

AT THE STARTING LINE

A Guide to Laying the Foundation
for an Early Childhood Classroom
Coaching Initiative

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Olivia Mirek

November 2024



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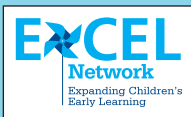
Introduction

When learning to implement a curriculum effectively, early care and education (ECE) teachers require ongoing feedback about their progress, along with multiple and frequent opportunities to practice.¹ Curriculum-based coaching initiatives, in which coaches facilitate active reflection on a curriculum and mentor teachers on adapting and applying new concepts to different scenarios, can provide these important forms of support.² Research suggests that these kinds of coaching initiatives can help build teachers' capabilities and improve children's outcomes.³ However, one downside to these initiatives is they can be complex and time intensive to implement.

This guide, for ECE coaches and organizations that provide coaching, is intended to support coaches in building a foundation for a strong partnership with teachers and to ease some of the challenges encountered during the initial stages of implementing a curriculum-based coaching initiative. It is based on technical assistance provided by MDRC and MEF Associates to coaches and ECE centers as part of the ExCEL Quality project, a large-scale study of approaches to improve classroom quality in preschool classrooms. (See Box 1 for an overview of the ExCEL Quality project.) This technical assistance was designed to support coaches focusing on curriculum implementation in Head Start and community-based child care centers serving a high proportion of children from families with low incomes. However, many of the strategies presented here can be applied to other types of coaching efforts as well.

BOX 1

The ExCEL Quality Project



Funded by Arnold Ventures and part of the Expanding Children's Early Learning (ExCEL) Network, the ExCEL Quality project aims to build evidence on two topics:

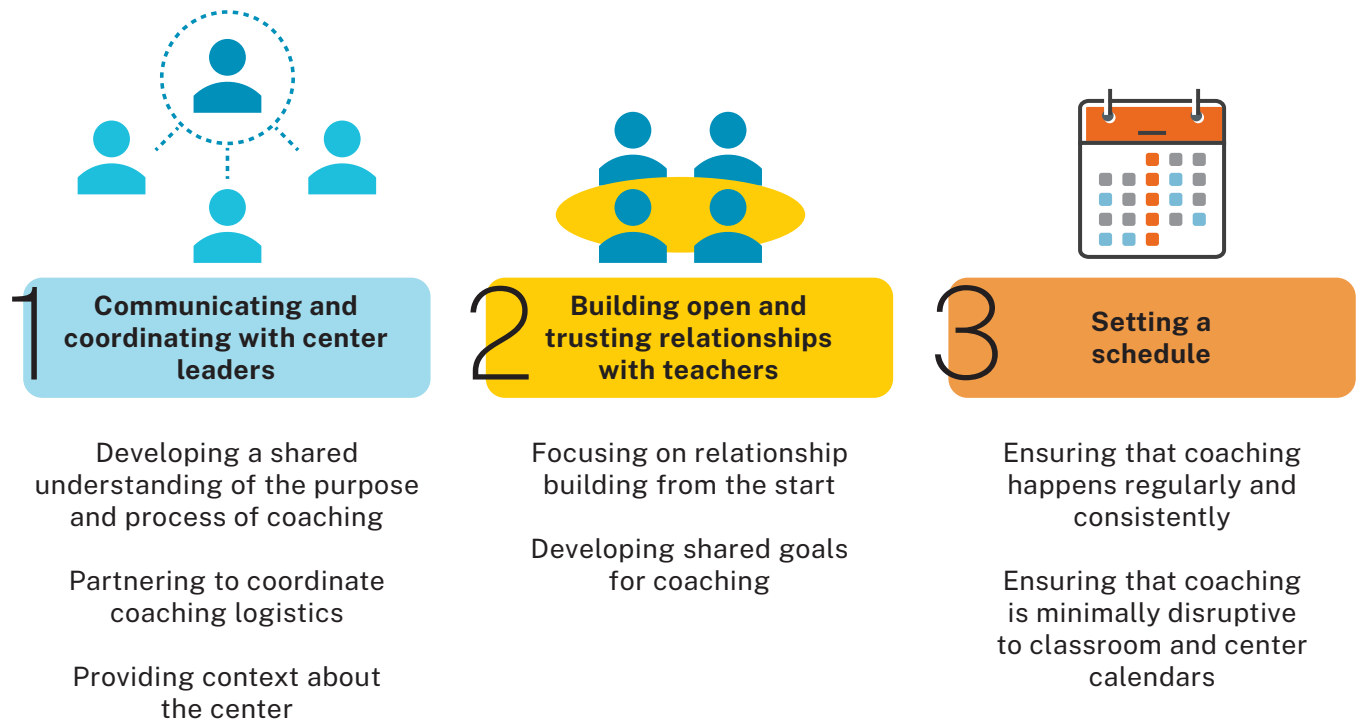
1. Ways in which different teacher practices and features of classroom quality promote children's learning and development.
2. The effectiveness of various types of support in strengthening teacher practices and features of classroom quality, taking into account faculty and staff members' levels of expertise.

