



Coaches' Perspectives on Implementing an Evidence-Based Practice in Typical Early Childhood Classrooms

Christen Park, PhD, Carl Sumi, PhD, Michelle Woodbridge, PhD,
Dan Cohen, PhD, Elisa Garcia, PhD
SRI International

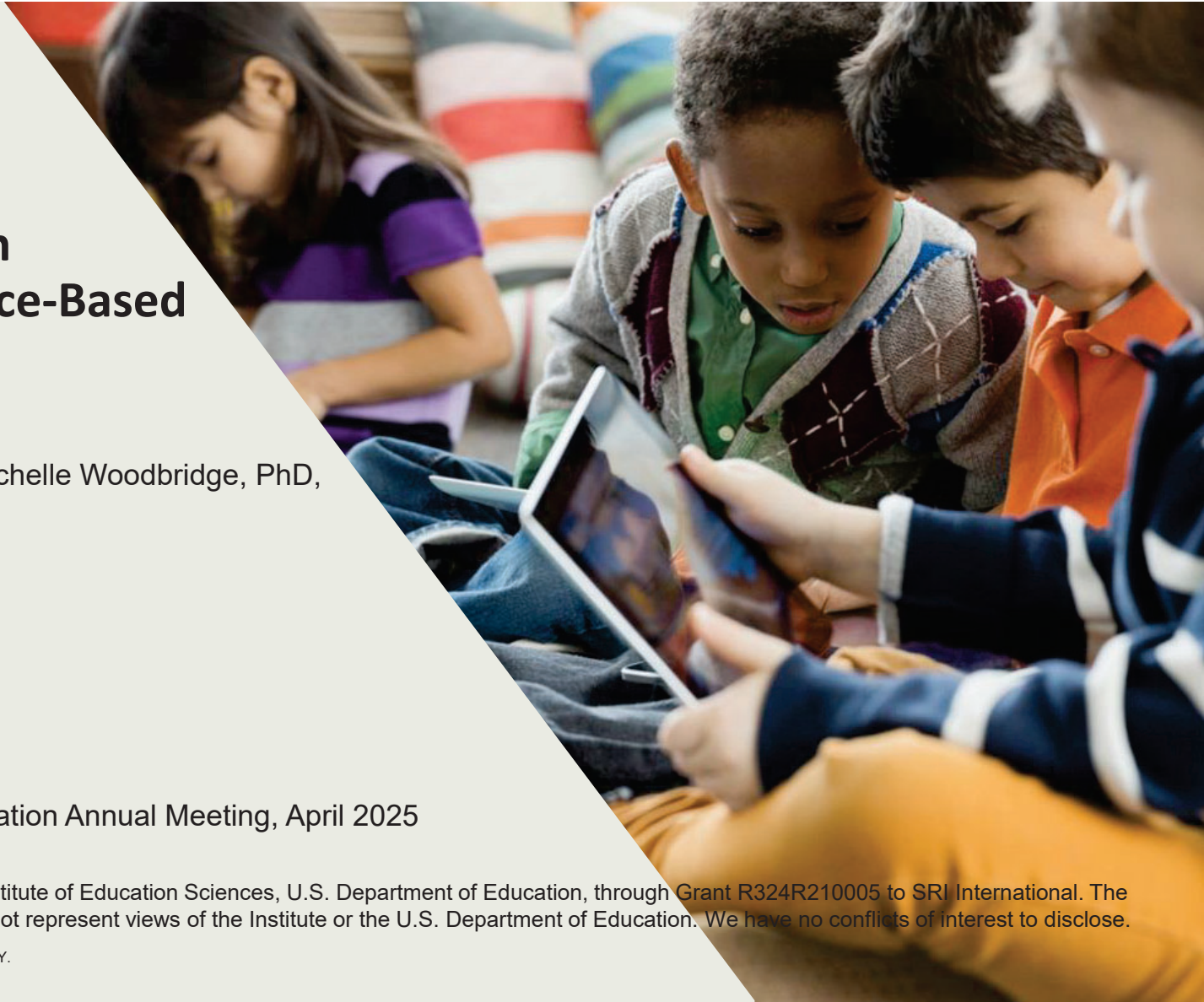
Maureen Conroy, PhD
University of Florida

Kevin Sutherland, PhD
Virginia Commonwealth University

American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, April 2025

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R324R210005 to SRI International. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

©2024 SRI INTERNATIONAL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PROPRIETARY.



