

# early care & education PARTNERSHIPS that keep children SAFE

## HOW STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ILLINOIS INFLUENCED CHANGE IN CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to provide evidence about how Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) influenced change in early care and education (ECE) programs. Strong partnerships between ECE programs and families are the foundation for the Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education initiative being implemented in 30 states.

This study's findings indicate that SFI influenced changes that improved the quality of family partnership practices in ECE programs. SFI's multi-level model of implementation was key to its effectiveness in promoting organizational change, with implications for the design of quality improvement and professional development policy and practice. Some programs encountered barriers to improving family partnership practices, such as a lack of cultural competence and a negative organizational climate. Additional efforts are recommended to ensure that all programs can develop the organizational context needed to successfully implement Strengthening Families.

### Methods

This study addressed two main research questions: (1) how did SFI influence change to improve the quality of family partnership practices? and (2) what were the facilitators of, and barriers to, change in programs?

This study used a multiple case study methodology to examine SFI implementation within four large ECE programs participating in the SFI initiative (Yin, 2003). The four programs were selected from over sixty programs involved in SFI because they met a set of selection criteria designed to increase the validity of the study. All four programs met basic standards for quality, served children birth through five, were medium to large-sized centers (those with six to eleven classrooms), served primarily low-income families, and had participated in SFI for at least two years. The programs were located in rural, urban, and suburban communities, representing four different regions of the state.

This study included three data collection components: interviews, observations, and document review. The data collection protocol addressed three topics: SFI

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implementation, staff perceptions of SFI, and the influence of SFI on organizational changes. A total of 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with program staff, including administrators and teachers, focused on the three topics identified above. Approximately twenty hours of observation were conducted at each program. Program documents pertaining to SFI, organization and management practices, and family support policies and practices, were collected. Qualitative analysis procedures were conducted using ATLAS ti software (Muh, 2004).

## Findings

### THREE TYPES OF CHANGE

This study found changes at programs in the following three areas as a result of SFI:

- Management practices
- Services and service delivery
- Beliefs and attitudes

At the management level, all programs made changes to improve the organizational infrastructure for family-centered practices. For example, they increased their collaboration with community resources and child welfare services, enabling them to better connect families to supports, as well as to bring in training and information about these supports to their staff.

The second type of change was in services provided for families and the delivery of those services. Greeting parents by name was a small but significant change in three of the programs. One teacher shared a common sentiment that SFI “made me realize I didn’t even know my parents’ names.” As teachers became more intentional about talking with parents, they described a growing relationship with families through these informal conversations at arrival and pick-up times. Program administrators as well as teachers increased their level

and quality of interaction with parents. For example, one director shared the following experience:

“I decided that I would actually get up from my desk and every time I saw a car outside, make sure I personally went outside [to ask] ‘How are you doing?’ ...One of the things I’ve learned from Strengthening Families is sometimes we don’t need to think so big. We try to overwhelm ourselves thinking [about] all these big, big changes that if we did ten small things we would have a greater impact on these families ... You know, it’s the little things that make all the difference. And I know it seems so minute that somebody would be like ‘Oh for goodness sakes, because you said hi to everybody you [think you] would make a difference.’ But you know, if you were standing in that spot, you would have seen that it made a difference.”

The third type of change was in the beliefs and attitudes of program staff and administrators. Both teachers and administrators in three of the four programs talked about SFI as a personally transformative experience that fostered shifts from a child-centered to a family-centered, strengths-based philosophy. For example, one director shared the following reflection on implementing new parent group meetings as part of SFI: “[Attendance] is way above my expectations. I never expected parents to welcome it as much as they have. I was one of those people that said, ‘Oh no that’s not gonna work in our center, not with our parents.’ Now I’m going outside going it’ll work, it’ll work.”

These changes reflect increases in the quality of family partnership practices. The changes directly align with widely recognized indicators of child care quality, such as those included in the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms et al., 2005), the NAEYC accreditation standards (NAEYC, 2005), and the Program Administration Scale (PAS) (Talan & Bloom, 2004).

