Research Brief

What Leaders Do: Embed Systems of Continuous Quality Improvement

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Effective leadership is key to organizational health and to the delivery of high quality services. While there is a substantial body of research studying the impact of leadership on positive outcomes in business, health care, and K-12 education, the literature is less robust in regard to early childhood education. However, the significance of ECE program leadership as a driver of quality outcomes for children, families, and staff is now emerging (Kirby et al., 2021; Douglass, 2017; Bloom & Abel, 2015; Talan et al., 2014). The competencies to foster the organizational conditions that attract and retain teachers are understood to be multi-dimensional and relate to distributed leadership, shared decision making, supervisor and peer support, job-embedded learning, and an equitable reward system (Bloom, 2016; Joo et al., 2020; Lee & Louis, 2019).

Over the course of three years, the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University provided quality supports for 34 rural child care centers participating in the ExceleRate Child Care Pilot funded by Illinois' Preschool Development Grant, Birth to Five.* The overarching goal of the pilot was to test new strategies to strengthen the effectiveness of child care programs by a) use of child care contracts providing funding for additional classroom staff and an enhanced salary scale based on the education and credentials of staff and b) leadership supports to establish continuous quality improvement (CQI) systems at the classroom and organizational levels. These supports included creating new structures to support CQI (Plan Do Review meetings; Individual Leadership Development Plans), implementing new processes (shared decision making; leadership coaching; Community of Practice), and supporting the professional growth of staff (new model of job-embedded leadership development). This study focused on the effectiveness of the quality supports component of the ExceleRate Child Care Pilot.

PILOT ACTIVITIES

During the first year of the pilot, reliable assessors provided classroom quality support through formal Environment Rating Scale (ERS) assessments with direct feedback and coaching for teaching staff in two classrooms within each center. The ERS data informed monthly Plan Do Review meetings throughout the pilot, during which classroom staff worked with administrators to strengthen teaching practices.

Also in the first year, all staff were invited to participate in an organizational climate assessment, the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES), and each administrator completed an Administrator Role Perception Survey (ARPS). An individual ARPS Profile was provided to each administrator as well as an ECWES Profile of the organizational climate at their center. These data informed the development of an Individual Leadership Development Plan (ILDP). A Leadership Coach provided supports for CQI through monthly coaching sessions with program administrators, the development of the ILDP, a facilitated Community of Practice (CoP), and job-embedded leadership development to support the achievement of five Illinois Director Credential competencies (from two of the Administrative Content Areas of the IDC: Leadership and Advocacy and Personal and Professional Self-Awareness).

SAMPLE

All Illinois licensed centers located in Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) Group 2 (rural) counties were eligible to participate in the ExceleRate Pilot if they served at least 40% CCAP children. Thirty-four out of fifty programs opted in. 100% of participants were white or Caucasian. At the beginning of the pilot, 43% of administrators had been in their role for 0-5 years, 11% had been in their role for 6-10 years, 27% had been in their role for 11-20 years, and 19% had been in their role for 20+ years. 79% of the centers were for-profit, and 21% were not-for-profit. At the beginning of the pilot, 38% of the centers were at the Gold Circle of Quality in ExceleRate Illinois, the Quality Rating and Improvement System; 26% were at the Silver Circle of Quality, and 35% were at the licensed level. Additionally, 9% of centers were NAEYC accredited, 21% were NAC accredited, and 3% were COA accredited.

Data were collected from the directors and staff of 31 rural center-based child care programs that participated throughout the three-year pilot. This study highlights the key findings from the evaluation of the quality supports component of the pilot. Pre and post analyses of the organizational climate assessments as well as administrators' evaluations of the pilot were used to evaluate effectiveness.

MEASURES

Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES). The ECWES was employed to measure the organizational climate of the ECE program across ten dimensions (subscales) and staff's commitment to the organization. The ECWES was administered at the beginning and at the conclusion of the ExceleRate Pilot (Bloom, 2016). Pre and post ECWES data representing 498 (pre) and 519 (post) staff across 31 programs were used for the analysis, and paired *t*tests were used to examine changes across time.

Finale Evaluation. Administrators were also asked to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the quality supports components of the pilot upon completion of the three-year grant. Thirty-one participants provided responses to the evaluation. The 5-point scale (from 1 = *Not at all Useful* to 5 =

Extremely Useful) was used. Top Box Proportion (positive responses of 4 = *Useful* and 5 = *Very Useful*) was used for quantitative analysis. The open-ended responses were summarized for qualitative findings.

FINDINGS

The data revealed some compelling information about the impact of the pilot at both the programmatic and individual levels and suggested areas of additional support. Table 1 shows the average scores and standard deviations for commitment to the organization. Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for each of the ten dimensions of organizational climate (possible range of scores for each subscale is 0 to 10). Table 3 provides means, standard deviations, and percentage of the positive comments for each of the pilot's components. Key findings in each area are noted below.

