

# Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership

Eight Strategies to Ignite  
Passion and Transform  
Program Quality

Susan MacDonald



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# Dedication

To my mother, whose commitment to providing unconditional love to the hundreds of children who were blessed to spend their days in her care provided the foundation for my ongoing passion for creating strengths-based environments for children to thrive in.



*Dorothy Elizabeth MacDonald holding Susan Elizabeth MacDonald.*



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# Introduction

This book explores how leaders can find new and empowering ways to adapt to the evolving world of early childhood education. Research into the immense, lifelong value of education at this stage of development has created a wave of reforms designed to increase the quality of early childhood programs. The research and its many resulting initiatives are aligned with the field's long-standing commitment to provide quality education and care to all children.

The field of early childhood education is at a crossroads. On one path is the current research that documents the vital importance of high-quality learning environments for young children. Down the second path are the ideas and practices that have been pervasive in the early childhood field for decades. Today's leaders of early childhood programs are faced with a multitude of questions:

- How do I motivate and inspire teachers?
- How can I be more effective in observing and giving nonjudgmental feedback?
- How can I be more confident in my role as a leader?
- How can I manage my time more effectively?
- How can I keep up with and help teachers align their programs with the newly articulated standards and quality initiatives without being overwhelmed and adding to the stress my teachers feel?

*Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership* is the reflection of the insights cultivated through my rich professional experiences supporting quality in early childhood programs. Throughout my career, I have supported these programs in many different ways—as a coach, consultant, professional speaker, college instructor, licensing supervisor, and director of a Reggio-inspired preschool. In each of these roles, I was able to see the stresses and challenges of truly creating a supportive, educational, and vibrant learning community. Over the years I have designed and delivered a myriad of leadership courses focused on supporting early childhood directors in reenergizing their programs, embracing change, and aligning with new standards and initiatives. I have seen firsthand the negative impact that stress can have on the culture and climate of a program. I have been inspired to

write this book to support directors in moving past their challenges and envisioning new possibilities for creating high-quality learning environments fueled by positive, engaging energy.

The goal of this book is to help you tap into the energy, passion, and engagement needed to truly lead early childhood programs. All too often, the words I hear from directors describing their energy for their work include *overwhelmed*, *stressed*, *exhausted*, *flat out*, or *drowning*. These are key descriptors for a negative spiral. Leading from a place of low energy and negativity increases the challenges for directors and makes strengths-based program transformation impossible. The strategies laid out in this book are designed to support directors in finding new ways to reduce the levels of stress and move into a unified, engaging system for leading with passion, intention, and purpose.

This shift from overwhelmed to focused, engaged leadership is truly what facilitates quality transformations. I have seen the shift many times in the directors that I work with in leadership groups and as coaching clients. One of the most vivid examples of moving from a point of overwhelming negativity into a fully engaged and inspirational leadership role is my encounter with Lyn. When I met Lyn, at the first session of a five-part Directing with Vision and Clarity course, I thought she had mistakenly come into the wrong room. The course was being held at a community college and Lyn's appearance—sullen expression, head down, wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up—made her appear much more like a disgruntled college student than the leader of an early childhood program.

After Lyn introduced herself to the group, two things were evident: she was in the right place, and she was in a crisis of leadership. When she shared her journey to her leadership position, it was inspiring. Lyn had quickly moved from being an assistant teacher to becoming a director who purchased the program and the building from the school's founder. Her focus and drive had helped her achieve her dream of running and owning the program. However, that focus and drive had eroded under the stresses she felt as she faced staff challenges, new Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) requirements, and an overwhelming sense of low energy across the program. On that first day of the course, Lyn shared with the group that she was seriously considering tossing aside her dream of running a high-quality early program and selling the school. Lyn wasn't just in a negative spiral; she was at the very bottom of the energy vortex. Although the course had more than twenty participants, the heavy drained energy that Lyn brought was permeating the whole classroom.

