



Fall '23 Newsletter

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Communities of Practice (CoP)

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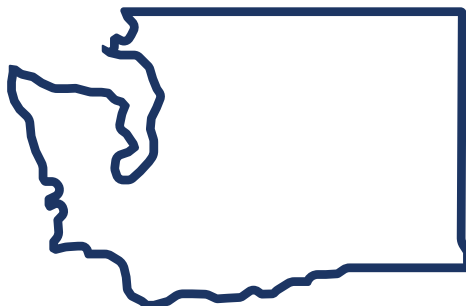
What is a Community of Practice (CoP)?

CoPs are peer learning groups where adults come together to learn and help each other. They are groups of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals. The community seeks not only to help individual members advance their own work, but also contribute to the larger field.

Bonnie Cox (Busy Bee's Preschool and Child Care) shares, "For child care providers, who work at home and are kind of in this bubble it's amazing to have this network that's built in for us we can refer each other families, support each other with curriculum, or meet each other on field trips. It's not something that I ever thought I needed but I've benefited from. It's nice to feel like you are not alone."



CoPs often focus on sharing best practices and challenges, and creating new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice. Interaction on an ongoing basis is an important part of this. Many CoPs rely on face-to-face meetings as well as web-based collaborative environments to communicate, connect and conduct community activities.



Early Achievers has promoted the organic formation of many CoPs across Washington state. Early learning professionals began to convene in CoPs, with the support of Early Achievers coaches, to support one another, learn from each other, and develop a deeper understanding of WA's Quality Rating and Improvement System, Early Achievers. There has been transformative leadership in action as the CoPs continue to gather year after year. Initially, Early Achievers coaches hold a strong hosting role as facilitators, this often begins to shift as Early Learning Professionals take on stronger roles leading and co-creating their own agendas and meetings. Early Achievers coaches continue to play a key support role for CoPs doing things such as creating inclusive and equitable convenings by providing translation and interpreter services, and offering logistical supports like securing a location, etc.

This role of Early Achievers coaches is one of many supports available to all Early Achievers providers FREE of charge. There is NO COST to providers for any Early Achievers services, including coaching, mental health consultation, business supports, and professional development* (*charges may apply for customized training offerings*). If in doubt about a particular service through Early Achievers, please contact Child Care Aware of Washington: childcareaware@childcareawarewa.org.



How are CoPs typically used in the early learning field?

In the early learning field, CoPs are formed by early childhood educators, coaches, and other leaders who share a passion for teaching children and engage in the process of learning how to do it better as they interact regularly and support one another. These groups provide members with opportunities to learn from one another and to develop a deeper understanding of the shared domain. In many cases, they also serve as support systems, providing a sense of belonging and social connection within the early learning field. Sometimes CoPs become self-sustaining groups as professionals build relationships with each other in the community and invite new members to the field to join and learn along with them. Members of the group lead the CoP and manage the agenda and the meeting, depending on the wishes and desires of the group.



Recently one group of Early Learning Professionals celebrated their CoP's 10th anniversary in the Thurston County area! This is a diverse group of Family Child Care Providers that have served their communities for decades providing high-quality care. Together for 10 years they have created an inclusive and welcoming space for shared learning and shared leadership. It's incredible to witness the strength that they bring to the field, their community, and each other! They truly are our early care and education champions. CCA of WA had an opportunity to interview a few of them and learn more about their work!

Deb Walters (Puddle Jumpers) shared that the benefits of a CoP were many. She stated "The one thing that was always lacking was community. There was this feeling you were working alone on an island. To be able to come together to work with other providers who are doing similar jobs was amazing. Having those moments of "oh that's how you do that!" was a game changer. The support of fellow providers, who share your passion, it's the greatest thing. We all agree the best part of Early Achievers is our CoP." She encourages other[s] to talk to their CCA of WA coaches; they are amazing, and they are your first stop. From there they can help support getting you started [with a CoP]. Once you get together with like-minded individuals, who share the same passions it just runs itself."

Heidi Hicks (Heidi's House) has found many benefits to CoPs over the years. She reflected, "Our job can be very isolating even though we work with children and talk to families, they don't understand what we go through. Having that network of other providers has been amazing." Heidi was hesitant at first. She was very busy running her Family Child Care business and thought she would give one CoP meeting a try. It's been 10 years and she is a strong believer of the benefits of coming together in CoPs.

