



Continuous Quality Improvement in Early Childhood and School Age Programs: An Update from the Field

June 2017

Build
Strong Foundations For
Our Youngest Children

About the BUILD Initiative

BUILD is a national initiative that supports state leaders across the early childhood spectrum—adults dedicated to family support and engagement, early learning, health, mental health, nutrition, and more. BUILD brings these leaders together to promote opportunities for all children from birth through age five to start school healthy and prepared for success. Since 2002, when the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative designed and launched the initiative, BUILD has partnered with state-based organizations, early childhood innovators, business leaders, government offices and others to build early childhood systems by developing infrastructure, connecting programs and services for young children that functioned in isolation, at cross-purposes, or without the sufficient resources to meet critical needs, and by advancing quality and equity.

BUILD:

- Provides tailored and timely technical assistance to leaders in partner states.
- Facilitates learning communities that share the latest research and promising practices.
- Serves as a knowledge broker by shining a light on promising early childhood systems efforts and highlighting new ideas and successful innovations.
- Supports new and emerging leaders and works to ensure diversity and equity in all aspects of early childhood systems building.
- Informs and influences state and national conversations and policy decisions by highlighting emerging issues, innovative approaches, best practices, and results from the field.

About the BUILD Initiative Community of Practice on Continuous Quality Improvement

The BUILD Initiative Community of Practice (CoP) on Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) brought professionals together from early childhood education and out-of-school time to engage in exploring models and applications of CQI. BUILD Initiative led five WebEx meetings and developed a Landing Pad with resources related to CQI. CoP members contributed time, talent and resources to this CQI venture. BUILD thanks them for their generosity.

Written by

Billie Young, BUILD Initiative Consultant

Introduction

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a process which ensures that organizations and their partners are systemic and intentional about improving services and practices, and increasing positive outcomes for children and families. CQI is optimally seated in an organizational culture that has a common vision, shared values and beliefs, and a commitment to ongoing quality improvement. CQI is reflective, cyclical and data-driven. It is proactive, not reactive. It goes beyond merely meeting externally applied standards and moves the lever for change internally. Participants control the process themselves, through continuous learning and a dedication to “getting better at getting better.” Throughout the early childhood education and afterschool field, there is a lot of buzz about CQI linked to Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), accreditation efforts, and government accountability efforts.

In the fall of 2016, the BUILD Initiative launched a CQI Community of Practice (CoP) to bring together leaders in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Out-of-School Time (OST) with the goal of scaffolding knowledge about CQI through sharing promising practices, asking deep questions and leveraging each other’s good work. CoP members were from 19 states and the District of Columbia, working in a range of settings—foundations, higher education, county nonprofits—and in a range of roles: state agency leads, federal TA providers, QRIS coaches, and child care industry executives. The common thread was a passion for quality improvement using a CQI approach and a conviction that what members learn with each other is critical to boosting collective impact. Members knew from experience the potential that CQI has to deepen and sustain quality improvements and ultimately to improve outcomes for children and families.

The CoP explored questions such as:

- What are the models for CQI and how is CQI different from program improvement plans? Both are informed by data, involve established goals and rely on technical assistance to be successful.
- Are there conditions that need to be present and how do we know if an organization is ready for, or already engaged in, CQI?
- What can be learned from school reform, the health care field, and others who are engaged in CQI, using a variety of frameworks and tools to guide improvement efforts, to gain collective impact and to speed up, spread, or sustain change?
- What does CQI look like, on the ground, in programs?
- How can early childhood systems embrace CQI, spreading the adoption of this approach in ways that maximize its potential to foster and sustain improvements in the quality of services, on both program and systems levels?
- How is CQI embedded in and supported by professional development?

This paper provides a summary of the discussions and key questions the CoP addressed from November 2016 through April 2017. For the purpose of contributing to the incorporation of CQI into quality improvement efforts in ECE and OST programs and systems, this paper offers the group’s findings, resources that were shared, and questions for further examination.

Continuous Quality Improvement: A Foundational Framework

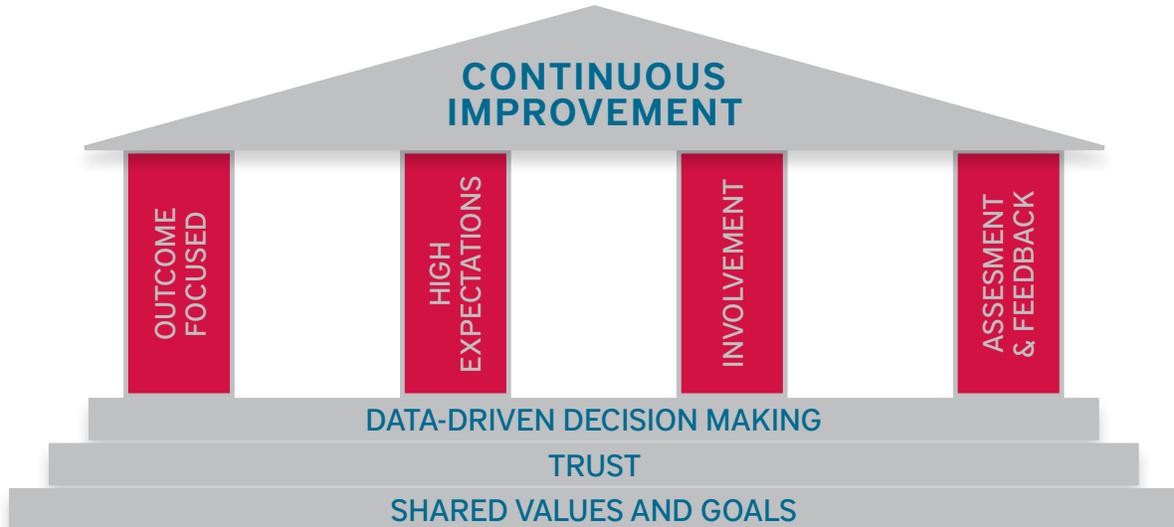
Several frameworks for CQI are being used to describe both the elements that organizations must exhibit to succeed at CQI, as well as ways to map the change process. The “house” graphic below is often used to describe the elements of an organization that successfully engages in continuous improvement, starting with a strong foundation built upon shared values and goals, a high level of trust amongst team members, and the use of data-driven decision making. The four pillars represent a quality framework that is strengthened through a focus on outcomes, high expectations, involvement of the entire team, and the use of regular assessment and feedback. As Ann Henschel, Branagh Information Group, noted, “You see on top of the house the importance of an overarching philosophy of CQI. This is what holds everything together and keeps organizations thriving.”



