

# Texas Change in Mind:

## A Collaborative Model for Infusing Brain Science & Equity Practices into Partnerships with Families and Children

By Karen Johnson and Kelly Martin

Amid our day-to-day work to partner with families and children, especially during an ongoing pandemic, it often is challenging to stay apprised of and incorporate the advancing knowledge, research, and evidence around brain science. However, brain science holds great promise in helping us to increase equity, support all families, and strengthen our workforce. The science is clear—adversity and toxic stress can change the brain’s architecture—and preventing and mitigating both are critical in every facet of our work (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014).

The Texas Change in Mind initiative, convened and led by Social Current, supports 10 community-based organizations that are working to create impact through intersecting levels of change (Social Current, n.d.). Funded by the Episcopal Health Foundation, The Powell Foundation, St. David’s Foundation, and an anonymous donor, the initiative uses a learning collaborative model that allows the organizations to learn from one another, Social Current, and other experts. The Texas organizations are using brain science and equity practices to effect transformative change by promoting the foundations of safe, stable relationships; positive childhood experiences; healthy development; and individual and collective resilience.

This work is guided by the Texas Change in Mind initiative’s theory of change that includes six key areas: Brain science, racial equity, organizational resilience, community impact, communications, and evaluation. Through a wide array of learning engagements over two years, the teams are incorporating new knowledge into their own organizational theories of change and determining their paths forward.

### Staff and Organizational Resilience

As the initiative launched in spring 2021, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the participating organizations noted this opportunity could not have come at a better time. They already had been working to embed brain science and equity and were eager for additional support in building capacity and resilience in their workforces.

“So many staff have experienced firsthand inequities regarding COVID-19 in their families and personal lives,”

said Nadine Scamp, CEO of Santa Maria Hostel. “We have been thinking about how we can support our staff so they can support our families. Change in Mind is an opportunity to put thought and resources behind this question.”

To equip staff with resilience-building tools, organizations are teaching them brain science concepts, including *executive functioning* (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020), and the *sequence of engagement: regulate, relate, reason* (Perry, 2020). These concrete strategies are being integrated into work with families and helping staff to stay regulated, build psychological safety, and engage in conversations that advance equity practices.

Hand in hand with embedding brain science principles, the Texas organizations are advancing their equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) journeys by administering the Intercultural Development Inventory® (IDI®; see [www.idiinventory.com](http://www.idiinventory.com)) to key staff. This cross-cultural assessment of intercultural competence is a first step in developing a plan for personal growth. In addition, the organizations’ executive leaders are receiving consultative support from Social Current’s EDI experts on advancing their organizational efforts. This work is stretching teams to, “reach across the organization, be inclusive of staff and team up with cultural proficiency and inclusion folks,” noted Dr. Teri Wood, a Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) clinician and coordinator with the Austin Ed Fund, which supports the Austin Independent School District (AISD).

“Working to grow our EDI skills can be uncomfortable at times and is often hard, but we know you can’t have trauma-informed, brain-based learning/services without EDI. They are interwoven,” said Karen McWhorter, director of development at Family Service Center of Galveston County, who is seeking funding to expand administration of the IDI® across the organization.

Children’s Museum Houston (CMH) has been advancing the work of its Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) Committee, which was started before the pandemic and seeks to make improvements to how it designs and provides programs. The CMH team is adding brain science modules to its new employee onboarding and equity training and regularly engaging with all staff in advancing racial equity.

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“We think of this as a journey—a process. It’s called “Change in Mind” for a reason—it’s really a shift. It makes us put things in perspective,” said Lisa Williams, director of gallery programs at CMH. “Children in this pandemic have suffered in a way that we don’t even know at this point. We are trying to position ourselves to give our families and communities what they need from us.”

### Child and Family Well-Being

By focusing on supporting staff, building capacities, and strengthening organizational resilience—all through the lens of brain science and a commitment to equity and justice—the participating organizations are already seeing positive impacts in organization culture shifts and their ability to support children and families.

“We have appreciated the intentionality of bringing the equity, diversity and inclusion conversation into brain science conversations,” said Scamp. “Having the space for staff to wrestle with their perceptions and to support participants in moving beyond stigma and bias regarding their substance use and mental health challenges is foundational change.”

Santa Maria Hostel primarily works with mothers who are experiencing the interwoven challenges of substance use, housing insecurity, and mental health concerns. Santa Maria Hostel’s recent work has focused on supporting healthy relationships between parent participants and their infants and toddlers. They also are building out-of-school-time programming to focus on school age children. Originally this looked like a traditional afterschool program. However, given what the team is learning about brain science and intentionally centering families in their children’s development, the program is morphing into a family-based afterschool program with an emphasis on strengthening attachment and serve-and-return communication (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child., n.d.).

The multi-generation approach, a hallmark of brain science-based strategies, is also being used by the Austin Independent School District. As Becky Murillo, LCSW and TBRI clinician, said, “This is going to make our support to schools, students, and families even stronger.” They are working with a group of parents to help them learn about brain development and how they can support their children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. “Parents understand how it better equips them as caregivers and as parents,” said Murillo. “As they learn, they say, ‘We need to get more parents at this table!’ It feels like an empowerment model to me.”

As the work of the initiative continues, NORC at the University of Chicago (see [www.norc.org](http://www.norc.org)) is overseeing multiple evaluation objectives, including evaluating the effectiveness of the Change in Mind learning collaborative model in helping sites achieve positive results at individual, organization, and community system levels; building the capacity of sites to use developmental evaluation; and assessing the uptake of racial equity at organizational and community network levels.

We will know more about impact of this work as evaluation results come in. For now, we can attest that the Texas Change in Mind Learning Collaborative is an exciting opportunity to accelerate the application of brain science and equity into systems change efforts in the communities served by the 10 participating organizations. These leaders are being supported to rethink, reflect, and reimagine at all levels of their work—personally, organizationally, and systemically. They’re sharing ideas, supporting each other, and creating a ripple effect in their networks. As Dr. Wood says, “This has brought life, excitement, and hope to our work. Our team is excited for every meeting and asking, ‘What can we do next?’” ■

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