Table 1 | Commitment to the Organization Pre and Post Training (*N* = 31)

	Pre-test		Post-test		Average Gain	*t*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Commitment to the Organization	7.51	0.71	7.79	0.70	0.29	2.07*

* *p* < .05

Table 2 | Organizational Climate Pre and Post Training (N = 31)

	Pre-test		Post-test		Average Gain	*t*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Collegiality	6.74	1.02	6.69	0.98	-0.05	-0.24
Professional Growth	4.38	1.17	4.87	1.28	0.48	2.57*
Supervisor Support	7.51	0.85	7.84	1.00	0.33	1.71
Clarity	5.90	1.31	6.08	1.24	0.18	0.89
Reward System	6.61	0.96	7.08	0.91	0.47	2.84**
Decision Making	6.34	0.79	6.82	0.89	0.47	3.30**
Goal Consensus	6.89	1.02	7.20	1.21	0.32	1.33
Task Orientation	6.42	1.19	6.62	1.38	0.20	0.91
Physical Setting	7.08	1.26	7.08	1.46	0.00	0.02
Innovativeness	6.73	1.05	6.87	1.06	0.14	0.65
Total Climate	**64.61**	8.72	**67.16**	9.83	2.55	1.58

Note. Possible range of scores for each subscale is 0 to 10. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01.

Table 3 | Final Evaluation of CQI Supports (*N* = 31)

Evaluation Item	Top Box Proportion*	M	SD
Usefulness of the participation in monthly coaching meetings	87%	4.32	0.95
Usefulness of the ARPS in setting leadership development goals	77%	3.97	0.75
Usefulness of the ECWES in setting leadership development goals	77%	4.10	0.83
Usefulness of the participation in the monthly Community of Practice	65%	3.84	1.37
Value of meeting with staff for the Plan Do Review process	77%	4.03	0.80
Understanding of the CQI Process	52%	3.35	1.28
Value of Quality Assessors' feedback and support	88%	4.23	0.81

Note. *Top Box Proportion refers to the percentage of positive ratings (i.e., 4 = *Useful* and 5 = *Extremely Useful*)

Center-Level Improvements

- Nine of the 10 dimensions of organizational climate saw increases in scores following the intervention. Moreover, statistically significant increases were seen in *commitment to the organization* ($t(31) = 2.07$, $p <. 048$), *professional growth* ($t(31) = 2.57$, $p <. 015$), and *reward system* ($t(31) = 2.84$, $p <. 008$), and *decision making* ($t(31) = 3.30$, $p <. 003$).
- Nearly all program administrators (97%) identified an increase in distributed leadership via shared decision making during Plan Do Review cycles. Further, administrators' perceptions were supported by staff responses on the ECWES showing a signification increase in their perceived levels of involvement in *decision making* ($t(31) = 3.30$, $p <. 003$).
- 87% of administrators reported that the feedback from ERS assessments conducted in two classrooms was used to support all classrooms and teaching staff in their center.

Individual Growth

- Self-reported growth in leadership skills indicated that administrators believed their greatest areas of growth as a result of participation in the pilot were their ability to communicate effectively with staff (58%), coach and mentor staff (39%), and team-building skills (32%).
- 94% of administrators reported that staff had increased credential levels, and 90% reported staff members had engaged in college coursework.
- An average of five staff members per center achieved or increased a credential level during the pilot; an average of five staff members per center had enrolled in college coursework.
- 17% of administrators reported earning a new Illinois Director Credential or increasing their credential level, and 32% reported enrolling in college coursework as a result of the pilot.
- Ten administrators reported enrolling in leadership academies as a result of the pilot, and four enrolled in the Aim for Excellence National Director Credential.

Further Support Needed

- When asked to select the areas in which participants felt they were currently struggling the most, the top three areas were family engagement (33%), team-building skills (30%), and having difficult conversations (30%).
- Administrators most frequently reported that moving forward they would benefit the most from more coaching (53%), completing online modules (50%), and participating in a facilitated COP (47%).

DISCUSSION

Encouraging professional growth and improving the reward system were built into the ExceleRate Pilot's objectives and deliverables. Seeing a significant increase in these dimensions of organizational climate as measured by the ECWES demonstrates the pilot's effectiveness. What is especially notable was the significant increase in the decision-making dimension as well as in overall commitment to the organization. Research in the area of shared decision making has found that when teachers believe their input matters in decisions related to classroom practices and center-wide goals, they are more committed to implementing program goals and to the organization (Bloom, 2016; Allensworth, 2012). Our findings appear to support previous research in this area. Shared decision making was not the focus of the content of the professional learning provided nor was it an intentional outcome of the pilot. The significant increases in shared decision making and commitment to the organization were likely the result of embedding systems of continuous quality improvement at the classroom and organizational levels. Two of the components of the pilot, described in more detail below, focused on iterative cycles of quality improvement based on data.

Plan Do Review Cycles

To embed a system of CQI at the classroom level, administrators were introduced to the Plan Do Review process. The Plan Do Review process involves the classroom teachers and administrator meeting monthly to collaboratively identify an area of focus for improvement, choose specific action steps to take, do the work, then reflect and celebrate, make adjustments, and document the work. Administrators had to intentionally schedule time to meet with teaching staff each month to complete this work. All reflections and new goals were documented on the Plan Do Review Meeting Template each month and submitted to the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development. This structure helped keep the administrators accountable to the process of meeting regularly with staff to improve the quality in the classrooms.