The focus for this first session was for each participant to write a vision statement that reflected their hopes, dreams, and aspirations as a leader in their program. Somehow, just thinking about all that was possible began to create a subtle shift in Lyn's demeanor. Her hood came off, and she volunteered to share her vision with the group. In that vision was the hope for the future that would

guide Lyn into fully embracing her dreams for herself as a positive inspirational leader and her vision for all that her program could be.

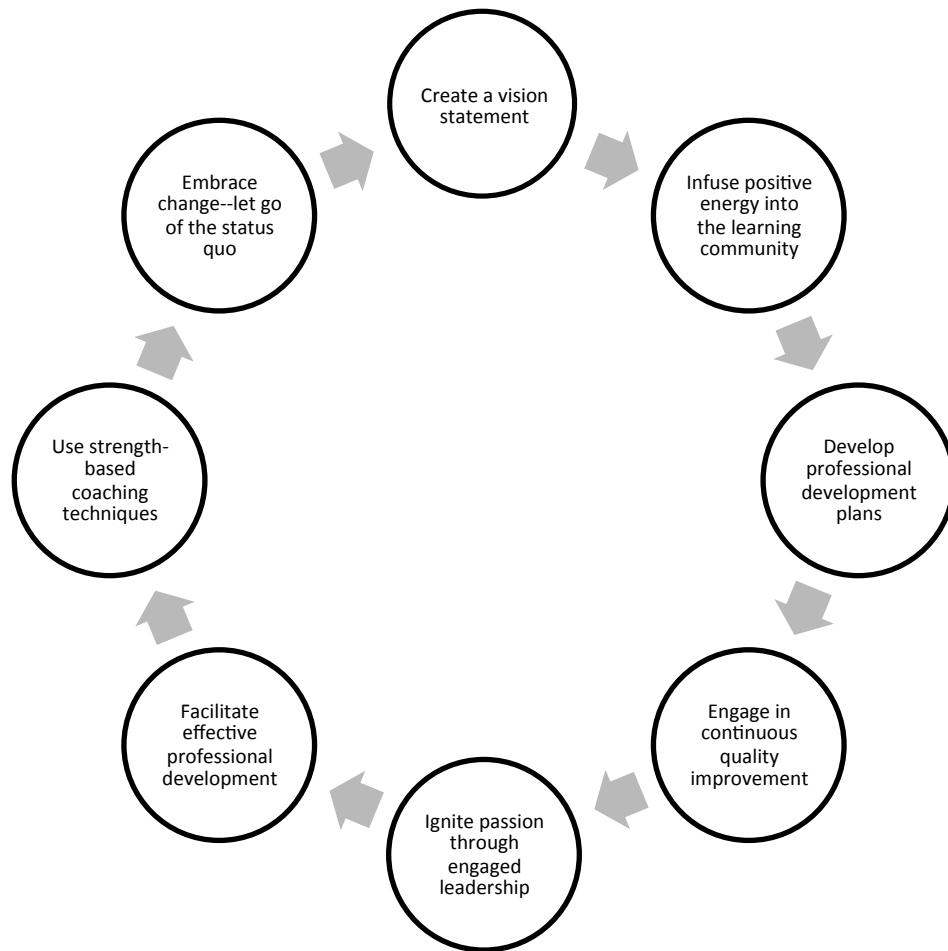
The journey up the spiral was not always easy for Lyn. She faced challenges and setbacks, but she stuck with her vision and developed a clear action plan for achieving her goals. Lyn became acutely aware of how her energy was reflected throughout the program, and she refused to let setbacks push her back down into the negative spiral. Her focus on staying true to her vision allowed her to implement many changes that have enhanced her program and her confidence in her own leadership abilities.

Lyn now speaks nationally about her leadership transformation and inspires others to shift to strengths-based leadership! Working closely with her and many other leaders in similar low-energy states has been my inspiration for writing this book. The strategies you will find here are designed to help you customize your own journey to increase your engagement and passion for the vitally important work of leading early childhood programs.

