

Kicking it up a Notch: Working Together for the Next Generation in Quality Improvements

By Mike Abel

Early childhood educators are some of the most resourceful people on the planet. They can apply their creative genius to make the most of what's available and deliver amazing experiences for kids. It's not always about how much they have but what they do with what they have. Of course they are inspired daily by the children and their families, as well as colleagues who help to form an incubator of social and intellectual interactions. As early childhood leaders, we can apply the same skills we use every day in classrooms and programs to solve seemingly bigger problems related to quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS)—use what we have, to get the job done.

With an unprecedented focus on early childhood care and education, we are at a precipice of breaking through in creating widespread systems of quality. After decades of telling our story, we have garnered the public and political will to agree that quality early childhood experiences are essential and beneficial for our youngest citizens. When qualified teachers and administrators use best practices, children grow and thrive. There is increasing awareness that early childhood education is a good financial value as well. **Change is on the horizon and we will need to “kick it up a notch” to be successful in the next generation of quality improvement initiatives.**

Early childhood leaders know how to work together—we've been collaborating across multiple sectors (e.g., early education, social services, human development, health care, small business, and corporations) since the 1960s when Head Start was created to work out solutions that are best for young children and families. We have discovered that respect and ethical conduct go a long way toward building trust and shared understanding that make cooperative projects successful. I'm reminded of the song that my daughter's preschool teacher taught the children in her class:

***“If we have a problem, we know what to do, Cool down, Listen well, Work it out,
and Do not shout.”***

By applying the knowledge and skills learned in programs and classrooms, we can come together as a field to tackle issues that keep us from delivering quality experiences for all children.

“Kicking it up a notch” is about embracing what we know and getting everyone involved.

May 29, 2015 | *This document may be printed, photocopied, and disseminated freely with attribution. All content is the property of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership.*

We have tools to help us move forward. Early childhood experts have developed resources and done the research to help us know what QRIS should like and how to organize an effective system.¹

Even though we have so much going for us—on the whole—it seems we continue to struggle with coming together. Sectors remain isolated. Systems are missing key elements. And wide disparity exists in the quality of early childhood programs. It is apparent that taking some of the most effective quality improvement models to scale is unrealistic. While 20 states received over \$1 billion in Race-to-the-Top—Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants, robust federal funding to support quality improvement in the remaining states has not followed. Future funding for quality initiatives beyond RTT-ELC grants is uncertain.

It is time for resourceful early childhood educators to lead the way. Lasting systemic change requires widespread participation. Perhaps the collective commitment of grassroots program leaders could be the tipping point to success?

HERE ARE SIX WAYS THAT INDIVIDUAL EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT:

1. **Enroll your program in your state's QRIS.** Regardless of the rating that you are afraid your program might receive—if you start the process—you plug into systems that are designed to help your program improve. Signing up may also give you access to technical assistance (e.g., coaching, individualized training, or other professional development opportunities). If your state or community doesn't have a QRIS, ask why. When everyone chooses to be part of QRIS, all children can be in programs that are striving toward continual improvement.
2. **Enroll yourself and staff in your state's professional development (PD) registry.** Professional development registries are great tools for program administrators to support staff in their individual professional growth and career planning. When aligned with identified competencies for teachers and leaders, the information recorded in PD registries is useful for creating comprehensive professional development plans that can meet both the individual and collective needs of staff. When registry information is combined for whole communities or states, it helps those who provide training and education to design opportunities that meet the needs of the workforce. Don't forget, updating each individual's information is essential for the registry system to work with accuracy.
3. **Volunteer to serve on committees that have a mission to improve quality in early childhood programs.** Some problems are too large for any individual or early childhood program to solve alone, but by working with other organizations, it can make a real difference. Working alongside leaders from other types of programs breaks down barriers that isolate people and focuses attention on outcomes to benefit children and families. It is important that many voices—including yours—

May 29, 2015 | *This document may be printed, photocopied, and disseminated freely with attribution. All content is the property of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership.*

participate in the conversations. The synergy that emerges from effective collaborations can impact communities and states with lasting changes.

4. **Join and actively engage with a professional association to keep abreast of emerging trends, new research, and standards to support quality.** Early childhood education is rapidly evolving and keeping up-to-date on advances is necessary for leading the way in quality improvement. Professional associations provide the means for leaders to stay on the cutting edge through publications, conferences, webinars, and learning communities. Associations serve as a forum where colleagues consider and debate new ideas and strategies for improving quality. Broad participation in the discussion is essential if the process is going to be informed by diverse perspectives. Most importantly, your engagement builds your professional knowledge and helps you to be an adaptive leader.
5. **Participate in research studies when you have the opportunity.** Occasionally, early childhood leaders and their programs are invited to be part of research studies. It may be as simple as responding to a questionnaire or as involved as allowing your program to be a test site for assessments. Busy program leaders—who may already feel overwhelmed with their responsibilities and pressures on the job—may be quick to respond that they don't have the time or energy to be part of a research study. But often, research participants receive significant benefits that are designed to improve program quality. Just rejecting the offer may be an opportunity missed for expanding your program's capacity and for an entrée into a network of other progressive leaders.
6. **Advocate for quality within your sphere of influence.** Everyone has a sphere of influence—family, friends, neighbors, work associates, acquaintances at the fitness center, people at church, etc. Whenever we interact with others, we can influence their understanding about quality early childhood education. As an early childhood leader, your opinion matters, and the ripple effect of sharing your expertise can help to sway the tide of public perceptions. Not to minimize the importance of formal advocacy efforts (see previous McCormick Center blogs: [Early Childhood Advocacy for Beginners | Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)), but advocating for quality also involves speaking up and standing up for what we know is best for children and families. You don't have to be a professional lobbyist to share with the people in your sphere of influence.

Can you imagine the impact on program quality if the two million early childhood educators in the United States were to embrace these six activities? We can hope that our federal and state governments can find the resources to fully fund early childhood education. We can believe that a handful of prominent key leaders will break through barriers to ensure a highly qualified workforce and best practices in every classroom. But the collective potential of resourceful early childhood leaders offers the most promise for supporting quality improvement in our future.

May 29, 2015 | *This document may be printed, photocopied, and disseminated freely with attribution. All content is the property of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership.*

Mike Abel is the Director of Research and Evaluation at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University. His background is in early childhood program leadership, teacher education, and applied research. He has worked on a number of state and national projects related to systems development and highly vulnerable children and families. He served as the Missouri AEYC-MO President and as a member of the NAEYC Affiliate Council Executive Committee.

May 29, 2015 | *This document may be printed, photocopied, and disseminated freely with attribution. All content is the property of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership.*