lot because I know what to look for and certain approaches to take when there is challenging behavior or something like that. And just the overall interaction with the families and the children—that's what I think the coaching has done for me.

Improved Program Quality

Site supervisors and program administrators connected improvements in educator practice with higher educator ratings on CLASS and the Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) and attributed the high number of programs that received high ratings to coaching. For example, Isela Turner, Early Care and Education Director for Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, said, "It is my honest belief that we would not be at this level, at this point, in Fresno County without coaching."¹⁰⁴

Similarly, participants from Alabama also attributed learning gains to coaching. Alabama's statewide coaching system grew rapidly between the 2012–13 and 2016–17 school years.¹⁰⁵ Between these years, child assessment data from Teaching Strategies GOLD showed steady increases in the percentage of children in First Class Pre-K who were meeting or exceeding expectations for all six developmental domains assessed (i.e., social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and math).

In Washington, state-level ratings and data from state and regional administrators and coaching leads suggested that Washington’s coaching system was having discernable impacts on the quality of early learning across the state. A QRIS rating of Level 3 is the foundational level of quality as defined in the Early Start Act, and the vast majority of sites in Washington’s system had achieved this level of quality—91% of centers and 86% of home-based sites as of 2019, compared with just 25% of all sites in 2016.¹⁰⁶ Study participants from Washington attributed the improved ratings to coaching. Juliet Taylor, Director of Strategy and Partnerships for Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington, shared:

Thousands of programs in Washington state have reached this foundational level of quality, and that is not where we started. So, it is an absolute win, it’s a huge win, and we’ve got more places to go.

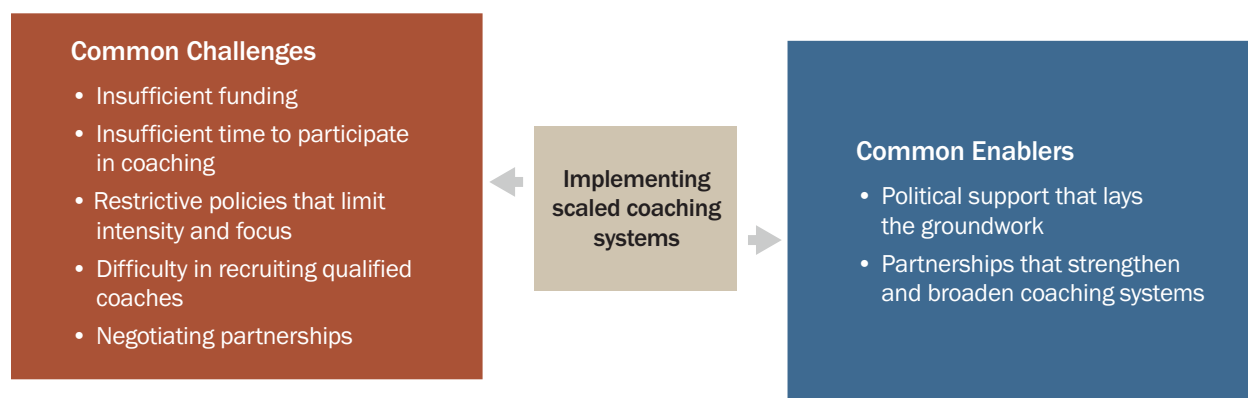
State and regional administrators reported that the impact of coaching was also evident in the climate and environment of early learning programs. One of the regional directors for QRIS coaching in Washington emphasized the improvements she had seen in early educators’ practices and how site leaders ran their early learning programs. In addition to acknowledging the quantitative metrics of the proportion of sites that meet the state’s quality levels, she expressed that coaching “has completely changed their programs [and] how they see best practices.”

Enablers and Challenges to Implementation

Across the coaching systems in this study, there were common enablers that helped establish comprehensive early childhood coaching systems scaled to the state and county levels. Political support helped ignite and sustain action around implementing coaching systems, and partnerships between governmental and nongovernmental entities helped increase capacity and strengthen coaching across the mixed delivery system. However, there were also multiple common challenges to creating and sustaining comprehensive coaching systems, such as insufficient funding, insufficient time to participate in coaching, restrictive policies that limit coaching, difficulty in recruiting qualified coaches, and negotiating partnerships.

Figure 6 presents the common challenges to implementing scaled coaching systems as revealed in this study, along with the enablers that helped counteract those challenges.

Figure 6. Common Enablers and Challenges to Implementing Scaled Coaching Systems



Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

Common Enablers to Implementing Scaled Coaching Systems

The key enablers that helped the states and counties in this study establish scaled early childhood coaching systems were political support and strong partnerships. Political governance, legislation, and policies that favor improvements to the quality and provision of early childhood education created pathways for funding and implementation of coaching systems to meet those aims. Partnerships between departments, agencies, and organizations helped establish a network of staff, resources, and services that reach across the expansive mixed delivery early childhood education system.

Political Support That Lays the Groundwork

Across the five coaching systems studied, support from policymakers played a vital role in laying the groundwork for the development of comprehensive early childhood coaching systems.

Legislation and funding secured by the state have been key factors in Washington’s ability to implement a statewide early childhood coaching system. Washington’s journey began with the efforts of legislative leaders and advocates who were champions of high-quality early learning. These champions helped build political will using the research and evidence behind quality early learning and its impact on children’s long-term outcomes. These efforts paved the way for the state to invest federal Race to the Top dollars to design and build Washington’s statewide coaching system as part of QRIS. State legislative leadership was critical to sustaining investments in the system with state funding when the federal grant was ending. Rachael Brown-Kendall, QRIS Administrator with the Department for Children, Youth, and Families, credited policymakers and advocates as key players in ensuring sustainability through their efforts to develop and pass the Early Start Act, which invested state funding to ensure high-quality early learning programs and included provisions for promoting high-quality early learning using QRIS and coaching.

In 2013, Alabama was spurred to action after ranking 50th in math performance for 8th-graders. The state reacted by making early learning an explicit priority in order to improve the long-term academic achievement and success of its students. Since then, the governor and legislature have consistently invested in the voluntary state PreK program for 4-year-olds, known as First Class Pre-K, which has been implemented in both school-based and community-based sites. The percentage of 4-year-olds served increased from 6% in 2012 to approximately 34% in 2020.¹⁰⁷ Over this period, the size of the preschool workforce more than quadrupled.¹⁰⁸

In order to ensure quality, the state recognized the need to improve educators’ professional development, so they initiated coaching as a key strategy to help meet this goal. Drawing on evidence of the effectiveness of coaching on instructional practice and previous experience with implementing an early reading coaching initiative, Alabama first began implementing coaching on a statewide scale in 2013.¹⁰⁹ Alabama ensured that coaching was an integral feature of state preschool by requiring job-embedded coaching for all programs that received state PreK funding. In 2020–21, these programs included 1,248 classrooms.¹¹⁰

In El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties, the county offices of education and local First 5 agencies have been pivotal to enabling the development and implementation of coaching to meet the needs of the mixed delivery system in their communities. At the state level, California has been working to build the political support and funding necessary to invest in the development of a comprehensive statewide coaching system as articulated in California’s *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*. The master plan calls for the “complete development of a comprehensive professional learning system” and for the state to “expand access to on-site coaching and certified coaches” as a step toward strengthening quality improvement supports for the early learning workforce.¹¹¹

Partnerships That Strengthen and Broaden Coaching Systems

To serve all the early educators across the mixed delivery system, the states and counties in this study implemented coaching systems that established and leveraged partnerships between different departments and local agencies or community organizations. The partnerships enabled the delivery of coaching to a wider range and larger number of early childhood education providers, with different partners sometimes providing separate or additional resources, such as funding, coaches, or professional

development programs. Coaching systems implemented at a larger scale required coordinated collaboration among partners—typically formalized through contracts or memorandums of understanding and recurring meetings—to deliver coaching using a common model and coaching approaches.

All the systems studied intentionally incorporated and leveraged partnerships with community entities. Building coaching systems through partnerships acknowledges that community agencies already have expertise, relationships, and capacity to provide high-quality early childhood services. As previously described, Fresno County’s infrastructure has included partnerships between the county office and multiple community organizations, including partnerships with:

- the local resource and referral agency to provide coaching support across the mixed delivery system to sites participating in QRIS;
- Fresno Unified School District to provide coaching for the district’s early childhood classrooms that include infant/toddler, state preschool, and transitional kindergarten classrooms;
- WestEd’s Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC) to provide a dedicated coach who can offer coaching specifically for infant/toddler educators; and
- the Department of Public Health to provide coaching focused on the health and safety components of quality ratings.

Similarly, Washington’s coaching system has been implemented in partnership between the state’s Department of Children, Youth, and Families; Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington; and Child Care Aware of Washington (the state resource and referral agency). Cultivate Learning provides research and coaching professional development, and Child Care Aware of Washington subcontracts with six regional entities, five community-based organizations, and one educational school district to implement regionalized coaching. It also works with state-funded PreK contractors that are responsible for providing coaching to sites where 75% or more of the slots are state PreK students.¹¹² In El Dorado, the county office has partnered with the public library to expand coaching supports to family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) sites enrolled in QRIS but not participating in the QRIS rating process. San Diego County has developed a strong partnership with its local resource and referral agency to engage home-based early educators and with Head Start grantees to coach Head Start site leaders.

Substantive partnerships require a great deal of coordination and collaboration among partners, and the systems in this study held regular interagency meetings to facilitate this. For example, Alabama’s Department of Early Childhood Education held monthly collaboration meetings between the state’s PreK, birth–age 5 sites, QRIS child care, and preschool–3rd grade alignment coaching initiative leads. In San Diego County, the office of education held regular coaching meetings with its key partner, the YMCA of San Diego County (the local resource and referral agency). These meetings helped the partners feel like they were part of a unified coaching team. One of the coach supervisors from the San Diego County Office of Education expressed that the county and YMCA coaches “all collaborate together so [that] it’s really just one team of coaches. They reside somewhere else, but there is really no differentiation.” Fresno’s monthly community of practice meetings included representatives from each partner agency, and every other month they included all coaches, providing ongoing opportunities to build cohesion and coordination.

Common Challenges to Implementing Scaled Coaching Systems

All the coaching systems in this study were confronted with challenges that placed limits on creating and sustaining scaled coaching systems. These included insufficient funding for coaching, lack of time for early educators to participate in coaching, and restrictive policies that limit the intensity or focus of coaching. Some coaching systems also faced challenges when attempting to recruit qualified coaches and when negotiating partnerships with other entities.

Insufficient Funding for Coaching

Study participants across all programs, at both the county and state levels, shared that a key barrier to building capacity and scaling is a lack of funding. Fresno's public health coach explained, "We need more coaches, we need more trainings, and the more trainings we do, the better prepared we are to help."

California county-level coaching administrators described the current state-level early childhood funding infrastructure as incoherent and inadequate. Due to insufficient state funding, the county coaching systems in El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties have relied heavily on local First 5 funding. However, those local funds have also been declining or insufficient to meet the needs and aims of the communities. Matilda Soria, Senior Director of Early Care and Education for Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, estimated that they would need more than \$2 million in additional funding per year to scale up and expand the coaching program to serve all sites in the county.

Because no single source of funding is enough, all the coaching systems in this study have relied on multiple funding streams, but in some cases, the large number of funding sources and programs has made local coordination difficult. According to Isela Turner, Early Care and Education Director for Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, "All the quality dollars are invested in different types of efforts in California, and there's hardly alignment." A state-level Washington study participant shared a similar concern, expressing that having multiple funding sources and policies for early childhood programs contributes to different compensation and caseloads between coaches of state preschool and other QRIS coaches, with state preschool and Head Start coaches receiving higher wages and smaller caseloads than the coaches in the nonprofit sector. The issue is complex because the state preschool and Head Start coaches are hired by the grantee and hold multiple roles and responsibilities, of which coaching is one.

State-level coaching administrators in Alabama and Washington also identified insufficient and uneven funding as a significant barrier. In Alabama, the coaching system will need significant ongoing and reliable funding from the state to sustain the model and grow it to full scale across all early learning sectors. Although the last three governors and legislatures have supported the state preschool program through funding, and the coaching system has grown significantly over the years, as of 2022, the state preschool program only serves 36% of 4-year-olds in Alabama and reaches approximately 1,200 classrooms that are part of state PreK.¹¹³ With many expansion efforts in place, Alabama is poised to eventually provide birth–3rd-grade coaching across the mixed delivery system, but finding enough funding to fully scale these programs is an ongoing challenge. (See [Appendix D](#) for additional details about Alabama's P–3 and other coaching initiatives.)

Insufficient Time to Participate in Coaching

Even when coaching was provided as part of a state or county system, lack of time to engage in coaching was a considerable challenge for early educators and site leaders. Finding time for coachees to meet with coaches to debrief about observations and engage in reflection was one of the most common challenges identified across the coaching systems studied. Without dedicated time built into coachees' schedules, study participants described holding coaching meetings during nap time or lunchtime or at the end of the day, each of which had its own disadvantages. As one participant shared, coaches tried to be flexible to accommodate educators' schedules, which is particularly important for home-based early educators operating by themselves or with only one assistant. At times, accommodating schedules means meeting with educators as early as 5:00 a.m. and ending coaching sessions as late as 8:30 p.m.

Finding time for coachees to meet with coaches to debrief about observations and engage in reflection was one of the most common challenges identified across the coaching systems studied.

Alabama has addressed this challenge at the state level by incorporating planning and reflection time for educators into program schedules and funding. State PreK teachers are given paid planning time, and Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership sites are also funded for teachers to have 1 hour per day to engage in reflection and coaching. Although these programs have better funding than most, they are rare examples of paid time for early childhood professionals to access coaching.

Policy Restrictions That Limit the Intensity and Focus of Coaching

In addition to inadequate funds, study participants expressed that restrictions placed on the use of funds and policy-related timelines and requirements were significant barriers to effective coaching implementation.

For example, because of restrictions placed on California state QRIS funds, unless counties were able to blend state funds with other funding sources, the highest-rated sites (Tier 4 or Tier 5) were limited to just two coaching sessions per year (see [Appendix C](#) for more on the California QRIS tiers). This restriction can be very limiting for sites that would like to receive a higher intensity of coaching in order to sustain quality and engage in continuous improvement. For example, in Fresno, most sites were rated as Tier 4 or 5, with only about 3% of participating sites rated as Tier 3, which means that most sites have not received as much state-funded coaching as they would like.

California's early educators and coaching staff alike expressed frustration with this limitation. The top-down restrictions on coaching frequency can unintentionally communicate that programs with higher ratings may not need coaching support or that they have no room for improvement. As one home-based early educator in Fresno shared, "Just because we're doing well doesn't mean we don't need the help still. We still need some kind of coaching. We still need that motivation to continue to do well."

Early educators need to acquire and refine a wide range of essential competencies¹¹⁴ to provide children with educational and play experiences individualized to where they are on their learning progression in an inclusive setting. Creating and implementing a successful learning experience for each child is not a static process, as children and families change from year to year, nor is the dynamic process fully captured by a site-level quality rating conducted annually or biannually.

California coaching staff and early educators shared that coaches often incorporated additional touch points for the sites rated as Tier 4 or 5 using tools like Coaching Companion for asynchronous virtual coaching and self-directed learning, text messaging, and email. Even so, “The funding is not there to support coaching once [a site] gets to that [higher-tier] level,” said one San Diego County coach supervisor. This limitation has created a gap within the system and has forced coaches to create work-arounds to help highly rated sites maintain their quality.

Policies have also created challenges by mandating requirements and timelines for reaching targets and maintaining funding. For example, the Early Start Act in Washington helped mobilize early childhood coaching by requiring QRIS participation for all sites that received state funding. However, it also mandated timelines for meeting milestones in the quality rating process and created a stressful, high-stakes environment for early educators and coaches, who were required to meet rating targets. Furthermore, the legislation established high-stakes milestones and a tiered reimbursement structure that required early learning programs to attain a certain rating to maintain funding. According to one study participant, such policies encourage an overemphasis on scores and assessment tools. Since early learning sites did not have the capacity to address all the quality indicators at once, many prioritized these assessment tool-based measures, taking the focus away from quality improvement and relationship building. Additionally, another participant explained that the legislation required coaches to concurrently adhere to multiple different timelines depending on which sites were being served and which funding sources were being used. This encumbered coaches and coaching systems with a heavy administrative burden.

Recruitment of Qualified Coaches

In Alabama and Washington, study participants expressed that recruiting coaches who met the coaching system’s qualification standards was difficult. In Alabama, recruiting early childhood coaches had been a particular challenge because there were few candidates equipped with both the necessary level of experience (i.e., previous work experience with the infant/toddler cohort) and the required educational qualification (i.e., a master’s degree).

In Washington, recruiting early childhood coaches who represented the communities they served—either by living in the community or speaking the language of the community—was a priority, but it was a challenge as well. To ensure the coaching workforce was equipped with this asset, Washington had to allow for more flexible guidelines around the requirements of educational qualifications—for example, hiring candidates who held an associate degree if they agreed to continue their education to obtain their bachelor’s degree.

Negotiating Partnerships

Although partnerships between various departments, agencies, and organizations were a key asset in developing and maintaining state- and countywide coaching systems, these partnerships sometimes introduced complications in negotiating variations or trade-offs within the systems. For example, Fresno County valued collaboration within its large network of partners, but some participating agencies preferred to have less involvement than others with the wider system. Some agencies supplied their own coaches and provided their own professional development, whereas others integrated more fully within the county system.

Study participants in Fresno expressed the importance of preserving agency autonomy, but they also acknowledged that this limited the amount of control the county had over coaching across agencies. Differences in the extent to which agencies engaged with QRIS and variations in how they implemented practices that were determined by the key partners made it harder to achieve consistency and quality across coaching agencies. For example, Fresno Unified School District and QRIS coaches all integrated the quality matrix and the embedded tools into their coaching. In contrast, Head Start's coaches operated much more autonomously, focusing more on federal regulations. Head Start grantees—who participated in the county QRIS—received coaching from both internal and QRIS coaches, with limited coordination between them.