During the 2019-2020 school year, approximately 50 early care and education centers in four metropolitan areas participated in the project. The centers were randomly assigned to either receive one of two curricular models, supported by ongoing training and coaching on the curriculum, or to continue with their standard procedures. For more information, see MDRC's brief about this project.*

NOTES: *Amy Taub, Michelle Maier, and JoAnn Hsueh, "Changes in Preschool Classroom Quality: The Timing of Rating Matters" (New York: MDRC, 2023).

This coaching guide provides practical strategies and tools in three focus areas that require careful attention at the start of the school year: communicating and coordinating with center leaders, building relationships with teachers, and setting a schedule. Goals for each focus area are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Focus Areas for the Beginning of the Year



Within each of the three focus areas, the guide presents a conversation road map and a list of potential challenges and solutions. The conversation road maps are designed to help coaches facilitate conversations with center leaders and teachers at the beginning of the school year. Coaches should use these road maps as starting points but follow the center leader’s or teacher’s lead and let the conversation flow naturally. The lists of potential challenges and solutions, which present obstacles coaches may face in each focus area, are intended to help coaches anticipate what is to come and to inform important choices made at the start of the year. Throughout this coaching guide, the particular curriculum targeted by a coaching initiative is referred to generally as “the curriculum.” For additional resources from MDRC on implementing early childhood curricula, see Box 2.

BOX 2

Other MDRC Resources on the Implementation of Coaching

This guide is a complement to these existing MDRC resources on implementation of coaching:

- [*Tools for Implementing Evidence-Based Early Childhood Curricula*](#) offers practical guidelines and resources, including a Leader Checklist and a Program Needs Action Planning Table and Questionnaire.*
- [*“Supporting the Implementation of High-Quality Early Childhood Curricula in Preschool Programs”*](#) offers lessons learned from 15 years of MDRC research on implementing supplemental curricula in preschools.†
- [*Coaching as a Key Component in Teachers’ Professional Development*](#) describes the planning and implementation of coaching in the Head Start CARES (Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social Skill Promotion) study.‡

NOTES: *Samantha Wulfsohn, Amena Sengal, and Shira Kolnik Mattera, *Tools for Implementing Evidence-Based Early Childhood Curricula* (New York: MDRC, 2021).

†Ximena Portilla, Shira Kolnik Mattera, and Samantha Wulfsohn, “Supporting the Implementation of High-Quality Early Childhood Curricula in Preschool Programs” (New York: MDRC, 2020).

‡Christhana M. Lloyd and Emily L. Modlin, *Coaching as a Key Component in Teachers’ Professional Development: Improving Classroom Practices in Head Start Settings* (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).



Communicating and Coordinating with Center Leaders

Having support from a center leader is critical for coaching. Center leaders manage staffing arrangements and classroom coverage (that is, making sure classrooms are staffed when teachers are away). They also provide feedback to teachers on their teaching practice, classroom management, and implementation of program policies. Therefore, coaches rely on center leaders to help get teachers to buy into the importance of coaching and to make coaching work within the overall context of the center.