The key premise of *Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership* is that a positive, strengths-based leadership system is the key to transforming quality in early childhood programs. Across the field it is evident that the stress of leading early childhood programs is on the rise. Increasing demands from the many new quality initiatives and standards have contributed to feelings of work pressure and have drained directors' and teachers' energy, creating school communities where low levels of engagement have become the norm. When engagement is low, all aspects of the program suffer, and the children feel these negative effects strongly.

The research is clear that high-quality early childhood programs have a lasting impact on the lives of children and families. In a 2014 article in *Time* magazine, Fareed Zakaria notes that the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development has found that early-childhood education "improves children's cognitive abilities, helps to create a foundation for lifelong learning, makes learning outcomes more equitable, reduces poverty and improves social mobility from generation to generation." Research findings like this have fueled a new sense of urgency at the national political level, which is building the momentum needed to bring about much-needed, lasting changes for early childhood programs. The time to fully commit to increasing the effectiveness of your program is now.

*Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership* lays out eight clear strategies that will support the development of vibrant learning communities where all teachers, children, and parents can thrive. This system aligns current research on positive psychology, school transformation, and strengths-based leadership with the current standards of quality in the early childhood field. This alignment creates new insights into what is needed to strengthen early childhood programs through consistent, intentional, and supportive leadership.



*Eight Strategies for Igniting Passion and Engagement in Early Childhood Programs*

The journey to transform your early childhood program requires commitment and the intention to fully engage in the reflective practice exercises throughout this book. Bringing to life your vision for all that your program can be is a richly rewarding experience that leads to higher levels of professional satisfaction for all administrators and teachers. It also creates a vibrant learning community where children will develop the skills needed for success.

Quality early childhood education is vitally important and directly linked to children's success throughout school—indeed, during their entire lives. Providing a strong foundation in the early years is essential to the development of strong social and intellectual skills. In President Barack Obama's State of the Union address on February 12, 2013, he clearly stated the long-term benefits of quality early childhood education:

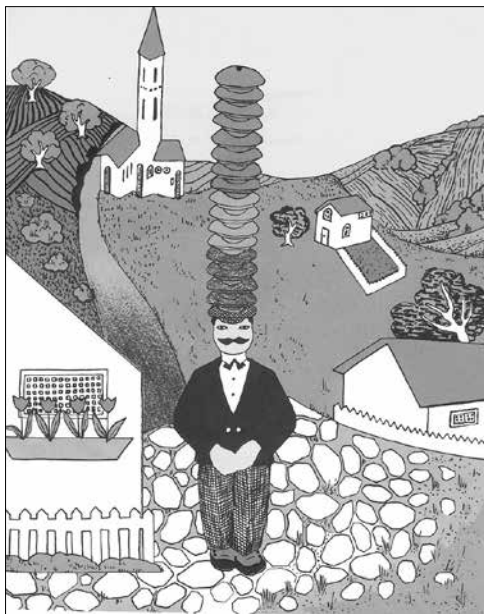
"In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children . . . studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable

families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind."

In the United States, quality initiatives have received billions of dollars in federal funding. Quality rating systems are being established in all fifty states. Each rating system is unique, but their fundamental focus is the same: supporting high-quality care for young children. In addition to the new QRIS initiatives, program leaders are adapting to new regulations and changing accreditation standards. All of these modifications are designed to create the quality learning environments children need. Embracing the programmatic changes required in early childhood programs calls for a new supportive system of leadership. The strategies laid out in this book are instrumental to developing the leadership skills necessary to support programs as they move from the status quo up the energy spiral to a place where full engagement and passion for the important work of early childhood programs flourish.

Incorporating these new quality initiatives into manageable systems for program leadership and staff supervision can be a struggle. School leaders are trying to juggle all the quality-related balls, while at the same time trying to balance the many leadership hats they are wearing.