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Ann Henschel
Branagh Information Group

Figure 1: The Components of Exemplary Organizations





Mapping the Change Process

A number of CQI approaches incorporate a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) sequence to describe the flow of reflection and experimentation that is a hallmark of a CQI approach. There are various ways of depicting this cycle. The model in Figure 2, below, was developed by CoP members. This model, like many others for CQI, assumes that change efforts will be based on a shared vision of quality and will be cyclical and ongoing, with each cycle informing the next round of quality improvement activities. The role of data is to both inform goal setting, but also to provide feedback loops which can stimulate adjustments in strategies or signal a need to recalibrate the plan. These cycles of reflection take programs back to their goals, signs of success, and predictions about changes. The PDSA cycle symbolizes testing a change in a work setting by planning it, building staff capacity, testing, observing and documenting the results, and then acting on what is learned.

Figure 2: A Model for Continuous Improvement



Tom Layman, Muriel Wong and members of the BUILD CQI CoP, 2017

This action model for CQI is deceptively simple. In practice, there are significant challenges to organizations that try to implement it. Consultant Tom Layman found that in Illinois many programs use parts of the cycle, but often don't tie them together into a complete cycle, and while the vision might be self-motivated change goals, "The reality for most programs is that they need to balance a desire for self-determination with a very real need to comply with the standards of their funding or licensing entity and possibly with the QRIS or accrediting agency." CoP members reflected:

- It is often easier for programs involved in QRIS to work on low-hanging fruit. It's harder to focus on teaching practices and implementation of proven practices.
- Sometimes there is a tension between what centers want to work on and what we "know makes a difference for children."
- Bottom line: on the ground, it's about the rating.

These questions were posed: "Is the cycle of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) useful for going beyond meeting externally applied standards and moving the lever for change internally? What's the "secret sauce" in organizations that have an active culture of CQI? How can that best be supported?" One participant noted that CQI can feel too broad and amorphous: "How do we get people to adopt CQI as a way of being? One way to get it internalized is in the context of something people want to improve. It needs to be connected to something concrete and then becomes a tool for a specific change. Using the process needs to be inquiry-driven."

