



Research Brief

Coaching in Early Care and Education Settings: A Snapshot of Coach Caseloads and Time Spent Coaching

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Introduction

An early care and education (ECE) coach's caseload might shape the way they coach. Caseload includes the number of programs, center or family child care (FCC) classrooms,¹ and center teachers or FCC providers that an ECE coach works with. The research literature does not tell us much about the typical size and complexity of caseloads for ECE coaches or whether those caseloads affect the coaching provided. Across previous studies examined in a literature review of coaching, only a limited number note the caseload of the coaches involved in an evaluation, and none included caseload as part of their analysis or findings (Aikens et al. 2017). Similarly, a review of coaching models across 14 states did not find guidelines or requirements for coach caseload, and a literature review undertaken by the same research team did not reveal any studies that tested the effects of coach caseload (Norton et al. 2017). A recent evaluation of the Virginia Preschool Initiative found that caseload was highly variable, even when resources were equally distributed for professional development (Hamre et al. 2017). A descriptive study of coaching in Head Start, the Early Learning Mentor Coach initiative (Howard et al. 2013), found that coach caseload varied; coaches served between 1 and 28 centers and a varied number of staff within those centers. In the Early Learning Mentor Coach study, caseload was related to some aspects of coaching (for example, the number of roles a coach takes on) but not others (for example, the methods of communication coaches use). Caseloads are similarly variable for coaches serving FCC homes (Bromer and Korfmacher 2017). The literature does not offer guidance about the amount and variety of coaching that can be implemented well by a coach.

The size of a coach's caseload might influence the amount of time they spend coaching and the amount of time they have to devote to each person they coach (Hamre et al. 2017; Bromer and Korfmacher 2017). In addition to caseload, the frequency and intensity of coaching can also influence how much time coaches spend coaching (Artman-Meeker et al. 2015; Bromer and Korfmacher 2017; Schachter 2015). The frequency or intensity of coaching is sometimes referred to as *coaching dosage*. Dosage is often described from the teacher or provider perspective as the amount of coaching they receive. In this brief, we describe aspects of the frequency and intensity of coaching from the coaches' perspectives, as part of the total time they spend coaching. The frequency and intensity of coaching interactions vary across approaches described in the research literature. For example, in a study of coaching within the context of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, the coaching occurred weekly to twice a month, it lasted several months to a year or more, and particular coaching sessions varied in length (Isner et al. 2011). Generally, the amount of coaching is thought to be important to successful change and progress in coaching, but research is limited in identifying the specific amount of coaching needed to affect center teacher or FCC provider and child outcomes (Artman-Meeker et al. 2015).

This brief describes findings from 2019 surveys of ECE coaches, center teachers, and FCC providers about coach caseload and the time coaches spend coaching (the frequency and length of interactions with teachers and providers). Information about the Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings (SCOPE) 2019 surveys is available in the box on this page. SCOPE did not attempt to address questions about the influence of coach caseload or time spent coaching on coaching outcomes. Rather, information from this study can help the field understand ECE coaching variation. Defining this variation can inform future research about the connections between caseload and other aspects of coaching, such as quality and time use with coaching activities. Understanding this variation also can be useful to ECE programs and coaching organizations, as they think about how to establish expectations for their coaches' caseloads and how to support coaching experiences for teachers and providers. Further, these findings might be of interest to those seeking to support coaches' professional development.

Overview

Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings: Coach caseload and time spent coaching from the 2019 SCOPE surveys

The Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings (SCOPE) was funded by the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. Mathematica conducted this project in partnership with consultant Chrishana M. Lloyd (Myles Ahead, LLC); Child Trends; and the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

SCOPE goals. Our primary goal in the SCOPE project was to learn more about the ways coaching is implemented to improve instructional practice in early care and education (ECE). SCOPE focused on coaching in center-based classrooms and family child care (FCC) homes that served preschool-age children from families with low incomes. SCOPE also explored the programmatic and systems-level factors associated with coaching.

Information about SCOPE, including its recruitment criteria, data collection, and sample, can be found here:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/study-coaching-practices-early-care-and-education-settings-2016-2021>.