Purpose



Research tells us that persistent challenging behavior has harmful long-term effects.

The **good news** is that evidence shows problem behavior is alterable with effective early intervention.

Positive teacher-child interactions can serve as a “protective” factor for social/emotional and academic success.

(Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012; McCabe & Altamura, 2011; O’Conner & McCartney, 2007)



Professional Development Components



Rules

Collaborative Coaching

Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Training: Competent Learners Achieving School Success

Linking & Mastery

**BEST in CLASS
Practices**

**BEST in CLASS
Teacher Workshop
and Manual**

**BEST in CLASS
Practice-based
Coaching**

Evidence for BEST in CLASS-PK



In comparison to Business as Usual, there is evidence that
BEST in CLASS-PK leads to:

Improved
classroom
atmosphere

Improved
teacher-child
interactions

Improvements in
child **appropriate**
behavior,
engagement, and
social skills

Reductions in child
challenging
behavior

- **BEST in CLASS-PK** is an intervention that mitigates obstacles shown to negatively impact short- and long-term child outcomes

- These findings have maintained

Over **time**
&
Across **trials**



Systematic Replication Study



Current evidence base for BEST in CLASS-PK from **efficacy trials**

- Conducted under **ideal** conditions:
 - Coaches were **highly trained** and experienced research staff, closely **supervised**.
 - Coaches observed teaching practices and **corrected deviations**.
 - Program developers provided **regular monitoring**.

Systematic replication study

- Intervention implemented in **naturally occurring** conditions (e.g., typical early childhood classrooms) with **typical end users** (e.g., current program staff) and **evaluated independently**.
- Results will provide practically important impacts on **meaningful education outcomes**.



Current Project: BEST in CLASS implementation and outcomes study



District partnership considerations

- Time commitment
- Staffing
- Alignment with district priorities
- Data collection activities
- Previous experience with research



Participating Sites



Site 1: Northeast/ Central Florida

- ECE agency serving children in 14 counties
- Suburban and **rural communities**
- ~3,000 children across more than 300 Head Start classrooms
- Children are **44% Black, 31% White**, 14% Latinx, 6% Multi-racial
- 8% speak Spanish at home
- 7% are children with disabilities

