

Dream BIG

Executive
Summary

for our
youngest
children

California Early Learning
Quality Improvement System
Advisory Committee





FINAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

What Is a Quality Rating and Improvement System?

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a set of ratings graduated by level of quality and used to assess early learning and care programs. Objective ratings help families identify quality programs, guide providers in making improvements, and give policymakers a basis for designing technical assistance. A comprehensive QRIS provides workforce development, financial incentives, and other supports to improve quality. The California Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee has proposed a QRIS; through this work, California joins more than 40 states that have adopted, or are developing, these systems. California is a leader in designing a QRIS that purposefully links improvements in program quality with child outcomes, including school readiness.

Why Develop a QRIS? To Improve Outcomes for Children, Including Reducing the Achievement Gap

The good news is that high-quality early learning and care programs with effective educators can improve children's readiness and school success, with higher test scores, better attendance, less grade retention, and long-term benefits in school completion and lifetime earnings. California

urgently needs to: 1) develop a quality rating and improvement system that builds on our effective programs; and 2) redesign the health and safety monitoring system for programs serving more than one million children ages birth to five annually.

- Only quality early learning and care programs that use research-based, developmentally appropriate practices achieve positive results. Poor-quality programs exacerbate the school readiness gap; they may be unsafe, unhealthy, and cause harm to our youngest children (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).
- More than half of our third graders do not meet state educational standards in language. The roots of the achievement gap start with differences in vocabulary development, an important indicator for school readiness, apparent as early as 16 months of age (Karoly & Cannon, 2007).
- By reducing grade retention and dropouts, use of special education and welfare, and involvement in crime, quality early learning and care programs are estimated to save from \$4 to \$17 for every dollar invested (Reynolds et al., 2007; Schweinhart, 2004; Karoly & Bigelow, 2005). While the benefits are less dramatic for children from more advantaged backgrounds, attending a quality preschool program is associated with higher achievement in elementary school for children in all income groups (Gormley et al., 2005).

What Are the Key Policy Opportunities?

Address concerns in health, safety, and quality review processes and phase in appropriate oversight for the early learning and care system.

To improve standards and frequency of reviews, streamline resources, and link programs to technical assistance and other quality improvement incentives, possible consolidation of current licensing and program reviews with QRIS should be considered. According to the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO, 2007), no statewide system measures the quality of early learning and care programs, and even the basic licensing system has out-of-date standards and one of the lowest inspection rates in the country. California has several early learning and care "systems" with great variability in standards, multiple review processes, and far too little oversight.

The state has three early learning and care "systems" – Title 22 licensed facilities, Title 5 state-contracted child development programs, and the federally administered Head Start, as well as a publicly funded "non-system" of license-exempt care.

- Only Title 5 and Head Start have standards that are designed to promote child development and school readiness, and both have a significant percentage of teaching staff with early childhood education degrees.
- Three different agencies are responsible for Title 22, Title 5, and Head Start reviews; and no one reviews license-exempt care settings.
- With the exception of Head Start, currently none of these systems is rated with sufficient frequency by trained, objective reviewers to ensure that standards are met.

Provide objective ratings of programs for families and policymakers by establishing unified statewide quality standards.

Families need help in assessing the quality of early learning and care programs. According to studies, parents valued high-quality care, but they rated centers nearly twice as high as did trained assessors on such key elements as health, safety, and staff-child interaction (Helburn, 1995). A RAND study involving onsite observations of 251 centers serving preschool-age children in California found problems ranging from alarming deficits in basic health and safety to shortfalls in teaching and learning (Karoly et al., 2008). These findings highlight a need for objective ratings on the quality of early learning, as well as the health and safety of settings where young children spend up to 11 hours a day. Parents need this information about the impact on their child’s learning, health, and well-being to make wise choices on behalf of their children and to support improvements through consumer pressure. Policymakers need the information to hold programs accountable and invest in effective quality improvement efforts. The LAO recommended making QRIS and licensing information widely available through Web access (LAO, 2007).