Just like the peddler in the classic children's book *Caps for Sale*, directors are always trying to balance their many, many hats. This is a difficult feat in the best of times, but when you add in the many unexpected challenges of leading in ever-changing times, many directors are unsure if they will ever be able to create a sense of balance and calm in their programs.



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*Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership* will guide you on your journey to develop a system that will ignite passion, engagement, and intention into all aspects of your program. You will begin by creating a vision statement that reflects all that your program could be, and then you will move through specific strategies and reflective practice exercises that will support and guide you as you bring your vision to life.

I think of vision as the light at the end of the tunnel. After working with a program leader in a coaching relationship for a few months, I noticed a new spark of energy as she talked about her program. For years she had been struggling with being overwhelmed by accreditation standards, licensing requirements, and the new quality rating scale the state was implementing. I wanted to know more about this new vibrant energy I observed, so I asked her if “the light at the end of the tunnel” had turned on for her. After a moment of reflection she replied “No, all the lights in the tunnel have turned on!” She described a sense of joy and relief when she realized that all the initiatives were directly linked to her own vision to create a high-quality program where children thrive and teachers happily engage in all aspects of their work. She was able to see for the first time how aligning with the new initiatives and integrating them into her daily work to bring her vision to life could transform her program.

My hope is that you will experience that electrifying moment when all the lights in the tunnel come on, when you as a leader step into the light and reenergize yourself and your programs to provide the high-quality early childhood care and education that children and families so desperately need.

Three stylized butterflies in shades of gray are positioned above the chapter title. One is on the left, one is in the center, and one is on the right, all facing different directions.

## CHAPTER 1

# Creating a Collaborative Vision Statement

*Oh, it's delightful to have ambitions. I'm so glad I have such a lot. And there never seems to be any end to them—that's the best of it. Just as soon as you attain to one ambition you see another one glittering higher up still. It does make life so interesting.*

—L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

Naturally, directors aspire to create high-quality early childhood programs. Yet many leaders are caught up in the struggle to get through each day and give little thought or energy to the big-picture vision for their program. Early childhood directors tend to be overly busy and often feel unsatisfied with their professional accomplishments. Directing an early childhood program without a clear vision and a system for leading your program can leave you feeling physically tired, stressed, and professionally drained. Why? Because when you lack a compelling vision statement and clear goals to guide your actions, you fill your days going through the motions and tackling the crisis du jour. This leads to wasted energy, an increased sense of frustration, and low levels of engagement. Working with a well-defined vision statement will support you in moving from being busy at work to being fully engaged, focused, and productive in your work.

A compelling vision statement is essential to creating a journey of growth for your program. Developing your vision with input from teachers, parents, and board members will build the collaboration that is essential for programwide transformation. A vision statement, quite simply, paints a vibrant picture of your program operating at its highest level of success. Each program will define *success* in different ways, and that process works best with input from all the stakeholders.



# A Method to Your Madness

Vision statements are not a new approach to education. They have been used for centuries to inspire and guide the work of individuals and institutions. I often reflect on this old proverb: “A vision without a plan is just a dream. A plan without a vision is drudgery. But a vision with a plan can change the world.” In the early childhood field, many programs are working without a vision or a plan that will support bringing the vision to life. Meg, a participant in a Wheelock College Leadership Course I taught, described the importance of creating a vision statement and action plan in this way: “My vision has always been clear to me, but the process of writing it out with a timeline and being detailed and thoughtful about how to get where I want to be was a wonderful process. I feel I have always worked to implement my vision, but there was no real method to my madness. Having this plan helps me to feel that my goals can be accomplished.”