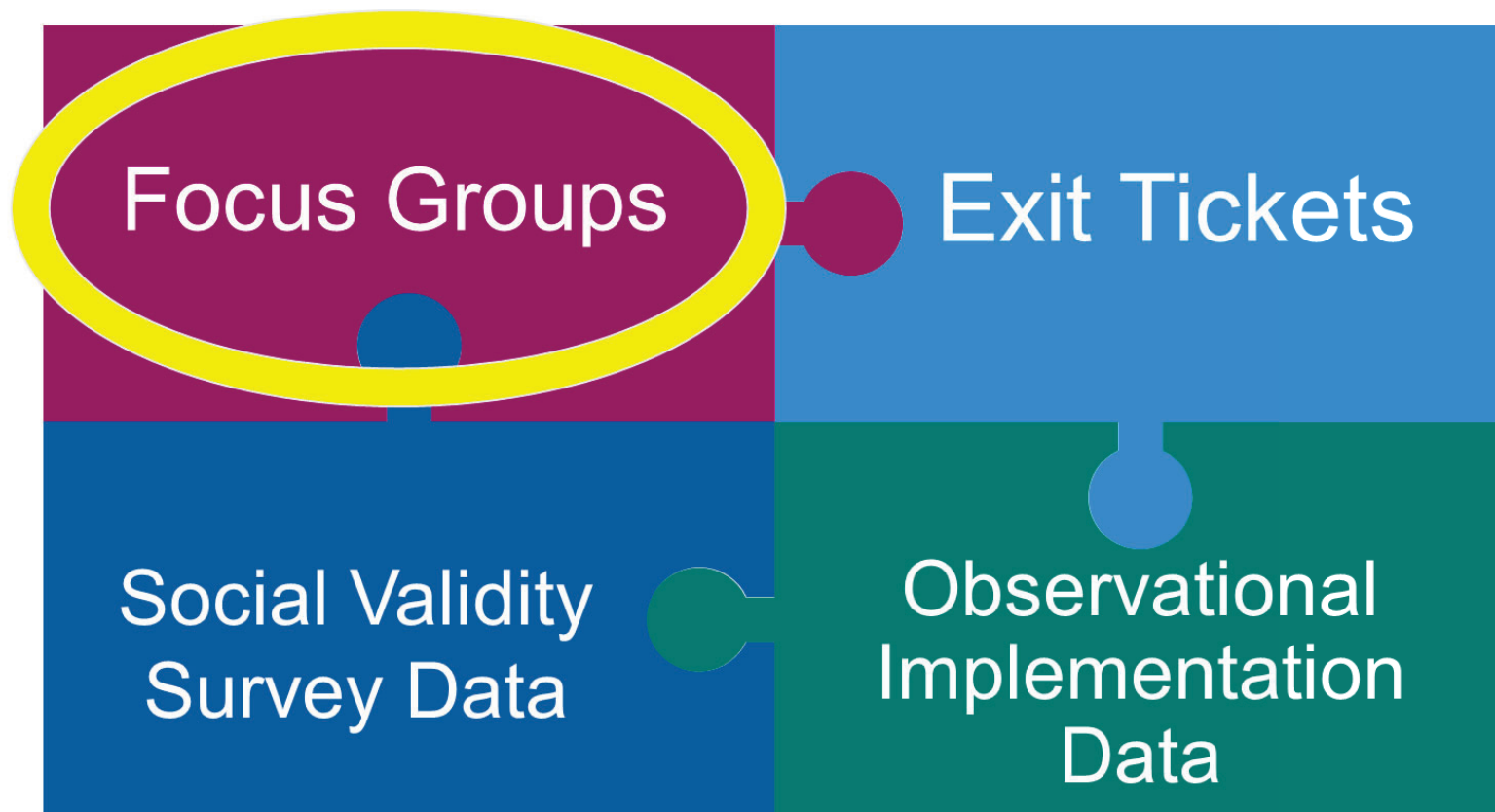
Site 2: Northern Virginia

- Public school district in **mid-size city**
- 95 early childhood programs
- Children are **89% Black**, 4% Multi-racial, 3% Latinx, 3% White
- 3% speak Spanish at home
- 8% are children with disabilities

Site 3: Northern California

- **Suburban** school district
- Over 1,000 children across approximately 190 center-based Head Start programs
- Children are **37% Asian, 33% Latinx, 20% White**, 8% Multi-racial, 2% Black
- **40% speak Spanish at home**
- 17% are children with disabilities

Measures of Implementation



Research Questions



1. How do district-based coaches experience and perceive the implementation of BEST in CLASS?
2. What barriers and facilitators do district-based coaches encounter during implementation?
3. How do district-based coaches perceive the impact of BEST in CLASS on teacher practices?
4. How do developer coaches' experience the implementation of BEST in CLASS under naturally occurring conditions?

Focus Group Methodology



Sample

- 2 cohorts (2022-2023, 2023-2024)
 - 14 district-based coaches
 - Behavior intervention specialists and instructional coaches
 - 4 developer coaches

Focus Group Methodology



Interview Protocol

- SRI researchers developed interview questions from a review of the BEST in CLASS **Coaching Integrity Manual** and in collaboration with VCU/UF partners.

Focus Group Analysis

- **6-Phase Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
 - SRI developed *a priori* codes based on existing theory, literature, and interview question content.
 - Analysis after each year of implementation



Findings

BEST in CLASS-PK Usability and Relevance of Practices



Useful and applicable to the needs of teachers

Tangible tools for preventing children's challenging behaviors

"I think these tools are things that can help [teachers]. I can give you a **tangible practice** to use so that you can be ahead of the behavior, being in front of instead of behind it."

"I liked it that it was trying to step in ahead of the challenging practices. I guess you'd call it an antecedent kind of thing... It **gave the teachers the tools to identify and try to help that child before there were incidents.**"

Helpful in supporting the classroom as a whole

"I think all of our teachers saw improvement in the class as a whole, not just the focal children, which feels good."

BEST in CLASS-PK Usability of Materials



Program materials and goals forms were supportive and helpful in facilitating the coaching process

Some coaches shared that coaching forms were burdensome. **Coaches didn't always have sufficient time** to complete all necessary forms.