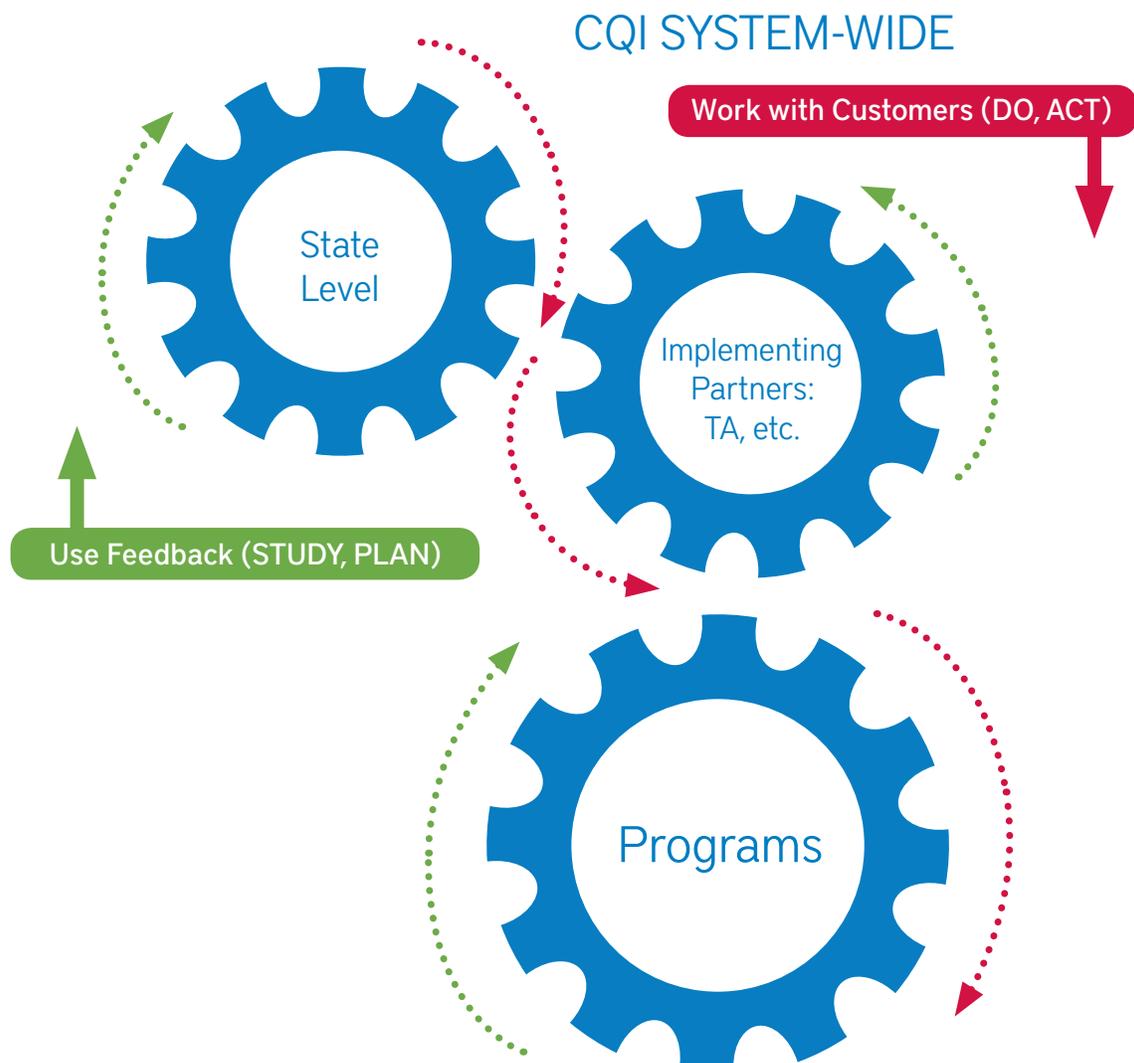


What conditions are necessary for an organization to implement CQI? What’s the “secret sauce?”

CQI takes place on multiple levels: early childhood education (ECE) or out-of-school time (OST) programs, implementing partners,¹ state systems, and national organizations. Systems-level work to improve effectiveness and outcomes impacts—and is impacted by—change on the program and implementing partners levels. All levels impact each other. Figure 3, below, shows the interrelationship of CQI efforts on each level.

1: Implementing partners include organizations that are contracted to provide technical assistance (coaching, mentoring, and consultation), training, professional development and other supports to ECE and OST programs involved in QRIS, state pre-K or other state initiatives which seek to improve program quality.

Figure 3: CQI System-Wide Interrelationships



Muriel Wong and Tom Layman, 2017

Adopting a CQI approach signals a shift from a focus on simply complying with standards imposed by external systems to an internally motivated culture of reflection, curiosity, ongoing learning, and commitment to high quality. Programs and systems with a CQI ethic aren't interested in "quality for a day"—the day of the assessment—but rather in adopting an ongoing culture of inquiry and reflection. At the heart of organizations that successfully embrace CQI are transformational leaders who practice change management skills such as inclusive communication, team approaches, and using evidence to inform goals and quality improvement plans. These leaders are able to inspire innovation and creativity, openness to change, and a culture of collaborative inquiry. It's really about approaching change from a shared leadership perspective, a collaborative process. CQI leaders secure the resources staff need to support the change process and model mutual respect and problem-solving. It's important for directors to be in a reflective mode, to "walk the walk" and be open to change. Transformational leaders make sure that the change team has a shared vision and goals, time for collaboration, and a safe space to experiment and work through challenges.

Clearly, an essential ingredient in the "sauce" is leadership. Marsha Hawley, Ounce of Prevention, provided this description from her work at the Ounce: "A leader who is confidently humble is able to establish a true culture of continuous quality improvement. He or she finds joy in teaching and learning and building a culture of learning and growing together. This kind of leader isn't afraid to learn from errors, but rather finds ways to collaborate with other school leaders to be renewed and to gather information about effective practices. She establishes a culture of trust within her school at multiple levels by continuing to practice 'not knowing' and exploring ideas with her team. She is intent upon creating a learning organization starting with herself. Leaders who want a 'quick fix' or to complete a checklist are not motivated to find systemic strategies for inclusive leadership and continuous improvement."



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Marsha Hawley
Ounce of Prevention

What can we learn about CQI from other sectors?