Pilot a quality review system and design incentives to support quality improvement.

Both financial and non-financial incentives are needed to support the implementation of California’s QRIS. A non-financial incentive would be marketing the program’s quality tier to promote program enrollment. An example of a financial incentive would be providing higher funding rates for higher quality programs. California would need to revise current reimbursement rates for publicly subsidized programs because they provide what might be called a reverse tiered reimbursement system. Higher rates are paid to voucher programs that are expected to meet only minimal standards, or in some cases are not required to meet any standards at all, while state-contracted programs are held to much higher standards but receive lower reimbursement rates.



Strengthen the links between early educator professional development and effective teaching to improve child outcomes.

While there is broad agreement that understanding child development and engaging in effective teaching and responsive care are central to quality early learning and care programs that improve child outcomes, most early educators lack sufficient professional development and academic training in child development to deliver such programs. Researchers indicate that early childhood education needs to be more focused on the desired child outcomes, and that degree-bearing courses need to include more observation of early educators in the classroom and more time for feedback on their effectiveness as early educators (Pianta et al., 2009). California needs to build on innovative projects and commit to statewide access to an articulated pathway through higher education based on early childhood educator competencies; research- and data-driven professional development practices, policies, and resource allocations that link effective teaching and learning relationships to child outcomes; and equitable compensation and environments.

Establish a statewide evaluation and research system to determine the impact of early learning and care programs on child outcomes.

California currently has no way to track the impact of the more than 57,600 licensed settings for children ages birth to five on the children's school readiness and their kindergarten through grade twelve achievement. Establishing a unique child identifier for children enrolled in early learning and care programs would enable the state to establish research and evaluation systems that connect improvements in program quality, including more effective teaching relationships, and child outcomes. Integrated research and evaluation systems can improve the accountability and transparency of our early education policies and investments.

Proposed Design of a Quality Rating Structure

- The proposed quality rating structure:
 - » Establishes a five-tier block system that assesses five quality elements: ratios and group size; teaching and learning; family involvement; staff education and training; and program leadership. Within each tier for each element, a program must meet all the standards before it can advance to the higher tier.
 - » Sets cohesive quality standards for all programs that will be connected to child outcomes through research, a data system, and a commitment to continuous quality improvement.
 - » Integrates competence in supporting the success of children from diverse ethnic groups, with multiple languages, and with disabilities and other special needs.
- Under the QRIS, a program or provider would meet the basic licensing standards, among other requirements, to obtain the entry-level rating. To advance to the mid-level rating, a program or provider would meet standards similar to the more stringent Title 5 state-contract standards for early childhood programs; and, at the top level, a program or provider would meet requirements

that incorporate nationally recommended quality standards, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children standards.

- The proposed QRIS includes objective ratings using standardized assessment tools to help families identify quality programs, guide programs in making improvements, and give policymakers a basis for designing technical assistance and other quality improvement initiatives.
- The QRIS will inform families and public policy through the following elements that have been shown to support quality improvement and child outcomes:
 - » Standardized assessments to measure the quality of teaching and learning
 - » Higher ratings for programs and providers that actively engage and partner with families
 - » Higher ratings for well-qualified early educators and directors trained in early childhood education, including ongoing professional development
 - » Higher ratings for education plans, sufficient staffing, and small group size

How the QRIS Will Work: Pilot Projects, Oversight, and Ratings

California's QRIS statewide implementation will be pilot tested and then phased in over five or more years. A three-year pilot will be launched that includes sufficient time for prior planning and evaluation. Voluntary local implementation efforts will be supported and encouraged through technical assistance (TA) and other resources. Participation in the QRIS will be initially voluntary with appropriate funding and incentives provided through a variety of partnerships. After piloting, the QRIS can then be required for publicly funded programs, and eventually required for all licensed early learning and care programs. The proposed QRIS will:

- Pilot test a rating process every two to three years involving Environment Rating Scales and, at higher tiers, measure teacher-child interactions for preschoolers with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System and for infants/toddlers with the Program Assessment Rating Scale.
- Explore options for a combination of local and state oversight, with QRIS reviews done at the county or regional level and the California Department of Education providing oversight and assurance of consistency.