Meg’s thoughts capture the importance of not just having a vision but having goals that can be implemented to create the reality described in the vision statement. Moving from the vision being a dream to being a guiding light for the work of the director and teachers is essential for transformation to take place. In the book *Soul Mission, Life Vision*, Alan Seale describes how a clear vision can guide our daily work: “Vision gives us hope, direction, and a path to follow. In times of a crisis, it is vision of another possibility that helps us through. And in everyday living, it is vision that keeps us on track, engaged in the creation of a positive, purposeful, and rewarding life.” The power and importance of having a collaborative vision statement cannot be understated. It is the essential first step in the journey to revitalize your early childhood program. Trying to create sustainable changes to a program’s quality without a vision is as ineffective as expecting your GPS device to lead you on a journey before you have programmed where you want to go.

## Ways to Build Momentum

Having a clear vision can thrust you into the energizing cycle of an upward spiral in your program. However, committing to bringing your vision to life is professionally challenging for some leaders. It is essential to see beyond the barriers and envision your program fully living your vision.

I am deeply inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to education, which originated in Reggio Emilia, Italy, after World War II. The school and community leaders’ commitment to intentionally and continually improving their programs has helped Reggio schools achieve recognition as some of the best preschools in the world. Steve Seidel, a researcher at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, states, “It seems always better to be on a difficult—even extremely difficult—path than a path that, in my heart, I believe won’t lead where I want to go. The challenge and beauty of coming to know the

experience in Reggio is to confront the possibility that I could work—as they have—with others to create the reality I would like to live in . . . whatever the demands of that creative act.”

Starting this vision-focused journey will definitely place some new demands on school leaders. The beauty of this work, whatever the short-term stress of moving toward a new system of leadership, is that you will be able to create a new strengths-based reality for your program to thrive in. Early childhood leaders need to become inspired to move their programs from stale complacency into vibrant, thriving learning environments. The lasting benefits from this shift will be felt in every facet of the program. Teachers, administrators, parents, and—most important—children will reap the benefits of being part of a flourishing community.

## Steps for Creating a Shared Vision

If you want to increase the passion, intentionality, and engagement of every member of your learning community, you need to create a shared vision that becomes the driving force that guides and inspires everyone’s actions and interactions. Creating a collaborative vision statement is a process that requires focus, planning, and open communication. The strategies and activities laid out in this book are designed to guide you as you cocreate a vision statement and then bring it to life in your learning community. Here is an overview of this empowering process:

1. Clarify the focus. What are the key areas you would like to focus on to enhance the quality of your program? What is the positive impact you want to make in the lives of children, teachers, and families?
2. Use reflective practices to identify the core values of your program. This book contains examples such as creating vision boards.
3. Select a series of reflective exercises to work through as a group to identify the core values of your program. Clarifying these values provides the foundation for writing a vision statement that honors and strengthens the long-standing ideals of the program.
4. Use appreciative inquiry to tap into all that is possible. Facilitate meaningful discussions around these questions: If you had three wishes to transform this program, what would they be? If we could look into a crystal ball and see this program operating at its very best, what would we see? What would you be doing? What would the children be doing? What would be the most exciting thing you would notice?
5. Synthesize all your reflections—key words, themes, and messages. Create word lists and summary statements that reflect all the key messages gathered from your reflective activities and appreciative inquiry exercises.

6. Write a draft. Form a committee, selecting staff members that reflect the diversity of your program. Be sure to include new and longtime staff and a mix of teachers and administrators. Some programs involve members of their boards and parent representatives. Work together to review your notes and keyword lists from all the activities. Then create two or three draft vision statements to share with the entire staff. Strive to create drafts that are clear, compelling, empowering, and motivational.



*Align!*

## Linking Your Vision to a Program Administrators' Assessment Tool

Vision statements are used as an indicator of quality in the early childhood field. The Program Administration Scale (PAS) is a tool developed to accurately measure the leadership practices of early childhood programs. In the PAS documentation, Teri Talan and Paula Jorde Bloom define a vision as “a statement of an ideal that can be used to motivate, inspire, and guide the center toward a desired future state.” Mission statements clarify an organization’s purpose and its current status; they are useful for strategic decision making.

