

# Research Notes

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## Stories from the Field: Directors Making a Difference

Change and child care administration go hand in hand. Daily, early childhood directors are confronted with issues and concerns that need attention. Helping directors define their role as one of change agent is crucial to instilling norms of continuous improvement in their programs. This is the goal of the Center's leadership training program, *Taking Charge of Change*.

*Taking Charge of Change* is currently funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). The 10-month program begins with a six-day residential institute in the summer. Participants come together again for two weekend retreats in November and May. The training curriculum focuses on the nature of individual, organizational, and systemic change and the director's role as change agent. During their supervised field experience, participants work with a mentor to implement an individualized Program Improvement Plan. Directors receive quality enhancement grants targeted to the improvements detailed in their Plans.

The rich anecdotal evidence amassed from seven cohorts of *Taking Charge of Change* provides powerful data on how conducting program improvements of this nature changes the early childhood profession from the inside out and from the bottom up, through changes in early childhood educators themselves. It appears that the planned change model utilized in this training has the potential to play a significant role in improving the quality of services provided to children and their families.

The following stories show the impact that a single director can make. Although the focus of these directors' efforts varies from programmatic changes to collaborative ventures, each story describes how changes improve program quality.

### Director Tackles Turnover and Builds a Winning Team

**Jill Hardwick Moore** (Cohort #1) has owned and operated her own NAEYC-accredited child care center—Early Learning—in Champaign, for 23 years. Jill's immediate concern, when she began *Taking Charge of Change*, was staff turnover. She suspected that low pay, staff's personal problems, and little opportunity for professional growth were among the possible reasons.

The results of the organizational climate assessments that Jill and her staff completed indicated the need to improve staff morale, collegiality, and communication. Jill shared the results with her staff and with them developed a plan to reduce staff turnover, improve staff salaries, add health benefits, and individualize staff development. Her action steps included: adopting a more positive supervisory style, rewriting job descriptions, instituting peer observation among the teachers, increasing teachers' involvement in staff meetings, and increasing staffs' access to professional development opportunities.

At the conclusion of the training, Jill assessed the organizational climate in her center once again. The results revealed statistically significant improvements in the areas she had targeted in her plan—staff morale, collegiality, and staff meetings. Jill's final reflection at the conclusion of the training provided some insight into what the change process meant to her. *"I feel much more competent and confident of my ability to handle change and accomplish goals. I plan to use the technique of the action plan now throughout my career."*

*"I appreciated the chance to work on an actual problem in my center. The concrete steps in the program improvement process were excellent. The experience helped me to break down what I needed to do and not feel so overwhelmed."*

**Jill Hardwick Moore**

### Director Mobilizes Community Support to Aid Teen Parents

**Mary Jane Forney** (Cohort #2) has served as the Director of Child Care Services for Family Service Center of Sangamon County, in Springfield for 22 years. When she enrolled in *Taking Charge of Change*, one of Mary's greatest concerns was with the population of teen parents who enrolled their children in her program. The parents' poor attendance at school and the children's poor attendance in child care were of primary concern. For her Program Improvement Plan, Mary decided to focus her efforts in this area.

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As a visible leader in her community, Mary called a meeting of all key plays to initiate her Plan. She elicited the support of the high school principal as well as the infant/toddler coordinator and social service worker from her agency.

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Mary was tireless in her efforts to meet the needs of the teen parents. She supported the parents during the year in a variety of ways including presentations on topics such as "How to Find a Job and Keep It." She recruited a graduate intern to counsel parents, built cooperative relationships with school administrators, developed a Mentor Program, networked with licensed family child care providers to provide child care for mildly ill children, created an academic tutoring program for the parents, and established contacts with local businesses to supply diapers, clothing, blankets, and infant formula. As a result of participating in *Taking Charge of Change*, Mary returned to graduate school and completed the master's degree she had begun in 1979.

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### **Director Puts Teachers First on Advocacy Agenda**

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When **Kathy Hardy** (Cohort #4) began *Taking Charge of Change*, she had just been promoted from preschool teacher to director. She recognized immediately that staff development was essential to making the changes she desired in the quality of her program. She successfully advocated with her Board to expand her training budget by 154%. She brought trainers to the center for a full-day workshop and sent her teachers to the Chicago Metro AEYC conference. She used her quality enhancement grant to reimburse six staff members for college tuition.

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During the training, Kathy became an outspoken advocate for the staff, children, and families at her center. As a result of her advocacy, her Board of Directors approved the addition of two assistant directors, and budget line items of \$11,000 and \$12,500 for tuition reimbursement and accreditation activities, respectively. As a result of her participation in *Taking Charge of Change*, Kathy's program successfully achieved NAEYC accreditation in 1998. Kathy recently completed her M.Ed. in Early Childhood Administration at National-Louis University.

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### **A Final Word**

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As the stories above show, directors need to build a vision for change, serve as the catalyst for change, create a conducive climate for change, and provide the resources and encouragement that are necessary to implement change in healthy and constructive ways. This does not happen by chance. Being exposed to different models of change and having opportunities to build the skills necessary to make the change process successful is essential to effective training for center directors.

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For more information about *Taking Charge of Change* and other Center training initiatives, please contact Eileen Eisenberg, Training Coordinator, at (800) 443-5522, ext. 7703 or visit our web site ([www.nl.edu/cecl](http://www.nl.edu/cecl)).

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*"In every aspect of the training, I picked up new skills or received information to build on current skills. Taking Charge of Change helped me refocus. I have found that I have a great deal of energy and savvy."*

Mary Forney

*"It's been priceless for me as a new director to participate in this training. I have made so many changes in my center as a result. Staff morale is much healthier, teacher stress has been reduced, and my board backs me. Taking Charge of Change helped me feel validated."*

Kathy Hardy

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