

Research Notes

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Child Care Center Directors' Experiences with QRIS

Implementing a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is an increasingly popular strategy to expand the access of families, especially the most vulnerable, to high-quality child care programs. Currently there are 22 statewide QRIS and several states have QRIS implemented at the county level. Recently QRIS was a major component of the Race-to-the-Top Early Learning Challenge competition. It is likely to continue to be the framework on which policymakers build an integrated system of early learning and development, inclusive of child care, Head Start, and state-funded pre-K programs. The National Women's Law Center (NWLC) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), recently conducted a study to explore the perspective of center directors on both the opportunities and the challenges faced by "on-the-ground" participants in QRIS.

Sample

In the fall of 2010 researchers interviewed 48 directors from nine states (Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) about their experiences with QRIS. The directors were asked to share their perspectives on the key components of QRIS identified by the researchers as critical to improving the overall quality of child care and strengthening early learning in particular.

The directors were selected based on referrals from state and local early childhood leaders. While not a representative sample, the directors who were selected had a range of experiences with QRIS, with center ratings at the low, middle, and high end of their respective rating systems. A two-day roundtable forum was held with 15 of the directors who had been interviewed to further discuss the benefits and challenges of QRIS.

Findings

Quality Standards

- ◆ Directors believe it is important to include staff education requirements in QRIS and that increasing professionalization of the workforce through higher staff qualifications benefits children, programs, and the field.
- ◆ There is a need for a wider array of training options and course offerings, increased supports for staff that speak languages other than English, and training and education that is accessible to staff that work fulltime.
- ◆ Professional development systems, including workforce registries that collect data on individual professional development activities, are critical to helping teachers track their efforts towards credentials and degrees that in turn help centers achieve higher QRIS ratings.
- ◆ Including a global measure of the learning environment and classroom practices in the QRIS is necessary but not sufficient. Directors believe there needs to be greater emphasis on the teacher-child interactions that are most predictive of the quality of care children receive.
- ◆ In order to meet standards concerned with administrative and management practices directors, especially directors of small centers, need business training and technical assistance.

Monitoring and Assessment

- ◆ The assessment process, though stressful for staff, enhances professionalism as well as quality services if there is reliability and consistency in the assessment practice.
- ◆ Intensive training is needed for assessors to ensure consistency in the interpretation of QRIS standards as well as joint training on the standards for assessors and technical assistance specialists who support program improvement efforts.
- ◆ Directors want an opportunity to provide feedback on how they were scored and a timely and reliable process for appeals in those situations where they disagree with the scores received.
- ◆ There is a need for greater coordination between agencies so that assessment for QRIS standards does not duplicate or conflict with other assessment and monitoring requirements (e.g., licensing, fire safety, Head Start, state-funded pre-K).

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Financing and Supports

- ◆ Directors view both monetary (grants, awards, tiered reimbursement rates) and non-monetary (coaching, mentoring, technical assistance) supports as essential to sustaining quality improvements.
- ◆ There is a need for expanded monetary supports substantial enough to cover the costs of achieving and maintaining a higher quality rating.
- ◆ Directors favored sustained funding through tiered reimbursements—higher subsidy rates paid to progressively higher rated programs—but stressed that tiered reimbursement must be built on adequate base rates to achieve and maintain quality.

Responding to the Needs of All Children

- ◆ Directors are supportive of strong QRIS standards to promote the development of infants and toddlers but believe that there is not enough emphasis on teacher-child interactions in program assessments.
- ◆ Existing QRIS standards and assessments do not adequately address how well programs are meeting the needs of children from diverse cultural backgrounds or with special needs.
- ◆ Professional standards in QRIS need to recognize and value staff with degrees in special education as well as early childhood education.

Helping Families Identify and Choose High-Quality Care

- ◆ Center staff use QRIS as an educational tool to inform enrolled families about the components of a high-quality early childhood program.
- ◆ For QRIS to have a greater impact on parents' choice of child care, states and communities must commit to a sustained effort to distribute information about QRIS and communicate to diverse audiences (pediatricians, parent networks, and other trusted sources of support).
- ◆ Directors want child care subsidy agencies to actively support the consumer education of low-income families by providing information about the quality rating of providers.

Aligning Standards across the Early Childhood System

- ◆ Directors call for greater coordination among monitoring agencies and alignment among standards based on their experience of conflicts between licensing and QRIS standards and how assessors for each system interpret these standards.
- ◆ Alignment between accreditation and QRIS is a win-win strategy that provides an extra incentive for providers to achieve accreditation because accreditation can boost the quality rating received.
- ◆ Directors support strong linkages between QRIS and state-funded pre-K as a means of improving the quality of services for children when achieving a specific rating in QRIS facilitates a center's participation in state-funded pre-K or when QRIS and state-funded pre-K use common program assessments.

Recommendations of NWLC and CLASP for Policy

The experiences of center directors who participated in QRIS provide important lessons to guide the efforts of policymakers building new or improving existing QRIS in their states. Based on these findings, NWLC and CLASP recommend that local and state policymakers

- ◆ set quality rating standards that reflect all the essential elements of quality care and education;
- ◆ ensure a quality assessment process that is valid, reliable, and responsive;
- ◆ provide adequate and sustained incentives and supports for improving quality;
- ◆ design QRIS to meet the needs of *all* children;
- ◆ educate families about QRIS and the importance of choosing quality programs; and
- ◆ align QRIS with other high-quality components of the early childhood system.

With these additional steps to strengthen QRIS, more programs participating in QRIS will be able to achieve higher quality ratings and provide greater access for children and families to high-quality early learning and development services.

1. Tout, K., Starr, R., Soli, M., Moodie, S., Kirby, G., & Boller, K. (2010). *Compendium of quality rating systems and evaluations*. Washington, DC: Child Trends and Mathematica Policy Research.
2. Schulman, K., Matthews, H., Blank, H., & Ewen, D. (2012). *A count for quality: Child care center directors on rating and improvement systems*. Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center and CLASP.

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