As previously mentioned, there were also some variations within partnerships in Washington's coaching system. Due in large part to different funding sources and program requirements, Washington's state preschool and Head Start coaches received higher wages and smaller caseloads (as well as responsibilities in addition to coaching) than the Child Care Aware of Washington QRIS coaches. In this instance, the difference in compensation can be seen as a trade-off that enables greater capacity and helps coaching systems widen their reach.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

This report has illustrated various ways coaching has been deployed at scale to support the mixed delivery early learning workforce across three California counties and two states. Strategies in the systems we studied suggest specific actions that policymakers can initiate to support the implementation of coaching systems for the early learning workforce. These recommendations are intended for state and county policymakers, but many are relevant to school district and local early childhood program administrators as well.

- 1. Provide dedicated funding for site-based coaching, with the goal of making instructional coaching accessible to all programs for quality enhancement, as well as to educators in need of more support.** Coaching is a core professional development strategy to which all educators should have access. However, it is too costly for most early learning programs to afford on their own. Ideally, coaching would extend to all early learning programs for quality enhancement and would be available to all educators in need of additional support. This includes school-, center-, and home-based sites and lead and assistant teachers working directly with children. Funding should be sufficient to allow coaches to have reasonable caseloads that give them adequate time to meet with the educators, particularly new educators and those who need extra support. In Alabama and Washington, new teachers or those who need extra support may meet with their coach on a weekly or biweekly basis, while experienced teaching teams may meet with their coach on a monthly or quarterly basis. Although the systems studied varied with regard to the primary coaching audience, the coaching caseload and ratio were similar across systems regardless of whether teaching teams or site leaders were the primary audience, with an average of between 20 and 25 sites or teaching teams per coach. Similarly, systems tailored caseloads for each coach based on the site sizes and needs. For instance, coaches with several large sites or whose coachees needed more frequent coaching sessions had fewer sites in their caseload. Community-based centers and home-based child care settings may need additional funding to support paid release time, which is not always built into their schedules. To ensure sufficient funding for coaching as its state preschool program grows, Alabama reserves approximately 8% of state preschool funding for coaching and instructional supports, or approximately \$10.1 million in 2020–21. This amount covered coaching for lead and assistant PreK teaching teams across 1,248 classrooms, with one coach for every 17 to 20 sites.¹¹⁵ Alabama has also incorporated planning and reflection time into program schedules and provided funding to ensure educators have sufficient time to participate in coaching.
- 2. Provide specialized coaching for site leaders in addition to early educators.** Coaching for site leaders—including site directors, program directors, and school principals—is a potentially high-leverage investment to ensure greater equity in quality across sites because it can provide site leaders with common knowledge and skills in early education. Furthermore, site leaders set the professional development agenda at their sites, and site leaders can sometimes provide instructional coaching themselves. Coaching for site leaders would help leaders build systems to support quality at their sites and build leaders' own competencies in leadership, early childhood development and learning, and instructional coaching. San Diego County has made coaching for site leaders the core of its coaching strategy to maximize coaching dollars. States that already have instructional leadership academies or professional learning networks for principals—such as the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy—can consider adding content about early childhood instruction to these programs.

- 3. Create coherence between coaching and quality rating and improvement systems.** States can enable greater coherence by having the content of coaching be informed by quality rating criteria, standards, and assessment tools—as was done in the systems we studied—and ensuring that traditional forms of professional learning (e.g., training and workshops) are paired with coaching. States can also keep coaching, monitoring, and rating roles separate within QRIS to help maintain focus on coaching for the purpose of improving the quality of practice (the “I” in QRIS) instead of narrowly focusing on the accountability-oriented rating system process (the “R” in QRIS). This division between coaching and monitoring enables coaches to build more trusting relationships with coaches in which improving practices—rather than accountability—remains the focus. It also allows coaches to balance data from the rating process with other sources of data to inform coaching, such as site leader and early educator reflections and coach observations. In Alabama and Washington, coaching staff are separate from monitoring and rating staff. In rural El Dorado County, coaches also serve as raters, but not for programs that they coach. Depending on governance structures, creating coherence may also require partnerships across agencies. To facilitate coordination and collaboration, the systems in this study held regular interagency meetings. For example, Alabama’s Department of Early Childhood Education held monthly collaboration meetings across the state PreK and birth–5 sites, QRIS child care, and preschool–3rd grade alignment coaching initiative leads.
- 4. Set standards for the expertise and experience of coaches and provide ongoing coach support.** To perform the job well, coaches need specific skills and competencies (e.g., expertise in child development, developmentally appropriate instruction, experience working with adult learners) and ongoing support. In Alabama and Washington, coaching qualification standards are set at the state level and include educational attainment of at least a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or a related field, several years of experience working with children from birth to age 5, and strong interpersonal skills. Regardless of their employer (e.g., in Alabama, the state employs the coaches, whereas in Washington, the state preschool contractors and Head Start grantees employ the coaches and Child Care Aware employs QRIS coaches for all other settings), coaches need particular skills and ongoing support to be successful. San Diego has developed its own county-level coach supports and resources that allow local control while standardizing quality expectations and supports. In this system, early learning programs receive site leader coaching from the county, and the site leader can either serve as the instructional coach to their early educators or choose to hire an instructional coach who is included in the county’s coaching professional development and peer mentorship process.
- 5. Identify regional strategies to recruit a diverse coaching workforce.** Coaching should be delivered by trusted individuals who have expertise in the settings in which they coach and are familiar with the culture of the children, families, and early learning staff they serve. El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties and Washington have all partnered strategically with organizations to employ coaches who represent, and are trusted by, participants across the mixed delivery system. Partner organizations include resource and referral agencies and local library systems that engage with home-based and family, friend, and neighbor educators. In some communities, it is particularly important to recruit bilingual coaches who can coach educators in their native language. In Fresno County, all the coaches working with home-based child care programs and community-based organizations are bilingual and offer coaching and professional development sessions in Spanish or Hmong. To ensure

that coaches are linguistically diverse, some regions of Washington have created pathways to recruit local coaches who speak early educators' home languages, providing these coaches with support to obtain their degree in early childhood education while working.

- 6. Develop a state clearinghouse of coaching resources to enable high-quality and consistent coaching.** States have an important role in developing or disseminating resources to support effective coaching, build the capacity of the coaching workforce, and bring consistency to the overall coaching approach across the state. One way states can support coherence in coaching across partners and regions is by building a set of coaching protocols, frameworks, and rubrics that facilitate consistent, evidence-based practices statewide. Partners can collaboratively develop these resources, and a state department can compile them, as in Alabama. Alternately, they can be developed by a nonprofit organization, as Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington does, to relieve the burden on regional and local staff. A state coaching clearinghouse could also include professional development modules and training for coaches in state priority areas, such as language development, early math, and social-emotional development. It could also support educators in working with dual-language learners and children with disabilities. Washington, for instance, has partnered with Cultivate Learning to develop statewide professional development content and provides ongoing professional development on its reflective coaching model. San Diego County has also created a set of shared protocols and guidelines that are used throughout the county, but there is not currently a mechanism for systematically sharing these resources with other counties. States and counties might also provide access to online platforms that support virtual and hybrid coaching, especially in rural areas. El Dorado County has invested in the online coaching platform Coaching Companion to support coaches working across the rural county and partnered with Cultivate Learning to tailor Coaching Companion with California-specific content and language. This investment paid off when programs closed their doors to visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic. To make virtual coaching successful, states should invest in broadband access, computer and webcam access, and technology training for early educators.
- 7. Fund and support a regional system of professional development for coaches.** States can provide funding and technical assistance to build regional systems or other networks of professional development for coaches—including communities of practice—that build from a set of statewide resources but are tailored to local context and support the dynamic nature of ongoing quality enhancement. In Alabama, for instance, each coach has a regional coordinator who provides local supervision and a coach facilitator who offers individualized coach-specific mentorship and professional development. In Washington, regional professional development is offered by the nonprofit organization Child Care Aware of Washington, utilizing the state's common coaching tools but tailored to the local context, such as discussing strategies for presenting information in ways that honor and respect the cultures prominent in different regions (e.g., tribal or Somali communities). The California counties profiled in this report have begun to set up their own regional professional learning networks, but these efforts could be scaled more robustly with additional state funding and assistance. Fresno County's office of education hosts peer learning networks for lead coaches, who in turn develop professional development for the coaches they supervise. Fresno and San Diego counties and Washington have also offered one-on-one coaching for the coaches themselves. Coaching systems might also consider employing lead coaches who are experts in certain

areas—such as in inclusion or dual-language learning—and who can work with coaches and site leaders at the local level on particular areas of practice. In San Diego County, each coach is certified as a trainer in one or more specialty areas, and early learning sites are then matched with coaches who have the expertise to best fit their needs.

8. **Collect and analyze data to scale what works.** Coaching is a potentially high-leverage improvement strategy, but it also requires large investments. Policymakers will want data to verify that these investments are paying off and that funds are used strategically. Quality data systems that collect and connect the content and frequency of coaching sessions for ongoing analysis—drawing on the factors tied with coaching effectiveness in the research (i.e., coach expertise, focused observations, reflection, feedback, coaching plans, perceptions of the coach–educator relationship)—can help coaching programs understand what is working, make strategic decisions, and ultimately support informed policymaking. In all the systems studied, coaches completed coaching logs that captured information about the length and focus of session, but few connected and analyzed that data to other programmatic data that could inform decision-making. Alabama was an exception and entered coaching log data into a database that also captured assessment, monitoring, budgetary, and other programmatic information about state preschool sites to allow for more efficient review of site-level data.

Conclusion

Coaching is a strategy widely recognized for improving early childhood education teaching and learning. With the knowledge that high-quality early learning can lead to benefits for children later in life, many states and counties have begun to implement coaching approaches that provide support to their early childhood education communities across the broad mixed delivery system. The case studies of El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties and the states of Alabama and Washington illustrate a variety of coaching models and infrastructures that have been implemented to provide wide access to coaching across each state or county. Each locale has its own needs and complexities when providing access to coaching, delivering quality coaching services, and funding and sustaining their coaching systems. However, by leveraging political support and partnerships within their local communities, they have been able to create coaching systems that serve the variety of early childhood providers across their communities, encourage participation in quality improvement efforts, and provide early educators with structures to support their professional development and instructional practices.

Appendix A: Study Participants

The case study included interviews with administrative staff, coaches, site leaders, early educators, and other stakeholders involved in implementing coaching at the case study sites. Participants are organized by site and role and are listed in alphabetical order.

El Dorado County, CA

Coaching Staff and Partners

Elizabeth Blakemore
Carolyn Brooks
Celeste Gigliotti
Kathy Ide
Elizabeth Meyer
Jill Morton
Brandi Pedigo
Jenny Pettit
Danielle Singley
Sarah Stowe
Karen VanPatten

Early Learning Site Leaders and Early Educators

Leslie Amato
Carmie Brincka
Kshama Dutta
Maria English
Beverly Folena
Kathi McCullough
Jan Roman-Gonzales
Maggie Williams

Fresno County, CA

Coaching Staff and Partners

Anna Arambula
Clara Arellano
Elvie Atkinson
Erica Ayala
Janey Bustillos
Maria Ceballos
Cristina Corchado
Janet Garcia
Sarah Grijalva
Yessenia Pena
Rosa Pineda
Elsa Rodriguez
Kathleen Shivaprasad
Matilda Soria
Fred Toshimitsu
Isela Turner
Feliciana Wong

Early Learning Site Leaders and Early Educators

Cristina Avila
Maritza Ceballos
Dalia Cuevas
Barbara Daniel
Adrianna Dippel
Donna Flores
Robin Fox
Jacqueline Fuentes
Michelle Maher
Annette Ochoa
Patricia Polanco
LaNetta Whittle

San Diego County, CA

Coaching Staff and Partners

Leah Albertson
Evette Callahan
Denisse Camargo
Marlo Dinkins
Lucia Garay
Martha Garcia
Melissa Gonzalez
Laurie Han
Roxana Jalali
Kristen Krauss
Jena Kubiak
Edna Marquez
Karen Matsuda
Eunice Munro
Meghann O'Connor
Blanca Silva
Mary Smith
Brettney Stanley
Dana Weevie
Andrea Williams

Early Learning Site Leaders and Early Educators

Justina Aguiar
Naoko Bright
Sandra Cumplido
Nikki James
Charmaine Lawson
Laura Morales
Fernanda Capilla Murillo
Melvetta Owens
Carman Padilla
Laura Phillips
Linsang Quach
Ameret Reed
Elsa Romero
Alison Schultz
Maria Soledad Solis
Jessica Sommerville
Brenda Stevens

Alabama

Jean Allen, Director of Innovative Projects & Assessment, Pre-K–3rd Grade Early Learning Continuum (P–3), Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Barbara Cooper, former Secretary, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Tara Skiles, Director of Professional Development, Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Tracye Strichik, former Senior Director, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Bonnie Sullivan, former B–5 Cohesive Systems Director, Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Salina Washington, Program Manager, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Joy Winchester, Director, Office of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

Washington

Rachael Brown-Kendall, QRIS Administrator, Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families

Lee Ann Bryant, Early Achievers Consultation Manager, Child Care Action Council/Child Care Aware of Olympic Peninsula

Janette Dosh, Early Achievers Implementation Coordinator, Catholic Charities of Central Washington

Kristin Gomez, Early Achievers Regional Coordinator, Child Care Action Council/Child Care Aware of Olympic Peninsula

Sonja Griffin, Manager, Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning

Rebecca Knox, Early Achievers Implementation Director, Catholic Charities of Central Washington

Sandy Maldonado, Director of Early Learning, Child Care Aware of Washington

Courtney Nolen-Viducich, Early Achievers Regional Coordinator, Chief Program Officer, Child Care Resources

Sabrina Perry, Early Achievers Consultation Manager, Child Care Action Council/Child Care Aware of Olympic Peninsula

Heidi Scott, Early Achievers Consultation Manager, Child Care Action Council/Child Care Aware of Olympic Peninsula

Juliet Taylor, Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Cultivate Learning at University of Washington

Appendix B: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe and better understand the implementation of job-embedded coaching for early learning when scaled up to the county or state level to inform implications for policy and practice. To do this, we conducted a multicase study of coaching systems in three California counties and two states to explore their coaching infrastructures, approaches, characteristics, structures, and funding mechanisms, as well as evidence of effectiveness and key takeaways based on their implementation experiences.

Site Selection

For the county case study sites, we selected three counties in the state of California to study the local systems and structures that support coaching, as well as the implementation of effective coaching practices. Based on background research and outreach to state study participants and county contacts, we selected El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties. Collectively, these counties met all the following selection criteria:

- Reflect the geographic and demographic diversity of California
- Support coaching for sites that serve children from multiple age groups—preschool and infant/toddlers
- Have developed some infrastructure to administer and coordinate coaching across settings in a mixed delivery early childhood education system
- Provide supports for the development of coaches themselves
- Have at least one site doing coaching in connection with the local Quality Counts California QRIS
- Have at least one site that includes bilingual coaches and an equity lens
- Have at least one site that includes home-based child care and/or family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care
- Have at least one site that provides or partners with school districts to align coaching for transitional kindergarten and/or P–3 educators

For the state case study sites, we selected two states that were implementing coaching systems at scale statewide for early learning programs. Based on background research and outreach to state participants and county contacts, we determined that Alabama and Washington met all or most of the following criteria:

- States operating coaching at a statewide scale for at least one of their early learning programs (i.e., preschool or child care)
- States that have sufficient geographic and demographic diversity to be relevant to California
- States that have developed some infrastructure to administer and coordinate coaching across settings in a mixed delivery early childhood education system
- States that provide supports for the development of coaches themselves

- At least one state providing coaching to programs that support children from multiple age groups—preschool and infant/toddler
- At least one state doing coaching in connection with QRIS
- At least one state that includes bilingual coaches and an equity lens
- At least one state that includes coaching for home-based child care and/or FFN care
- At least one site that provides or partners with school districts to align coaching for P–3 educators

Research Questions

This study was intended to address the following research questions:

1. What does the existing literature say about the links between coaching and the quality of early learning instruction, as well as the key elements of coaching that drive its effectiveness?
2. What are the characteristics of strong coaching programs in California and nationally?
3. How are coaching programs administered and funded?
4. How successful have coaching programs been in improving the knowledge and skills of educators?
5. How has coaching adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. What lessons do these programs offer policymakers about how to provide coaching that is both cost-effective and successful at improving instructional quality?

Data Collection

We used a case study approach to address these research questions. Case studies allow researchers to investigate real-life phenomena in context, generating understandings of a phenomenon and its interplay with its environment.¹¹⁶ The case study sites were selected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the majority of the data were collected in the second school year of the pandemic, between May 2020 and January 2021. Data were collected by a five-person research team, which subdivided into two- or three-person research teams to collect data in each county and state. We collected data from a range of sources, including by conducting 37 interviews with early learning county and state coaching program administrators and supervisors; 20 focus groups with coaches, site leaders, and early educators; and 10 observations of coaching sessions and professional learning opportunities for coaches. (For a full list of study participants, see [Appendix A](#).) Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews, focus groups, and observations were conducted virtually by videoconference or phone. Additionally, to be responsive to the new sociocultural and historical context the COVID-19 pandemic created, we added a research question to the study to capture adaptations to coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To develop protocols for data collection, we conducted a review of the literature and identified factors we wanted to inquire about during data collection (e.g., professional learning opportunities available to coaches). We next constructed semistructured interview, focus group, and observation protocols to help us better understand the previously identified factors and to surface any other conditions that might emerge as necessary to support implementation of coaching at the state and local levels. Although we

captured information about how coaching was adapted during the pandemic, that was not the main focus of the study. The intention of this study was to understand a broad view of state- and countywide comprehensive early childhood coaching systems based on an in-depth exploration of five case studies.