Proposed Systems to Support Quality Improvement

Voluntary Technical Assistance to Help Programs Improve

It is proposed that every early learning and care program, upon entry into the QRIS, be offered a voluntary "quality improvement plan" that is based on the program's rating and explains the



rating, establishes a collaborative relationship for TA, including direction on how to improve, and builds a learning community that fosters continuous program improvement. This plan would include TA that:

- Focuses on informing programs about the QRIS, helping programs to move up to higher tiers, and sustaining higher tiers
- Is voluntary, builds on local-state-national expertise and delivery systems, and uses a client-driven, data-based coaching model as well as other strategies
- Builds on California's early learning resources,

including the *California Preschool Learning Foundations*, the *California Infant/Toddler Learning & Development Foundations*, the *California Preschool Curriculum Framework*, and child assessment tools that provide research-based, effective practices and that link to kindergarten and elementary education

Workforce Development to Promote Effective Teachers

It is proposed that California's early learning and care workforce and professional development system incorporate the progress of current quality improvement projects and accelerate state-wide accessibility, accountability, and coherence through the following steps:

- By 2012, *Early Childhood Educator Competencies*, which include the *Foundations* and *Frameworks*, will be developed into a common and comprehensive course of study that is reflected in courses for Associate and Bachelor degrees and delivered statewide.
- Using the statewide common and comprehensive course of study based on the *Competencies*:
 - » By 2013, all California community colleges that offer early learning and care programs incorporate the "core eight" classes and additional courses to reflect designated lower division *Early Childhood Educator Competencies* into their degree programs.

- » By 2014, all California State University, University of California, and private higher education institutions that offer early childhood education programs align these courses to a common and comprehensive course of study across the two and four-year degree system.
- By 2015, a clear and accessible system of demonstrating the *Early Childhood Educator Competencies* equivalency for courses will be developed and publicized. This includes courses taken from out-of-state, foreign, and non-regionally accredited institutions, as well as competencies developed through professional practice.

Strategies to Encourage Family Involvement

California's QRIS includes family involvement as an essential element to establish opportunities for families to become involved in their children's early learning and care, to strengthen their impact as their child's first teacher, and to partner with early educators and programs. As a national leader in QRIS family engagement efforts, California needs to provide broad outreach and communication to families, as well as to programs, early educators, and the public.

Data Systems to Track Progress

An important first step in developing a QRIS data information system will be to develop a unique child identifier based on birth certificate numbers and to assess the information needs and current data collection processes for young children, early educators, and programs.

Financial Model and Other Resources

A financial model and other resources for future funding require the following:

- The development of the funding model aligned with the quality rating structure for early learning and care programs that serve children from birth to five years of age. Additional work on this and other issues, includes:
 - » Cost analysis using the Office of Child Care's National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center cost calculator and other methods
 - » Further study on effective financial and non-financial incentives
- A pilot phase to test the feasibility and value of a collaborative approach involving partnerships with local entities to increase the resources available for the QRIS
- Incorporation of existing funding streams to the maximum extent possible in both the pilot test phase and statewide build-out of a QRIS. Further work will be needed to prepare California to access all possible funding streams.

Next Steps for Quality Improvement Through the QRIS

The federal government recently issued policy directions that support California's QRIS, including stronger health and safety standards for early learning and care settings, expanded implementation of a statewide QRIS, increased effective professional development for early educators, and strengthened program integrity. California is well positioned for additional resources as the California State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care (Early Learning Advisory Council—ELAC) assumes responsibility for implementing a QRIS. Success depends on our public leaders' commitment and our dedication to garnering the public will necessary to champion the phased implementation and continuous improvement of a QRIS to ensure optimal early learning outcomes for all California children.

You can find this report at the California Department of Education
(Senate Bill 1629 Advisory Committee- Child Development Resources page)
at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/rt/caelqis.asp>.



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