

EARLY CHILDHOOD SNAPSHOT

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Theory of Change of Early Care and Education Leadership for Quality Improvement

Leadership is important for quality improvement in center-based early care and education (ECE) settings that serve children birth to five. However, little is known about who leaders are, what leaders do, and how leadership influences quality outcomes in center-based ECE settings. The Early Care and Education Leadership Study, or ExCELS, is defining ECE leadership, and developing ways to measure it, based on the range of staff who participate in decision-making and quality improvement and the actions they take as leaders. ExCELS is led by Mathematica in partnership with the University of Massachusetts-Boston Institute for Early Education Leadership and Innovation and funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families.

A key task of ExCELS was to create a theory of change about the influences on and the influences of ECE leadership based on the [research literature in ECE and related fields](#), and analysis conducted during the course of the study. This theory of change is an illustration of how leadership by center managers and teaching staff can influence multiple outcomes in center-based ECE settings. The ExCELS theory of change ([Exhibit 1](#)) shows from left to right: (1) what can influence ECE leadership, (2) what leadership looks like by illustrating who leaders are based on formal and informal roles in decision-making, change, and improvement; what individuals bring to leadership; and what center staff do as leaders to promote quality and positive outcomes; and (3) what leadership can influence in terms of outcomes for staff, center quality, and children and families. Each component in the theory of change includes details that are important



to understand because of their influence on, contribution to, or outcome of leadership.

What leadership looks like in center-based ECE settings

The gold square (in center of [Exhibit 1](#)) shows what leadership looks like and is made up of three key elements:

- 1/ **Who leaders are in center-based ECE settings:** Defined by a) the formal roles that can be identified by job title and administrative oversight or supervisory responsibilities and, b) who participates in leadership by contributing to decision-making and influencing change and quality improvement. Individuals who hold formal roles are leaders in ECE centers as are teaching staff and families who contribute to decisions about center operations and improvement.
- 2/ **What individuals bring to leadership:** Defined as the education, training, experience, and values and beliefs about ECE that individuals (**center managers and teaching staff**) “bring” to their leadership or develop over time.

3/ **What center staff do as leaders to support good outcomes:** Defined as the actions center managers and teaching staff take and practices they pursue to promote quality and positive outcomes for staff, families, and children. These practices include a range of responsibilities related to managing center operations, guiding the educational program and instructional practice, and creating an environment that encourages positive communication and fosters respect among all staff, families, and children.

Within the gold square, the circle around what center managers do and bring as leaders is a solid line because center managers are always part of who leaders are. The circle around what teaching staff do and bring as leaders is a dotted line because there can be a range in how much teaching staff participate in leadership.

The tan oval that surrounds the center gold square presents what happens in a center related to its culture and the practices and structures that exist. The literature suggests that a connection between leadership and the center climate, workplace relationships, and communication is essential to the ability of leadership to influence positive outcomes. The tan oval surrounds the three key leadership elements in the gold square to show this interconnectedness.

These connections, represented by the swooping arrows, show that center manager leaders who build **relational coordination** can create a supportive and collaborative environment among all center staff

and families. In these supportive environments, more individuals (like teaching staff and families) can become involved in leadership, creating a **distributed leadership** structure for decision-making and quality improvement.

What can influence ECE leadership

The light green vertical rectangle (far left) and the four stacked darker green shapes immediately next to it that connect to the tan oval represent the influences on leadership. The literature points to ways that the characteristics of the center (such as size, profit status, or being embedded in a larger organization) can influence who participates in leadership. Also, external factors or contextual influences (like state policy, the economy, or professional development and workforce supports) can affect what happens in a center as well as what individuals bring to leadership and can do as leaders.

What ECE leadership can influence

The set of blue stacked squares (far right) shows that leadership might influence staff outcomes and ECE center quality, which can lead to improved child and family outcomes. Research on outcomes of ECE leadership is limited, however the theory of change presents the potential reach of leadership in bringing about positive outcomes. In particular, substantial roles in leadership for teaching staff can provide a strong path to influencing child and family outcomes.

Key definitions

Center manager leaders: staff (one or multiple) who hold formal responsibility for overseeing administrative, operational, and instructional activities within an ECE center including a primary site leader or director

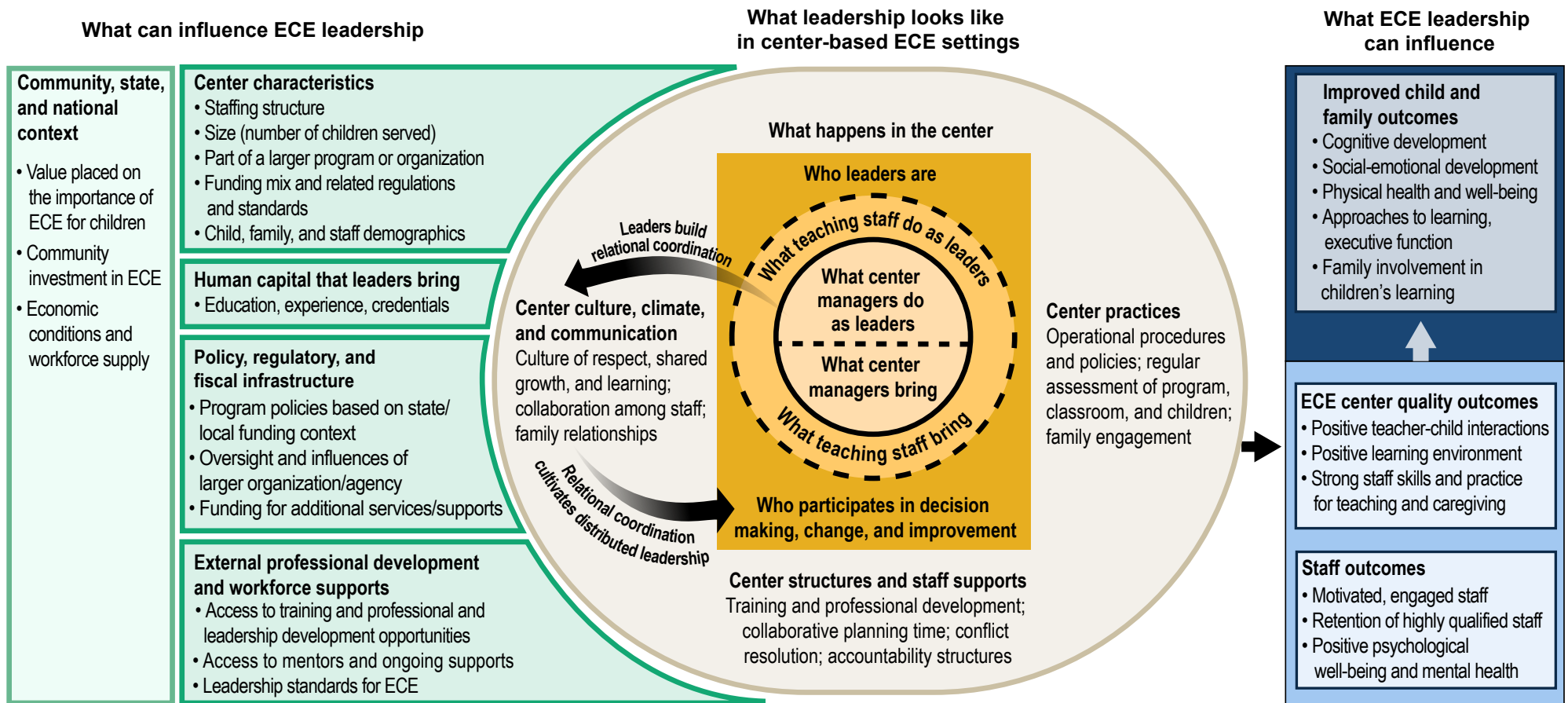
Teaching staff leaders: teaching staff (lead, head, or co-teachers and assistant teachers) who carry responsibilities in the classroom and hold formal or informal responsibilities to supervise and support other teaching staff or contribute to decision-making and center quality improvement

Leadership: the combination of center manager and teaching staff leaders that exist within an ECE center, and the contributions of families to decision-making, change, and improvement

Relational coordination: shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect, and high-quality communication between center managers, teaching staff, other center staff, and families.

Distributed leadership: involves the center managers along with a range of staff—including teaching staff—in learning, decision-making, and planning and implementing change for improvement. ▲

Exhibit 1. ExCELS theory of change of ECE leadership



Next steps

Using data from a descriptive study of 110 centers conducted in 2022, the project team created a measure to assess who leaders are based on participation in decision-making, change, and improvement; what individuals bring to their roles as leaders; and what center managers and teaching staff do as leaders to support quality improvement and promote positive outcomes. The ExCELS leadership measure can help researchers further explore and identify the critical elements necessary for effective ECE leadership for the benefit of staff,

families, and children. The measure can also inform practice by pointing to areas in which center managers and teaching staff might benefit from technical assistance or professional development opportunities to develop how they participate in leadership and what they do as leaders for change and quality improvement. Findings from the descriptive study and tests of the relationships among the elements in the theory of change can inform next steps for additional testing and refinement of the measure to understand and help improve ECE leadership in centers serving children birth to five.

About the Project

The Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS), funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families, has three goals: (1) fill the gaps in definitions and measurement to understand how effective leadership can improve the quality of experiences for children ages birth to five in center-based ECE settings, (2) develop a measure of ECE leadership, and (3) identify actionable leadership development initiatives and methods of evaluating them. The project has produced [a literature review](#) describing what we know about the elements of leadership in ECE center-based settings and how leadership influences staff, center quality, and family and child outcomes. The literature review also informed the development of this theory of change. A descriptive study of 110 ECE centers in 2022 tested the theory of change and informed the creation of a new measure of leadership. For more information, and to access other project-related products, please visit the [OPRE project web page](#).

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