To analyze the data, we engaged in a multistep process. First, we transcribed all interview, focus group, and observation data. Next, we drafted a preliminary coding scheme based on the factors identified in the protocols and research questions. We then coded them in Dedoose (a web-based application for qualitative analysis) after calibrating the coding scheme with several interviews or focus groups. This coding included deductive codes based on the literature, as well as inductive codes that emerged during the coding process. To increase inter-rater reliability, we met weekly or biweekly to discuss and compare decisions about the coding process and emergent themes. Document review supplemented the analysis of interviews, focus groups, and observations.

Ultimately, the research teams triangulated findings across multiple data sources and sought both confirmatory and contradictory evidence to develop illustrations of the key features and findings that emerged as well-grounded based on the evidence. Each case study profile was reviewed internally by members of the research team, checked by a state or county site leader for accuracy, and revised based on expert peer review.

For the cross-case analysis, the research team leader reviewed the evidence and analysis for each individual case study and summarized the findings and conclusions that could be drawn across the cases. In doing so, the cross-case analysis accounted for the commonalities across counties and states, as well as the important ways in which they differed. The research team leader then solicited internal feedback from the full research team, vetted recommendations with two expert peer reviewers, and revised the findings and conclusions based on their feedback.

Appendix C: Profiles of California Counties’ Early Learning Coaching Systems

California, the most populous state in the country, has begun to develop a statewide early childhood coaching system.¹¹⁷ Under Governor Gavin Newsom’s administration, California has begun concerted efforts to invest in, and build a road map for, the early learning system, articulated in California’s *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care*. The master plan calls for the “complete development of a comprehensive professional learning system” and for the state to “expand access to on-site coaching and certified coaches” as a step toward strengthening quality improvement supports for the early learning workforce.¹¹⁸

Although the state does not yet have a comprehensive coaching system, several of the state’s 58 counties have been developing and implementing their own countywide coaching programs. In this section, we profile the coaching programs in three counties: El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego. First, however, we provide an overview of the state landscape in which these programs are operating.

Overview of California’s Coaching Landscape

California first began coaching in 2010 with the launch of the Comprehensive Approaches for Raising Educational Standards (CARES) Plus program by First 5 California (the organization created by the California Children and Families Act to distribute tobacco tax revenues to support early childhood development).¹¹⁹ Through the CARES Plus program, First 5 California partnered with 34 counties to support the educational advancement and professional development of the early learning workforce.¹²⁰ One of the core CARES Plus program components was individualized, virtual coaching for early educators using the [MyTeachingPartner](#) coaching program to focus on improving interactions.

The CARES Plus program ended in 2014, replaced by the state’s efforts to develop its Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)—known as Quality Counts California—which was spurred by the federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge Grant program. Since then, QRIS has served as the primary vehicle for quality improvement for the early learning workforce in the state and the means through which the early learning workforce has access to coaching.

California’s QRIS is implemented through a partnership between First 5 California, the California Department of Education, and the California Department of Social Services, funded primarily through the state’s annual budget, the federal Child Care and Development Fund Block Grant, the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Renewal, and First 5 California budget funds. It is a three-layered system with state-level coordination, oversight, and data collection; regional coordination and training and technical assistance hubs; and county-level operations run by local consortia, or—in rural areas—several consortia operating as multicounty partnerships.¹²¹ As a result, California’s QRIS has a statewide rating system, but the quality improvement supports for the early learning workforce are determined locally by each consortia.

Participation in California’s QRIS is voluntary for early learning sites, including state preschool, Head Start, community-based organizations, and home-based child care sites. Participating sites are rated on how well they meet the state’s standards for quality.¹²² California’s QRIS rating matrix assigns points in core areas—child development and school readiness, educators and teaching, and program and environment—and early learning sites are designated a quality tier ranging from 1 to 5 based on their total points, with Tier 5 being the highest.¹²³ Although local consortia may choose to rate sites more frequently, the statewide QRIS system requires sites to be rated every 3 years for sites rated Tier 1–3 and every 5 years for sites rated Tier 4 or 5.¹²⁴ After receiving a rating, participating sites work with their local QRIS technical assistance providers to create annual quality improvement plans. These quality improvement plans guide the sites’ quality improvement activities, including coaching, which are based on the specific offerings of their local QRIS.

Due to the locally determined nature of California’s QRIS, not all counties provide coaching. Some provide monitoring and technical assistance; others lack a coherent structure and approach to coaching and consider coaching to be synonymous with mentoring, communities of practice, or other professional development offerings.¹²⁵ Each county that does provide coaching has developed its own approach, but the state places restrictions on the frequency of coaching that is allowable using state QRIS funding based on a site’s rating.¹²⁶ When using state QRIS funding, sites rated Tier 4 or 5 are restricted to two coaching sessions per year and no restrictions are placed on the frequency of coaching sessions for sites rated Tier 1–3. While some counties using state QRIS funding for coaching maintain this limit, others have decided to leverage non-state funds to provide more coaching to sites with higher ratings, if needed, determined by more dynamic and individualized coachee needs.

In addition to the local QRIS coaching, there are smaller-scale coaching efforts throughout the state, often focused on specific content areas or local education agency–led coaching initiatives with external coaching partners. For example, the Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) program partners with more than 20 local education agencies to provide coaching for supporting English learners and dual-language learners.¹²⁷ Oakland Unified School District partners with the New Teacher Center to implement instructional coaching on best practice to support early childhood development with the district’s early learning teachers.¹²⁸

As California continues to build its high-quality early learning system, the state has been developing a set of coach competencies, accompanying training modules, and a statewide coach certification process. Currently being piloted, these tools will help increase coaching capacity and improve the quality and consistency of coaching throughout the state.

In the following sections, we present profiles of the coaching programs in El Dorado, Fresno, and San Diego counties. Each profile includes an overview of the county’s early learning coaching system, including the infrastructure, key partnerships, and funding mechanisms that help the systems to function and a description of the key characteristics of the coaching models they implement. These profiles primarily focus on program administration. We describe other aspects of these coaching systems—such as content of coaching, structural features that support coaching, and common enablers and challenges to implementing coaching systems—in the cross-case analysis that constitutes the main body of this report.

El Dorado County's Coaching System

El Dorado County is a small, rural community located in Northern California between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe and covering about 1,700 square miles. Approximately 193,000 people live in El Dorado County, placing it near the middle in terms of population size among California's 58 counties. The majority of El Dorado's population identifies as White (77%); about 13% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino; and less than 11% identify as Asian or American Indian and Alaska Native.¹²⁹ The median household income is about \$83,000, and census data estimate that a little more than 8% of the county's residents live in poverty.¹³⁰

The early childhood coaching system in El Dorado is an intra-agency endeavor led by the El Dorado County Office of Education, which works in collaboration with external partners. El Dorado provides coaching to early learning sites participating in the county's QRIS (El Dorado County Quality Counts California). Additionally, the partnership with external entities enables El Dorado County to also provide coaching to sites enrolled in QRIS but not yet participating in the QRIS rating process. Overall, the countywide coaching system involves 91 sites that are dispersed across the geographically large and primarily rural community.

Coaching System Infrastructure

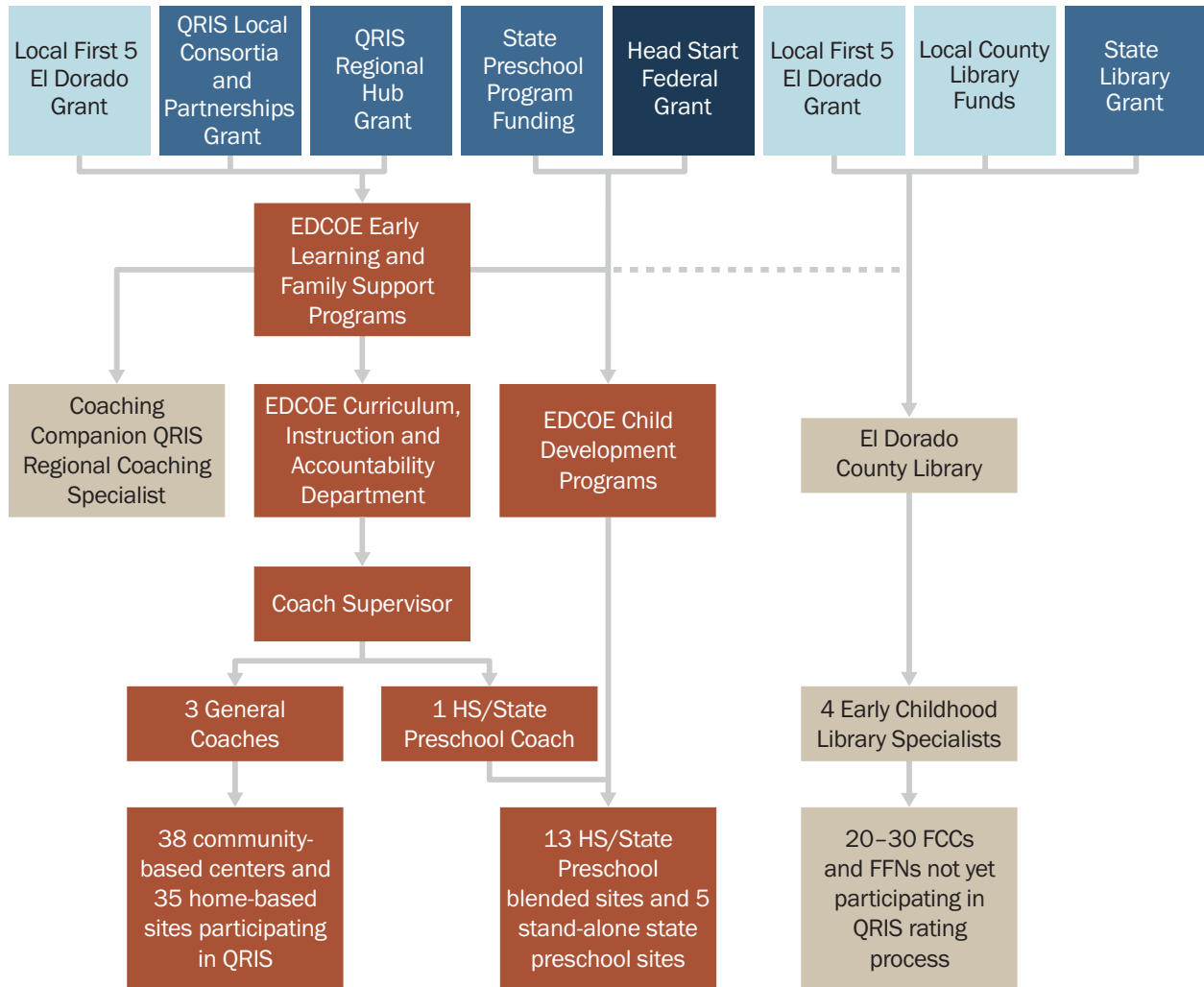
The El Dorado County Office of Education supports coaching across the mixed delivery system through internal partnerships among three different departments by collaborating with the county library system and by leveraging regional QRIS resources. El Dorado County's coaching system infrastructure is presented in [Figure C1](#).

The El Dorado County Office of Education's Early Learning and Family Support programs department provides the vision setting and overall coordination for coaching. It is responsible for administering programs and initiatives to support children, families, and early educators, including the county's QRIS and the QRIS Regional Training and Technical Assistance Hub for El Dorado and 13 neighboring counties in the region (Region 3 in the state QRIS).

The Early Learning and Family Support programs department partners with the Child Development Services department to coordinate coaching specifically for Head Start and California State Preschool Program. The Child Development Services department is the federal Head Start grantee for the county and is responsible for the oversight and administration of all the state preschool classrooms in the county, many of which are Head Start/state preschool-blended classrooms. The Child Development Services department passes funds through to the Early Learning and Family Support programs department for one coach dedicated to providing coaching to the Head Start and state preschool teachers.

The Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability department, which houses K-12 teacher induction coaches, collaboratively hires the early learning coaches with the Early Learning and Family Support programs department and then houses and supervises the early learning coaches with funding provided by the Early Learning and Family Support programs department. County administrators indicated that having all the coaches in the county within the same department has allowed for efficiencies, reducing overhead costs for program components such as supervision while also creating opportunities for shared learning by those in similar roles.

Figure C1. El Dorado County Coaching Infrastructure



■ Local funding
 ■ State funding
 ■ Federal funding
 ■ Lead coaching agency
 ■ External partners

Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year. CDE = California Department of Education; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of El Dorado County coaching participant interviews from 2022 and El Dorado’s Quality Counts California Local Consortia and Partnerships 2020–21 grant report. (2022).

The El Dorado County Early Learning and Family Support programs department also serves as the lead for the Region 3 QRIS Hub and works regionally to fund and offer professional development opportunities, certification training, and technical assistance to coaches in the 14 counties in the region, including El Dorado. El Dorado County administrators indicated that as a small, rural county, El Dorado County alone would not have the resources to offer the level of professional development necessary to maintain a highly qualified coaching workforce. The regional hub resources have been essential to offering a breadth and intensity of training and professional development opportunities to build the competencies of the coaching workforce in the county and region writ large.

El Dorado County was an early user of the Coaching Companion virtual coaching platform. (See [Coaching Companion](#).) This virtual platform enables coaches and coachees to interact more regularly via video and web-based feedback tools, increasing frequency of coaching interactions. Coaching Companion is being used increasingly across California and in Washington’s statewide coaching system.

Coaching Companion

Coaching Companion is a tool for virtual, asynchronous reflective coaching. Originally developed by the University of Washington and its partners for the Office of Head Start’s National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, Coaching Companion is a web-based video feedback and annotation application that supports collaboration between coaches and educators. Educators upload videos and documentation of real-life teaching practices with children, and coaches provide feedback within the application. They even have the ability to make notes or provide reflective prompts on specific parts of the uploaded video. The Coaching Companion platform also includes a media library with exemplar videos of effective teaching practices and training materials.

El Dorado County partnered with the University of Washington to develop a California-specific Coaching Companion version using federal Race to the Top funds. Coaching specialist Danielle Singley worked with coaches to develop coaching cycle sets focused on topics such as high-quality interactions with infants and toddlers, how to increase instructional supports in preschool classrooms, growth as a professional educator, family engagement, and social-emotional development. Additionally, the platform offers the ability to create customized coaching cycles or group coaching supports.

In El Dorado, Coaching Companion is used as an optional tool in conjunction with synchronous face-to-face coaching sessions. It enables more touch points between coaches and early educators who are face with limited resources and the challenges of traveling to remote, rural sites for face-to-face coaching.

Sources: Cultivate Learning. [What we do](#). University of Washington; interview with Danielle Singley, independent contractor, Coaching Specialist for the Region 3 Quality Counts California Hub (2020, October 27); interview with Elizabeth Blakemore, Director, Family and Early Learning Programs, El Dorado County Office of Education (2020, November 12).

Lastly, the Early Learning and Family Support programs department also partners with the El Dorado County Library on a less formal basis. The library employs four early childhood library specialists who provide the coaching and professional development supports for home-based child care centers and family, friend, and neighbor (FNN) providers.

Coaching System Overview

El Dorado County first began providing coaching in 2012 as part of Race to the Top efforts. County administrators describe the initial system as being focused on technical assistance and compliance with state licensing and health and safety standards. However, as the program developed, El Dorado County incorporated feedback from educators, directors, and coaches to create the current system, which they now describe as having an equity-driven, reflective approach.

By 2020–21, El Dorado County provided coaching to the majority of center-based programs participating in QRIS, including 38 licensed private community-based centers, 17 blended Head Start and California State Preschool Programs, 5 stand-alone state preschool sites, and 10 home-based sites. Additionally, in partnership with the county office of education, the El Dorado County Library provided coaching to an additional 30 home-based child care sites, and FNN providers that were enrolled in QRIS but not yet participating in the QRIS rating process.¹³¹

Some of the key characteristics of El Dorado County’s coaching system are summarized in [Table C1](#).

Table C1. El Dorado County Coaching System Summary Characteristics

Characteristics	Summary
Year launched	2012
Structure	Multiagency partnership involving coordination across departments and with an external agency
Key players and partnerships	El Dorado County Office of Education Early Learning and Family Support programs (lead); El Dorado County Office of Education Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability programs; El Dorado County Office of Education Child Development programs; El Dorado County Library
Programs that receive coaching support	Head Start and state-funded preschool sites; licensed community- and home-based child care centers and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers voluntarily participating in the county QRIS, as well as additional home-based child care and FFN providers enrolled in QRIS but not yet participating in the QRIS rating process through the library
Recipients of coaching	Primary recipients: early educators (lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators) Secondary recipients: some site leaders to address sitewide needs
Funding sources	Main source: local First 5 El Dorado grant funds Additional sources: State QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant funds, QRIS Regional Hub grant funds, and federal Head Start and state preschool program funds. The county library also utilizes its own local First 5 El Dorado grant and county and state library grant funds to fund lighter-touch coaching for home-based child care sites and FFN providers not yet participating in the QRIS rating process.
Coaching dosage and ratio	Individualized and co-determined with educators: Coaching sessions typically occur twice per month, with additional visits or flexibility depending on needs. Ratio: 1 coach for 23 sites
Coach qualifications	Required: bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or related field; a California Site Supervisor or above Child Development Permit; a minimum of 3 years of practical experience in early care and education programs; obtaining and maintaining reliability in standardized assessment tools Preferred: knowledge of child development, California Preschool Learning Foundations, and Creative Curriculum ¹³² Additional asset: bilingualism in English and Spanish

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

El Dorado County early learning coaches provide instructional coaching to early educators in center- or home-based early learning sites participating in QRIS, including lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators. For teaching teams, coaches work with the educators to determine if coaches will meet with the educators individually or as a team. Although they focus primarily on early educators, coaches also meet with site leaders and directors to support a site's overall quality improvement goals.