This brief. This brief focuses on information from the SCOPE 2019 surveys with coaches, center teachers, and FCC providers. We describe findings from the coach, teacher, and FCC surveys related to the coaches' caseloads and the dosage of the coaching.

Settings and participants. The centers and FCC homes in the SCOPE sample served children from families with a low income primarily through a Head Start grant and/or with Child Care and Development Fund subsidies (though many settings had other sources of revenue as well). When responses differ by setting, or when it is helpful to interpretation of findings, we present data for Head Start centers (that is, centers with any Head Start funding), centers not funded by Head Start, and FCC homes.

Some coaches worked across these types of settings. In the survey, coaches reported on the settings in which they worked, and in this brief, we report on the number of coaches with mixed caseloads. For questions about specific coaching activities, respondents were asked to focus on one type of setting in the survey, and their data is grouped with that setting.

Exhibit 1 on the next page shows the number of coaches, center teachers, and FCC providers who responded to the SCOPE 2019 surveys. Across all 100 coach responses in SCOPE 2019, 70 focus on coaches' work with centers and 30 focus on coaches' work with FCC providers. If teachers or FCC providers were working with more than one coach, they were asked to focus on the coach who had also been recruited for SCOPE 2019.

Exhibit 1. SCOPE 2019 study sample



	Head Start-funded centers	Centers not funded by Head Start	FCC homes
SCOPE 2019 study sample sizes			
Coaches	42	28	30
Directors	80	50	38

Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Teacher and FCC Provider Survey; SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Note: FCC = family child care.

Caseload

Coach caseload varied widely, and some coaches worked across ECE centers and FCC homes.

We asked coaches about their caseload in three different ways:

1. Classroom-focused (the number of center classrooms or FCC classrooms the coach worked with)
2. Setting-focused (the number of centers or FCC homes the coach worked with)
3. Individual-focused (the number of center teachers or FCC providers the coach worked with)

Exhibit 2 shows the average response for these three components of caseload.^{2,3} There was wide variety in the caseloads among coaches. Asking about caseload in multiple ways enables us to understand underlying variety in coaching. Future research could be designed to explore these differences and how coaches interpret them in order to identify the best ways to measure coaching caseloads.

Exhibit 2. ECE coach caseloads of classrooms, settings, and individuals varied

	Classrooms		Settings		Individuals	
	Center classrooms	FCC classrooms	Centers or schools	FCC homes	Lead teachers	FCC providers
Sample size	98	98	98	98	98	98
Mean	15.3	5.3	6.8	5.1	16.0	5.6
Median	12	0	5	0	11.5	0
Range	0-50	0-50	0-50	0-50	0-50	0-50

Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Notes: Coaches reported the number they worked with for each of the categories in this table (centers, center classrooms, and center teachers; FCC classrooms, FCC homes, and FCC providers). The web survey was programmed such that the maximum value allowable for any of the categories was 50. This was done to reduce erroneous values as we did not expect many respondents would have a caseload of 50 or more. Eight of the 98 respondents never responded with the maximum value. FCC = family child care.

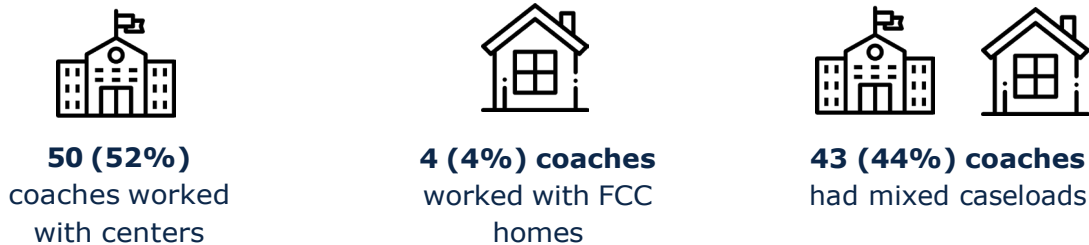
The three ways we asked about caseload are likely associated with one another, but each might have different implications for the time a coach spends coaching. For example, settings might greatly vary in the number of classrooms to be supported, and classrooms might vary in the number of staff to be coached. Coaching evaluations should measure these layers of caseload variables to understand coach burden and complexity. In the data presentations that follow, we use the number of center classrooms and/or FCC classrooms that a coach worked with as the total caseload variable.