In the strategic planning section of the scale, a program’s vision and mission statements are rated using the following criteria:

- *Inadequate*—The center does not have a written mission or vision statement.
- *Minimal*—The center has a written mission or vision statement.
- *Good*—Staff members and the center’s governing or advisory board were involved in developing or reviewing the written mission or vision statement.
- *Excellent*—The center’s mission or vision statement is reviewed at least every five years by staff members and the center’s governing or advisory board.

7. Gather your community to work on revising and redrafting. Choose a time to reflect on the vision statements. Discuss wording preferences, likes, and dislikes. Also, find ways for people to give candid and confidential feedback—distribute note cards at the meeting or have them complete a short survey, either on paper or online.
8. Share your vision. Make the vision statement visible in all aspects of the program. Create visually appealing posters with the vision statement and place them in the entranceway, classrooms, and teacher spaces. Select photos that capture the essence of the vision statement and create a photo board display of the vision in action. Change the photos frequently to keep the board appealing and interesting. Use the vision statement on your website, in newsletters, blogs, job postings, and marketing materials. Read the vision statement at parent nights, staff meetings, and board meetings.
9. Live the vision. Create the momentum needed for the vision to come to life by finding ways to incorporate the vision's key message in your daily work with children, teachers, and families. Use the vision as the foundation for creating meaningful and relevant professional development goals and learning experiences for teachers, administrators, and the program. Successfully weaving the vision into the daily life of the program will build a renewed sense of purpose, will increase engagement, and will, with persistence, lead the program to new levels of quality.

## Moving Forward with Confidence

To successfully create the program transformation detailed in your vision statement, you as a leader must have full confidence in your ability to make it happen. As inspirational coach Jack Canfield says, “Whether you call it self-esteem, self-confidence, or self-assurance, it is a deep-seated belief that you have what it takes; the abilities, inner resources, talents and skills to create your desired results.” You need to step into your role as a director with full confidence in your own competence. This will create the positive energy to inspire everyone in your program to fully engage in their work and the work of transformation. Fully committing to using your vision statement as a guiding light will allow you to keep your attention focused on where you want to go, rather than on what is stopping you. It will support you in leading with confidence.



## Following NAEYC's Strategic Planning Guidance

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) advises that an early childhood program should have a strategic planning process that outlines actions for accomplishing the following:

- Implementing the program's vision and mission
- Achieving outcomes desired for children
- Maintaining high-quality services to children and families
- Providing long-term resources to sustain the operation of the program

A strategic plan is intended to ensure that programs conduct self-evaluations and reflect on their current practices to improve services provided, and then make a plan for how to implement those improvements. The following examples can serve as evidence to document these accomplishments:

- Plans for professional development
- A formal statement of a program's quality goals
- Informal or formal reports on how the program is carrying out its mission
- Surveys that are distributed to families and used to inform strategic planning

## Sample Vision Statements

Vision statements can be short or long. The key is that they capture the essence of where you want your program to go. Creating a vision statement involves opportunities for rich, meaningful dialogue among all those involved in the program. In the exercises section at the end of this chapter, you will find a variety of strategies for generating the dialogues necessary to write a vision statement that is truly reflective of the aspirations of all those involved in your program. The examples here show what is possible.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD COOPERATIVE

“Our vision is to create a nurturing environment rich in respect, individuality, and support for diversity. We acknowledge people’s strengths and challenges and encourage everyone to try new skills regardless of the outcome. We allow for individuality and growth by focusing on positive contribution and consistently using clear, honest communication.”

## LARGE COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM

“Our vision is to create a thriving early education and child care program that deeply respects and nurtures the potential that exists in each child, teacher, and family. Through ongoing collaboration and open communication we will establish a vibrant community where joy, learning, creativity, and meaningful relationships flourish.”

## PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

“Our Vision for Sunny Brook . . .