El Dorado supplements state QRIS funding with local First 5 and Head Start grant dollars in order to better align the frequency and length of coaching sessions with the needs and preferences of the early educators. Without these additional funds, dosage of coaching for each site would be based solely on its QRIS rating. El Dorado County staff emphasized the importance of offering coaching based on individual needs, not on quality ratings. As they explained, QRIS tier ratings represent a point in time captured every 3 years and do not always reflect how a site is actually performing. The county's approach is to offer coaching to all sites and engage all early educators in continuous quality improvement, regardless of tier.

Although there is wide variation in coaching intensity across the county system, most often, coaches visit their coachees approximately twice a month for about an hour. Coaches work with individual early educators to identify a focus area for coaching that is related to their site's QRIS quality improvement plan. Coaches often employ a reflective inquiry process that includes both discussion and data from assessments to help educators assess the needs of their learning environment. For example, coaches help coachees use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) or the Pyramid Model (a conceptual framework of evidence-based practices for supporting young children's social-emotional development and addressing challenging behaviors).¹³³ As one coach explained, "We start with what's working in your classroom, what's not working in your classroom. Just getting that feedback, having them start to be reflective." Additionally, coaches for Head Start and state preschool sites use a teacher success rubric¹³⁴ to identify areas of focus for coaching.

The library largely operates independently in providing professional learning and coaching to home-based early educators and FFNs not yet participating in the QRIS rating process. Supports can range from providing bilingual story time to coaching early educators using [Parents as Teachers](#)—a model that focuses on increasing caregivers' knowledge of child development and interactions; detection of developmental delays; detection of child abuse; neglect prevention; and children's school readiness and success.¹³⁵ Additionally, in 2020–21, the library began piloting the [Language Environment Analysis \(LENA\)](#) early language program, a 10-week program to enhance supports for the language environment in conjunction with the Parents as Teachers program. In past years, the Early Learning and Family Support programs department subcontracted with the county library to provide these coaching supports. Currently, the library has funding for coaching and other professional development supports through its own local First 5 grant, local county library funds, and a state library grant.¹³⁶

Funding

El Dorado County's annual early learning coaching budget was estimated to be \$331,313 in 2020–21, with an additional \$16,900 in estimated in-kind contributions from the El Dorado County Office of Education.¹³⁷ The greatest cost of the coaching program is for coaches' positions and travel. Additional annual costs include data collection and entry staff time. In-kind contributions from the El Dorado County Office of Education were primarily for coach supervision and program leadership.

Funding for El Dorado County's coaching program comes from both state and local sources that are blended and braided to provide coaching to lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators participating in QRIS across 91 sites across the mixed delivery system. When the county coaching system was first developed in 2012, federal Race to the Top funds allocated by the state were a major source of funding. When the Race to the Top funding ceased, local First 5 dollars taken from tobacco tax revenues became the backbone of the coaching funding, composing 70% of El Dorado County's coaching budget.¹³⁸ The coaching budget is also supplemented by the state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant, California State Preschool Program, and federal Head Start grant funding. (See [Figure C1](#).)

One of the principles of El Dorado County's coaching systems was founded on providing universal access to coaching for all sites participating in QRIS, regardless of their setting type or tier rating. Blending and braiding funding streams has been crucial to implementing and ensuring this vision. As the county's Early Learning and Family Support Director, Elizabeth Blakemore, said:

We have always offered every single one of our sites coaching no matter where they were. There's always been a founding principle, and [we have] found ways to provide coaching even to those who are not eligible according to the state.

Having multiple funding streams has also made it possible to offer coaching intensity that is individualized to the site or to the specific early educator participating in the coaching. Making this a reality, however, has required substantial investments and collaboration. Blending local First 5 grant dollars with the state quality improvement grant and directing Head Start grant dollars to fund one coach has been an essential strategy in allowing El Dorado County to offer coaching to all QRIS-participating sites in the county. Without supplementing the state quality improvement funds, sites rated as QRIS Tier 4 and 5 would be limited to two coaching sessions per year due to state restrictions.

As the county's Head Start grantee, the El Dorado Office of Education's Child Development Services department is able to leverage Head Start funding more systemically than counties with multiple agencies receiving federal Head Start grants. However, partnership is still required internally within the El Dorado County Office of Education between the Early Learning and Family Support programs; Curriculum, Instruction, and Accountability department; and the Child Development Services department to redirect funds and to centralize coaches to create a coherent coaching system and approach.

Another enabling condition is that the El Dorado County Early Learning and Family Support programs department and its director, Elizabeth Blakemore, serve as the lead for both the El Dorado County QRIS and the Region 3 QRIS Hub. As a result, Blakemore has both a regional and county-specific perspective about how to marshal regional funds to support common training, certification, professional development,

and data needs for coaches in El Dorado and the other 13 counties in the region. Centralizing these functions enables El Dorado and the other counties in the region to use their local dollars to fund coach salaries and travel costs, which can be quite high in rural areas.

Fresno County's Coaching System

Fresno County is located in California's Central Valley and covers about 6,000 square miles, much of which is rural land used for agriculture. It is home to about 1 million people, making it one of California's largest counties in terms of both population and land area. About half of the population is concentrated in the city of Fresno, the state's fifth-most-populous city.¹³⁹ More than half of the county's population is from Hispanic or Latino backgrounds. The median household income is about \$54,000, and based on census data estimates, 17% of county residents live in poverty.¹⁴⁰

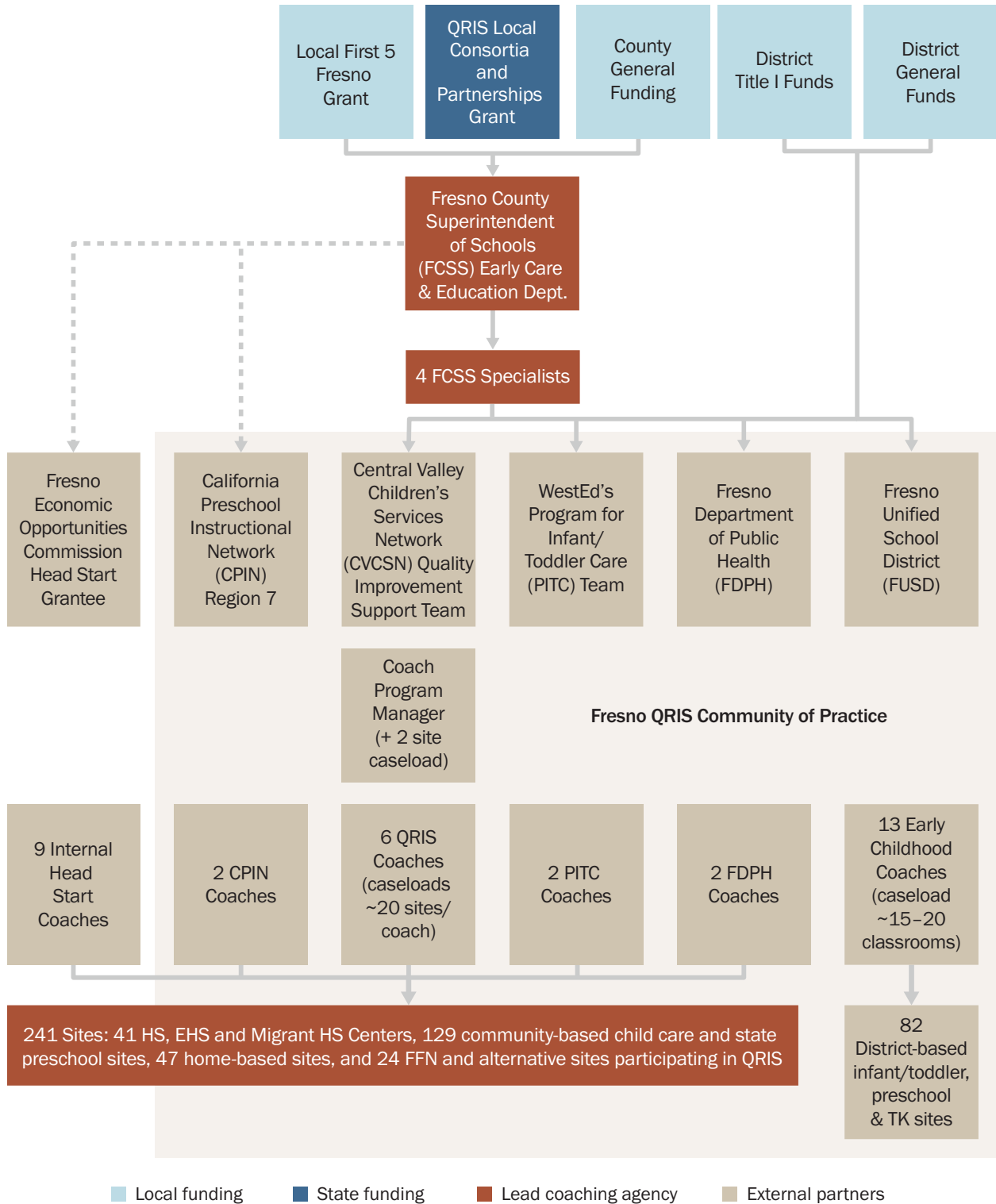
Fresno's early childhood coaching system consists of a countywide infrastructure implemented in coordination with a local resource and referral agency and the school district. It includes 357 sites participating in QRIS.

Coaching System Infrastructure

The county's office of education—Fresno County Superintendent of Schools (Fresno County)—coordinates coaching across the county's mixed delivery system. Coaching is provided for a large number and wide variety of early learning providers for children from birth through age 5, including community-based organizations, Head Start programs, and district-based preschool and transitional kindergarten programs.

The Fresno County coaching system is composed of several key partners: Fresno County, the Central Valley Children's Services Network (the local resource and referral agency), Fresno Unified School District (Fresno Unified), the Fresno Department of Public Health, WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care, and the local California Preschool Instructional Network chapter. (See [Figure C2](#).) The key partners work together to coordinate and leverage community resources across the system. Additional unfunded, informal partners are involved in efforts to share resources and coordinate across coaching initiatives and include other school districts and agencies in the county, such as Head Start and Migrant Head Start grantees. Leaning on these partnerships allows the county to take advantage of existing coaching capacity, expertise, and relationships within the Fresno community. Building on collective resources is also a sustainability strategy. Because funding is tenuous, these partnerships also allow Fresno County to make the most out of scarce resources and build a program that can be sustained, regardless of changes in staffing and policy.

Figure C2. Fresno County Coaching Infrastructure



Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year. EHS = Early Head Start; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System; TK = transitional kindergarten.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interviews with Fresno County coaching participants from 2022 and Fresno’s Quality Counts California Consortia and Partnerships 2020–21 grant report. (2022).

Central Valley Children’s Services Network (CVCSN) Fresno Accreditation Institute housed two coaches who supported early learning sites through the process for National Association for the Education of Young Children or National Association for Family Child Care accreditation.¹⁴¹ In doing this work, CVCSN already had experience with outreach, caseload management, and coach support to early learning sites and educators, precluding the need for Fresno County to build such program infrastructure from scratch. Furthermore, with the launch of the county QRIS, coaching content shifted so that accreditation technical assistance evolved into quality improvement coaching.

CVCSN QRIS coaches work with home-based, Head Start, private, faith-based, and FFN providers, as well as state preschool sites in 10 districts other than Fresno Unified.¹⁴² CVCSN houses a team of seven QRIS coaches. One of these coaches serves as the agency’s program manager and has a caseload of two sites. The other six coaches each have caseloads of around 20 sites, some of which have multiple classrooms. The QRIS coaches also provide professional development workshops and trainings for site administrators, other coaches, and educators—on the various tools that are used within the quality improvement framework. By partnering with CVCSN, Fresno County built on the organization’s established system of site directors and early learning educators to recruit and retain participants for the new coaching program. Some of the QRIS coaches have been working with sites and early educators for many years, having established relationships with them through previous work. In assigning caseloads, CVCSN strives to keep these relationships intact to facilitate strong relationships between coaches and coaches.

Fresno Unified School District is also a critical partner because of its wide reach across Fresno County and the large number of coaches it employs. In 2018, Fresno Unified began providing in-house quality improvement coaching in all its early childhood classrooms as part of a cohesive, districtwide coaching program. Fresno Unified employs 13 early childhood coaches who each serve between 15 and 20 of the district’s 2 infant, 7 toddler, 70 state preschool, and 85 transitional kindergarten classrooms. Although only 37 of these classrooms participate in QRIS, all district preschool teachers receive coaching based on the QRIS framework.¹⁴³ Fresno Unified includes QRIS coaches in district-sponsored early learning professional development opportunities, and Fresno Unified coaches also provide dual-language learner support and coaching to QRIS participants throughout Fresno County.

The Fresno Department of Public Health has two dedicated coaches to support early learning sites participating in QRIS. Through professional development and coaching, the public health coaches support all QRIS sites within the county with the health and safety components of the quality rating.

The county also provides a subgrant to fully support one coach from WestEd’s Program for Infant/Toddler Care to be dedicated to Fresno County. This coach, with the assistance of the WestEd Regional Program for Infant/Toddler Care coordinator, works specifically with the infant/toddler classrooms across Fresno County. This coach coordinates with the QRIS coaches to provide professional development, support infant/toddler classrooms, and help recruit early learning sites into QRIS.

Additionally, the county’s office of education works with several collaborating agencies that do not receive funding from the county but participate in county-sponsored quality improvement activities such as professional development offerings and convenings, such as the California Preschool Instructional Network and Head Start centers. These agencies vary in their levels of coordination with the county QRIS. The regional California Preschool Instructional Network community has a coach who

provides supplemental support to sites on topics such as inclusive practices and family engagement in coordination with QRIS and is highly engaged in QRIS activities and events. The California Preschool Instructional Network coach coordinates with site-level administrators to ensure that supports do not overlap with QRIS coaching.

Fresno County also has been increasing its collaboration with Head Start grantees. During the 2020–21 coaching year, about one third of the Head Start, Early Head Start, and Migrant Head Start sites in the county participated in the county QRIS. Head Start’s nine internal coaches have largely operated independent of the QRIS coaching program, although they are invited to county-sponsored meetings and events. In Fresno County, it has been challenging to incentivize Head Start—which receives federal funding—and privately funded programs to participate in shared initiatives like QRIS. According to administrators, this is a major disadvantage of voluntary participation in QRIS. Although the county has minimal leverage, it continues to encourage programs to participate in QRIS coaching. QRIS coaches provide quality improvement support for participating Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms, while internal Head Start coaches provide a parallel coaching program based on agency-specific goals and federal requirements.

Fresno County houses a team of four specialists and two administrators who oversee and help coordinate all the partners. In addition to providing a master calendar of all available trainings, it hosts two communities of practice: one for lead coaches (who are experts in certain areas, such as in inclusion or dual-language learning, and work with coaches and site directors on those particular areas of practice) and one for all coaches. These communities of practice provide consistent messaging across agencies and align coaching approaches and practices through peer learning and consensus building. The team also hosts occasional larger convenings—such as a regional Coaching Summit—where coaches can share practices and learnings, funded by the QRIS Region 5 Training, Technical Assistance, and Coordination Hub. Finally, the county uses a data management system called Hubbe (previously iPinwheel) across key partners for logging coaching notes and assessments, and storing program quality improvement goals and rating information. The Hubbe data management system is available cost-free to partner agencies, financed by QRIS Region 5 Training, Technical Assistance, and Coordination Hub funds.

While Fresno County values collaboration, it also respects agency autonomy. This, along with limited funding to support all potential partner agencies, can lead to limitations on Fresno County’s control over coaching across agencies. Differences in the extent to which agencies engage with QRIS and implement agreed practices make it difficult to implement consistent, high-quality coaching across the mixed delivery system. For example, Fresno Unified’s coaching practices are highly consistent with those of the QRIS coaches, integrating the quality matrix and the embedded tools. In contrast, Head Start’s coaches operate much more autonomously, focusing more on federal regulations.

Consistent with Fresno’s strategy of leveraging existing resources, Fresno County and the Central Valley Children’s Services Network (CVCSN) work with both internal and external partners to provide additional professional development for coaches and early educators. For example, within CVCSN, the quality improvement team collaborates with another internal team—the Find Care department—to provide professional development related to trauma-informed care. For special needs-related professional development, Fresno County partners with area agencies, including the Diagnostic Center and the Sequoia Regional Office of the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities. Fresno Unified’s

Language Learning Project provides support related to working with children who are dual-language learners.¹⁴⁴ A Fresno Unified Language Learning Project coach provides professional development both within and outside of Fresno Unified, as well as coaching for sites. Professional development and coaching focus on supporting the home language and family engagement while promoting oral language development in both the home language and English.

Coaching System Overview

Fresno County Superintendent of Schools (the county’s office of education) collaborated with the CVCSN to launch Fresno County’s QRIS coaching program (known locally as Early Stars) in 2011, with two coaches serving nine sites. In 2020–21, Fresno’s QRIS coaching program served 241 sites: 129 centers (community-based child care centers and state preschool sites not located in Fresno Unified); 41 Head Start, Early Head Start, and Migrant Head Start centers; 47 home-based child care sites; and 24 FFN providers and alternative sites. Fresno Unified also has a cadre of coaches who provided coaching to early educators in its 82 district-based infant/toddler, state preschool, and transitional kindergarten sites. Across partners in Fresno’s coaching system, coaching is targeted at improving instructional practices and the quality of the environment by working with early educators, including lead and assistant teachers and home-based early educators.

Some of the key characteristics of Fresno’s coaching system are summarized in [Table C2](#).

