

Tackling turnover

One center's efforts to institute center- and community-wide change

by Kristine Greer

"People who are optimistic see a failure as due to something that can be changed so that they can succeed the next time around, while pessimists take the blame for the failure, ascribing it to some characteristic they are helpless to change."

— Daniel Goleman

Mayfield Child Development Center is a large child care center in Colorado that is beginning its 20th year of operation. It has three preschool classrooms — with two teachers and 15 children in each of the classrooms — and one toddler classroom with four teachers and 16 children. The director, Suzanne, has been at the center for two years and is concerned because she needs to hire three new teachers before school starts:

- Sari, the lead teacher in the toddler room (a single mom, with two children) left because she was unable to pay for her private health insurance with the salary she received from the center.



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- James, a preschool teacher who had been with the center for five years, left because of a philosophical difference he had with Suzanne.
- Rita, another preschool teacher, left when she could no longer deal with the behavior of a child in her classroom.
- Suzanne knows that she has to do something to improve the morale and job satisfaction among her employees.

The field of early care and education as a whole is recognized as an optimistic profession, but it is stuck in a system that some feel is hopelessly malfunctioning. In a report by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (2009), the total replacement needs for child care workers were 29.5% in 2006. Hiring and training new staff every year (usually 30%) is a costly and difficult problem for directors that can result in low staff morale, reduced teacher effectiveness, and drains on your budget. Children and families are also affected when there is a high turnover rate as they lose established relationships. This affects the social system and changes the organizational outcomes as a whole. Our profession should look to our strengths to promote change.

Job satisfaction

Early care and education workers are known for their compassion, diligence, empathy,

and ability to wear many hats at one time. We are applying new research on brain development and emotional intelligence in our classrooms and we have intuitively carried out much of what we are now learning is 'best practice' since our profession began. Let us apply this to effect change in our field. Research tells us that co-worker and supervisor relations, relationships with children, the nature of our work itself, and working conditions, are the primary predictors of job satisfaction (Bloom, 2005). Job satisfaction is a prime motivation for keeping us in the workplace, and we must be able to articulate new ways of describing our work to expand our advocacy voice (Traill, 2005). To that end, we must:

- Learn to form coalitions inside and outside of our profession that are strong and secure in the knowledge of our daily work, so that others can learn of our noble and intelligent vocation.
- Use our expertise to inform policy (Greer, 2004).
- Utilize a systematic approach to problem solving and goal-setting (Kagan & Cohen, 1997).

Let us look at the steps involved when we want to manage change in our centers as first suggested by Paula Jorde Bloom (2005).

Managing change

There are six steps in the process of managing change in our programs. Let us look at each one in turn.

Identify the problem. Suzanne, the director of Mayfield Child Development Center, realized that with a turnover rate of 30% she had a problem. The field as a whole has identified that turnover rates are high in our profession. And we know that job satisfaction is directly related to turnover. To be satisfied in our jobs:

- We need to know that our coworkers recognize and value our contributions.
- We want to learn from those we work with and establish caring and productive relationships with them.
- We expect our supervisors to be supportive, challenging, and motivating.
- We want to see progress in the children in our care.
- We cherish our growing relationships with our students and their families.
- We appreciate the challenge of our work and take pride in performing a service to others.
- We expect high standards in our working conditions and professional development.
- And last, but not least, we expect pay and promotion opportunities.

Suzanne understood that the reasons that staff had left her program were directly related to job satisfaction. Suzanne decided to ask her advisory board for help in identifying some specific issues she might be able to work on. Based on resignation history, she and her board believed there may be issues related to policies on pay and benefits, staff relations, and support in teacher-student relations. Her board suggested that she might want to conduct a survey to understand how current staff felt about issues surrounding job satisfaction.

Gather data. Most centers gather data such as the number of teachers in a

center, how many teachers leave in a designated year, degrees held, professional development opportunities, adult-child ratios, teacher evaluations, pay rates, and other information. We often ask our teachers and families to participate in center and director evaluations. These evaluations often focus on overall feelings about the center, and directors often interpret the data as problems to be solved rather than as motivating factors for success.

Suzanne's advisory board included many members of the local ECE community, and they felt that the issues at the Mayfield Child Development Center were not isolated issues, but rather common challenges that many directors were dealing with. They suggested that Suzanne not only survey her staff, but also share the information with her local early childhood council. When Suzanne contacted the council coordinator, she was asked to bring this agenda item to the next meeting. When other professionals heard about the issues and the idea of a survey, a discussion ensued about other job satisfaction issues and the need for a community-wide assessment. They theorized that maybe there were solutions that the whole group could solve that an isolated center could not. It was decided that Suzanne would bring the survey to the next directors' meeting to discuss other centers' participation.