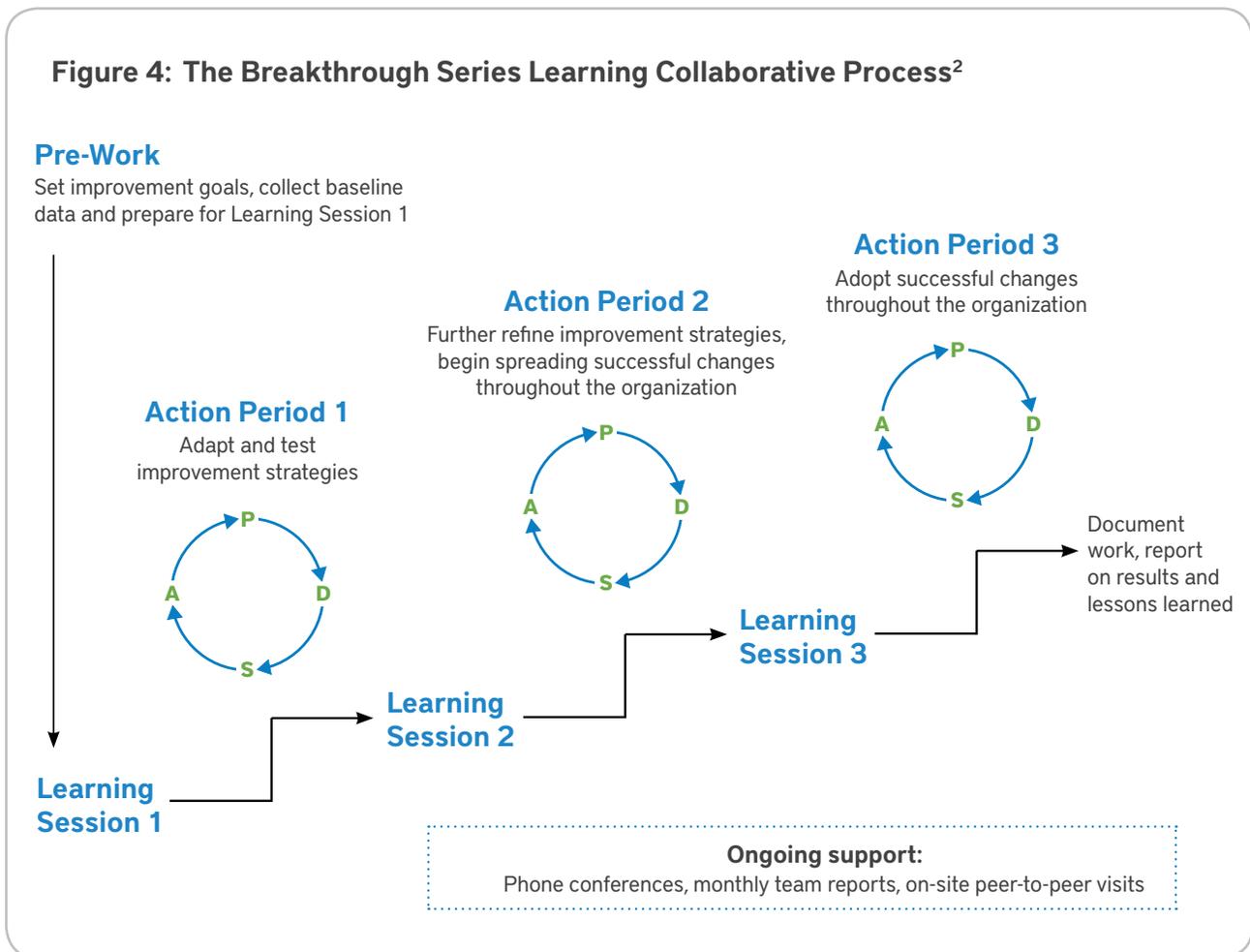
BUILD CoP members were eager to explore models of CQI from other sectors. CQI has been an important influence in health care, child welfare, and school reform movements over the past two decades. A Boston study tested the applicability of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) practices from the health care field to ECE programs in the city's low-income neighborhoods. The BSC model has five key elements:

- Multi-level inclusive teams;
- Shared learning environments;
- A change framework;
- A model for improvement linked to data; and
- Faculty (coaches and other content experts).

The process starts with pre-work, including developing a shared vision, setting improvement goals, collecting baseline data, and preparing for learning session one. Each of the three learning sessions is two days, with additional sessions after each of the PDSA cycles. The BSC process incorporates the PDSA cycle in three phases:

1. Adapting and testing improvement strategies.
2. Refining these strategies and spreading successful changes throughout the organization.
3. Adopting successful changes and sustaining them throughout the organization.

Data is collected regularly, there are frequent meetings and on-site peer-to-peer visits, and the process is concluded with documentation of the work, results and lessons learned. Figure 4 maps the BSC process, which one member observed, “takes the PDSA cycle and places it in a broader system improvement context that could be used on an individual program level or in a state-wide system to leverage collective impact.”



2: Douglass, Anne (2017). The trauma-informed early care and education breakthrough series collaborative. Invited presentation for the Build Initiative/QRIS National Learning Network Continuous Quality Improvement Community of Practice Webinar Session 2: What can we learn about CQI from the health and social service sectors? January 25, 2017.



In BSC, multiple ECE programs share the same goal and attend the same learning sessions. The model fosters implementation of evidence-based practices and organizational change through collaborative teams that include staff of all levels and families. The teams are able to act as champions for the new practices with colleagues and learn from each other, spreading success within and across programs. This process of testing ideas, using data for feedback, adapting and then spreading strategies to others is the embodiment of CQI in practice. Success is enhanced by ensuring time and space for teamwork and relationship-building, having leadership fully committed, using data to inform experiments, and supporting innovation and risk-taking. Anne Douglass, University of Massachusetts Boston, found that success for the study participants depended on having an inclusive organizational culture that went beyond a “fix-it” mentality, noting that, “There is a huge gap between what we know and what we do. The BSC process helps keep the focus on a circular process of continuous improvement and experimentation.”



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Anne Douglass
University of Massachusetts
Boston

While turnover is an issue for most quality improvement efforts, in the Boston BSC adaptation, it was partly mitigated by taking a systemic, whole-team approach. CoP members observed that careful consideration would have to be given to turnover to keep teams from getting stalled, and supports would need to be in place to bring on new team members—which is true in all CQI efforts. The group supported the idea of a focus on evidence-based practices but cautioned that, “It’s easier in the health care field. In ECE there are fewer evidence-based practices and some of our most innovative practices still lack research.” CoP participants said that high-level buy-in within programs will be essential. Several members raised the question of the role of organizational readiness in a complex approach like this model. Which programs would benefit from the BSC cycle of continuous improvement? Should states focus on programs that already have strong leadership in place or does a model like this develop readiness and strong leaders?