Coaches who worked with centers and FCC homes (mixed caseloads) in SCOPE 2019 reported higher total caseloads than coaches who worked only with centers or only with FCC homes. Slightly less than half of the coaches in SCOPE 2019 had mixed caseloads (Exhibit 3). Only four coaches in the SCOPE 2019 sample worked only with FCC homes. The remaining half of coaches (52 percent) worked only with centers.



44% of the coaches in SCOPE 2019 had mixed caseloads, working across centers and FCC homes

Exhibit 3. Most ECE coaches worked with only centers or had mixed caseloads



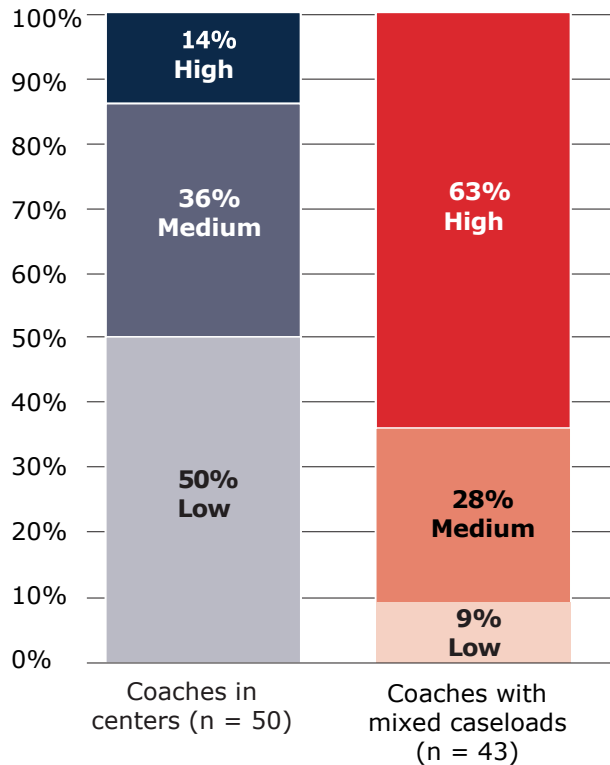
Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Notes: Coaches reported the number of centers, center classrooms, and center teachers they work with. Any coach who reported at least one of these three is included as working with centers.

FCC = family child care.

Because caseload had such a big range, we split the coaches into low (number of cases ranging from 0 to 5), medium (number of cases ranging from 6 to 26), and high (number of cases ranging from 28 to 75) caseload groups based on their reports of the total number of center classrooms and FCC classrooms in their caseload.⁴ Exhibit 4 shows the percentage of coaches with mixed caseloads and the percentage who work with just centers in the high, medium, and low caseload groups. Because there were only four coaches who worked just with FCC classrooms, we did not include them in the exhibit. About half of the coaches who worked only with centers had caseloads in the medium or high range, while almost all (91 percent) of the coaches who had mixed caseloads had medium or high caseloads.

Exhibit 4. Most ECE coaches who had mixed caseloads had medium or high caseloads



Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Notes: In the survey, coaches reported on multiple aspects of their caseload. This exhibit reflects coach reports about the numbers of center classrooms and FCC classrooms they worked with. The high caseload group (number of cases ranging from 28 to 75) includes coaches with a caseload in the top quartile of the caseload distribution in the SCOPE sample; the medium caseload group (number of cases ranging from 6 to 26) includes those in the middle two quartiles, and the low caseload group (number of cases ranging from 0 to 5) includes those in the bottom quartile.

The group of coaches who work only with FCCs was excluded from this exhibit because of small sample size (n = 4).

Amount of time coaches have available for each classroom

We calculated the number of hours coaches have per classroom in their caseload (using the amount of time in their job they reported spending on coaching activities).