Table C2. Fresno County Coaching System Summary Characteristics

Characteristics	Summary
Year launched	2011
Structure	Countywide coaching infrastructure that supports coaches across different programs
Key players and partnerships	Fresno County Superintendent of Schools’ Early Care and Education department (lead coordinating agency); Central Valley Children’s Services Network (the local child care resource and referral agency); Fresno Unified School District; WestEd’s Program for Infant/Toddler Care team; Fresno Department of Public Health
Programs that receive coaching support	State-funded preschool sites’ licensed community-based child care centers; licensed home-based child care sites; Head Start centers; family, friend, and neighbor providers voluntarily participating in the county QRIS; district-based infant/toddler, preschool, and transitional kindergarten classrooms
Recipients of coaching	Primary recipients: early educators (lead and assistant teachers and home-based early educators) Secondary recipients: early educators: birth–age 12 programs as part of the Expanded Learning Opportunities Quality Initiative; some site leaders to address sitewide needs

Characteristics	Summary
Funding sources	<p>Main source: local First 5 Fresno funds</p> <p>Additional sources: state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant funds; Fresno County general funds; Fresno Unified funds (Title I, district general funds, California Department of Education special grants, and foundation grant funds)</p>
Coaching dosage and ratio	<p>Tiered and on-demand: Sites rated as Tier 1 through 3 receive monthly or bimonthly coaching sessions. Sites rated as Tier 4 or 5 are restricted to two formal coaching sessions per year, but coaches aim to informally check in with sites at least quarterly and are available on demand by request.</p> <p>Ratio: 1 coach for 17 sites</p>
Coach qualifications	<p>Required for QRIS coaches: a minimum of a bachelor’s degree in child development (or related field), at least 3 years of practical experience in a child care setting, fluency with Microsoft Office software, and fluency in English and Spanish or Hmong</p>

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

Until recently, the frequency of QRIS coaching was based on early educators’ needs or requests. For example, some sites had two or three visits annually, except in QRIS rating years—during which they requested more frequent coaching. Most commonly, QRIS coaches visited educators monthly or bimonthly, regardless of rating. In addition, county specialists visited educators once or twice per year to provide technical assistance for QRIS documentation and to ensure that early educators were receiving the coaching they needed. Due to policy restrictions on the use of state QRIS funds enacted in 2018,¹⁴⁵ QRIS coaches now provide only one or two QRIS-funded coaching sessions per year for sites rated as Tier 4 or 5, while sites rated as Tier 1 through 3 can still receive monthly or bimonthly coaching sessions. However, using additional funding sources, CVCSN—which runs the QRIS coaching—aims for quarterly check-ins at sites rated as Tier 4 or 5 to maintain connections. Furthermore, coaches are still available on demand when sites or educators need extra support. Similarly, the Department of Public Health coaches, who focus specifically on health and safety issues, typically make one or two visits annually to QRIS-participating sites, but they also respond to on-demand requests for additional site visits or phone or video consultations.

Fresno County seeks to co-construct consistent practices across agencies and coaches through ongoing dialogue facilitated by the quality improvement matrix and the four tools embedded in the matrix.¹⁴⁶ Specifically, Fresno County and CVCSN work across all the key partners to develop consensus around substantive issues such as coaching content, how to infuse equity into coaching, and professional development workshop topics, as well as procedural topics such as how to write coaching notes.

Fresno County also convenes regular community of practice meetings for coaches from different agencies to engage in consensus building, peer learning, and networking. It provides two alternating bimonthly group meetings: a lead coach professional learning community and a coaching professional learning community for all coaches. The lead coach community of practice includes the people who oversee coaching at partner agencies. They meet and plan the agendas for the All Coach community of practice meetings, share and build consensus around practices, make decisions about next steps and protocols, share outside resources, and engage in professional development. The All Coach community of practice meetings aim to include all early learning coaches across partner organizations. Community of practice topics are determined by coaches based on what they hear or observe in the field, and the meetings focus on peer learning and building consistency across coaches and agencies. These interagency communities of practice supplement regular within-agency learning groups that take place in partner organizations.

As the QRIS Region 5 Training, Technical Assistance, and Coordination Hub grantee, Fresno County has also hosted regional coaching summits that brought together coaches from neighboring counties. These coaching summits were organized like conferences, with a keynote speaker and sessions. Several coaches mentioned the value of larger networking opportunities to build more cohesion across the region.

Educators and site supervisors reported multiple examples of improved instructional practice as a result of coaching. For example, educators learned to ask open-ended questions to stimulate children’s critical thinking and verbal skills. They began integrating the collection of observational assessment evidence into learning activities, making assessment a more natural activity for the children and using the educators’ time more efficiently. They rearranged learning environments to be more stimulating and appropriate for children’s engagement, and they interacted with children more effectively, a key to supporting children’s cognitive and social-emotional development. These changes in instructional practice resulted in higher educator ratings on CLASS and Environmental Rating Scales (ERS). One educator, who is also the site director for her state preschool classroom, shared, “When I came into my center, I had no experience with [QRIS, but] I got hired in a rating year. I was able to increase the rating score from the previous teacher, and I was one point away from five stars. It was with [my coach’s] help and support that I was able to [increase the rating].”

Site supervisors and program administrators also attributed the high number of programs that received high ratings to coaching. Isela Turner, Early Care and Education Director for Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, said, “It is my honest belief that we would not be at this level, at this point, in Fresno County without coaching.”

Funding

Fresno County blended funding from several sources to cover the QRIS coaching program’s self-reported 2020–21 annual coaching budget of about \$695,000: 70% of the budget is funded through a grant from First 5 Fresno, 22% comes from state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant, and 8% is through general Fresno County funding.¹⁴⁷ This budget accounts for the coaching provided to the lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators at 241 center- and home-based sites participating in QRIS but does not include the additional 82 district-based sites that receive coaching from Fresno Unified School District.

Of the total budget, \$555,000 is dedicated to subcontractual agreements with key partners: about \$76,000 to support 20% full-time equivalent for the four county specialists; about \$12,000 to support a small percentage for the two Fresno County administrators; and about \$50,000 to support other program costs.¹⁴⁸

The Fresno County subcontract to Fresno Unified only makes up about 1% of the district's early childhood coaching budget. Fresno Unified brings together multiple additional funding sources for the district's early childhood coaching budget, primarily Title I dollars and district general funds (composing 85% of the coaching budget), along with grants from private foundations and California Department of Education special grants (composing 14% of the coaching budget).¹⁴⁹

San Diego County's Coaching System

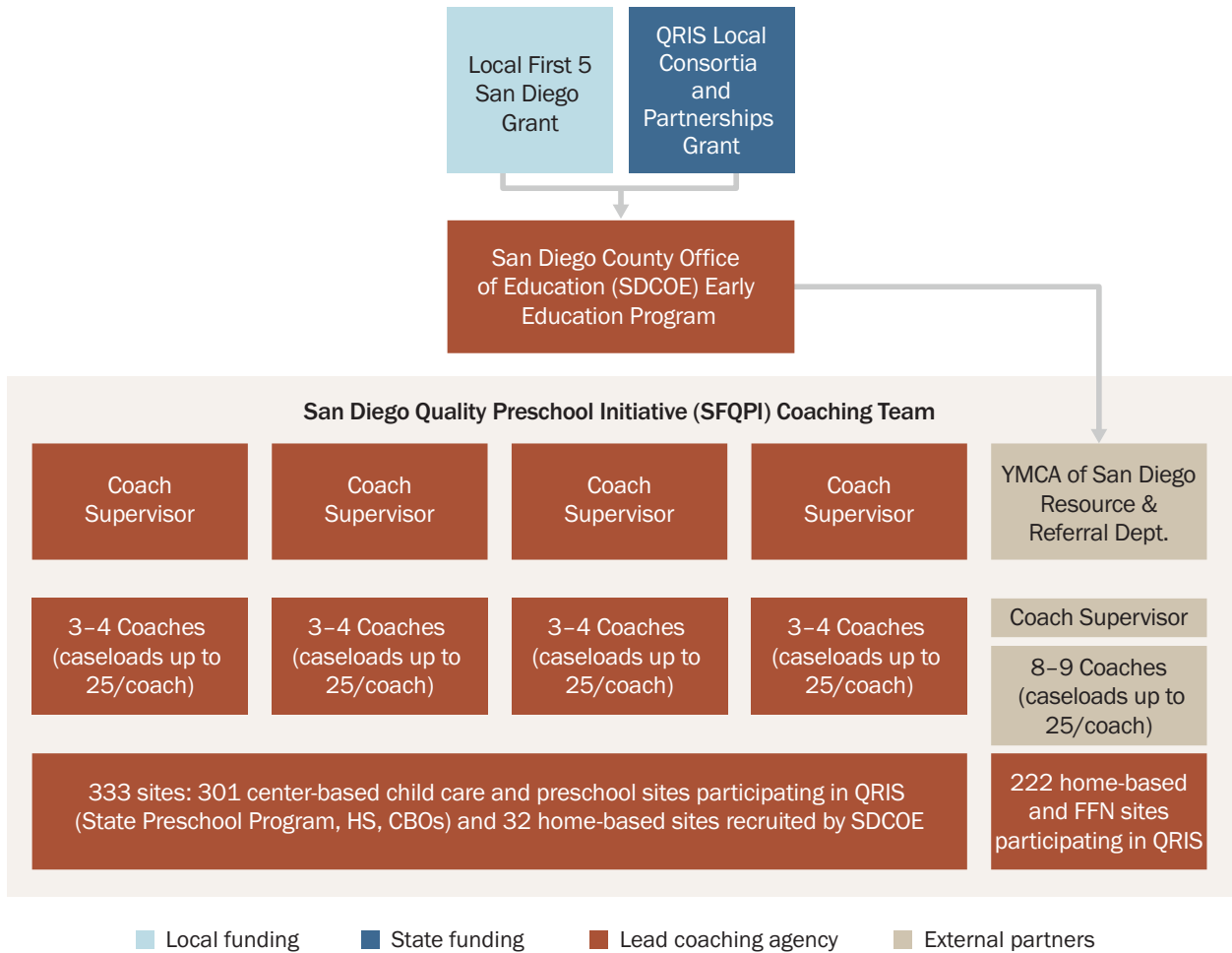
San Diego County is located in Southern California, adjacent to Mexico, and covers about 4,200 square miles, including nine military bases. More than 3.3 million people live in San Diego County, making it the second-most-populous county in California.¹⁵⁰ About 34% of San Diego's residents are from Hispanic or Latino backgrounds, and about 45% are people who identify as White. The median household income is close to \$79,000, and census data show that a little less than 10% of the population lives in poverty.¹⁵¹

The San Diego County Office of Education partners with the YMCA of San Diego County—the county's child care resource and referral agency—to provide direct coaching that is accessible across settings in the mixed delivery system. The county's coaching program is notable for its coaching-of-coaches approach and its formal structures that foster consistency in the reflective coaching approach used across the various coaching providers.

Coaching System Infrastructure

San Diego County works closely with the YMCA of San Diego County to provide coaching across the mixed delivery system. San Diego County's coaching system infrastructure is presented in [Figure C3](#).

Figure C3. San Diego County Coaching Infrastructure



Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year. CBO = community-based organization; FFN = family, friend, and neighbor; HS = Head Start; QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of San Diego County coaching participant interviews from 2022 and San Diego’s Quality Counts California Local Consortia and Partnerships 2020–21 grant report. (2022).

San Diego County has a team of coaches and coach supervisors that serve child care centers and preschool centers participating in QRIS, early childhood coordinators employed by school districts who oversee district-based state preschool, and Head Start/state preschool-blended sites. It also provides supports for embedded instructional coaches, if desired. Most districts that have state preschool program sites participate in the county QRIS and receive these supports. A notable exception is San Diego Unified School District—the largest school district in the county and second largest in the state¹⁵²—which provides its own professional development for the state-funded preschool program it runs and professional development directly to preschool teachers.

To meet the coaching needs of all early learning site leaders in the mixed delivery system, the county subcontracts with its key partner, the YMCA, which provides coaching for home-based site leaders and—starting in the 2020–21 school year—FFN providers. The county and the YMCA provide similar coaching. They participate in interagency coaching team meetings at least monthly and have access to and use the same tools and resources (e.g., protocols, quality improvement plan self-assessment). As Laurie Han, Executive Director of the Childcare Resource Service department at the YMCA of San Diego County, articulated, “We’re all together and learning it all together and not separated. We just happen to be two different groups.”

The YMCA has implemented split shifts and provides additional flexibility for coaches in order to best serve the needs of home-based site leaders and FFN providers. YMCA coaches often work a few hours in the morning and a few hours in the evening so they can accommodate home-based early educators with before- and after-school programs.

As the local resource and referral agency, the YMCA is a known and trusted resource for home-based educators. It developed a QRIS orientation for home-based early educators to inform and educate them about QRIS, which supports the recruitment and onboarding of home-based early educators into QRIS and coaching. Also, through previous funding from First 5 San Diego, the YMCA supported home-based sites with universal screening using the Ages and Stages Questionnaires, and many of the home-based early educators who participated in that initiative shifted to QRIS and coaching.¹⁵³ As one home-based early educator described:

When I first decided to become [licensed], I started taking classes with the YMCA and I became a part of their of their Childcare Initiative Program right off the bat. So, I’ve been a part of that since before I got my license. ... So I’ve just [gone] into different programs with the YMCA during that 8 years. And that’s how I got into [QRIS]—just by being part of the Childcare Initiative Program.

Although delineating roles between San Diego County and YMCA coaches supports efficiency and makes strategic use of the agencies' respective expertise and infrastructure, it initially created some inequities between the two groups of coaches, particularly in coach qualifications and compensation. Previously, county coaches were required to have higher levels of education and received higher salaries than YMCA coaches. The county worked to reallocate funding in the coaching budget to be able to increase YMCA salaries and create more pay and qualification parity between the two sets of coaches.

Coaching System Overview

San Diego County began providing quality improvement technical assistance in 2008. The county's QRIS program—the San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative—was launched in 2012, at which time the technical assistance evolved into a coaching program for preschool settings. Between 2012 and 2019, coaching expanded to include settings for children from birth to age 5 and home-based child care sites. In 2020, San Diego's coaching approach evolved further to create a more sustainable, scalable model by directly coaching site leaders and supporting job-embedded coaches who provide coaching to the educators in their respective centers and programs.

In San Diego County, coaching is available across the mixed delivery system to all early learning and child care sites that participate in the county QRIS. Coaching is targeted at site leaders (i.e., center directors, site supervisors, and home-based site leaders). In 2020–21, participation in QRIS and coaching included approximately 180 state preschool sites; 121 nonstate preschool centers (e.g., Head Start, district-based, or community-based child care or preschool sites); and 254 home-based child care and FFN sites.¹⁵⁴

Some of the key characteristics of San Diego County's coaching system are summarized in [Table C3](#).

Table C3. San Diego County Coaching System Summary Characteristics

Characteristics	Summary
Year launched	2012
Structure	Operationalized by local nonprofit to organize and support site-level coaching
Key players and partnerships	San Diego County Office of Education, Early Education program (lead); YMCA of San Diego County (the county's child care resource and referral agency)
Programs that receive coaching support	State-funded preschool sites; Head Start centers; licensed community-based child care centers; licensed home-based sites; and some family, friend, and neighbor providers voluntarily participating in the county QRIS
Recipients of coaching	Primary recipients: site leaders (center directors, site supervisors, and home-based lead early educators) Secondary recipients: early educators (lead or assistant teachers)
Funding sources	Main source: local First 5 San Diego grant funds Additional sources: state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant and state QRIS Regional Hub grant funds

Characteristics	Summary
Coaching dosage and ratio	<p>Co-determined between coaches and site leaders: Coaches meet with coachees one or two times per month in the first 3–6 months of the coaching year to self-assess, develop a quality improvement plan, and set goals. After the quality improvement plan is complete, coaching session frequency is determined based on goals and needs. Sessions range from monthly to multiple times per month.</p> <p>Ratio: 1 coach for 25 sites</p>
Coach qualifications	<p>Required: bachelor’s degree in child development (or related field); a valid California Site Supervisor (or above) Child Development Permit; and 5 or more years of practical experience in early childhood education (at least 2 years in the classroom or as a home-based early educator and at least 3 years in a coach, mentor, or professional development role)</p> <p>Preferred: bilingualism in English and Spanish</p>

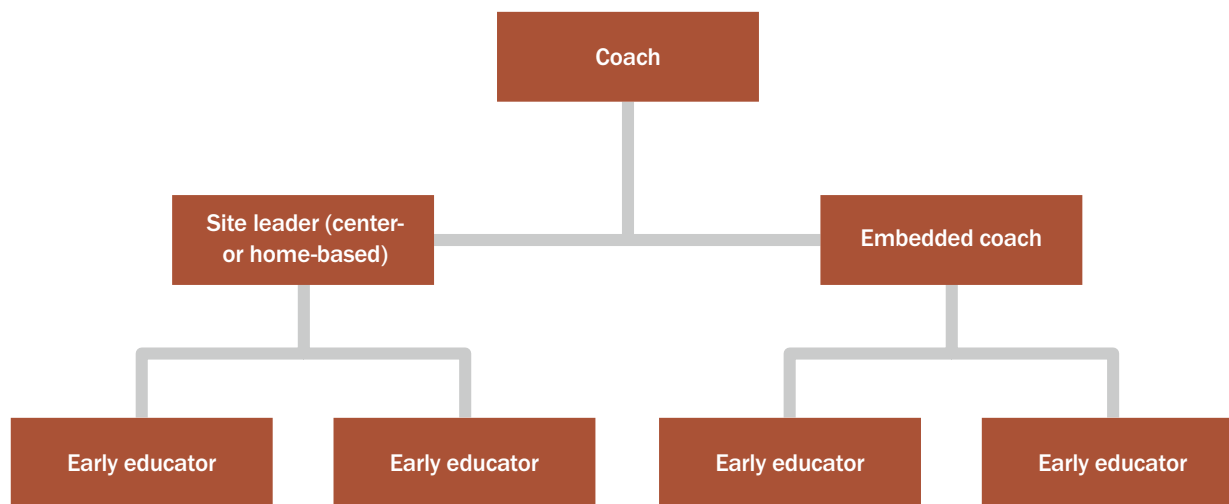
Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

For the first 3 to 6 months of the year, coaches meet with all site leaders individually monthly or bimonthly and guide them through a self-assessment process to assess their needs, develop a quality improvement plan, and determine their primary goals and focus for coaching. Once the quality improvement plan and coaching goals are set, coaching frequency is based on a multi-tiered systems of support approach to prioritize the sites with the greatest need for quality improvement.

