

Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS)

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***Grant or Contract Number:* HHSP233201500035I/HHSP23337038T**

***Period of Funding:* September 2018 – June 2023**

Project Description.

Leadership is widely recognized as an essential driver of organizational performance and improvement, but little is known about its role in driving quality of early childhood programs and outcomes for staff and children. In launching the Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) seeks to fill the definitional and measurement gaps to help the early childhood field understand how effective leaders can improve quality experiences for children in early care and education (ECE) settings. The study team will identify leadership constructs, map out and test their associations to outcomes, and develop a short-form instrument to measure ECE leadership in center-based settings.

Over the next five years, this multi-phase study will:

- Identify the features of effective ECE leadership through a **review of the research literature**
- **Construct a theory of change** that shows how ECE leaders can act as change agents for quality improvement and that reflects the unique elements of ECE settings;
- **Develop a compendium of existing measures** to identify what information is needed to better understand leadership in ECE settings

- **Identify promising leadership quality improvement initiatives** and methods of evaluating them
- **Conduct a descriptive study in 100 centers** to test hypothesized relationships between leadership constructs and outcomes in the theory of change

Research Questions.

Foundational tasks:

- What are the key features of effective leadership in ECE center-based settings?
- How does leadership influence outcomes, including program quality, and children's learning?
- Where are the gaps in measuring ECE leadership?
- What are the features of promising QI initiatives in ECE or related fields and what types of interventions exist?

Descriptive study:

- Who are the leaders in ECE settings? What forms does leadership take within the setting (including directors and teachers)?
- What are the values, beliefs, and actions of leaders?
- How are leadership constructs associated with staff and center characteristics or context?
- Are leadership constructs associated with proximal and distal outcomes that suggest ECE leaders are agents of change for quality improvement?

Sample. The purpose of the descriptive study is to examine empirical support for the associations among key constructs and outcomes in the theory of change and develop a short form measure of ECE leadership that has strong psychometric properties. The study will include a purposive sample of 100 centers that receive funding from Head Start or the Child Care and Development Fund selected to achieve variation that is critical for both assessing the conceptual modeling and for psychometric analyses.

Methods. Planned methods for data collection in the descriptive study include the use of self-administered surveys of directors, managers, and teachers to gather information about the work environment and their role in and perceptions of leadership in the setting and as well as classroom observations of quality.

Progress Update. The project team is working on the foundational tasks of producing a review of the literature and developing a theory of change.

Implications for policy/practice

Findings from the project will suggest ways in which leadership might be developed and sustained through training, technical assistance or professional development activities and help policymakers and program administrators make informed decisions in developing policies or targeting funding in ways that can support effective leadership.

Implications for research

The project team and OPRE will be partnering with substantive, technical, and practical experts as well as a range of stakeholders from government agencies, ECE-related associations, and leadership development programs to inform the work and produce information on ECE leadership to advance research. The final product will be a short-form measure of ECE leadership.

For more information:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/early-care-and-education-leadership-study-excels-2018-2023-overview>

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