When combined with information about a coach’s total caseload, the amount of time they have available for each classroom could help the field better understand coach workload. There is a wide range in available time. Future research could be aimed at unpacking how time per classroom varies by characteristics of the coach, the center teacher, the FCC provider, the setting, or the coaching approach. Future research might also be helpful in identifying how coaches use this time.

- Average time spent per classroom: 2.3 hours per classroom per week
- Range: 0.3 hours to 10 hours
- Median: 1.5 hours per classroom per week
- Mode: 1 hour per classroom per week

Time spent on coaching responsibilities

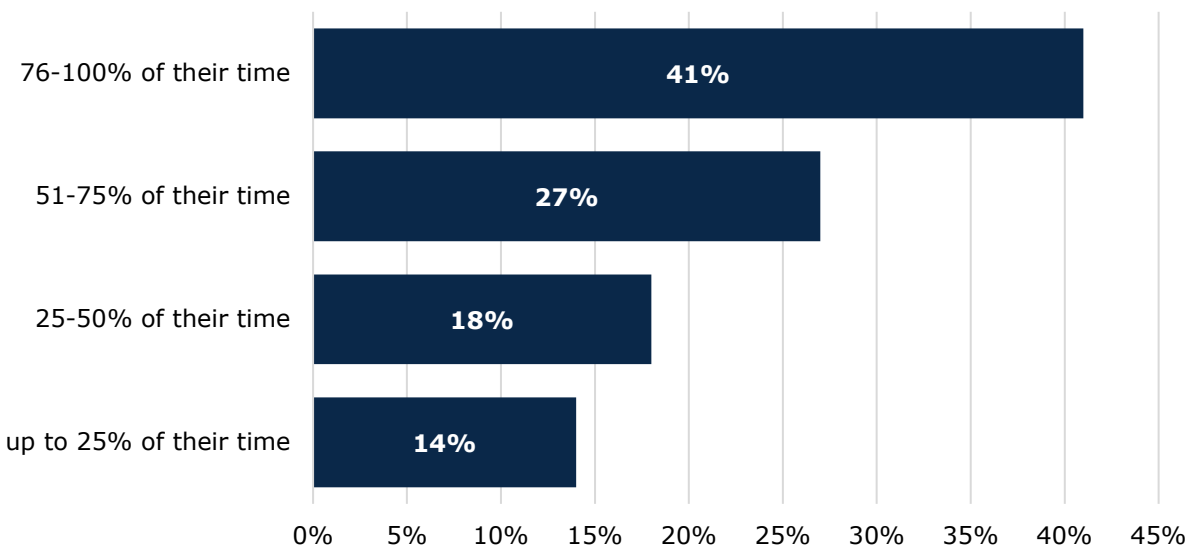
Coach perspective

In addition to the number of classrooms (or individuals or setting) a coach works with, the amount of time coaches spend in their role as a coach and communicating with teachers and providers might also impact the structure and quality of coaching. Time spent could improve or undermine quality and impact. A great deal of time with each teacher or provider may be beneficial or may overburden the coach or may strain the

coach–teacher or coach–provider relationship. In this section, we describe the time coaches spend working with teachers and providers, split by FCC homes and centers (Head Start funded and non-Head Start funded).⁵

The majority (95 percent) of SCOPE 2019 coaches worked full time (at least 35 hours per week). Sixty-eight (68) percent of those coaches spent more than half their time doing coaching-related work. As Exhibit 5 shows, there was a similar pattern for coaches who worked with Head Start centers, those who worked with non-Head Start centers, and those who worked with FCC homes. As expected, the bigger the caseload, the greater percentage of a coach’s job was spent doing coaching-related activities ($r(96) = .34, p = .05$).

Exhibit 5. Time coaches spent on coaching duties, among those working full time



Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Notes: Coaches reported how many hours per week they worked; in this analysis, full-time work is defined as 35 or more hours per week. Coaches also reported how many of their weekly hours were related to their work as a coach; they could choose to respond in hours or as a percentage.