Coaches typically provide sites rated as Tier 1 through 3 and unrated sites coaching every 2 to 4 weeks. The exact frequency and duration of coaching is co-determined by the coach and the coachees based on each coachee’s schedule and needs. For sites rated as Tier 4 or 5, coaches provide two formal coaching sessions during the year and are also available on an as-needed basis for additional informal touch points, communicating via text message or email.

San Diego uses a “cascade” coaching model whereby county-level coaches provide one-on-one coaching and supports for site leaders—center directors, site supervisors, and home-based lead educators—to serve as instructional coaches. The county coaches also provide coaching supports for “embedded instructional coaches.” The site leaders and embedded instructional coaches then provide support and coaching for the early educators in their respective centers and programs. Embedded instructional coaches are those who are independently hired or contracted to provide instructional coaching to educators. They typically work in Head Start, school district, and community college early learning settings. This coaching-of-coaches approach is intended to unify coaching across settings and to scale coaching to reach more educators without using additional funding. The content of the coaching focuses on developing leadership and management skills as well as on creating structures and systems to support quality learning environments. Having coaches work with site leaders (center- or home-based) and embedded instructional coaches, rather than directly with early educators, is intended to widen access to coaching to a greater number of early educators without additional funding. (See [Figure C4.](#))

Figure C4. San Diego County’s Coaching Approach



Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

Coaching for site leaders and supports for embedded coaches aim to develop the skills of coaching educators through a reflective cycle. The coaching of the site leaders and embedded coaches focuses on coaching competencies aligned to *California Early Childhood Educator Competencies (2nd ed.): Supplemental—Performance Area: Adult Learning and Coaching*.¹⁵⁵ As a result of coaching, site directors have reported improvements in how they interact with and support their educators. One home-based educator explained how her coach supported her ability to work with her staff:

[My two assistants] didn’t have any background working with children, so it was like being a trainer. So that’s why I was interested in getting a coach—because I [could] get coached on how to be a teacher to [the children] as well as to my staff. ... [Coaches] come and observe and they give positive feedback on how I can improve my business. And that’s important to me, knowing how I’m doing. ... I’m learning more, and the more I learn, it’s better for the children, for me as a parent, and also as a daycare provider.

One San Diego County coach described the progress of another site director:

[She] was able to really do some deep reflection about her sense of wanting to feel in control. And she was able to let that go a little bit last year [in] working with the teachers and helping them plan, helping them do some their observations, helping them to get the data from the [Desired Results Developmental Profile]. And she was really pleasantly surprised at how successful it was.

San Diego County also provides site leaders and embedded coaches with ongoing supports such as communities of practice and tools to support their coaching. A former San Diego County coach supervisor described the type of supports provided to site leaders and embedded coaches:

We'll give them a buddy from our system to support them. We'll do communities of practice, professional development. They'll get access to go to any of the trainings we provide for free. They'll get coaching protocols [and] they'll be trained on those. They'll get access to basically everything for us to continue to invest in [and] support them.

San Diego has developed a robust set of tools and resources to enable high-quality and consistent coaching for all recipients—San Diego County and YMCA coaches, site leaders, and embedded coaches—including coaching protocols, coaching logs, and a quality improvement plan self-assessment tool to identify coaching goals and action plans. Another San Diego County coach supervisor noted that the intention of these tools was to create consistency and documentation of procedures. She explained:

As we saw our group of coachees growing, we knew that we had to create systems for consistency, and we knew that we needed to have things in writing because we needed to refer to things instead of by memory. And so that's how the whole idea of creating systems procedures [and] forms began. We knew that as our coaches were throughout the county, they needed to refer to something. And so, that's where that whole idea of creating coaching protocols stemmed from.

The coaching protocol provides guidance for facilitating reflective coaching cycles that include setting goals and action planning, focused coach observation, and self-reflection and coach feedback. As part of these reflective cycles, the protocol includes concrete guidance on specific coaching strategies—such as paraphrasing and modeling—as well as discussion prompts for communicating with coachees and facilitating self-reflection. The coaching protocol also includes tips for case management, instructions for coaching log entries, and links to additional coaching tools and resources. A San Diego County coaching framework outlines the coaching competencies that coaches should integrate into each session to support relationship-building, communication, and learning.

Coaches and coachees use the quality improvement plan self-assessment tool to identify goals and action steps. The self-assessment asks site leaders to record data and examples of evidence for 43 quality indicators, reflect on their level of implementation for each indicator, and rate each indicator as *not in place*, *partially in place*, or *in place*. The tool summarizes these ratings and translates them into a series of charts and graphs that coaches and their coachees can use to develop site-based quality improvement plans. The tool is designed to accommodate 3 years of self-assessment data, which enables coaches and coachees to track site progress over time.

San Diego County and YMCA coaches also have a coach supervisor and access to other resources that support them to grow professionally. Coach supervisors model best coaching practices, help coaches reflect on their own coaching practices, set goals, and create action plans much like coaches do with site leaders. Other resources include the annual professional development catalog that lists information for San Diego County workshops and the San Diego County manual that provides guidelines for professionalism and conflict resolution, among other things.

The formalization of routines and expectations into guidelines and manuals fosters consistency in coaching approach, process, and content across different coaches and sites. As one coach supervisor from San Diego County shared:

We know that our coaches may be coaching one agency one year and then they may be going to another, another year. And we don't want the participants to feel like it's something new each time because our coaches might be different. We want them to feel like it's just a continuation of the same process. And so that's why we spend a lot of time in making sure that [coaches] truly understand all the coaching reflective practices that we have in writing [and] have a huge toolbox that they can pull from.

Funding

In 2020–21, the county had an annual budget of about \$6,054,500 for its coaching program—including coaching materials and supplies and data management support to provide coaching to site leaders (center directors, site supervisors, and home-based leads) across 555 sites participating in QRIS.¹⁵⁶ The vast majority of the coaching (84%) is funded through the local First 5 San Diego, and the remaining 16% is funded through state QRIS Local Consortia and Partnerships Grant funds.¹⁵⁷ The county also leverages administrative and clerical positions supported by other sources, thanks to integrated funding across early childhood activities at the department level. Of the total budget, \$760,000 is subcontracted to the YMCA to cover administrative, operational, travel, and supervision expenses for six coaches and one supervisor.

Appendix D: Profiles of Statewide Early Learning Coaching Systems

In this appendix, we profile the implementation of coaching at a statewide scale in the context of mixed delivery early learning systems in two states—Alabama and Washington. We present high-level profiles of Alabama’s and Washington’s coaching systems. Each profile provides an overview of the state’s coaching system, including key partners and funding mechanisms, then spotlights a distinguishing feature of each state’s coaching approach. These profiles primarily focus on program administration. We describe actual coaching sessions, structural features, and challenges in the main body of this report.

Alabama’s Coaching System

Alabama is a midsize state in terms of population, with approximately 290,000 children under age 5.¹⁵⁸ According to the National Institute for Early Education Research,¹⁵⁹ Alabama has one of the highest-quality state preschool programs in the nation. In 2019–20, 20,574 children across 1,203 classrooms participated in Alabama’s public preschool program.¹⁶⁰ More than half of the state’s children under age 5 are White (56%), 29% are Black, 9% are Hispanic or Latino/a, and 2% are Asian,¹⁶¹ and 7% speak a language other than English at home.¹⁶² Alabama has among the nation’s highest rates of child poverty, with 26% of children under age 6 coming from families with incomes below the federal poverty level.¹⁶³ Alabama also has a sizeable portion of the population living in rural areas: Just 59% of its population lives in urban areas, compared with the U.S. average of 80%.¹⁶⁴

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education implements coaching and other professional development for all First Class Pre-K (Alabama’s state prekindergarten) lead and assistant teachers and also has several other initiatives that are expanding coaching across the early childhood continuum. Alabama provides a strong example of a state that has set high quality standards for state preschool and has built coaching as an integral element of professional development for state preschool implementation so that teachers and learning environments can fulfill those quality standards.

Alabama has been able to build and expand coaching across the state by starting small, piloting, and adapting along the way based on feedback from the field and data. Tara Skiles, Director of Professional Development, Office of School Readiness, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, attributes the successful growth and sustainability of the system to its approach of scaling the system gradually and applying an adaptive mentality. As Skiles articulated about the growth and adaptation process:

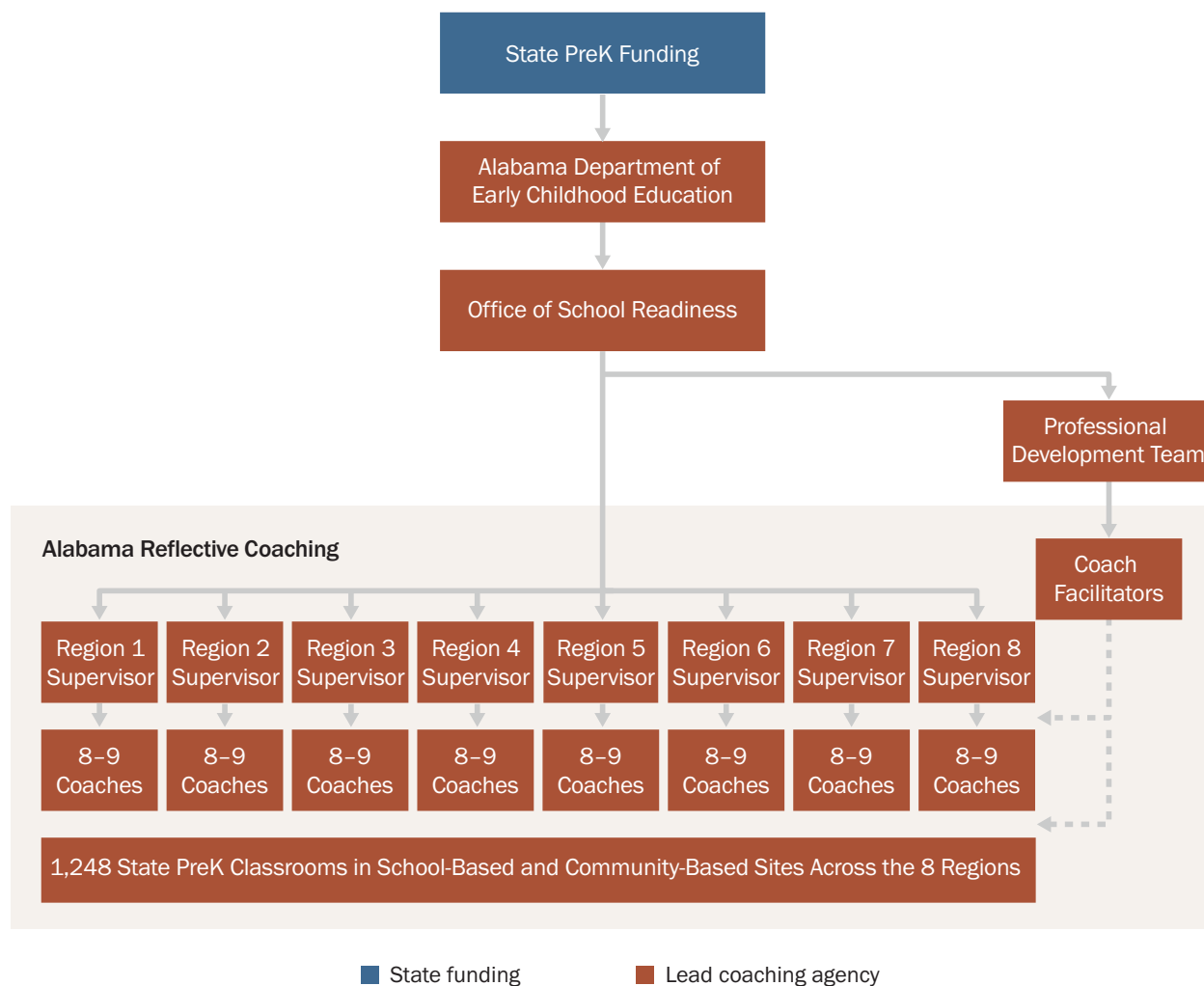
[Outside observers] need to keep in mind that we started out with eight classrooms in 2000. When [other states] see a program like ours, they often say, “Oh, our program cannot do this.” And you’re right—you can’t go from 0 to 100. [As of 2020, we have] 1,239 classrooms, and it’s taken us a long time to get there. We started out with eight, and, over time we have continued to make adjustments and shift support as we grow the number of First Class Pre-K classrooms.

Coaching System Infrastructure

The Department of Early Childhood Education’s Office of School Readiness administers state PreK coaching, and the coaching is implemented in partnership with the staff across several groups within the Office of School Readiness through a regional model. (See [Figure D1](#).) The centralized state professional development team within the office develops the procedures, coach facilitation, and resources to guide coaching across eight regions in the state. Each region has a director who directly supervises the coaches. Coach facilitators sit on the state’s Office of School Readiness Professional Development Team and serve as mentors to the coaches. The director of professional development supervises the coach facilitators and provides overall leadership for the coaching across the state.

As the state coaching program was being designed, the state placed a high priority on ensuring that coaches were able to maintain an exclusive focus on instructional coaching. This priority was informed by a previous early reading coaching initiative that utilized local education agency–hired coaches; however, as Tracye Strichik—the former Senior Director of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education—explained, the state “found that a lot of coaches were being used as assistant principals or to relieve administrative staff.” As a result, when designing the statewide early learning professional development system, the state chose to hire coaches as employees of the state rather than local programs or districts. This structure has created a coaching workforce that is able to maintain a focus on strength-based coaching rather than being pulled into administrative or compliance tasks. Coaches are “not evaluating. ... They’re there as a support to the teachers” using observation and data from classroom assessment tools and standards to support the teacher’s professional development and growth, said one coach administrator. Alabama’s coaching system infrastructure is presented in [Figure D1](#).

Figure D1. Alabama State Coaching Infrastructure



Notes: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of state participant interviews from 2022 and the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education 2019-2020 Data Snapshot. (2022).

Coaching System Overview

In 2013, when Alabama ranked 50th in math performance for 8th-graders, the state made early learning an explicit priority in order to improve the long-term academic achievement and success of its students. Since then, the governor and legislature have consistently invested in the voluntary state PreK program for 4-year-olds, known as First Class Pre-K, which is implemented in both school-based and community-based sites. The percentage of 4-year-olds served increased from 6% in 2012 to approximately 34% in 2020.¹⁶⁵ Over this period, the size of the preschool workforce more than quadrupled.¹⁶⁶

The state recognized a need to improve educator professional development in order to ensure quality. Drawing on evidence of the effectiveness of coaching on instructional practice and previous experience with implementing an early reading coaching initiative, Alabama first began implementing coaching at

statewide scale in 2013 as an integral feature of state preschool.¹⁶⁷ Job-embedded coaching is required for all programs that receive state PreK funding, which in 2020–21 included 1,248 classrooms.¹⁶⁸ State PreK coaches primarily focus on providing instructional coaching to state PreK lead and assistant teachers, but they also engage with site leaders to address systemic site needs.

Some of the key characteristics of Alabama’s coaching system are summarized in [Table D1](#).

Table D1. Alabama Coaching System Summary Characteristics

Characteristics	Summary
Year launched	2013
Structure	Operated by the state, with coaches as state employees
Key players and partnerships	Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (lead); Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education Office of School Readiness, Office of Early Childhood Development, and Office of Professional Development and Coaching Support; Alabama Department of Human Resources
Programs that receive coaching support	State-funded PreK (First Class Pre-K); Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships; select birth–age 5 child care centers with state PreK classrooms; center- and home-based child care sites voluntarily participating in quality enhancement coaching as part of voluntary state quality rating and improvement system (QRIS, known as Quality STARS); and licensed center- and home-based child care sites that request coaching to address challenging behavior
Recipients of coaching	Primary recipients: lead and assistant state PreK teachers Secondary recipients: P–3 teachers as part of P–3 Initiative; Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships early educators; center-based lead or assistant teachers and home-based early educators participating in voluntary QRIS quality enhancement or challenging behavior coaching or at Birth–5 Foundation sites; and site leaders to address systemic needs
Funding sources	Main source: state Additional sources: Preschool Development Grant, Child Care and Development Fund, and Head Start
Coaching dosage and ratio	Coaching sessions range from multiple times per week to monthly, including face-to-face and virtual reflective support opportunities with a tiered frequency, based on the needs of the classroom as co-determined by the coach and coachee. Ratio: 1 coach for 19 sites
Coach qualifications	Required: master’s degree in early childhood education (or related field) and practical experience working in early childhood Preferred: live in the community in which they coach

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022.

Alabama’s Reflective Coaching approach (known as ARC) has been clearly articulated over the past decade and guides the coaching for state PreK and as coaching scales to other early learning settings.¹⁶⁹ (See Figure D2.) In addition to coaching for state PreK, for the past several years the state has been expanding coaching—through several initiatives—for other early learning settings that receive support or funding from the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. The expansion initiatives include coaching for:

- Early Head Start, Head Start, and Head Start/Child Care partnership sites;
- educators, child care centers, and home-based sites that participate in quality enhancement coaching as part of the voluntary QRIS;
- teachers of younger children in sites for birth to age 5 that are connected to state PreK (B–5 Foundation sites); and
- P–3 alignment for K–3 teachers as part of its Pre-K–3rd Strong Start Early Learning Collaborative initiative.