Central goals for the early collaboration between coach and center leader are:

- 1. Develop a shared understanding among the center leader, the coach, and the teachers about the purpose and process of coaching.** In their role overseeing day-to-day operations, center leaders provide frequent support to teachers on a variety of topics. Coaches, on the other hand, typically have less frequent but more focused interactions with teachers. Both roles play a part in helping teachers improve their practice. Establishing a shared understanding from the beginning about how and why the curriculum is being implemented and consistently communicating the purpose of coaching can increase teacher support for the process and minimize misunderstandings later on, leading to improved curriculum implementation.
- 2. Partner to coordinate coaching logistics.** Because center leaders play a central role in managing faculty schedules and responsibilities, coaches need to collaborate with center leaders to ensure that coaching sessions happen consistently and teachers have the time to engage fully.

- 3. Provide coaches with context about the center, its faculty and staff, and the families it serves.** Coaches need center-level context, such as information about staffing arrangements and curriculum requirements, to understand the processes and priorities of the center or program and to figure out how coaching fits in. In addition, coaches need individual-level context, such as information about teachers, children, and families, to adapt their coaching approach to best benefit those individuals. Learning about the center, teachers, and families is especially important for coaches who are external to the organization.

The conversation road map below offers ideas for a coach's first conversations with the center leader. The suggested topics and questions will help initiate progress towards the three central goals.



Road Map for First Meetings with the Center Leader

Introduce Yourself

- Introduce yourself to the center leader. Get to know each other by exchanging information about your backgrounds such as:
 - Roles you have held in the early childhood field
 - Different kinds of settings you have worked in (such as Head Start, school districts, or community-based child care centers)
 - Why this work motivates you

Introduce the Coaching Initiative

- Discuss the purpose and goals of coaching.
 - Describe the sequence and content of topics you plan to cover with teachers.
 - Share your goals for coaching.
 - Ask about the center leader's goals and expectations for coaching.
 - Consider how you and the center leader can collaborate to deliver a consistent message to teachers about the purpose of coaching.
 - Answer any questions the center leader has about the purpose of coaching.



Agree on Communication Processes

- Discuss general communication preferences related to coaching updates and scheduling or rescheduling coaching sessions. (Establishing the details of your coaching schedule will happen separately. Refer to the “Setting a Schedule” section later in this document.)
 - Ask the center leader about preferred modes of communication (phone, email, or text).
 - Let the center leader know when you plan to send reminders (for example, the day before a coaching visit).
 - Come up with a plan to communicate about rescheduling when necessary. Ask the center leader to let you know (or to have the teachers let you know) as soon as possible if all participating teachers in a classroom are going to be absent or need to reschedule for another reason.

Get to Know the Center

Use the following questions, grouped by topic, to get to know the center (and the program, if the center is part of a larger umbrella organization).

- Key players at the center
 - Which staff members (such as education coordinators, special needs staff, and behavior support specialists) regularly support teachers in the classroom?
 - Are there staff members other than you, such as education coordinators, who should be kept updated about what is covered in coaching sessions?
- Curriculum or activity requirements
 - What primary curriculum do you currently use? Do you use any supplemental curricula?
 - What training on the curriculum have teachers received in the past?
 - How do teachers use and adapt the curriculum? That is, when do teachers make changes to the way the curriculum activities are written? Are there components that teachers do not use?
 - Are there times when teachers are expected to complete other projects or activities outside the curriculum?

TIP

Especially with larger programs, there may be several staff members with different support roles. Know how coaching fits in with these other forms of support.

TIP

Consider how to align these activities with curriculum objectives.

- Lesson-plan process and requirements
 - Do teachers write their own lesson plans? Are there requirements for lesson plans such as the use of a certain format?
 - *If the curriculum allows for flexibility in scheduling, ask: Do you expect that different classrooms will work through the curriculum at the same pace and using the same sequence?*
- Reporting child abuse or neglect
 - What is the procedure if a coach suspects child abuse or neglect?
 - What is the required time frame for reporting?
- Supporting teachers hired midyear
 - When a new teacher is hired midyear, what type of training does that person receive?
 - Are teachers who are hired midyear permitted to spend time on additional training in the curriculum to get oriented? (Training might include watching a recorded training session, doing online training, or attending an additional coaching session.)
- Learning about the teachers
 - Which teachers have been at the center the longest? Who are the newest teachers here?
 - What do you hope that teachers will gain from this coaching initiative? Do you have any specific goals for certain teachers?
 - What have you told teachers about this coaching initiative? What do you think they understand about the purpose of the initiative? How do you think they are feeling about it?