Almost all SCOPE 2019 coaches (89 percent across settings) met at least monthly with the teachers or FCC providers they worked with (see Exhibit 6). The length of the average coaching meeting also varied by setting (see Exhibit 7). Coaches working with FCC providers reported the longest meetings (an average of 92.6 minutes). As discussed earlier, coaches working with FCC providers tended to meet slightly less frequently than those working with centers. The nature of working with FCC providers might be part of the reason for less frequent but longer meetings with FCC providers. For example, spread out locations may make meetings less frequent. A lack of coverage for children during care hours may make it more challenging to have frequent meetings, or FCC home isolation may make the visit more welcome and thus longer. It is also possible that meetings with FCC providers are longer because coaches meet with them less frequently and so simply have more material to cover.

Exhibit 6. Most ECE coaches met with teacher and FCC providers at least monthly

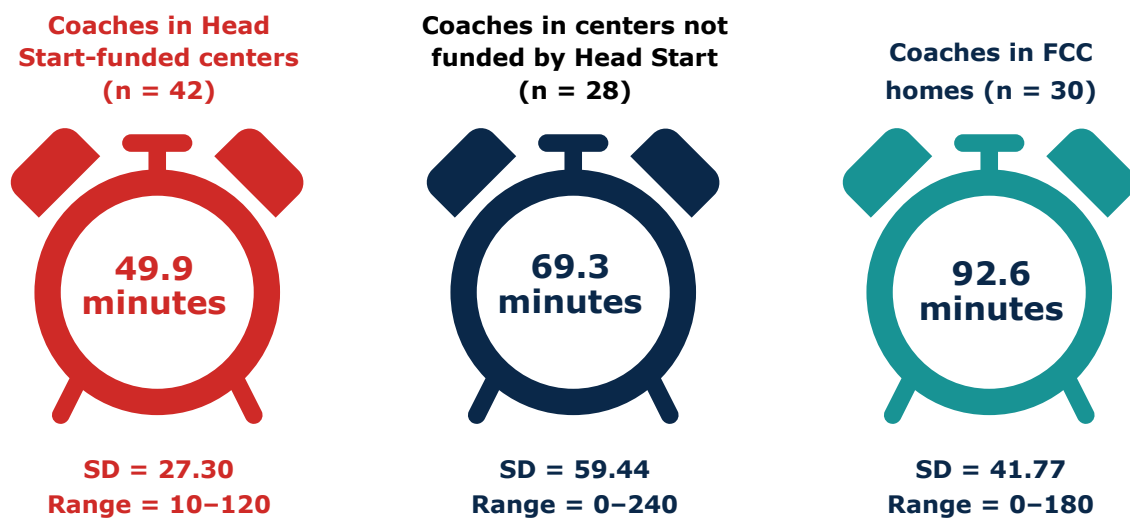
	Coaches who work in Head Start-funded centers (n = 42)	Coaches who work in centers not funded by Head Start (n = 28)	Coaches who work with FCC homes (n = 30)
One or more times a week	31%	14%	16%
Two or more times a month	38%	50%	33%
About once a month	29%	25%	47%
Less than once a month	2%	11%	3%

Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Notes: Coaches were asked, “On average, how frequently do you have coaching meetings with an individual whom you coach?” Response categories included “two to three times a week,” “about once a week,” “two to three times a month,” “about once a month,” and “less than once a month.” The top two response categories are combined in this table.

FCC = family child care.

Exhibit 7. ECE coaches who worked with FCC providers spent the longest time in coaching meetings



Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Note: Coaches were asked “On average, how much time do you spend in a typical coaching meeting interacting with an individual whom you coach?”

FCC = family child care; SD = standard deviation.







The frequency with which coaches met with their teachers or providers and the length of those meetings were related to the size of their caseload but not in the way we might expect. The coaches with bigger caseloads met more frequently and reported longer meetings with the center teachers and FCC providers.⁶

Teacher and FCC provider perspective

We also asked teachers and FCC providers about who was included in the meetings they had with coaches. The number of people participating in coaching meetings might increase demands on a coach’s time. **SCOPE 2019 teachers and FCC providers reported that when they met with their coaches, they met one-on-one and in groups.**

Exhibit 8 shows who participated in coaching meetings, split by the type of setting that teachers and providers worked in. Across settings, at least 80 percent of teachers or providers reported that at least some of the time, they met with their coach one-on-one. However, many teachers and FCC providers also reported that other people joined their meeting with their coach. For example, about two-thirds of teachers in Head Start and non-Head Start centers (60 percent and 58 percent, respectively) met with their coach along with other teachers from their classroom or setting. About one-third (29 percent) of FCC providers reported meeting with their coach along with other providers.