Some coaches felt that the teacher manual was overwhelming for teachers

- **Possible tradeoff between providing a lot of information and realistic expectations for teachers to review all materials**

Essential Program Components: Practice-Based Coaching



Use of **practice-based coaching model** provided key opportunities to model and support teachers in BEST in CLASS-PK practices

- Goal setting as an essential step for teachers
- Partnership model guides teacher change

Importance of **coach-teacher alliance building** through ongoing meetings

“I think the greatest part of it was **consistency** of it. We would meet with them every week, and we would talk about it every week, and **we'd get to see the progress as they went along**. And I feel like my teachers definitely started feeling more confident about what was going on as we continued, and they really feel that they saw changes in the children when they were utilizing these practices, and noticed that not only those children that we were focusing on, but the group of children as a whole.”

Essential Program Components: Sequence of Practices



Sequence of BEST in CLASS-PK modules are important

- Teachers **build on and expand on core practices** learned from previous weeks
- Combining and using **practices in tandem** as teachers progress through program

“No matter what practice you were working on that particular week, I still reflected back on what we did previously, or what we're going to be doing, going forward, and how they're gonna make that connection [between practices]. I'm still intertwining all of them throughout our conversation. **I felt like that made it easier for them to make those connections how some of them will just easily go hand in hand if you're doing it.**”

Facilitator of Implementation: Ongoing Coach Supports



Weekly district-based coach meetings with site leads provided ongoing supports

- **Support system** for district-based coaches

“It felt much more important in these sessions to be a **cheerleader and really encouraging**. You know, “Thank you for working on this, and we know you have so much competing demands.” And “Look how much growth we've seen in the teacher” as a way to sort of kind of motivate them that this investment was worth it. It just seemed like that was a really important piece of this, like alliance building, as part of this team to just **communicate kind of both ways that, like we valued each other and that we recognize there was a lot of other stuff going on.** [...] That encouragement piece like felt like it got kind of boosted this season. “

- Providing **individualized support** for district-based coaches based on role and experience

Facilitator of Implementation: Ongoing Coach Supports



Weekly district-based coach meetings with site leads provided ongoing supports

- Development and **maintenance of BEST in CLASS-PK content knowledge** amongst coaches

“Overall, I felt like the weekly coaching sessions were really wonderful. [...] But we realized that some of the practices, they weren't grasping it as deep as we hoped. So, **we really realigned the content of the trainings and focused on them.** We showed examples of the practices and we really talked about the practices and prepared them for their next coaching session. [...] I think that really helped them, and it really drove them back to the manual, and we wanted them to use that as a resource.”

- Weekly sessions acted as **accountability** and supported implementation over time

Facilitator of Implementation: Alignment to Existing Structures



Program alignment with existing professional development structures (e.g., CLASS observations, Pyramid Model, other behavioral supports)

“I think maybe the only other thing I would add is one of coach in particular, who was really excited about BEST in CLASS, and was talking about, you know, using it this year.

Was trying really hard to fit it with an existing intervention that was running and asking me lots and lots of questions about, how does this work with this or like, how do I combine this with this? [...] If these are complementary, it's much more likely that people are gonna latch on to the new thing.”

“Being also a class officer observer and then utilizing like BEST in CLASS practices. It's kinda neat because I feel like we go over regular CLASS observation stuff with our staff. I felt like using the BEST in CLASS, was able to break it down a little more for them, and going through like the definition, and like the plain, simple examples that we can give them. I feel like it hit home a little better for them.”

Implementation Challenges



Variance of **teacher engagement** week to week

- Some challenges with initial teacher buy-in

“That initial meeting was kind of like, we're going to come in there and we're going to help you deal with behaviors. It felt like an **invasion of space** more than it felt like you're there to help me... But it felt like it was going to be a lot more **intrusive** on the teachers than it actually was, which is why I feel like a lot of teachers didn't really sign up for it, because it was like somebody's going to be **in my classroom all the time up in my space**, telling me what to do.”

- Coaches felt that consistent teacher engagement and effort to refine their knowledge and skills was integral due to the length and intensity of the coaching schedule.