The primary focus of Alabama’s Reflective Coaching approach is educator capacity building. Alabama coaches use a strengths-based approach in which they empower educators to identify the areas of practice in which they are performing effectively and help them build new skills by harnessing their existing abilities.¹⁷⁰ Skiles, from the Department of Early Childhood Education, described the strengths-based approach in this way:

When coaches walk into the classroom, our focus is on highlighting moments of effectiveness and the impact that makes on child outcomes. [We] then use those strengths to support further development in the teachers’ skills to positively impact other areas of their work in the classroom.

Figure D2. Alabama Reflective Coaching Approach



Source: Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. (2018). *Alabama Reflective Coaching Model* [White paper].

Each state PreK teacher jointly plans with their coach to set professional development goals that determine the focus of their coaching for the year. This process parallels the work educators are expected to do with children. Salina Washington, Program Manager, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, explained, “The partnership between the coach and teacher is mirrored in the partnership the teachers have with their students. It’s the ripple effect.”

Coaches use a variety of data sources to help educators craft their professional development goals, including self-assessment tools, Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) observations, and educator surveys. Once goals are set, coaches loosely organize their caseload into tiers to assist them in the planning process to provide an appropriate individualized dosage of support.¹⁷¹ Generally, sites with more beginning teachers are provided more intensive and frequent coaching support, and sites with teachers who are progressing in their skills are provided monthly face-to-face or virtual support. Supplemental coaching support is provided for sites rated as Tier 3. Ultimately, educators are given agency to co-create a coaching plan with their coach, which informs the intensity, frequency, and duration of coaching sessions. Coaching sessions can take place multiple times per week, weekly, or monthly, with additional touch points such as brief follow-up phone calls.

Over the past decade, Alabama has crafted its statewide professional development system for PreK by using coaching as the cornerstone for quality improvement. As such, the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education views coaching as the critical component of its professional development system, which enables educators to transfer knowledge they gain from other trainings into practice.

By designing the professional development system around coaching, Alabama ensures coaching is viewed as the main “bridge to professional development,” as Skiles has described it. In this structure, coaching follows professional development workshops and other training for state PreK teachers. Research has indicated that this two-step approach is a key feature of effective educator professional development that impacts instructional practice.¹⁷² “After a teacher completes a professional development experience, the coach supports the teacher’s reflection on what resonates with them and how they would like to use this to impact quality and child outcomes,” Skiles explained.

To enable coaches to have the knowledge and skills to meaningfully support educators in implementing other professional development, coaches and coach facilitators are trained as trainers for nearly all the professional development content areas offered to educators. In those instances when the state contracts with external trainers and professional development providers, coach facilitators and coaches receive the training first so that they understand the content and can later support educators in applying it to their practice. In the long-term, department officials hope that internal staff, such as coach facilitators, can build sustainability by eventually doing the trainings themselves.

Alabama attributes steady increases in instructional quality and child outcomes to the use of coaching. Child assessment data from Teaching Strategies GOLD have revealed steady increases in the percentage of children in First Class Pre-K who were meeting or above expectations for all six developmental domains assessed (social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and math) between the rapid expansion years of 2012–13 and 2016–17.¹⁷³

Furthermore, state study participants indicated that Alabama’s coaching model has been a successful component of scaling state PreK while maintaining a high level of quality. As Skiles observed:

Coaching really is the professional development that we provide to teachers that ... creates practice change and impact on their classrooms ..., because it is in context of the teachers with their children. And it’s just much more meaningful.

Expanding Coaching in Settings for Children From Birth Through 3rd Grade

As Alabama expanded quality improvement and professional development initiatives across birth through 3rd grade settings, the state has been able to leverage the Alabama Reflective Coaching approach as a vehicle for improving educators’ instructional practices and quality in a variety of early learning programs beyond state PreK. Skiles said using the same coaching approach creates a “foundation of quality adult learning” that is maintained throughout child care, preschool, and the early elementary grades. She explained:

We hone a lot of the work in PreK, but then it’s shifted appropriately into each setting that we serve with coaches to ensure that [strengths-based reflective coaching is] taking place in all of the work that we do from the department.

Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education staff create consistency and coherence across coaching initiatives through weekly meetings in which staff share resources and apply lessons learned from one context to another. These meetings have served as the foundation for the Department of Early Childhood Education to develop a common set of coaching competencies for state PreK, QRIS, and Head Start coaches.¹⁷⁴ Since some state PreK coaches also work in sites for children from birth to age 5, the birth–5 initiative leads also meet weekly with state PreK coach facilitators to coordinate supports.

Analyzing data to inform what to scale and what to adapt has also been key for Alabama. Data from the logs that coaches complete after each coaching session have been especially informative. Coaching logs—which include reflections from focused observations, goal setting, and activities completed—capture information about the length and focus of sessions. Coaching logs are entered into a database that also captures assessment, monitoring, budgetary, and other programmatic information about state preschool sites to allow for more efficient review of site-level data. The state has been using coaching log data to optimize coaches’ schedules and inform the length of coaching observations. Coaching log data helped the state conclude that longer coach observations were not necessarily more helpful. State administrators reported that they found that educators were more engaged in coaching when coaching observations and sessions were shorter rather than longer (e.g., a duration of 1 hour rather than the majority of the school day). The coaching logs have evolved and continue to be refined as the state has been reviewing and using the data to inform decision-making over the years.

The state has been taking a similar approach to piloting and adapting coaching to a wider variety of settings and adapting coaching based on feedback from the field as it expands coaching to Birth–5 Foundation sites, licensed center- and home-based child care sites participating in quality

enhancement coaching or coaching to address challenging behaviors, and P–3 alignment sites. “I think it’s very important if we look through a teacher’s lens about what they think coaching is, and their experiences help us define coaching so much better,” explained Skiles.

The additional early childhood coaching initiatives are as follows.

QRIS coaching initiatives. Like other states, Alabama offers coaching through its QRIS—known as Quality STARS—for licensed center- and home-based child care sites and Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership (EHS–CCP) sites. QRIS coaching has three main initiatives: coaching specifically for EHS–CCP sites; optional quality enhancement coaching for center- and home-based sites participating in QRIS; and optional coaching to address challenging behaviors. These coaching efforts are implemented by the Office of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. There are 15 QRIS coaches supervised by 1 coach administrator and 14 EHS–CCP coaches supervised by 1 mentor coach.¹⁷⁵ Each coach has a caseload of about 20 educators.

In EHS–CCP sites, educators get 1 hour of reflective time built into each day to participate in coaching, as well as on noncoaching days to work on assessments, lesson planning, and other teaching-related activities. This time has been “extremely beneficial,” said Joy Winchester, Director, Office of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. The planning time “gives everyone a time just to breathe.”

Coaching focused on challenging behaviors is offered and open to any licensed center- or home-based site. Sites can apply for coaching in 6-month cycles and receive training on Conscious Discipline, a social and emotional learning and classroom management program designed to help reduce inequities in response to children’s challenging behaviors.

To provide coaching for all three QRIS coaching projects, the Office of Early Childhood Development and Professional Support has an interagency agreement with the Alabama Department of Human Resources, which oversees QRIS, child care licensing, and EHS–CCP. Funding for QRIS coaching is primarily federal, coming from the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start/Early Head Start.¹⁷⁶ All the coaching provided to child care sites includes funds to purchase developmentally appropriate materials for the classroom, which Winchester said was an initial incentive to participate in coaching.

Recruiting coaches with the educational, experiential, and interpersonal skill set required of an effective coach has been challenging regardless of age span, but recruiting coaches to support infant/toddler educators has been a particular challenge. In Alabama, state administrators reported that there are few candidates with infant/toddler experience who also have a master’s degree, one of the required coach qualifications. Winchester described it this way:

We interviewed constantly and we met some amazing people who taught 1st grade, 2nd grade, 3rd grade, but I can’t put them in an infant classroom. We also met some amazing people from Head Start, but they didn’t have a master’s [degree]. So, it created this really special nook for a person who was master’s level, infant/toddler, early childhood experienced. And then you throw on that, do they have the heart of a coach?

Birth to 5 Foundation coaching. Alabama has a growing number of Birth to 5 (B–5) Foundation sites funded by Alabama’s Preschool Development Grant,¹⁷⁷ in which infants, toddlers, and 3-year-olds are included in state PreK sites that typically serve 4-year-olds. In 2020, the second year of the pilot, there were 11 sites served by six state PreK coaches. Each site has a coach who works with teaching teams in classrooms for infant/toddlers, 3-year-old preschool, and state PreK.¹⁷⁸ Coaches have infant/toddler qualifications in addition to meeting state PreK coach requirements.¹⁷⁹

Foundation site coaching is particularly important because of the lack of investment in infant and toddler staff, explained Salina Washington, Program Manager, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. She added:

A lot of times, private child care centers may not be able to afford to provide as much professional development. And a lot of times, they have hired staff with no prior knowledge because they can’t afford to pay them.

In the second year of B–5 Foundation site coaching, the state used a competitive application process to establish additional licensed child care programs with state PreK classrooms, called First Class Foundation Sites. As with the demonstration sites, Foundation sites receive coaching along with funding to make the spaces more developmentally appropriate and to provide additional professional development. Correspondingly, the coaching team has been expanded to include eight coaches, one for each of the eight state PreK regions.

However, stakeholders noted that recruiting and retaining coaches for B–5 educators can be challenging due to the greater breadth of qualifications and knowledge required of coaches when coaching both infant/toddler educators and preschool teachers. There are also increased demands placed on coaches to build the knowledge and capacity of B–5 educators who are more varied in their experience and qualifications. However, the state also viewed the investment in coaching B–5 educators as an opportunity to increase impact and strengthen outcomes for children.

The B–5 Foundation site coaching is still in the initial stages of implementation but is being gradually scaled each year, with the goal to reach up to 120 sites over the 3 years of the Preschool Development Grant.¹⁸⁰

In the sites that have participated thus far, Washington reported that she observed changes to the quality of interactions that infant and toddler educators have with children. She explained:

With [the infant/toddler educators] having the knowledge and receiving the professional development, you can just see the small things of how they interact, even if it’s just a diaper change or interacting with [children] more during feedings. Whereas before, you know, they may have just picked up the baby and fed them.

P–3 Initiative Coaching. Alabama offers coaching to groups of preschool to 3rd grade (P–3) teachers on school campuses as part of a P–3 alignment initiative. This coaching utilizes the same Alabama Reflective Coaching approach used in state PreK. Seven coaches serve 36 school campuses participating in the initiative, each of which has between 2 and 10 participating classrooms.¹⁸¹ The goal of the initiative is to make kindergarten through 3rd grade more developmentally appropriate, following the state’s

P–3 guidelines for a high-quality early childhood environment. For example, coaches help guide teachers in reducing the amount of whole-group instruction and replacing it with small-group instruction and learning centers.

The P–3 coaching pilot was funded for the first 3 years by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation with state matching funds; 2020 was the first year it was fully funded by the state.¹⁸² The state plans to expand access to the P–3 Leadership Academies in coming years to enhance the quality of P–3 leadership in schools.

Funding

Funding for state PreK coaching is provided by the state, built into the cost of implementation of the state PreK program. Alabama state PreK has grown consistently over the past decade, from serving 6% of all 4-year-olds in 2012 to 34% of these children in 2020; as a result, coaching funds have consistently increased as more students are served.¹⁸³ Approximately 8% of the money invested in state PreK goes to coaching and instructional supports.¹⁸⁴ In 2020–21, this equated to approximately \$10.1 million of the \$126.8 million annual funding appropriated for state PreK to provide coaching to state PreK lead or assistant teachers across 1,248 classrooms.¹⁸⁵

Washington’s Coaching System

Washington is a large state, with 454,705 children under age 5.¹⁸⁶ Fifty-four percent of those children are White, 23% are Hispanic or Latino/a, 8% are Asian, and 4% are Black,¹⁸⁷ and 22% speak a language other than English at home.¹⁸⁸ Relative to other states, Washington has one of the lowest rates of child poverty, with 13% of children under age 6 coming from families with incomes below the federal poverty level.¹⁸⁹ Washington’s population primarily lives in urban areas: 84% percent of its residents live in urban areas, compared with the U.S. average of 80%.¹⁹⁰

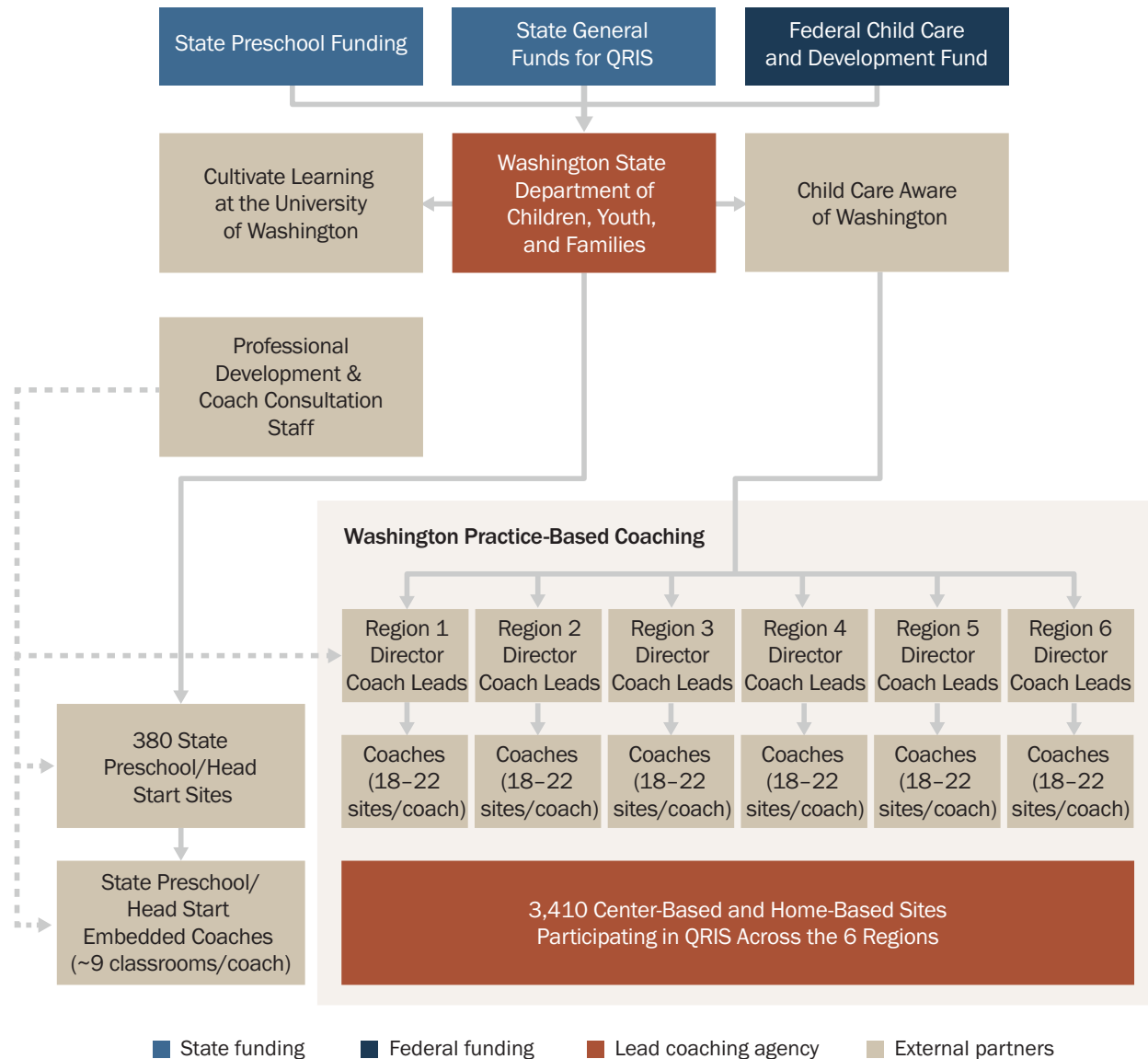
Washington’s statewide early learning coaching system is operationalized through a partnership with a nonprofit organization, Child Care Aware of Washington. Coaching is implemented through the state QRIS, known in Washington as Early Achievers. Because participation in QRIS is required for all early learning sites that receive any state funding or subsidies, coaching is provided universally across the full continuum of the mixed delivery system, including state preschool, Head Start, child care (those serving infant/toddlers and preschoolers), and home-based child care sites. Washington illustrates a state-coordinated approach to QRIS that has set high expectations for programs receiving state or federal funding and also has invested in providing the coaching supports necessary for programs to fulfill those quality expectations.

Importantly, the state has not seen a significant reduction in sites accepting subsidies as a result of the requirements to participate in QRIS and meet quality rating targets.¹⁹¹ In fact, rather than deterring sites from receiving subsidies, sites seem to value coaching as an incentive for participating in QRIS, and most take up the opportunity. Rachael Brown-Kendall, QRIS Administrator for the Department of Children, Youth, and Families in Washington, reported that approximately 97% of subsidy sites receive coaching and that “coaching is definitely a big carrot for folks.”

Coaching System Infrastructure

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF, formerly the Department of Early Learning) partners with Child Care Aware of Washington and Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington to implement statewide coaching. DCYF sets policies and oversees QRIS implementation overall, contracting with Child Care Aware to administer the coaching system and with Cultivate Learning to provide professional development to coaches. Washington’s coaching system infrastructure is shown in Figure D3.

