

Streamlining Systems, Stronger Leaders, More Time for Children

BY EMILIE AUSTIN

Early childhood leaders are carrying more than ever: compliance demands, staff support, family communication, and the daily work of holding a community together. At the same time, artificial intelligence tools are racing ahead, often faster than our policies, comfort, and shared understanding. While many claim AI is “taking everyone’s jobs,” we know that isn’t true—who will calm parents, pivot on a dime, and hold space for children and staff? AI, used thoughtfully and very specifically, can instead give you more time, streamline your workflow, help you set up sustainable systems, and ultimately make you a stronger leader.

AI use in education must be grounded in a commitment to keeping children, families, and educators at the center. In the administrative realm, AI can draft newsletters, outline policies, generate schedules, build meeting agendas, and surface compliance reminders, all while streamlining documentation without flattening your voice or values. For pedagogical leadership ([Click to access Whole Leadership Framework](#)), you can use AI to brainstorm lessons and units, write observation summaries, draft family conference preparations, and generate reflective questions for teams and for yourself. When it comes to leadership essentials ([Click to access Whole Leadership Framework](#)), such as preparing for difficult conversations, clarifying vision statements, strengthening grant language, and reviewing materials for alignment with regulations and program values, AI can serve as a gut check and a powerful second reviewer.

But how can you do all these things? Who has time for the learning curve? Here are simple steps to get started right now!

1. Name your recurring tasks across administration, pedagogy, or communication.
2. Pick an AI tool you have access to. Some of the industry front runners include:
 - [ChatGPT] (<https://chatgpt.com>)
 - [Claude] (<https://claude.ai>)
 - [Gemini] (<https://gemini.google.com>)
3. Prioritize privacy: Use a paid account for identifiable info, and NEVER share specific child, family, educator, etc. details.
4. Prompt your AI tool to draft your task. Use ready examples such as the following:

- Attached are the grant requirements and my draft to submit the grant. Please review my draft based on the requirements and give me specific examples where I miss the mark or areas where I should refine what I have written.
- I need to draft an announcement to remind my parents that spring break is coming up and we will be closed X date to X date. I want this to be short and conversational. They should reach out to me (insert contact information) with questions.
- We need to write a new open drink policy for staff that meets Indiana's standards for open drinks in early childhood education settings.

5. Refine the output until it matches your voice and needs.

6. Still unsure? *Join my "Onward" presentation at Leadership Connections, where we'll walk through it live and discuss in more detail the concerns and safeguards for AI.

I hope these actionable steps help reduce the fear of AI and help you see it as a tool to lighten your workload! I would love to learn from you as well. How are you experimenting with AI in an early childhood education leadership role right now, whether in Montessori environments, community-based programs, home-based settings, public Pre-K, or other settings? Are you using AI for documentation, coaching and reflection, planning, or not at all yet? You can reach out to me on LinkedIn ([click here to Access](#)) or email me at Eaustin3@nl.edu.

Emilie Austin is the Manager of Learning Experience Design and Innovation for the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University. In this role, she leads the design, development, and implementation of innovative instructional solutions that enhance learning outcomes and advance the Institute's mission to strengthen early childhood leadership and practice. Emilie collaborates with subject matter experts, trainers, and institutional partners to create engaging, accessible, and research-informed learning experiences across multiple modalities, including e-learning, blended, and instructor-led formats.

As part of her work, Emilie champions the integration of emerging technologies and pedagogical best practices such as AI-driven personalization, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and competency-based education to foster meaningful learning experiences for professionals in the early childhood field. She also provides leadership in continuous quality improvement, supporting data-informed design and innovation across MIEC programs. She is passionate about advancing equitable, learner-centered education and empowering educators through creative and effective instructional design.