Analyze the situation. When Suzanne raised the subject at the next directors' meeting, there were mixed reactions. Many of the directors were hesitant about airing their dirty laundry, but felt that the profession as a whole could benefit from the information gathered through the survey. Suzanne suggested that the survey be implemented by someone who was removed from the everyday workings of the field, but who understood the language and culture of early care and education. Suzanne and the group decided that using an inde-

pendent researcher would be a good way to step back from the problems and help center staff discuss issues that affected them in an open, non-threatening environment. The group decided to approach a professor of early childhood education at their local community college. They stressed to the professor that the information gathered would not be reported by individual center, but rather as community-wide issues.

Analyzing situations in your center is difficult because the issues are emotionally-charged. When you are responsible for the smooth operation of a system and you are presented with a challenge, it is often difficult to manage your own emotions. The early childhood council in Suzanne's community felt that bringing these issues to light was the first step to examining them in a healthy and open way. It was believed that the data collected should be community specific because they wanted to present the data to local change agents that would be driving forces behind policy change in the area. Suzanne's survey, which included open-ended questions that explored expectations of relationships, the nature of early care and education work, and working conditions, as well as pay and promotion opportunities was considered a good fit for their needs. The investigator was asked to share the information with the early childhood council and then disseminate the report to local social and government agencies. In addition, each center that participated would receive a copy of the report.

Generating possible solutions. The council stressed the importance of looking at best practices in ECE as a competent, forward-thinking, and relationship-based model. When they were ready to generate possible solutions, they agreed that they would think about community resolutions, but use the strengths of the individual centers to problem solve. They also agreed that although they

needed to form relationships with the larger communities that were reciprocal and responsive to help solve their concerns, it needed to be clear that they were the experts in the field. It would be important that the community understand the issues in a real and honest way, framed in a language that was understood by all.

Develop and implement an action plan.

Child care is a vital part of our economic and social system and directly affects all communities. The reality of our profession is that we are frequently unable to participate in activities — due to scheduling conflicts and demands on our time — that would bring about systemic change. Suzanne and the early childhood council contacted community members that were seen as powerful community leaders to form a coalition. In this way, these individuals were identified early so that change could occur at both the individual center and community levels.

Suzanne was aware that as a driving force in this project, her center should be actively involved in the coalition.

Suzanne invited her staff to participate in all coalition meetings either through actual attendance, or through reading meeting minutes and discussing these as a center group. During each center meeting, Suzanne's staff listed suggestions and solutions that they felt needed to be addressed in their center and suggestions and solutions that they felt the community could work on. If staff were unable to attend coalition meetings, they were still part of the process and contributed to the solutions for the center and community. Suzanne felt that a relationship-based model (Raikes & Edwards, 2009) was the best way to focus staff on the needs of their center. She indicated to the teachers that she had confidence that they could generate their own solutions; she knew that they used best practice when working with children and families, and it was criti-

cally important that all staff members feel they were part of reciprocal and supportive relationships.

Evaluation. The early childhood council and the individual directors in Suzanne's community agreed at the onset that evaluation would be an ongoing process that would be shared with the key stakeholders in the coalition. They felt it was important for all to understand the distinction between accountability for one program and accountability for broader changes. The coalition would participate in (at least) annual strategic planning to ensure that the early childhood community was an active part of community action, resource development, and relationship-building. In addition, individual centers were encouraged to act on their own needs as they saw fit.

Results

As a result of Suzanne's staff participation in the coalition they found ways to strengthen their own center's structure in the following ways:

- They revisited their mission and philosophy statement annually with the board so that all could feel ownership and value in their day-to-day work.
- The group scheduled biannual retreats away from the center (a board member offered his home) to discuss issues that were important to all and they formed work groups to act on issues between the retreats.
- Although there was no money in the budget to redo the salary schedule or enhance the benefits package, Suzanne and her staff were active members in the coalition and worked on the child care worker educational stipend project that the early childhood council began as a result of the survey.
- To address the issues related to enrolling children with challenging behavior, Suzanne asked her local

special education school psychologist to conduct a day-long training and follow-up mentoring to the classroom teachers. In addition, Suzanne scheduled time into every monthly staff meeting to discuss children's challenging behaviors, methods learned in the training and mentoring sessions, and brainstorming for solutions.

Conclusion

As a result of this process, Suzanne's center did not solve all their problems, but they are well on their way to establishing trust and respect, creating goals that encompass the welfare of all concerned, and engaging in collaborative decision making. Suzanne believes that the use of an open-ended survey, the shared decision-making environment, and acting as change agents in the community has helped the center feel empowered to make positive transformation individually, center-wide, and in the greater community.

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