A new federally funded study will examine the processes and outcomes of the BSC model in ECE settings. Researchers Anne Douglass, along with Tamara Halle (Project Director) and Kathryn Tout (Principal Investigator) of Child Trends, identified the study’s five key feasibility questions:

- What adaptations to the BSC model are needed for ECE context and systems?
- What makes an ECE program “ready” to participate in an intensive quality improvement process?
- What supports do ECE program staff need to learn how to collect and use data?
- What measures can be used to document a change in organizational culture?
- What is the capacity of the ECE system to support CQI interventions at the level of organizations rather than in individuals?

What does CQI look like on the ground in ECE and OST programs?

Culture is a way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization. So what are the indicators of a culture of CQI in ECE and OST programs? The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning identified the following indicators of a culture of CQI:³

- Curiosity
- Reflection
- Tolerance of failure and vulnerability
- Use of feedback
- Systems thinking

Several CQI culture indicators have emerged from Marsha Hawley’s work with directors and principals. She described the ideal CQI leader as one who is “confidently humble” and who commits the time and resources needed for CQI. These leaders nurture staff curiosity, have a commitment to innovation and use of data as part of their change process. CQI leaders nurture a shared belief that “there is no finish line.” Instead, the goal is to get better at getting better.

The term “continuous” implies a cycle that loops repeatedly, challenging individuals to look at what is working and what can be improved to achieve better results. This process of inquiry is ongoing, not episodic.⁴ Shared values, goals and trust are the building blocks of a program that successfully engages in CQI. CoP members have discovered that successful directors are in tune with how they feel about change and how they feel about leading change. Having staff members who are curious about what the data says about what’s working and what needs improvement is dependent upon ensuring that all practitioners are trained on the rating tools, so they gain an appreciation of the role these assessments play in providing valuable feedback and inspiration for changes in practice. The house graphic (*Figure 1: The Components of Exemplary Organizations*) provides a visual reference to these qualities of organizations that have a culture of CQI.

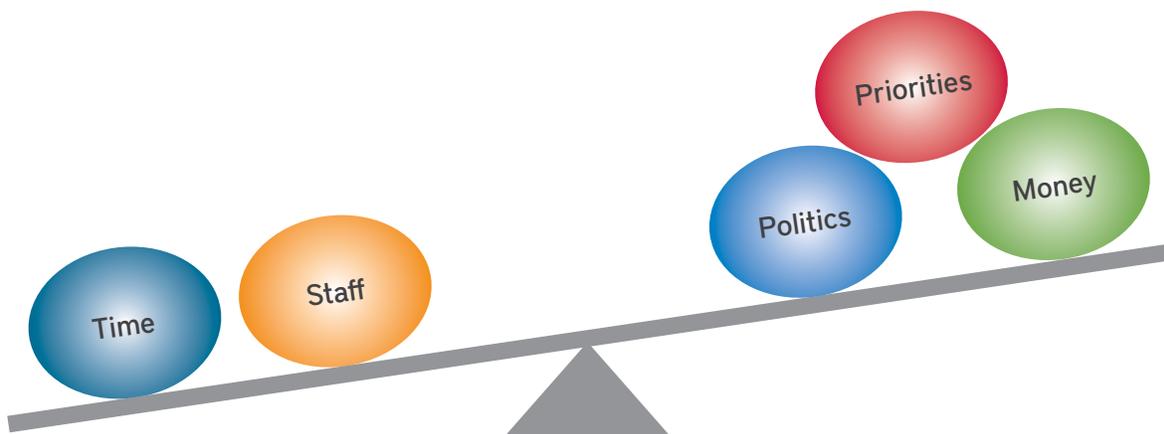
3: National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. 2011. *School Readiness for All Children: Using Data to Support Child Outcomes*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start.

4: *A Resource Guide for Head Start Programs: Moving Beyond a Culture of Compliance to a Culture of Continuous Improvement*, OPRE Report #2015-02, January 2015.

The work environments of CQI-focused ECE and OST programs are positive because everyone feels valued and heard and there is a shared investment in making the programs the best they can be. As one participant framed it, “I am part of something larger and I feel connected to how my work impacts our greater cause.” Jill Bella, McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, has found that these organizations have a climate that is highly innovative and that they go beyond the checklist mentality (i.e., what needs to happen to get to the next star level or to complete the program improvement plan). They expect people to be creative, to challenge themselves, and to find new ways to be even more effective. They use new information and data to make decisions. Innovation is a norm—it’s expected.

As Rebecca Berlin, Teachstone Training, depicts in Figure 5, below, all of this requires balancing the realities of your program against the constraints you face.

Figure 5: The Balancing Act



Rebecca Berlin, 2017

Training for leaders on how to use Appreciative Coaching and how to create a culture of dialogue and joint learning is helpful. Though it often is challenging for program leaders to accept coaching while they are leading, it can help them know when they are “doing it right” and support them in their roles as agents of change. One participant stated that principals who were successful with change and improvement spent 30 percent of their time on leadership for change—it takes a major commitment of time and resources. Several states are using Communities of Practice with cohorts of ECE and OST program directors to both support directors and to model for them how to create their CoPs for their own staff. The McCormick Center uses 10-month leadership academies, called Taking Charge of Change, to harness the power of colleagues to motivate each other and accelerate the pace of change. Some states’ QRIS are layering CoPs for technical assistance providers, directors, and teachers to model CQI on all levels and catalyze change implementation. Part of their goal is to ensure that all levels of the system have a shared understanding of the “why” behind the requirements or standards and how data can be used to develop ownership of goals for change. The goal is to shift attitudes from “I hate all of this testing—it takes time away from my work with kids” to “This data is so interesting, I wonder what it means and how I can change outcomes for some of my kids.”