TIP

Learn about lesson-planning expectations and how much flexibility teachers have.

TIP

Make sure you understand the center's process for reporting abuse and neglect. Request a copy of the center's child abuse and neglect protocol for your records.

TIP

There will probably be some teacher turnover during the school year. Think about how coaching can support teachers hired midyear.

TIP

To help you prepare for your initial meetings with teachers, begin to get to know the teachers through conversation with the center leader. In addition, continue to discuss the goals and purpose for coaching so that you and the center leader can deliver a consistent message.

Anticipated Challenges: Communicating and Coordinating with Center Leaders

The table below presents potential challenges related to communication and coordination with center leaders, along with possible solutions.

What challenges might come up?	How might coaches approach the challenge?
<p>Lack of resources to obtain required materials</p> <p><i>Some activities may require materials that the center does not have access to.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicate ahead of time with the center leader about the availability of materials required for curriculum activities.• Suggest possible sources of donations for the classroom, including parents and local businesses.• Consider alternative materials or ways to restructure an activity to achieve the same objective.
<p>Need for more support for children with special needs or behavior issues</p> <p><i>The curriculum may include strategies for behavior management and promoting social-emotional learning, but the center probably serves some children who need more support than the curriculum offers.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk to the center leader about additional support (such as extra time working with specialized staff members) that might be available for children who need more assistance.• Create an action plan, in collaboration with teachers and the center leader, for providing additional support to children who need it and consistently follow up on that plan.
<p>Conflict between curriculum requirements and center or program expectations</p> <p><i>The center or program (if the center is part of a larger organization) may expect teachers to plan and execute classroom activities in ways that differ from what the curriculum specifies.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Before</i> you begin coaching, ask the center leader about required protocols for teacher responsibilities such as lesson planning, to make sure you know where teachers do and do not have flexibility.• Look for ways to embed curricular activities and classwork on core objectives into center or program requirements, such as participation in seasonal activities.

What challenges might come up?

How might coaches approach the challenge?

Teacher turnover

There may be staffing changes in the classroom during the school year.

- Discuss with center leaders how coaching can complement the training process for teachers hired midyear. If possible, schedule an extra coaching session with a new teacher to help smooth the transition.
 - When working with teachers hired midyear, start out with the same relationship-building strategies that you used for teachers at the beginning of the school year.
-



Building Open and Trusting Relationships with Teachers

A second foundational component of coaching is building rapport and developing trust between the coach and teachers. Once these are established, most teachers will feel more comfortable taking risks and making changes, which are essential steps in refining one’s teaching practice. An open and trusting relationship between the coach and teacher allows coaches to tailor their approach to the individual and give honest feedback, and helps teachers receive that feedback in a productive way. Reaching this stage takes time, but there are two central goals to aim for early in this process:

- 1. Focus on relationship building from the start.** Early on, building rapport is a priority, so a “getting-to-know-you” conversation at the beginning of the school year or when a new teacher comes on board is recommended. Get to know teachers’ backgrounds and what motivates them and share the same information about yourself.
- 2. Develop shared goals for coaching,** based on teacher and coach experiences. To build trust, coaches need to understand teachers’ goals and expectations and adapt their plans accordingly. In turn, teachers need to be informed about the coach’s expertise, approach, and priorities.

The conversation road map below offers ideas for a coach’s first conversations with teachers. The suggested questions can help initiate progress toward the two central goals.

Road Map for First Meetings with Teachers

Introduce Yourself

- Start by introducing yourself and giving a brief overview of your background in teaching and coaching.
- Ask general questions about the teacher's background.
 - Why are you a teacher? Why did you become a teacher? How long have you been a teacher?
 - How long have you been at this center?
 - What are the things you enjoy about teaching?
 - What do you not enjoy about teaching?
- Ask about the teacher's experience with curriculum and coaching.
 - What is your experience with the curriculum? *If teachers have experience with the curriculum, ask follow-up questions to learn how comfortable they are with it and which components they have used.*
 - When was the last time you had training on this curriculum or other curricula?
 - Have you received classroom coaching before? What did you like about that experience? Was there anything you didn't like?
 - What is your experience or comfort level when working with children with behavior issues or children who have experienced trauma?