## INFLUENCES ON CHANGE

Next this study asked how SFI influenced the changes just described. The following four factors were found to influence the changes:

- The quality of the SFI training
- Engagement of the program director in SFI
- Supportive organizational culture at programs
- SFI's learning networks

The findings highlight the multi-level "ecological" design of the SFI model, and show how the various levels of support contributed to the changes at programs. Prior research suggests that this supportive context can create an environment both within and outside of organizations that is conducive to the application of new knowledge and changes in practice (Ackerman, 2008; Borko, 2004; Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). SFI's implementation model targeted individuals, program leaders, whole programs, and regional communities, as well as state policy. SFI fostered the development of "professional communities" focused on Strengthening Families.

This research brief provides an example of the influence of factors #3 (organizational culture) and #4 (Learning Networks).

SFI influenced a shift in the organizational culture around working with families in two of the programs in this study. Implementing SF raised awareness and attention to improving family partnerships among the staff as a whole, creating new norms about interacting with families. As one teacher explained, seeing other teachers reaching out more to families encouraged her to "step up" her interactions with families.

The Learning Networks are SFI's regional entities designed to provide local support, training, and technical assistance to ECE programs as they implement the Strengthening Families approach. The Learning Networks were a) a source of ideas and motivation

for implementing changes in program policies and practices, b) a forum for generating and sharing solutions for challenges programs faced as they implemented Strengthening Families, and c) a catalyst for change in beliefs and attitudes about families and family-centered practice. One director contrasted the Learning Network to other director support groups in which she had participated, which she found to be "superficial" and focused on "the next quality grant to be written" and "the mechanics of running the business. It's not the heart. And this [the Learning Network] has been the heart."

## BARRIERS TO CHANGE

While all programs made changes to improve family partnership practices, two programs confronted notable barriers to improving the quality of family partnership practices: the first was a lack of cultural competence, and the second was a negative or disrespectful organizational climate. These barriers were not the results of SFI, but rather factors that hindered or limited the implementation of SFI. Even when all of the previously described facilitating influences were present, a lack of cultural competence in two programs created a significant barrier to implementation and change. The second barrier was a disrespectful organizational climate, characterized at times by a lack of respect and support among staff as well as between staff and the administration, which appeared to spread to the implementation of SFI. As one staff member described, "SFI is being 'shoved down our throats. If the center wants teachers to support families, the center needs a 'Strengthening Staff' program." Some teachers felt they were being asked to respect and care about parents when the center did not extend respect or care to them.

## Recommendations

### THE SFI MODEL

Quality improvement and professional development are likely more effective in promoting real change when they target multiple levels of the context in and around child care programs. SFI should preserve its multi-level model, and the Learning Networks which may be the “heart” of the model. The national Strengthening Families initiative should consider ways to support the use of this model with other states implementing SF.

### A SUPPORTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

A clear implication from this study is that quality improvement efforts in the area of family engagement may be more effective when specific attention is given to strategies for creating a supportive organizational climate and collegial relationships among staff. Positive supervisor-staff relationships set the tone for positive staff-family relationships (Parlakian, 2002). SFI should ensure that leadership and management supports include a focus on developing a supportive, collegial, and respectful work environment that sets the tone for supportive and respectful partnerships with families.

### ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural competence is such an essential element of family partnerships that it warrants significant attention in SF’s ongoing efforts. Supporting the development of cultural competency in some programs likely requires far greater support, embedded within each layer of the SFI model, as well as in other professional development and policy contexts. One recommendation for SFI is to increase the focus on cultural competence through its training and resources offered through the Learning Networks, addressing cultural competence

specifically as an organizational competency. A focus on organizational cultural competence may provide the environment necessary to support culturally competent practice among program staff (Goode & Jones, 2006).

## Conclusion

The extent to which child care professionals effectively partner with families may be strongly influenced by the Strengthening Families initiative, which supports and promotes this role. This study highlights SFI’s use of a multilevel approach that improved family partnerships in the programs in this study.

## Note

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