



ECE SOLUTIONS

Mobilizing Leadership with the Breakthrough Series Collaborative

*In her 2017 book, *Leading for Change in Early Care and Education: Cultivating Leadership From Within*¹ (Teachers College Press), Professor Anne Douglass offers a framework for leadership in early care and education that is inclusive, collaborative, and purpose-driven and that defines a leader as someone who can influence and inspire change from within the field. In Chapter Seven, Douglass examines the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) model for organizational change. BSCs have supported quality improvement in the health, child trauma, and child welfare fields, but they have not yet been widely tested in early childhood education (ECE). In describing the results of an 18-month pilot program of the model in ECE settings, she shows how it offers a concrete strategy for facilitating individual and organizational change within ECE by mobilizing leadership from all levels.*

Performance Breakthroughs Require System-Wide Change

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative model was designed to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice by building the capacity of teams and organizations to learn with and from each other to create lasting improvement.² The BSC method is rooted in the belief that every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets. That means that if we want to achieve different, or better, results, we must change not just individual practice, but the way the system works. Successful BSCs can dramatically improve areas of practice that have already proven to be difficult to change. In the health care field, BSCs have reduced patient waiting times by 50%, reduced worker absenteeism by 25%, reduced ICU costs by 25%, and reduced hospitalizations for patients with congestive heart failure by 50%.³ In the ECE context, a BSC might focus on reducing challenging behaviors in the classroom, increasing children's vocabulary or social skills, or engaging parents as partners.

Consensus Is Built on Results

In a BSC, all team members contribute and test ideas, whether the team member is the director, teacher, or a parent. The often lengthy process of gaining consensus, which can stifle creativity and become a barrier to change, is not needed to test an idea. Instead, the BSC model encourages rapid testing of new ideas on the smallest possible scale with one person, classroom, or family. Ideas that achieve results are iterated further, while those that do not are replaced. For example, one teacher in a BSC explained that she had learned to keep trying different strategies with a challenging child in her class. Rather than giving up when a new strategy failed or blaming the child for not responding well to her approach, she kept developing new strategies with her team, trying them, and measuring them until she found one that worked for that child.

Lasting Change Is Not Possible Without Teacher Involvement

Researchers are finding more and more that professional development achieves limited impact when it is disconnected from the everyday contexts in which educators work.⁴ A BSC designed to promote the adoption of trauma-informed practices in six urban ECE programs achieved positive results by overcoming the barriers that would have otherwise prevented teachers from actively participating as leaders in the change effort. For example, teachers assigned to work directly with children all day, with no paid planning time, do not have opportunities during the work day to participate in weekly meetings with colleagues to plan, make, and spread improvements. By adapting schedules so teachers could participate alongside other team members—which included a senior administrator, program director, early childhood mental health consultant, and a parent—without disrupting the care and education of children, the BSC was able to engage in a transformative 18-month period of learning and improvement.

Teams saw how valuable the educators' perspectives were, and teachers reported feeling empowered and more respected by their peers and supervisors. Teachers became agents for change with children and families who were living with high levels of violence and trauma.⁵ One educator described a success she'd had with a parent with whom she'd been struggling to connect: “[A]t the beginning of the year, this was a woman who wouldn't come to the school, who wouldn't pick up phone calls, who wouldn't return letters.

And at the end of the school year, now she's showing up for everything; she's sending me notes and giving me phone calls just to check in on her daughter.”

Efforts to improve quality can be designed in ways to cultivate educator leadership or not. Most of what is done now in ECE minimizes the opportunity for early educators to be leaders and active agents of change. The science of improvement explains why it is so important to engage the leadership of those who work most closely with children and families.

¹ Douglass, A. (2017). *Leading for Change in Early Care and Education: Cultivating Leadership from Within*. New York: Teachers College Press.

² Institute for Healthcare Improvement (2003). *The breakthrough series: IHI's collaborative model for achieving breakthrough improvement*. Cambridge, MA: Institute for Healthcare Improvement.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Darling-Hammond et al, (2009). *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad*. National Staff Development Council.

⁵ Doyle, S., Rivers, S., Agosti, J., Douglass, A. (2016). *Trauma-Informed Early Care and Education Breakthrough Series Collaborative: A Toolkit*. Boston: Boston Public Health Commission.

ECE Solutions: Mobilizing Leadership with the Breakthrough Series Collaborative is one in a series of policy briefs summarizing original research by the Leadership Institute that is generating new knowledge and accelerating creative and critical thinking about leadership and innovation in the field of early care and education.

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