These great groups of leaders hope their words will encourage others to get connected in their community CoPs. "Get connected with your local CCA of WA and your coach. Dipping your foot in by doing some research online, it's a little scary at first but the benefits have outweigh[ed] the work and the efforts." -Bonnie Cox

"Our heartfelt gratitude to the members of the Thurston County Family Child Care CoP and early learning Coaches for including us in their celebration! Thank you for your leadership, and the many ways each of you promotes a culture of care in Washington State."
-Sandy Maldonado



Resources

- Find Your Coach:

<https://childcareawarewa.org/find-your-coach/>

- Articles:

<https://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

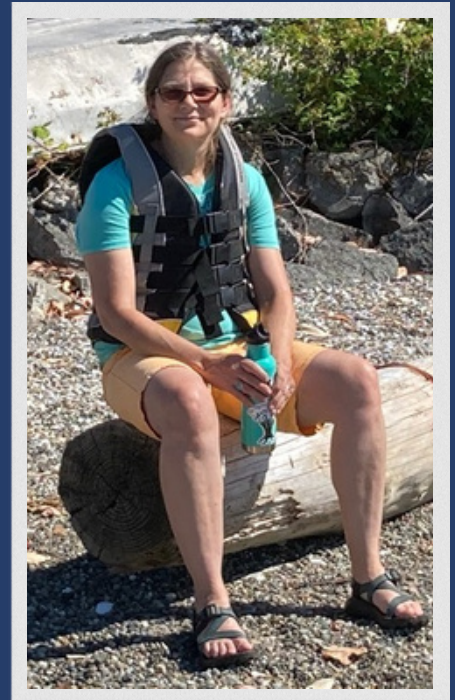
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/collective-change/learning-communities-in-action/community-of-practice-on-play/>

COACH & PROVIDER HIGHLIGHT

Deb Walter

Early Achievers Provider

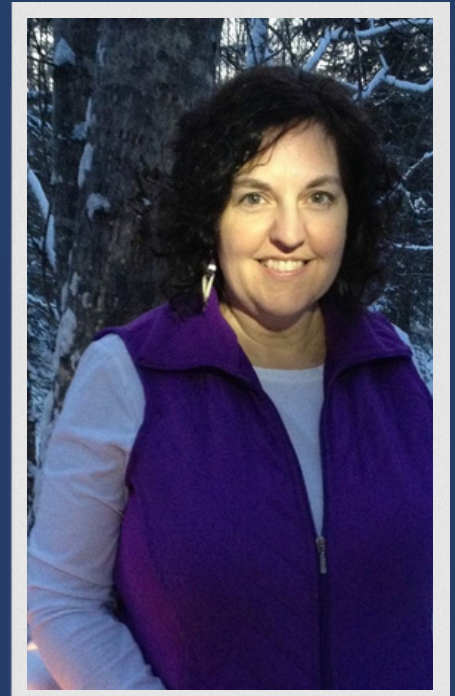
Deb has been operating Puddle Jumpers Family Child Care for the past 34 years. She grew up in Oklahoma, graduated from Goddard College in Plainfield Vermont, where she met her husband, Steve. They have two children, Shilo and Zoe. She loves camping, kayaking, singing and gardening! Her greatest joy is building community with children and families. Many Puddle Jumpers families meet and become lifelong friends. Helping children build strong relationships through the messy work of play is Deb's passion and she is honored to get to do this work every day.



Shelly Knight

Early Achievers Coach

Shelly coaches in the Olympic Peninsula with a specialty in tribal relations. She is excited to serve her community alongside caring and committed providers who strive to provide excellent care for children. She is passionate about supporting families in the early childhood years, a time that is precious and important. "To love and teach our children is to care for our community" is an Alaskan Native proverb that she lives by. Shelly has over 30 years in the Education field, she has taught Preschool, Head Start, and elementary school K-3 in Alaska and Washington.



How would you describe a CoP?

It's a group of providers, center directors/managers that come together to build relationships, study topics, network, have book studies or read articles. It can be in person or online. It can help solve community issues by working the issue out together. During COVID this became a great way to help each other. - Shelly

What has this CoP meant to you?

It has been a very consistent ongoing support learning group. It's special because of how long we have been together, we have seen many changes throughout the years, we have overcome hard times together and also celebrated wins. This has been the best part of Early Achievers. - Deb

What is the benefit of a CoP?

You are able to communicate with others in the same field as you. They can bring new perspectives and some much needed adult interaction after spending most of your day with children. - Deb

How did you start your COP?

Ten years ago, a couple of coaches spoke with providers to see if they'd be interested in starting a CoP. They added in some fun games, introductions, and chances for everyone to get to know each other better. It really helped build a sense of community within our community. - Shelly

Whats your advice for anyone thinking about starting a CoP?

Start it with the intention of building community, relationships and networking. Plan fun activities to help pull folks out and get them together. Getting food involved or something to get them excited will go a long way. - Shelly



Shelly's and Deb's CoP (Thurston County) celebrated 10 years!



Connect with your Early Learning Coach

Looking for someone who can support your goals and offer tips and strategies to improve child outcomes and professional growth? Learn more about ways to improve the care you give, your business performance, or your family engagement practices. Relationship-based professional development (RBPD) coaches give you one-on-one support and offer a wide array of customizable coaching services.

[FIND YOUR
COACH HERE](#)