Implementation Challenges



Teachers need multiple training days to learn content (in addition to ongoing coaching)

“The teachers get that one-day training. It was a lot of a content and then, when time goes by, they already forgot those practices, and I spend so much time to review just what they have learned. And then they have other responsibilities. And then it is becoming not as important as other responsibilities.”

Co-teacher dynamics

- Coach perception that lack of involvement of co-teachers may result in a mismatch between classroom staffing model and structure of program, which only worked with the lead teacher

“I have always had the co-teacher kind of just sit in alongside and listen to us. I think both teachers should be involved because they're both an intricate part of that child's day. And if one's not there that day, then the other one can carry the routine of the practices.”

Implementation Challenges



Competing demands and **high caseloads** of district-based coaches

“I was surprised about how many competing demands they had... It seemed like it was next level, they would get pulled randomly into a grant meeting or have a teacher that wouldn't show up, so they'd be driving across town to then fill in... They took a lot of those meetings from their car or walking in the rain to get to their next building... **it really illustrated their dedication to sticking with it... But I think it also inhibited how much they could participate.**”

“We had a **lot of people that were coaches that had quit, and somebody had to fill that hole.** So I doubled up my schedule. I mean, it's happened probably around the nation this past couple of years. But now that we're downsizing, I'm hoping that my caseload will not be as heavy. But yeah, **to be effective at anything that we do, you know we don't want to be overburdened, or rushed,** you know you don't want to rush through the process with these teachers because they're not going to get the full potential of it.”

Indicators of Success: Teachers



Increased **teacher confidence and sense of agency**

“I think it empowered them. You know, [another district-based coach] spoke a lot about like how it's really important for teachers to feel like they're in the **driver seat in their classroom** and I think we can put **tools in their toolbox**.”

Changes to **teacher-student relationships**, particularly with focal student identified with challenging behaviors

“[...] definitely the relationships were being strengthened. Not that [the teachers] weren't paying attention to anyone else in the class, but really establishing, really **working on establishing relationships with those [focal] kiddos based on the attention that they are receiving in different practices**.”

Indicators of Success: Classrooms



Teacher observation of **positive changes in student behavior in the classroom**

“I think both of my teachers saw changes in the other kids before they saw changes in the focal children. And so, seeing that it did make a difference, even if not necessarily with that child. They felt hopeful, even though, like that particular kid wasn't making any progress. Other kids were, and it kind of **created this environment where that that child had a better chance of expected behavior.**”

Indicators of Success: District-Based Coaches



BEST in CLASS offered a framework for new coaches

“I was on the kind of newer end of the whole coaching experience. So I really feel a lot more confident in my coaching now than I did before. [...] I think I think my coaching got a lot stronger.”

Coaches reflected on improvements in their own coaching practices

“I feel like I talk about teachers growth. But I also feel like I have grown a lot over this process as well and a lot of ways. I would tell the teachers that I was coaching. I say, we're kind of learning this kind of together, and we're supporting each other. And so yeah, I feel going forward really, more, much more confident than we started out right.”

Coaches were able to build on existing coaching practices



Key Takeaways and Implications

Key Takeaways



- Coaches found BEST in CLASS-PK to be practical and impactful due to the focus on concrete strategies. Coaches observed changes in student behavior, teacher practice, and teacher self-efficacy.
- Coaches discussed overall classroom effects beyond focal students.
- Strong coach-teacher alliance and ongoing coaching supports were seen as essential for successful implementation and fidelity.
- Consideration for the school context and infrastructure is important to support implementation.
 - An implementation challenge included competing coach demands and high caseloads.
 - An implementation facilitator included alignment of BEST in CLASS-PK with other professional development

Implications for Practice



- When designing coaching programs consider integrating program elements that are practical, relationship-driven, and adaptable, with attention to real-world classroom dynamics like co-teaching and limited time.
- Provide consistent and ongoing supports to teachers and coaches to support fidelity and continuous learning.
- Ensure programs are aligned with existing professional development systems to promote sustainability.



Student Behavior Blog



Purpose: To help stakeholders learn about **evidence-based** approaches to support all students' **positive behavior**, **mental health**, and **well-being**.

Includes tips and findings from our research, evaluation, and TA work.

- Perspectives from our partners on the ground, too!

Send comments and inquiries about partnering or working with us to:

studentbehaviorblog@sri.com

Visit us at:

<https://studentbehaviorblog.org/>