Exhibit 8. Most ECE teachers and FCC providers met with their coaches one-on-one or in groups

	Teachers in Head Start-funded centers (n = 80)	Teachers in centers not funded by Head Start (n = 50)	FCC providers (n = 38)
 Meet with coach alone (one-on-one)	81%	80%	87%
 Meet with coach and teachers/providers from my setting (as a group)	60%	58%	29%
 Meet with coach and teachers from other classrooms in my center (as a group)	23%	36%	N.A.
 Meet with coach and my supervisor or director (as a group)	14%	38%	N.A.
 Meet with coach and teachers/providers from other centers/FCCs (as a group)	8%	6%	16%
 Meet with coach and other types of staff from my center (as a group)	6%	14%	N.A.

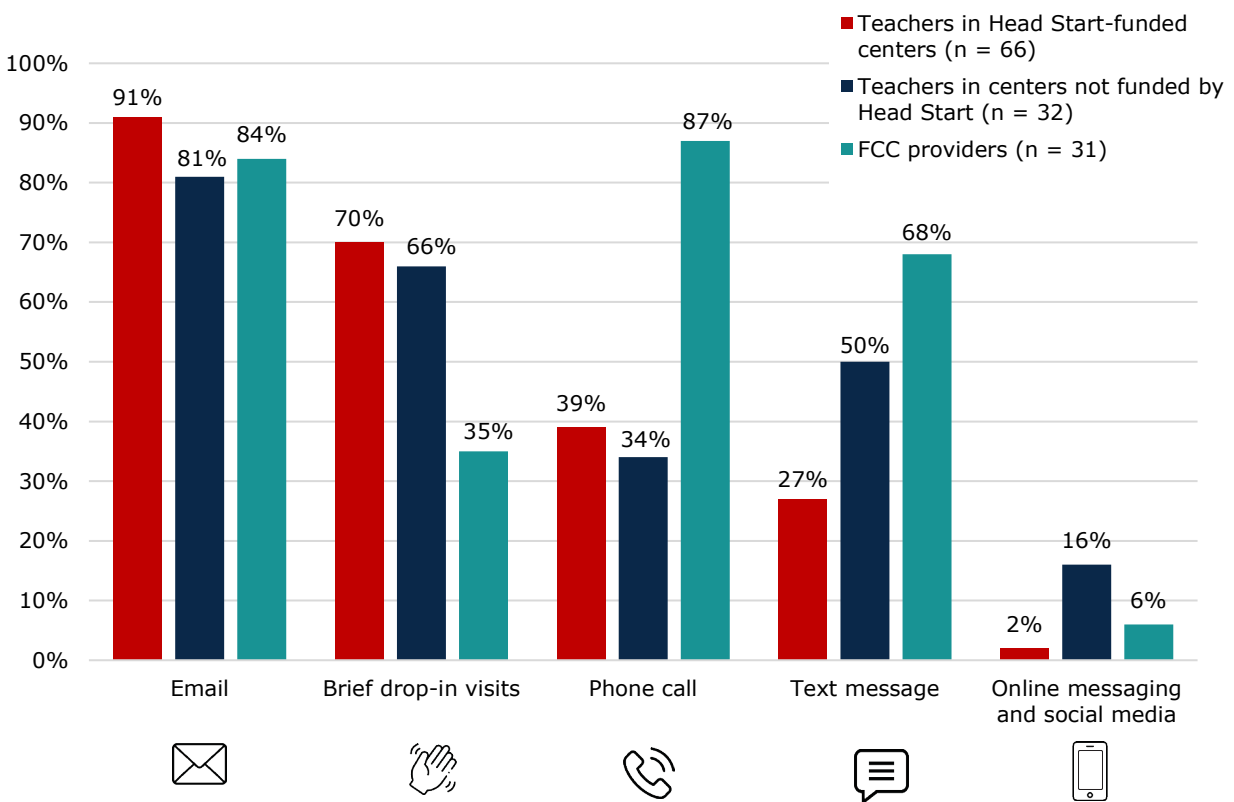
Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Teacher and FCC Provider Survey.