TIP

Try to determine how open teachers are to trying new ideas, where they might need support, and what areas they may not be ready to work on at first.

TIP

Understanding past coaching experiences will allow you to adapt to meet teachers' needs.

Set Goals for Coaching

- Ask questions to learn about the teacher's expectations and interests related to coaching.
 - What do you hope to get out of coaching?
 - What do you know about coaching? What do you still have questions about?

- Do you have any hesitations or concerns you want to share with me about coaching or implementing a new curriculum?
- What do you think is your best skill as a teacher?
- What is a skill that you'd like to improve on as a teacher?
- What do you think will be most challenging this year?
- What are you most excited about?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?

TIP

Answers to these questions may help you to identify a starting point for coaching.

TIP

Open-ended questions allow teachers to share what they think is most helpful for you to know.

Anticipated Challenges: Building Open and Trusting Relationships with Teachers

A list of potential challenges and solutions related to collaborating with teachers is below.

What challenges might come up?	How might coaches approach the challenge?
<p>Outside sources of stress</p> <p><i>Teachers and children may face challenges such as trauma, violence, and abuse in their community or at home. This stress can be emotionally difficult for teachers and can inhibit their ability to focus on implementing the curriculum.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make time to get to know teachers well and learn about what sources of stress they or the children in their classrooms may be facing. Acknowledge how challenging this stress is for teachers and children. Understanding where teachers are coming from and what their experiences are outside of the classroom will allow you to tailor coaching to meet their needs. • Help teachers focus on what they can control, rather than the sources of stress that are outside their control. Teachers <i>are</i> in control of the learning opportunities that they create in their classroom. Help teachers see how the curriculum can support their ability to provide a rich, interesting learning environment for children. • Celebrate successes, even small ones, such as a breakthrough with an individual child or attempting a new curriculum component.

What challenges might come up?

How might coaches approach the challenge?

Need for more support for children with special needs or behavior issues

The curriculum may include strategies for behavior management and promoting social-emotional learning, but the center probably serves some children who need more support than the curriculum offers.

Difficulty trusting the coach

Some teachers will love having a coach and immediately jump into curriculum implementation, but others may need much more time before they accept the idea of having a coach.

- Create an action plan, in collaboration with teachers and the center leader, for providing additional support to children who need it and consistently follow up on that plan.
- Communicate to the teacher that, for children who need extra support, a prescribed curriculum activity can be viewed as a goal to work toward. Help the teacher work backward from the curriculum activity and make a step-by-step plan to support children in moving toward the goal.
- Actively participate in classroom activities — offer suggestions, model lessons, or provide other support — to help teachers see value in the curriculum and coaching.
- Use your coaching time to help teachers accomplish day-to-day tasks — for example, pull materials and help set up for the next week, help children with mealtime and teeth brushing while you discuss the plans for the day, or model a transition activity while children wait to wash their hands.
- Frame coaching as a résumé builder for advancement with their current center or a new role.



Setting a Schedule

A third component of establishing a strong foundation for coaching is setting a schedule. Ideally, during a coaching visit, the coach observes a class engaging in different types of activities — such as choice time or centers, small- and large-group activities, and reading aloud — and also meets with that class’s teachers outside of the classroom.

Setting a schedule will help accomplish the following important goals:

- 1. Ensure that coaching happens regularly and consistently.** Having a regular schedule gives coaches the best chance of observing a class and meeting with the teachers on a frequent basis with limited interruptions.
- 2. Ensure that coaching is minimally disruptive to classroom and center calendars.** When coming up with a coaching schedule, coaches should consider the class’s and teacher’s existing schedules and what is happening outside of the classroom in the center (such as center events that happen regularly).

The conversation road map below is designed to help coaches gather information and create a schedule for visiting a center with multiple classes. It can be used with both center leaders and teachers as a supplement to the conversation road maps above.



Road Map for Developing a Schedule

First, describe the duration and frequency of coaching sessions based on the coaching model:

- Indicate how much time and how often the coach will spend observing and coaching in the classroom.