Figure D3. Washington State Coaching Infrastructure



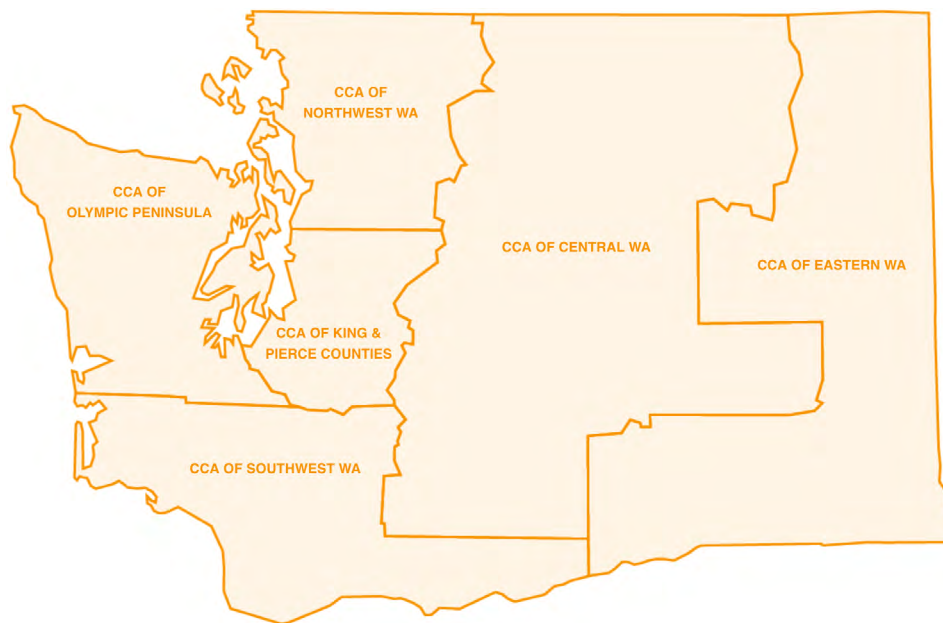
Note: Based on data collected during the 2020–21 coaching year.

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview data from 2022 and Washington Early Achievers Data Dashboard March 2020. (2022).

Child Care Aware implements coaching for the nonstate preschool and Head Start sites participating in QRIS (i.e., those that receive state subsidies or those voluntarily participating). Child Care Aware implements coaching statewide within a regional structure, which enables coaches to tailor coaching based on community characteristics and needs. (See [Figure D4.](#)) Child Care Aware subcontracts with six regional entities (five community-based organizations and one educational school district) across the state.¹⁹² The regional agencies each have a director and one or more coach leads, depending on the size of the region. The regional directors oversee the program administration and hire coaches for each community in the region. Coach leads provide reflective supervision, mentorship, and support with caseload management for coaches.

Child Care Aware works with each of the six regional agencies to provide guidelines and develop the coaching job descriptions specific to their region. Although a bachelor's degree is preferred for coaches, DCYF is committed to recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce of coaches who are from the communities they serve. As the state implemented Early Achievers, Child Care Aware highlighted the challenges of recruiting coaches who met the education requirements and who represented the cultural diversity of the communities they served. Child Care Aware therefore worked with DCYF to allow for more flexible guidelines around hiring qualifications. For example, in regions where recruiting coaches was challenging (e.g., in tribal regions), coaches may be hired with an associate degree if they agree to continue working toward their bachelor's degree.

Figure D4. Child Care Aware of Washington's Coaching Regions



Source: [Child Care Aware of Washington Regional Partners](#)

Cultivate Learning provides professional development for coaches (Child Care Aware and embedded coaches hired by state-funded preschool contractors and Head Start grantees) to ensure common foundational knowledge and understanding. It has been a critical partner in articulating the state’s coaching approach and providing research and data support to inform the structure and rating aspects of QRIS in Washington.¹⁹³

To ensure consistency in coaches’ knowledge and skills related to the practice-based coaching framework, the QRIS coaching approach, and the virtual video-based coaching platform, Coaching Companion, Cultivate Washington worked with Child Care Aware to develop a robust onboarding process that culminates in a practice-based coaching certificate. Cultivate Washington also provides ongoing professional development and coach consultation services for more tailored coach-focused professional development.

Brown-Kendall, QRIS Administrator with DCYF, described the collaboration between DCYF, Child Care Aware, and Cultivate Learning as “a different type of relationship.” As she said, “It was more about partnership and how we come together around strategy and really being able to bring the different lenses to the table for the different parts of the system that each entity represented.”

Each partner has defined roles and responsibilities based on where it is situated within the overall system. Brown-Kendall explained that the work of defining roles began with the QRIS and coaching pilot. This foundational systems-building allowed the partners to identify “who was going to be doing what element of the work,” Brown-Kendall explained. Defining roles and responsibilities has supported implementation and ongoing coordination by reducing duplicative work, maximizing expertise and resources, and helping to ensure that the three partners attend to all aspects of implementation.

The three-way partnership between the state agency (DCYF), research organization (Cultivate Learning), and trusted regionally based implementation provider (Child Care Aware) exemplifies a balanced approach to Washington’s coaching and professional development system by bringing together research, the voice of the field, and state policy perspectives. The partnership has experienced challenges over the years, with multiple changes in leadership at the partner agencies and state-initiated shifts in the state agency’s structure, but throughout the partnership-building process, stakeholders focused on “approaching this as a way [of] collaborating to do what’s best for kids and how we’re supporting providers,” said Brown-Kendall. As a state agency, having partners trusted by the community was important because “they know their community there and their communities know them, and having that trusted partner set us up for success.” Although building the partnership was a challenging process, the state has stayed grounded in the relationship and purpose of coming together to support early learning professionals and what is best for children and families.

Coaching System Overview

Washington began coaching as part of its 2-year QRIS pilot, which ran from 2009 to 2011, and in 2012–13 it was formally included as part of the staged rollout of QRIS across the state.¹⁹⁴ In 2015, the state legislature passed the Early Start Act, which required Washington to increase access to high-quality early learning opportunities as a key element to improving outcomes for young children and strengthening kindergarten readiness.¹⁹⁵ To raise quality, the Early Start Act mandates QRIS participation and sets quality rating targets for all licensed child care sites—both center-based and home-based

sites—that accept child care subsidies or state preschool funding.¹⁹⁶ With passage of the Early Start Act, Washington became the only state other than North Carolina to require QRIS participation for early learning sites that receive state funding. By the end of 2015, approximately 46% of all licensed child care sites in Washington and 72% of Head Start and state preschool sites were participating in the state’s QRIS program, known as Early Achievers. As of 2020, 97% of licensed settings that accepted subsidies participated in QRIS and received coaching.¹⁹⁷

Some of the key characteristics of Washington’s coaching system are summarized in [Table D2](#).

Table D2. Washington Coaching System Summary Characteristics

Characteristics	Summary
Year launched	2012
Structure	Operationalized through a partnership with nonprofit organizations; coaches are not state employees
Key players and partnerships	Department of Children, Youth, and Families (lead); Child Care Aware of Washington; Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington
Programs that receive coaching support	All sites that receive any state funding or subsidies, including state preschool, Head Start, child care centers (those serving infant/toddlers and preschoolers), and home-based child care sites, as well as nonstate subsidy sites that voluntarily participate in QRIS
Recipients of coaching	Primary recipients: early educators (lead and assistant teachers) Secondary recipients: site leaders as needed to address sitewide quality needs or goals
Funding sources	Main: state general funds as part of QRIS to meet the quality mandates of the Early Start Act Additional sources: Child Care and Development Fund
Coaching dosage and ratio	Coaching frequency is tailored to the needs of the early educators within each site based on specific goals and needs. Typically, the frequency of coaching ranges from weekly to monthly. Ratio: 1 coach for 29 sites
Coach qualifications	Required: experience working in a child care or early learning setting; experience providing instruction and training Preferred: bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, education, human/social services, or human/community development (though there is flexibility to hire candidates with an associate degree who are working toward their bachelor’s degree based on community needs); residency in the region in which they will coach

Sources: Learning Policy Institute analysis of interview and coaching systems documents from 2022

Receiving coaching at no cost is one of the key benefits that early learning sites receive for their required participation in QRIS. The coaching was designed to help sites progress in their quality rating level in the QRIS system, which the state tied to a tiered reimbursement system. Subsidy sites that achieve a QRIS Level 3 through 5 rating earn a percentage increase in their base subsidy rate (10%–20% for home-based sites and 4%–15% for center-based sites).¹⁹⁸

The state provides coaching through two avenues. Sites where at least 75% of slots are designated for state preschool or Head Start receive state funds to hire site-embedded coaches dedicated to their early educators. All other QRIS sites receive coaching provided by regional Child Care Aware coaches that include specialists in preschool and infants/toddler settings. Coaches primarily focus on coaching early educators but will also work with site leaders to address sitewide quality if necessary. Although the embedded coaches for state preschool sites and Child Care Aware coaches use a common coaching approach and framework, their different funding streams and also differences in embedded coaches' additional responsibilities create differences in their caseloads. The embedded state preschool coaches support about nine classrooms. By contrast, Child Care Aware coaches typically support between 18 and 22 sites, many of which have multiple classrooms.¹⁹⁹

Washington's coaching approach is based on the [practice-based coaching framework](#) developed by the University of Washington. (See [Figure D5](#).) Practice-based coaching is intended to provide a flexible, relationship-based framework for coaching that uses a cycle of shared goals, action planning, observation, and reflection and feedback. All coaches—whether they are embedded state preschool or regional Child Care Aware coaches—are trained on the practice-based coaching framework, a common set of guiding principles for Washington's QRIS coaching approach, and the virtual Coaching Companion platform that serves as an optional supplemental tool for coaches to use in their coaching.

Figure D5. Practice-Based Coaching Framework



Source: Cultivate Learning, University of Washington. [Coaching](#).

The state intended for coaching sessions to be guided by a state-developed framework that incorporated the QRIS quality standards and effective everyday practices for supporting children's school readiness. The framework is organized into six elements: family engagement and partnerships; everyday interactions

with children; choice and implementation of a strong curriculum; use of regular assessments of children's skills; individualized teaching for every child; and professional development and training.²⁰⁰ However, early educators and site leaders wanted a narrower focus to help them reach the required quality rating milestones set forth in the Early Start Act legislation. State and regional administrators indicated that for many sites that were in the process of being rated, there was a narrowed focus on the areas that would increase their assessment scores.

QRIS coaches tailor coaching frequency to the needs of the early educators based on each early educator's coaching goals and quality improvement plans that articulate the steps, resources, and supports needed to reach each goal. The frequency and length of coaching sessions can vary over the course of the year, depending on what early educators are working on with their coach, but the frequency of sessions typically ranges from weekly to monthly.

To expand coaching around the state, Washington has also been working to develop the coaching workforce pipeline. Recruiting and retaining qualified coaches, especially coaches who represent diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, is a challenge. Child Care Aware has seen patterns of higher coach turnover, particularly in two regions with higher populations of Spanish- and Somali-speaking early educators. According to Sandy Maldonado, Director of Early Learning for Child Care Aware of Washington, because the number of multilingual coaches is limited, they tend to have higher coach caseloads, which can lead to burnout and attrition.

To reduce burnout and address the limited number of multilingual coaches, Child Care Aware and DCYF have been working with the legislature to secure additional funding in order to hire more coaches, including multilingual coaches, and thereby reduce coach caseloads. In part to increase retention and prevent burnout, Child Care Aware has also been pursuing funding for mental health professional development supports for coaches, including anti-bias training and trauma-informed care using the Pyramid Model²⁰¹ and the Facilitating Attuned Interactions²⁰² model. In addition to building capacity for coaches and early educators to support children's mental health, training on these approaches includes strategies coaches can use to be attuned to their own mental health and well-being, such as how to practice mindful self-regulation. Maldonado explained that "it's about being regulated yourself as an adult so that you can listen to the adult you're going to go visit. ... We're really focused on building the coach as a person."

State and regional study participants emphasized the transformational role that coaches have played in Washington—not just for state preschool, but for all programs across the mixed delivery system. Universal coaching promotes equity among programs by providing easy access to supports for quality improvement. Maldonado shared:

Here in Washington, the coaches really have transformed the early learning landscape and have built up the provider voice. ... It's a really a great way to put equity into practice around access to support for child care providers and to really see them maximize their potential for the families and children they serve ... especially licensed child care providers that aren't tied to federal or state funding in the way that Head Start or state preschools are.

Washington’s Racial Equity and Social Justice Framework

Racial equity is a key priority in Washington’s early learning system, including in its coaching. The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and the state Early Learning Advisory Council, in conjunction with a large group of stakeholders, developed and adopted a racial equity theory of change and the [Racial Equity and Social Justice Framework](#). In addition, the state has formed a racial equity advisory group to inform equity work within QRIS. The state team uses the framework and input from the advisory group to work toward an anti-racist system.

The racial equity theory of change includes four drivers to advance racial equity: (1) increase community voice and influence for those furthest from opportunity, (2) inform practice with diverse measures and diverse stories, (3) design and implement systems that respond to children’s diverse situations, and (4) make decisions that genuinely meet the requirements of communities of color. Based on these drivers and the guiding principles outlined in the framework, the state developed a racial equity tool with high-level questions for stakeholders to use, not as a checklist, but as a guide to keep the focus on equity.

As Rachael Brown-Kendall, DCYF QRIS Administrator, described, part of the racial equity work means that every week, the coaching staff are working to be aware of, reflect on, and work toward using a racial equity lens “in our own personal lives and within our team meetings as we’re approaching the work that we’re doing.”

Washington’s racial equity work has included developing a state-level quality improvement plan to specifically target areas that have been concerns for equity and social justice, including those within the QRIS and coaching system.

Feedback from the field identified four major areas in need of improvement for the QRIS and coaching system:

1. The quality improvement and rating system can feel like a one-size-fits-all or “cookie cutter” approach.
2. Snapshot data collection does not allow programs to fully showcase quality.
3. The rating process can be stressful and lack transparency.
4. The number of QRIS indicators can be overwhelming.

The improvement plan aims to address these four areas and is being developed through the work of eight work groups, with 119 participants from different stakeholder groups—including coaches and early learning directors and educators. Each of the work groups was tasked with recommending improvements to one aspect of the QRIS system, including coaching cycles and the rating system. The aims of coaching and rating system revisions are to reduce barriers and encourage more sites to participate and to shift to an anti-racist recognition system.

As a part of this work, Washington developed a research-based assessment tool called Quality Interactions in Child Care (QUIC). This tool was designed for video analysis and was also built with the equity-based framework as a guiding framework. This results in multiple ways for programs to demonstrate quality that are aligned with cultural values and programmatic approaches and moves away from cookie-cutter program recommendations or standards that do not quite work for

some programs. Programs such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and home-based sites have provided feedback throughout the years that the previous system did not quite seem to fit their learning environments. Early childhood programs also have the autonomy to choose their focal standards and manage their submission timelines. This new QRIS recognition process focuses on improvement cycles and participation in coaching paired with feedback on practices, rather than only achieving certain scores.

System revisions are also focusing on making processes and resources more culturally relevant. Sandy Maldonado of Child Care Aware shared, “We get a lot of pushback from our tribal communities about the tools not being culturally aligned.” Maldonado explained that it is important to have “cultural humility to navigate those spaces” and to present information or schedule meetings in ways that honor cultural norms. Brown-Kendall further explained that they have to consider the following:

Who’s delivering the service and what resources are available and how can we do things differently for different communities? It’s not like we [can] create one resource and then just translate it into all the languages—that doesn’t always work. We need to be developing resources in specific languages in the cultural context that is meaningful for that community. And we’ve really been thinking about how do we do things more visually, like video demonstrations or using icons and things like that, so that it doesn’t necessarily have to be a translation or an interpretation but [is more accessible to more people].

With these system revisions, Maldonado hopes that the state can “reframe [QRIS] around equity and a more liberatory design framework to really include home-based early educator and coach voices.” State leaders “wanted the provider to be in the drivers’ seat of their quality improvement,” said Maldonado. “So, we’re asking that the system sets it up that way and sets up the provider and the coach for success.” According to Brown-Kendall, “DCYF, Child Care Aware, and Cultivate Learning all have a very strong commitment to advancing racial equity and social justice. And I think that really drives much of what we then see implemented in the field and how they’re [coaches] responsive to providers.” This commitment to equity comes through in the state’s redesign and plan to continue stakeholder group work on an ongoing basis.

Sources: Interview with Rachael Brown-Kendall, Early Achievers Administrator, Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (2020, October 16); Maldonado, S., William, D., Simmons, D., & Brown-Kendall, R. (2021, July 22). *Washington State QRIS: Stakeholder-focused quality recognition revisions*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the BUILD Initiative.

Funding

Federal funding was key to establishing Washington's QRIS and early learning coaching system, but the state is devoting resources to sustain and further improve the program. The Early Start Act created the need for a coherent and comprehensive approach to quality improvement. Its timing coincided with the federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge program, which provided funding to develop state QRIS.²⁰³ As a result, according to Brown-Kendall, the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge program was critical to developing the necessary infrastructure to support a high-quality early learning system.

The state continues to utilize federal Child Care and Development Fund dollars to support coaching,²⁰⁴ but coaching is now largely funded through state general funds as part of QRIS.²⁰⁵ In the 2020–2021 state fiscal year, \$1.7 million was appropriated from the general operating fund for implementing QRIS overall, most of which is used to provide coaching to lead or assistant teachers, and home-based early educators participating in QRIS across 3,410 sites.²⁰⁶ Coaching for Head Start is funded by federal Head Start grants directly to the local Head Start grantees. State funds are used to support the professional development and training of coaches in the state, regardless of setting.

As it builds the coaching workforce, Washington is developing clear and consistent expectations for the coaching workforce across the state. Washington had initially developed standards for coaching that were very broad and could span across the different settings in which coaches worked. The state is now in the process of developing competencies specific to roles and sectors.²⁰⁷ These standards and competencies for the coaching workforce will help set clear expectations and consistency for professionals providing coaching as a service.

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