Notes: Teachers and FCC providers were asked, “During in-person coaching meetings, do you meet with [your coach] alone or with other teachers or staff too?” and were presented with all the options shown in the table. Respondents could select more than one option.

FCC = family child care; N.A. = not applicable; item only presented to center teachers in the survey.

In addition to the more formal meetings, SCOPE 2019 teachers and FCC providers reported that most coaches (65 percent) communicated with them regularly between meetings (more than once a month). Teachers and FCC providers reported that they had an average of two communications with their coaches between meetings. Exhibit 9 shows the types of communication. The most common forms of communication between meetings were email and drop-in visits. In addition to the forms of communication in Exhibit 9, 3 percent of FCC providers reported virtual meetings with their coach between their regular meetings. Drop-in visits were the only form of communication between meetings that was significantly related to caseload, with fewer drop-in visits occurring among coaches with higher caseloads.⁷

Exhibit 9. ECE teachers and FCC providers communicated with their coach between coaching meetings in varied ways



Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Teacher and FCC Provider Survey.

Note: Teachers and FCC providers were asked, “What methods of communication do you and/or your coach use between coaching meetings?” and were presented with all the options shown in the exhibit as well as one more option (virtual meetings). The most common options selected by respondents are included in the exhibit. In the survey, online messaging and social media were presented as separate options but are combined for reporting ease. Respondents could select more than one option.

FCC = family child care.

Key takeaways about ECE coaching caseload and time spent coaching

- **Caseload size was highly varied and typically larger for SCOPE 2019 coaches who worked across centers and FCC homes.** The broad range in caseload size for ECE settings aligns with the few prior research studies and the lack of standard guidance or evidence for effective coaching caseloads (Hamre et al. 2017; Howard et al. 2013).
- **Most ECE coaches in SCOPE 2019 worked full time and spent the majority of their working hours involved in coaching-related activities, suggesting that coaching was the primary component of their job.** The bigger the caseload, the greater percentage of a coach's job was spent on coaching-related activities. It could be that coaches whose job description includes more time coaching receive bigger caseloads.
- **Across settings and caseload size, SCOPE 2019 coaches met and communicated frequently with teachers and FCC providers.** Caseload size was related to the frequency with which coaches met with teachers and FCC providers and the time they spent in those meetings. Coaches with bigger caseloads met more frequently and had longer meetings with teachers and FCC providers. It is possible that caseload size is related to the skills and management capabilities of the coach, or perhaps coaches with larger caseloads use a coaching structure or approach that determines the frequency and length of meetings. Caseload size was not related to communication outside of meetings, although drop-in visits occurred more frequently among coaches with smaller caseloads.

Areas for future exploration related to coaching caseload and time spent coaching

- **Understand more about the different aspects of caseload size.** In future studies, it will be helpful to explore which aspects of caseload size (whether measured by individuals, classrooms, settings, or FCC homes) matter most for time spent coaching, coach and teacher/provider engagement, and coaching effectiveness. There might be no single way to effectively measure caseloads, and including the range of measures might be important to understanding best practices for setting caseload sizes for coaches. Which aspect of caseload size matters for outcomes might differ by coaching model and arrangement (for example, internal versus external coaches). Combining multiple measures of caseload size with qualitative information about how coaches, FCC providers, and teachers experience coaching could help illuminate how various perspectives on caseload size influence coaches' work.
- **Refine the measurement of caseload size.** In SCOPE 2019, there was some variation in how coaches answered questions about caseload, depending on whether they were describing the number of individuals, classrooms, settings, or FCC homes they work with. Future research could benefit from measurement development that includes testing multiple ways of asking about each type of caseload and gathering feedback from coaches about how they are interpreting the questions.
- **Examine whether there are differences in the quality or intensity of interactions between ECE coaches and teachers or FCC providers based on caseload size and composition.** It is reasonable to assume that coaches with very high caseloads could not engage with the same depth or quality as those with smaller caseloads (for an example, see Norton et al. 2017). However, results from SCOPE 2019 suggest that a bigger caseload does not necessarily correlate to fewer interactions. The composition of the caseload (types of settings that teachers and providers are working in, characteristics of the teachers and providers) may influence coaching factors such as individualization and responsiveness. Implementation studies of coaching models that take varied caseload factors into account or experimental evaluations in which caseload factors are systematically varied might help identify connections among caseload, coaching interactions, and quality for different ECE settings.