Is to be a place where the

ORDINARY can become the EXTRAORDINARY.

Where we start each day anew and Open-minded

so we can see and believe the Endless Possibilities

and Uniqueness in our Sunny Brook Community!

Recognizing Children as individuals . . .

we will bring out their strengths by

Listening and being Flexible to their ideas and needs.

We will be Respectful and Inclusive of all Families.

As a Staff . . . we will remain Positive and Work Together.

We will stay Confident in who we are;

Encouraging each other to reach our Full Potential.”

## LARGE PUBLIC-SCHOOL PROGRAM

“We will live the dream to work together and respect each other, which will create a fun, developmentally appropriate environment for ALL to flourish. By using research-based practices through play and creative learning experiences, the HPS Early Childhood Program provides a strong foundation for learning and actively engaging families and the community where all members are key players in a positive learning environment.”

## SMALL COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM

“At the PATCH Early Childhood Center we embrace the joy, energy, sense of wonder, and inner beauty of each child, teacher, and parent. We create vibrant and peaceful classroom environments where children are free to explore and the teachers are intentional about creating child-centered learning opportunities. We value the cultures of the children and families to foster their growth and independence. We are committed to providing nurturing early learning experiences that form the foundation for the children’s educational journeys!”

## AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM

“To create an environment where children, teachers and parents are respected, valued, and fully engaged in all aspects of our program.”

# Reflective Practice Exercises

Creating a vision statement that is truly collaborative and reflective of all the constituents of your program is a multistep process. The following exercise will generate the key insights into the core beliefs and program aspirations that are the essential ingredients for a vibrant, collaborative vision statement. Doing each exercise is not necessary. Select the ones that are most relevant to you and gather the rich data that each exercise produces to write your vision statement.

## BIG ROCKS DEMONSTRATION

In order to develop a vision statement that is grounded by the core beliefs of your organization you need to spend some time identifying your guiding principles, or in leadership guru Stephen R. Covey’s phrase, *big rocks*. Why do you exist? Who do you serve? How do you serve them? What are the reasons you do what you do every day? Once these foundational principles are named, you can begin to move forward. This exercise helps the group to clearly define guiding principles—big rocks that shape and define the program.

**Materials needed:** Chart paper and marker, a quart Mason jar, 10 to 12 rocks (golf ball size or a bit larger), a bag of smaller rocks (large pebble size), and a bag of tiny rocks (fish tank stones work well).

### Process:

1. Take the glass jar and place it on a table in front of the group. Then simply say, “This glass jar represents your professional life here at Caring for All” (substitute your program’s name).
2. Ask participants what core values shape their work. Prompt them with follow-up questions: What brings you the greatest joy? Why do you work here? What gets you out of bed and into the program every day? When friends ask why you work here, how do you answer them? The

answers to these questions will generate the big rocks. For each response, put a big rock in the jar, and use chart paper to record the big rocks of the program.

3. Ask the group what day-to-day tasks fill up the jar of their professional life. The group will have a large number of responses (paperwork, planning, meetings, and so on). For each response, throw in a small handful of the medium-size rocks.
4. When the jar is almost full, ask the participants what small tasks of their professional lives fill up their jars. I often refer to this as the minutia of our daily work. Participants will have many responses, such as wiping noses, changing diapers, and cleaning. For each response, throw in a small handful of the tiny rocks.
5. When the jar is full to almost overflowing, stop and hold the jar up. Remind the group that the jar represents their professional life, and ask the pivotal question: What would happen if the big rocks were not placed in the jar first? The response is clear and always includes “They wouldn’t be in there” or “They wouldn’t fit,” and similar statements. One of my favorite responses was “They would be buried out in the playground.”
6. Debrief the key message from the exercise: We need to keep the big rocks—the reasons for doing the important work we do with children, families, and each other—at the center of all we do.

You can end this exercise here, and you will have an invaluable list of the big rocks for your program. However, completing the next steps takes this exercise to a more vibrant conclusion and gives you the opportunity to add new big rocks to your list.