- Indicate how much time the coach will spend meeting with teachers outside the classroom (that is, in a quiet, private space separate from classroom activity) and whether the coach will meet with both the lead and assistant teacher(s) together or separately.

Collect the following information from teachers and the center leader about teacher and classroom schedules:

- Do lead teachers have “prep time” (time set aside for teachers to work on administrative tasks, without children present)? If yes, what day(s) and time(s)?
- Do assistant teachers have prep time? If yes, what day(s) and time(s)?
- Do students have “specials” (classes such as music or art led by instructors other than the lead and assistant teachers)? If yes, what day(s) and time(s)?
- Do classrooms have regularly scheduled guests (such as members of the community who visit to read a book to the class)? If yes, what day(s) and time(s)?
- What else should be considered when scheduling coaching visits?
- Discuss whether it is feasible for the coach to visit two classrooms at the same center on a given day:
 - Do classrooms have the same schedule for instruction time, mealtimes, and outdoor time?
 - Is teacher prep time the same across classrooms?
- Discuss what space(s) in addition to the classroom can be used for coach-teacher meetings. Ask about logistics, such as:
 - Are electrical outlets available in the space(s)?
 - Is internet available in the space(s)?

Based on the information about scheduling, work together with the center leader and teachers to devise a list of best possible options for the coaching schedule at this center.

TIP

Coaching requires dedicated time. Make sure all parties understand what you are asking for and where you can be flexible if needed.

TIP

As you build your schedule, try to anticipate when the best times for rescheduled meetings might be. You may want to vary the day of the week on which you visit a classroom so you can observe different content areas or activities.

TIP

Ask these questions to anticipate good times to visit and times to avoid, for both classroom observations and coach-teacher meetings. How you use this information may vary depending on each teacher’s preferences.

TIP

If visiting two classrooms on the same day, you may need to shorten your observation time slightly, split your observation into segments, or include mealtime or transition time in your observation.

Anticipated Challenges: Setting a Schedule

The table below outlines common ongoing challenges and possible solutions related to scheduling.

What challenges might come up?	How might coaches approach the challenge?
<p data-bbox="248 541 724 583">Coverage</p> <p data-bbox="248 604 724 730"><i>There may be times when no one is available to supervise a classroom while the teachers meet with the coach.</i></p>	<ul data-bbox="854 541 1404 884" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="854 541 1404 730">• Adapt your plan so that you don't have to cancel altogether: Meet with teachers during naptime, shorten the meeting, meet with a class's teachers separately rather than together, or schedule a virtual check-in for another day.<li data-bbox="854 762 1404 884">• Communicate frequently with the center leader about scheduling and work as a team to find solutions when there is limited classroom coverage.
<p data-bbox="248 951 724 993">Absences and rescheduling</p> <p data-bbox="248 1014 724 1098"><i>Teachers may miss or reschedule coaching sessions for a variety of reasons.</i></p>	<ul data-bbox="854 951 1404 1318" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="854 951 1404 1045">• Leave time for one "makeup day" in your schedule each week, to accommodate rescheduled sessions.<li data-bbox="854 1077 1404 1171">• Ask that teachers and center leaders let you know as early as possible if they need to reschedule.<li data-bbox="854 1203 1404 1318">• If one of two teachers assigned to a classroom is absent, consider going ahead and holding the coaching session with the one teacher.

Conclusion

Building trust and rapport with teachers and center leaders is an essential component of coaching on curriculum. While it takes time to build and maintain these relationships, coaches can benefit from setting the stage properly at the beginning of the school year. Clear communication of expectations and processes, coupled with deliberate efforts to learn about the teachers and children they will be working with, are important steps in this process. This guide is intended to support coaches in leading initial conversations about the structure, process, and content of coaching and in preparing for potential challenges that may arise. Once a strong foundation is established, coaches can further adapt their practices to align with the specific environments in which they are working.

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2. Beth Boatright and Chrysan Gallucci, "Coaching for Instructional Improvement: Themes in Research and Practice," *Washington State Kappan* 2, 1 (2008): 3–5.
3. Jim Short and Stephanie Hirsh, *The Elements: Transforming Teaching Through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2020).

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles.