

# Communities of Practice support Early Care education leadership and professional development in Palm Beach County

By Monique Wilkinson NSRF National Facilitator and CFG Coach in Florida, and Mary Sibley, CFG Coach in Florida

*Note: Palm Beach County uses the term “Communities of Practice” (CoPs) rather than Critical Friends Group to emphasize the concept of community which reflects our holistic approach to early care and education (ECE); working with children, families, and colleagues in “a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic, and who come together for discussion, in search of resolution, or perhaps just to share best practices.” Despite the difference in terminology, the purposes and processes are the same as one would find in a Critical Friends Group community.*

Palm Beach County, Florida’s Early Care and Education community is nationally known for being on the cutting edge of quality improvement to support outcomes for children. In a movement dominated by state initiatives, Palm Beach has been one of only a few counties in the United States to create and maintain a quality rating improvement system (QRIS) for early care and education programs, including classroom assessments, technical assistance, and professional development supports. The QRIS has recently evolved into the Strong Minds Network and is funded by the Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, a voter-approved, independent special district supported by local tax dollars.

Since 2012, Palm Beach State College’s Institute of Excellence in Early Care and

Education (IEECE), a partner in the County’s ECE system, has taken the lead in developing and co-facilitating communities of practice at all levels. Of particular interest is supporting child care center leaders to be successful in the new Strong Minds system. Two Center Leader CoPs have been established, including

directors, curriculum specialists and lead teachers, who are charged with not only day-to-day management of the centers, but also mentoring the implementation of evidence-based curriculum and assessments, and guiding staff professional development that meets program and personal goals.

Currently, Palm Beach County’s Strong Minds system is emphasizing two data-driven assessment tools that will lead to more positive outcomes for children. The first is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observational tool measuring the quality of teacher-child interactions. The second is Teaching Strategies GOLD, an authentic assessment measure designed to assess the ongoing development and learning of children from birth through kindergarten. Early childhood practitioners attend courses to learn the “why and how” of these assessments and can request on-the-job technical assistance to address any challenges they encounter.

To scaffold the success of these initiatives, the Institute of Excellence has sponsored two New Coaches Trainings, with a third planned for summer 2015. The New Coaches Training provides center leaders with the skills and confidence to build their own Leader Community of Practice, as well as grow CoPs at their centers. With mentoring from colleagues and other NSRF-trained coaches and

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Palm Beach County’s Founding Center Leaders Community of Practice: Nancy Tirado, Kiddie Haven; Shannon Vasquez, Palm Beach Preschool; Deirdre Phillips, Opportunity, Inc.; Mary Sibley, facilitator; Catherine Stefano, Center for Early Learning; Ali Eger, Opportunity, Inc.; Kathleen Winger, The Appleseed.

national facilitators, these leaders create a trust-based, learning organization within which teachers and leaders share different approaches to similar issues, gather new ideas from one another to ease frustrations and dilemmas, and enjoy personal support, creative collaboration and innovation. In other words, Palm Beach County's ECE community is becoming a valuable professional source for new and relevant learning and support.

Members look forward to the regular meetings. Says one director, "I am so excited to be a part of the Palm Beach County Center Leaders [Community of Practice] group . . . This wonderful group of leaders has been invaluable to me as an administrator. We meet together monthly and tackle some of the biggest challenges that we face as directors and as advocates for the field of education. It has been a great source of strength that I can call upon. And, it has helped me share my passion and vision with my own staff."

An owner/director states that the Center Leader CoP "has brought friendship, bonding, and trust with local col-

leagues. It allows us to see that we're not in it alone. And another member in the community shows her enthusiasm by saying "... I am excited to see the improvements for children that I know are on the way. I believe those changes will be child outcomes and teacher team building within my school. I feel prepared to facilitate while also looking forward to gaining more experience."

No doubt, communities of practice are making positive differences in the lives of center leaders and their staff. It is helping them connect "what they know" with "what they do" (Buisse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). They are experiencing the benefits of collaboration, sharing ideas, networking and much more. And from this shared experience, the young children in their care will have greater opportunities to grow and flourish.

<http://www.palmbeachstate.edu/ieece/>  
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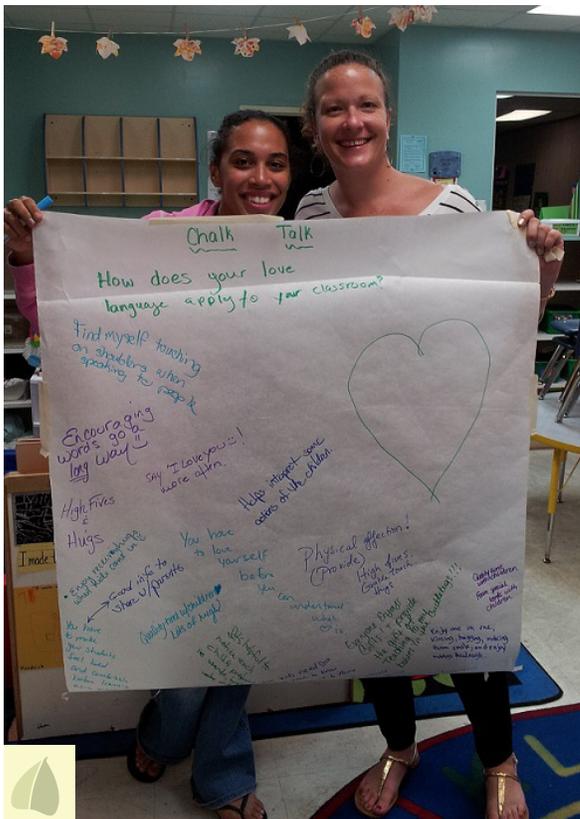
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**Mary Sibley is a CFG coach in Florida and Instructional Designer and ESOL professor at Palm Beach State College. Since completing the Five-Day CFG New Coaches Training two years ago, Mary has applied what she learned across her work. Most rewarding has been facilitating monthly CFG meetings with Early Childhood leaders, some of whom are pictured in this article. Email her at [sibleym@palmbeachstate.edu](mailto:sibleym@palmbeachstate.edu)**



Early Childhood leaders, Cyndy Sanders and Deirdre Phillips, proudly share Chalk Talk results from the group of early educators they facilitate at Opportunity, Inc. Early Learning Center, Palm Beach County.