All centers started the Plan Do Review process with the two classrooms that had received formal ERS assessments as well as assessor feedback and coaching. The teachers used their ECERS-3 and ITERS-R assessment feedback to choose their areas of focus and make improvements. Over time, additional

formal and informal assessment data were collected. Using that data, the Plan Do Review process was introduced in other classrooms, used at the organizational level with items from the Program Administration Scale, Second Edition, and three centers used their work with the Pyramid Model as the foundation of their Plan Do Review work. All center administrators complied with meeting with teaching staff and submitting a minimum of ten Plan Do Review reports each year.

Nearly all respondents (97%, *n* = 30) indicated that teachers had participated in shared decision making during the Plan Do Review meetings. When asked to describe the impact of shared decision making, all 27 participants who provided a comment described improved teamwork, buy-in to the center's mission, and empowerment of staff. Representative comments include:

- *"Coming up with solutions and allowing them to work together seems to be impactful for them as a team."*
- *"All the teachers have been so excited in sharing their ideas instead of the director coming in and telling them what to do."*
- *"Buy-in to the center, improved retention."*
- *"I feel like giving some of the decision making up to the teaching staff has empowered them to take quality in their classrooms more seriously."*
- *"It has empowered the teachers to take ownership of the ideas."*
- *"They discuss and share their ideas and come to an agreement on which idea to use or not to use."*
- *"Having accountability and continuous goal setting keeps us moving forward."*
- *"The bonding and relationships that have been formed with the teachers at these meetings have been a benefit at our center. It is an uninterrupted time for us to talk and discuss new ideas."*
- *"The meetings force us to stay on task. It allows us the opportunity to evaluate and challenge each other. As an owner, I want and need accountability. We have never had this type of support and follow up in the last 20 years."*
- *"Staff get excited when they see things change for the better. They understand that more materials isn't more mess, it's more engagement!"*

Leadership Coaching

A Leadership Coach provided monthly relationship-based professional development with center administrators focused on leadership skills development and embedding CQI practices at the personal and professional levels. Using the individual data from the Administrator Role Perception Survey (ARPS) and the organizational data from the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES), all administrators set goals using a documented Individual Leadership Development Plan (ILDP). The goals focused on advancing their education and credentials, advancing their leadership skills (ARPS), and embedding CQI practices throughout their organizations to improve the work environment (ECWES). Throughout the month, administrators would do the work to make progress on their goals and embed CQI in the organization. During the monthly coaching meetings, the coach and administrator reviewed the ILDP documentation, reported on incremental steps taken each month, reflected on the work accomplished, celebrated successes, and discussed challenges or barriers to getting the work accomplished.

It is notable that 84% of respondents (*n* = 26) indicated that their work was positively impacted by the leadership coaching. Representative comments regarding the usefulness of leadership coaching include:

- *"Discussions with the leadership coach helped me decide when and understand how to respond to organizational conflicts."*
- *"I focus more on reflective practice and being more organized. I also set goals for delegation that have helped me empower other staff."*
- *"She helped me forgive myself when I could not accomplish all my plans and had to rewrite my plans due to COVID. My coach pushed me to just do my best and celebrate small steps and helped me to realize that I was making progress even when it did not seem like it."*
- *"I was able to plan goals for myself, my staff, and my center and discuss them with someone who not only cared but had valuable information to give."*
- *"These monthly meetings kept me accountable for the things that I needed to be doing in my role as a director. They also helped me cope with the day to day stressors that come along with being a director of a center..."*
- *"I knew what I needed to work on, but it was nice to be able to talk it out each month and discuss the action steps coming up, to keep it all front and center in my work. Sometimes it is easy to put plans on the back burner as things pop up, and the coaching meetings helped me to stay focused and gave me a sounding board for steps to take."*
- *"These meetings were very valuable to me. I never asked a question or had a problem that I didn't get an answer and or a resource. I received help on a conflict resolution training and policy I needed. I received help from my coach on improving the areas we scored low on during our state visit. I had many credentialing questions that were answered, and was given information on how to get quick answers for my staff. My coach was very positive and encouraging."*

Implications for Further Study and for Policy

The ExceleRate Pilot field tested two areas of innovation—foundational contracts for centers to support an increased number of adequately compensated and well-qualified staff and enhanced leadership and classroom supports for CQI. While the results of the evaluation are promising, they also suggest the need to further test and study scaling up in both areas of innovation. Increasing compensation and staffing through contracts alone is unlikely to reach the quality outcomes achieved through this pilot. At the same time, supports for CQI alone, without creating the mechanisms to ensure a living wage as a base and compensation parity as an imperative, would do little to stabilize the early care and education workforce. The implication for policymakers is to consider the adoption of an "and/with" strategy---ensure increased compensation *and* additional staffing *with* enhanced quality supports for leaders and teachers.

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