Other challenges to establishing and sustaining a culture of CQI include: reaching agreement on what constitutes “quality,” maintaining momentum in the face of staff turnover, finding time for the CQI process and, of course, funding for support for change. Some programs are able to meet these challenges while others are not. That’s where the readiness factor comes in. Many programs are in survival mode and turnover can cripple readiness to embrace change or a program’s ability to spread and sustain changes in classroom practice. There are also significant issues related to equity, including having TA staff who are a good “fit” for the program (in terms of culture, language, and race) and barriers to accessing the resources, support, and funding necessary to sustain a CQI approach.

What are the readiness factors? Can we develop readiness? Do we need to choose programs that are already “ready” to ensure they will benefit from state-supported training and technical assistance?

Understanding a program’s readiness for change starts with consideration of the director’s developmental level. Is the director at the novice, capable or master level? For the novice director, big changes are going to be tough, and if they are busy putting out fires, they won’t have time for reflection or managing a CoP and creating a climate of innovation. Tools like the Blueprint for Action⁵ or the Five Stages of Change (next page) can be used to determine where directors and teachers are, and motivational interviewing has proven effective at helping people to move through the stages of readiness.

5: Bloom, Paula J. (2005) Blueprint for action: achieving center-based change through staff development Lake Forest, Ill.: New Horizons.

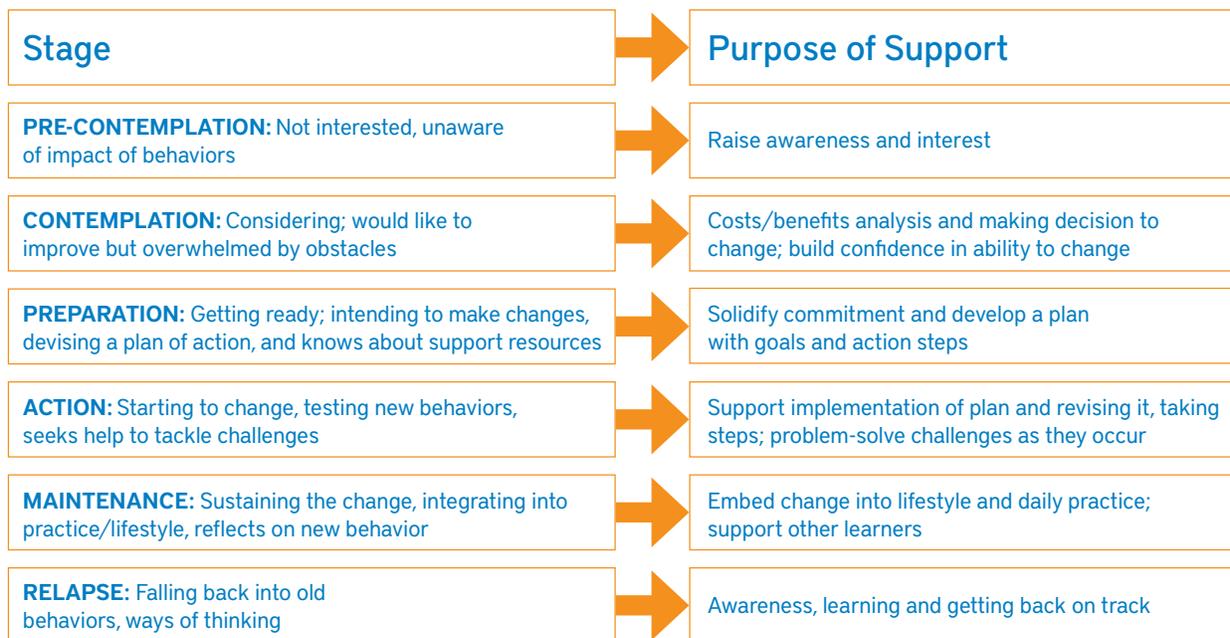
The Stages of Change Approach for Quality Improvement in Early Care and Education is a research-based framework that draws upon the Trans-theoretical Model and Motivational Interviewing. It recognizes and responds to early educators’ readiness to change their attitudes and behaviors with young children. Jani Koslowski, Zero to Three–NCECDTL, observed that “The purpose of using an approach that differs by stages of change is to increase the effectiveness of early childhood initiatives by providing people in the early stages of change with the necessary supports to increase awareness, internal motivation, self-efficacy, and commitment to change.”



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Jani Koslowski
Zero to Three–NCECDTL

Figure 6: Stages of Change Model (Adapted)



Adapted from Prochaska, J. O., Norcross, J.C., DiClemente, C.C. (1994).⁶

6: Prochaska, J. O., Norcross, J.C., DiClemente, C.C. (1994). Changing for good: The revolutionary program that explains the six stages of change and teaches you how to free yourself from bad habits. New York: W. Morrow.



COP members have used a combination of stage-of-change tools and motivational interviewing to move programs to higher levels of readiness. But, change takes time. Programs with a strong culture of continuous quality improvement have leaders and staff who are engaged in instructional inquiry, and they will find a way to preserve time for shared inquiry if they truly value it. Understanding the level of commitment to change within an organization and linking them with the appropriate supports at the right time can provide the boost programs need to build and maintain a robust culture of CQI.

How are states and implementing organizations taking a CQI approach to generate innovation and coordination across systems and programs?

Three stories illustrate the creative ways that states and implementing organizations are embedding a commitment to continuous improvement in their systems. Commonalities across Oregon, Arizona, and California include: leadership focused on inquiry, systems thinking, using data to inform system improvements, use of feedback, and support for innovation and risk-taking.