- **Combine information about caseload range, how ECE coaches and providers experience caseload, and the influence of caseload size and complexity with information about the quality of coaching interactions.** Guidance or standards related to caseload sizes in coaching are rare (Norton et al. 2017). Future research examining caseload size and its consequences should focus on informing this guidance. At the same time, it will be important for future research to identify how coaching approaches and activities improve various types of teaching practices and outcomes for teachers and providers. This will enable the field to use information about coaching quality to help inform the ideal caseload size.
- **Consider how caseload might relate to support and professional development for ECE coaches.** Coaches working with a small number of teachers or providers or coaches working within one ECE setting might have different support needs than coaches with larger or mixed caseloads. Drawing on the proposed next steps above can help identify gaps in support.

Reminders about interpreting SCOPE findings

SCOPE 2019 participants were purposively selected, and the information learned from these surveys cannot be generalized to a specific ECE coaching approach or group of centers and FCC providers.

Information was gathered in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic likely impacted coaching processes, possibly in ways that will continue even after the pandemic ends. In 2021, SCOPE conducted surveys and interviews with some of the same coaches, center directors, and FCC providers to learn more about coaching in the context of COVID-19 ([see ACF 2022 About the Study](#)). Taken together, these two data collection efforts help to inform the field about what has changed in coaching and professional development and what might be important to understand for the future of coaching.

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Endnotes

¹ We recognize that some FCC providers might not use the term “classroom” to describe their setting. We use it in this brief to align with the way respondents were asked about caseload in the survey. We used “classroom” to distinguish from an FCC home, in cases where a large FCC home might have more than one group of children.

² Some coaches reported a positive value for one or more of the FCC categories (that is, classrooms, homes, or providers) but reported 0 or did not respond for other categories. For the purpose of calculating the averages in this table, we used the value for the category that coaches did report on. For example, if a coach reported 0 FCC classrooms but 10 FCC homes, we recoded FCC classrooms to equal 10, which assumes the FCC home was not split into multiple classrooms.

³ The web survey was programmed such that the maximum value allowable for any of the categories was 50. Eight of the 98 respondents never responded with the maximum value (7 for the number of center teachers, 6 for the number of center classrooms, 1 for the number of centers or schools, and 1 for the number of FCC homes and providers). Therefore, in these cases, we might be underestimating aspects of the coaches’ caseloads.

⁴ We did this by first dividing the coaches into quartiles (four groups of about equal size) based on their total caseload. We then used the highest quartile as the high caseload group, the middle two quartiles as the medium caseload group, and the lowest quartile as the low caseload group.

⁵ Coaches with mixed caseloads were asked to respond to the survey by thinking about their work with centers or FCCs. For analysis, they were grouped with the setting they were associated with for the survey.

⁶ Pearson’s correlation coefficient of caseload and frequency of meetings: $r(96) = .33, p = .001$; and caseload and time in those meetings: $r(96) = .28, p = .001$

⁷ Pearson’s correlation coefficient of caseload and drop-in visits: $r(96) = -.44, p < .001$

For more information about SCOPE

Visit the project page:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/study-coaching-practices-early-care-and-education-settings-2016-2021>

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SCOPE data

The SCOPE surveys and interview protocols as well as the study data are archived with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), located here:

<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/>

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