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United Way Bright Beginnings on Professional Development and Retention Among Administrators and Teachers

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It is well known knowledge that retaining administrators and teachers in the field of education is a challenge faced each year within the United States and is costly to the education system. Attrition rates of teachers within their first few years in the profession are alarmingly high with many educators citing lack of support for leaving the profession before the age of retirement. Moreover, many educators feel they must “sink or swim” in the current educational environment. The fast rate of attrition of educators concerns administrators and policy makers alike. As such there is a need to prepare new and effective teachers as well as to support administrators to sufficiently staff their schools and create nurturing environments for students and teachers alike. This training extends to administrators providing quality professional development that is viewed as increasingly important in order to promote high-quality educational programs that serve every student. Participating centers in the United Way Bright Beginnings program were administered quarterly professional development courses to improve teaching and administrative skills. The participants included directors and teachers from seventeen centers. Results indicated that the self-efficacy of administrators and teachers alike were enhanced as well as retention rates of staff were higher than national averages.

Administrators and teachers are leaving the field of education at alarming rates that has caused a rise in concern for the future of education. Each year, troves of administrators and teachers vacate their positions for various reasons including retirement, termination, and voluntary resignation. Carroll (2007) found that between 1994 and 2004, U.S. schools hired more than 2.25 million teachers while losing 2.7 million during the same time period. Approximately 50 percent of teachers in the nation leave the field within their first five years of working citing poor working environments and not having enough support as two of the main reasons for pursuing alternative careers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Similarly it was also noted by Pomanski et al. (2010) that a lack of motivation and “disengagement from one’s work” occurs in response to a lack of resources and poor working conditions (Pomanski et al., 2010; p. 1341). Moreover Whitebrook and Sakai (2004) argue that turnover rates among early childhood education staff may be at a higher rate compared to national averages with between one fifth and one third vacating their positions annually. In the State of Texas, nearly 40 percent of teachers leave their position in the first three years costing the state \$329 million annually (Greenlee & Brown, 2009). Compounding these already frightening statistics is the reality that approximately 50 percent of current education administrators and teachers are baby boomers that are expected to soon retire (Huling, Resta, & Yeargain, 2012).

Each time an educator is lost, time and money must be spent on recruiting, hiring, and training new staff. The high turnover rate of administrators and teachers in schools are detrimental not only financially but in terms of creating continuity and stable learning environments for impressionable students. When an educator is lost, so is the sense of community the educator established within the school and with fellow staff members, students, parent, and families.

In contrast, research has shown that through supportive environments and quality professional development and continuing education, administrators and teachers can build higher levels of self-efficacy, thus remaining longer in the field of education. Moreover, research suggests that when teachers receive adequate support from administrators and additional education training including professional development, classroom quality improves (Barnett 2004, Bowman 2011, Whitebrook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009).

In 2002, United Way of Greater Houston and Exxon Mobil created an innovative early childhood education program entitled Bright Beginnings aimed at aiding children from lower-income families in achieving social, emotional, physical, and cognitive milestones as well to have program participants enter school ready to succeed. In addition, this program aimed to strengthen the quality of child care and early childhood programs through staff training and leadership development to create competent and confident directors and teachers. In order to strengthen administrators and teachers United Way Bright Beginnings provided quarterly professional development training.

Method

In 2012, United Way Bright Beginnings consisted of seventeen participating learning centers staffing 17 directors and 119 teachers. During 2012, UWBB provided quarterly professional development trainings with the goal of building the confidence of directors and teachers. In order to accomplish this goal, teachers received on-site coaching as well as participated in 24 professional development training hours specific to their teaching assignment. Teaching assignments were allocated to four different professional development tracks: new teacher, infant cohort, toddler cohort, and preschool cohort. During professional development training hours, teachers met with teachers of other centers who shared the same teaching assignment. Additionally, UWBB encouraged and provided support to teachers to complete their CDA.

Directors participated in 114 professional development training hours. UWBB provided three day training on the GOLD assessment to help directors learn about and understand the assessment process. Additionally, directors received training on the parent-child-provider relationship in the first six years of a child's life from the Brazelton Touchpoints Center. This training aimed at helping directors understand the importance of partnerships between parents and providers and to boost directors feeling of competence in communicating with and serving their parent community. Many directors also attended five local, state, and national conferences. Directors travelled to the Chicago Commons for Reggio Emilia Inspired Learning Tour in which they learned how Reggio teaching philosophies can be implemented in American classrooms to engage children in meaningful play.

Results

The Annual Survey revealed that 77% of teachers attended three or more of the quarterly professional development trainings while 23% attended two or fewer. Additionally, teachers reported changes in their teaching practices regarding observation, documentation, communication, confidence, and collaboration. 82 percent of teachers reported a change in their confidence as a result of participating in UWBB professional development trainings. One teacher shared that "I've always been confident, but UWBB appreciates me and sees me as a professional and for that I am grateful."

Directors indicated that they felt a greater sense of community and improved relationships. Several directors noted that their confidence grew in response to their improved stress management skills. Moreover they indicated that by being able to better manage their own responsibilities and stressors, they in turn improved their listening and communication skills, being able to better support their staff and be a team player.

During 2012, 42 staff members left their positions: 14 staff members were dismissed or voluntarily left, 21 left for personal reasons (school, health, family, retirement, moves), and 5 left for better pay. Among the staff that left, 71 percent had less than 4 years of teaching experience, 26 percent had between 4 to 9 years of experience with an average of 5.3 years, and 3 percent had over 9 years of experience. Overall, 105 staff members remained in their positions, a retention rate of 72 percent. Thus, UWBB turnover rate for 2012 was that of 28 percent, at the low end of the national average.

Discussion

United Way Bright Beginnings has seen success and higher rates of retention by offering quality professional development training to directors and teachers. Directors of UWBB centers average 10.7 years of experience as directors of centers and 8.9 years of childcare teaching experience. Teachers have an average of 10.1 years of experience, 21 percent under 4 years, 39 percent between 4 to 9 years, and 40 percent with 10 or more years of experience.

By continuing to educate, develop, support, and supervise teachers and administrators beyond formal training, we create educators of quality which in turn positively impacts student achievement. Analysis of norm referenced tests indicated that students of UWBB centers who are predominately high risk populations (children of teen mothers, living in poverty or homeless, new immigrants, and victims of domestic abuse) are consistently ranking as high as or higher than both the national average and HISD average on the Stanford reading and mathematics, Aprenda reading and mathematics, and STARR reading and mathematics tests.

Thus, in order to change the climate of education, we must first build competent and confident administrators and teachers supporting their growth professionally and providing them with opportunities for further education and exploration of practices, As stated by Elliot, Isaacs, and Chugani (2010) "the development of and progression of.. teachers [and administrators] into truly skilled professionals requires continued support and supervision." (Elliot, Isaacs, & Chugani, 2010, p. 141) In order to be successful, professional development should be "engaging, regularly repeated, and monitored for implementation" (Morgan & Kritsonis, 2008, p. 4). Building confident and competent teachers and administrators is the way to build the success of current and future students.

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