Oregon's QRIS program currently uses a building-block system with five star levels. The staff and advisory board review dashboard data and evaluations and use this information to inform changes in the QRIS. In the spring of 2017 they considered a radical new rating concept: moving to four star levels, with the top level requiring a portfolio and stretch goals that the ECE program itself would develop. The new model would support the development of CQI practice in programs and trust them to know what their four-star challenge should be. Dana Bleakney-Huebsch, The Research Institute noted: "This approach, while risky, embodies a belief in CQI and the power of ECE programs being self-actualized to determine what's next and where the data leads them." Challenges with this approach include weighing the value of different goals across programs, as some may be more ambitious than others. Another challenge is establishing parameters to guide level-four goal-setting and having TA available to support a wide variety of stretch goals.

In Arizona, the implementing organization, First Things First, has 27 regional partnerships that fund Quality First (Arizona’s QRIS) participation. Supports include coaching and child care health consultation, with additional supports in some regions. Regular evaluations demonstrated a need for increased collaboration when ECE programs work with more than one TA provider and to ensure that coaches were more consistent in their practices. Quality First started an academy for all TA providers, identified coaching competencies and tiered coaching strategies along with protocols to ensure coaching would be more consistent. They use reflective supervision and ongoing data and evaluation to make sure these strategies are achieving the desired results. Quality First, aware of the unsustainability of a “coach-heavy” support model, is examining ways to create a “stickiness factor” that will serve to sustain the changes and ECE programs’ commitment to ongoing quality improvement. Lisa Sutherland, First Things First, noted: “We wondered how we could increase the capacity of TA providers to support programs to become more self-sustaining.” Debi Mathias, BUILD Initiative, asked, “Can we conceptualize the role of the TA provider as capacity-builders—agents of change whose greatest success would be to work themselves out of a job?” She also wondered, when programs have implemented their desired changes, what level of “inoculation” do they need to ensure stickiness, and could we use a “booster-shot” approach to sustain the gains? These are important questions with budget and sustainability implications that merit further study.

California is a state of great complexity, with multiple state initiatives, including 48 regional QRIS consortia and a multi-layered governance and communication model. This matrix of interconnections is embedded with CQI. Debra Silverman and Sarah Neville-Morgan of First 5 California explained that, “Our state QRIS system



Can we conceptualize the role of the TA provider as capacity-builders--agents of change whose greatest success would be to work themselves out of a job?”

Debi Mathias
BUILD Initiative



structure is built to ensure CQI” and “we are constantly looking for system efficiencies and anticipating the impact of state decisions on local programs.” Scalability and sustainability of new initiatives were key considerations, along with the absolute necessity of coordinating across multiple intersecting state initiatives, such as Pre-K For All, Transforming the Workforce Birth to 8 California, First 5 California T&TA, Effective Interactions, and CDE EESD.⁷ They used the Coffman Framework⁸ to map the QRIS landscape. The challenge of coordinating and aligning training and technical assistance across multiple systems and players will be addressed by a new Request for Proposal which will fund efforts to provide statewide consistency for raters and assessors, as well as coaches supporting QRIS and trainers through a training and trainer approval process. Communities of Practice and a culture of continuous learning help to ensure that they are striking the balance between aspiration and reality.

How is CQI embedded in training and professional development?

Trainers, coaches, mentors, consultants and program directors have long understood that their ability to inspire changes in practice is dependent upon motivation. We know that classroom learning doesn’t necessarily translate into changes in practice, either at the program or systems level. Change requires more than simply acquiring knowledge. To change, people need to feel and believe that the change will be better for them. See Figure 7, below, for an illustration of change motivation.

Figure 7: What inspires change?



This awareness has fueled a movement toward embedding CQI into professional development systems and supports in order to capture opportunities to increase staff motivation and to incorporate new practices. Programs can create a shared vision for change and test new strategies using the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. This holds true on all levels: program, implementing partners and state systems. Lindsey Allard Agnamba, School Readiness Consulting, said: “CQI may look different on the program level (providers, teachers and leadership), implementing-partner level (training, higher education, technical assistance, resource and referral and others) and the state-systems level (state agencies, statewide organizations, policymakers, private funders), but the essential framework and approach are ideally parallel processes and interconnected.”

7: California Department of Education, Early Education and Support Division

8: To learn more about Julia Coffman’s theory of change process model:
www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange/issue-archive/advocacy-and-policy-change/evaluation-based-on-theories-of-the-policy-process

9: Copies of Muriel Wong’s surveys and other tools can be found on the CQI CoP Landing Pad:
<http://qrisnetwork.org/lt/continuous-quality-improvement-community-practice/overview>

Muriel Wong, WELS System Foundation, worked with the state of Pennsylvania and Palm Beach County to build change readiness and cultures of continuous quality improvement. In both cases, she used surveys⁹ to identify readiness for change and shape professional development strategies. The focus was primarily on the technical assistance providers, using TA competencies. Surveys gave TA providers a voice in crafting their professional learning based on their strengths and what they needed to learn to become more effective. The data also provided a climate check regarding the culture of their agencies, which helped determine how best to provide leadership support and professional learning opportunities. They wanted to explore questions such as, “What are we not asking about what we are doing (or not doing) and about where we need to go?” As a result, professional development in Pennsylvania focused on developmentally appropriate practice across age groups, supporting change and a CQI approach with programs.