### **Extended Activities**

**Classroom- and administrative-team reflections:** Divide the group by classroom teams, and, if possible, have an administrative team. Ask participants to work in their groups to discuss and define their own big rocks for their work together in the classrooms. If you like, give the groups a reflection sheet containing the following questions:

- What are your big rocks for your team? What do you care most about? What are your top priorities?
- Are you willing to make a commitment, right now, to put those big rocks in the glass jar of your life?
- What steps will you take to be sure the big rocks get in your jar of life first?

The sheet gives them a way to focus their conversation. When you collect the sheets after the exercise you’ll have more big rocks to add to the initial list.

**Classroom- and administrative-team skits:** This step produces amazingly positive energy and brings a sense of true ownership to the big rocks of the program. Ask each team to develop a list



of big-rock rules that will help them remember to put their big rocks in first. Then ask each team to create a short skit, poem, story, word play, or rap to perform for the whole group that reflects their big-rock rules. Encourage the groups to use any props that might be available in the program. Have a camera on hand to take pictures and videos of these powerful performances. When I share this idea with directors, many tell me that their staff members will never be willing to carry out the performance. Guess what? They all do! Seeing each other's skits is inspiring to the whole staff.

**Debrief the skits:** Be sure to have a follow-up discussion. Ask what participants learned about their big rocks. Do you have more big rocks to add to the initial list? What are the most important things you can do to keep the big rocks in the jar of your professional life?

## HOPES AND DREAMS

This activity is, by far, one of the simplest ways to learn your parents' and teachers' aspirations for the future of your program.

**Materials needed:** Index cards and pens. When doing this exercise with different groups, such as parents and teachers, I use different colors of index cards for the groups (parents, teachers, administrators, or board members).

### **Process:**

1. Set the stage. Discuss with the group that you would like to get shared perspectives on their hopes and dreams for the program. This exercise can be broad or specific. For a broad perspective on overall expectations for your program, ask for their hopes and dreams for their program in the next year or two years. For parents, it is important not to go too far into the future, as their child will age out of the program. For teachers, administrators, and board members, you can extend the timeline. Examples for a specific focus include the learning environment and social interactions.
2. Distribute index cards. Ask participants to write their hopes and dreams on index cards, one idea or thought per card.
3. Collect the cards.
4. Read the statements back to the group. People are often reluctant to share and read their own cards, so create opportunities for all the cards to be read without having individuals read their own. You can ask for volunteers to come up and read the cards back to the group with you. Or distribute the cards back to the group and ask everyone to read one. Again, ensure that participants do not read their own cards. One of the most powerful experiences I have had with this exercise was to do this first with teachers and then with parents at a parents' night event. After

I collected the cards I distributed them back to the parents in the room and then gave each teacher a card to read (not their own). Then, round-robin style, parents and teachers stood up and read the cards back. The sense of unity among the eighty people in the room was palpable. I can still recall the energy that created a driving force for our program that year.

5. Debrief. After all the cards have been read, ask the group: “What are the common themes? How do the hopes and dreams relate to the continued growth of the program?” Collect all the discussion points on chart paper.
6. Create a hopes and dreams list. Type up all thoughts on the index cards and the notes from the debriefing. Share them with participants and use them as guide points for creating your vision statement.

### **Optional Follow-Up Activities**

After doing this exercise at a parents’ night, I thought we should somehow tie the hopes and dreams into our end-of-the-year family event. I decided to create a video containing photos from the school year and quotes from the hopes and dreams cards. It showed the parents that we honored their thoughts and brought them to life daily in the program. The result was a moving and inspirational evening that allowed parents to see firsthand how valuable their thoughts were in shaping all aspects of our program.

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Susan MacDonald is the founder of Inspiring New Perspectives, a consultancy focused on empowering education leaders to create quality early childhood programs.

  
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