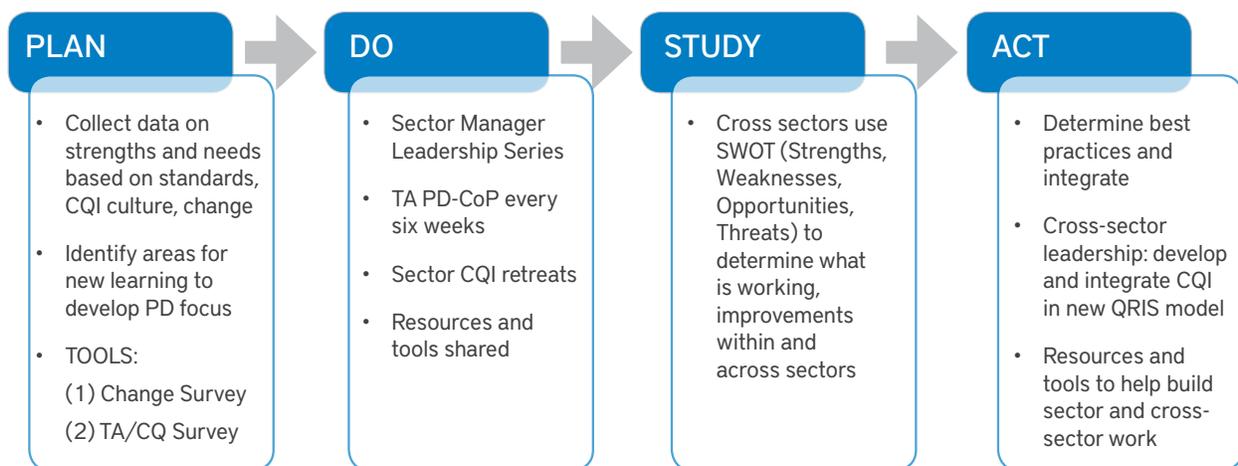


There is no right or wrong when it comes to change; it’s about where you are and your readiness.”

Muriel Wong
WELS System Foundation

In Palm Beach, the focus was also on the system level, including public schools, higher education systems, the Quality Improvement System (QIS), and resource and referral. The focus for professional development (PD) at this systems level was supporting change and CQI processes, as well as shared understanding about programs and agencies. Figure 8, below, shows how Muriel and Palm Beach leadership used a CQI approach, including Communities of Practice, survey data, study groups and reflective practice to navigate from an agency-centric to a provider-centric system. One thing Ms. Wong has learned through her change-management work is that, “There is no right or wrong when it comes to change; it’s about where you are and your readiness.” Equally as important as the content of the change is the process for change and making sure that everyone’s voices are heard on every level. “People need time to think about change before moving through a change process.”

Figure 8: The PDSA Cycle in Palm Beach



Muriel Wong 2017



Leadership for innovation was a key ingredient in Pennsylvania and Palm Beach. The ability of leaders in these places to create a welcoming environment for innovation and feedback was essential, and they had to demonstrate risk-taking, openness to input, and self-reflection. Leadership was invited to reflect upon the challenge with questions such as, “What are you willing to hear and how well can you hear what you’re not ready to hear?” Through this CQI process, the TA professionals in both Pennsylvania and Palm Beach were able to develop their own approach to CQI based on what they learned about their own change process and how best to work with clients on the ECE/OST program, implementing partner and state-systems levels.

After-School Quality: The Process of Program Improvement

This process was developed in the 1990s by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). Known as ASQ, it includes national quality standards and a process for program improvement. ASQ uses a five-step process of program improvement which closely aligns with the PDSA cycle:

- Start by preparing the community for change and having all stakeholders identify core values to guide CQI.
- Create a CQI team to include program leadership, staff, family members, community and school partners, and older youth.
- Collect and analyze data—program assessments and surveys of staff, families, youth, partners, etc.
- Create an action plan.
- Implement the plan and check in on progress and challenges; ensure that changes have the desired impact.

Pennsylvania has implemented ASQ as its model for quality improvement for OST programs. Professional development is aligned with the ASQ process. Susan O'Connor, National Institute on Out-of-School Time, said: "Program improvement is a developmental process. Programs are the most successful when we adjust the improvement process and supports, like training and TA, to their readiness level." Pennsylvania Keys offers up to 40 hours of TA to programs involved in quality improvement. TA professionals use an Appreciative Coaching model with the CQI team as they move through the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. TA professionals share resources, model best practices, build leadership skills, and foster Communities of Practice.

Much like the Breakthrough Series model, Pennsylvania's ASQ process works with regional cohorts of programs to provide training on the five-step process and time to work through the steps. Program leaders assess readiness and identify their goals and strategies. Both leaders and emerging leaders from each program are part of the training and CoP as a hedge against turnover—so the CQI process can continue even if the program leader leaves for another job. TA professionals have their own CoP monthly meetings to encourage personal reflective practice. They use fidelity checklists to identify challenges. True to their commitment to parallel processes, Pennsylvania Keys has created online training for program leaders, as well as TA professionals, and their supervisors on the concepts and skills needed to guide CQI. The Pennsylvania ASQ project demonstrates that building change that lasts requires understanding readiness and using scaffolding skills to boost it; getting buy-in and involvement of all stakeholders; taking the time for relationship and strengths-based practices; engaging in dialogue and appreciative coaching; supporting and modeling reflective practice on all levels; and fostering shared decision-making.

Through experience, Pennsylvania learned that programs with more than 40 percent turnover annually simply couldn't make it through the ASQ. So, part of the readiness assessment involved defining the turnover rate and working to reduce it as a first action step. It's undeniable that staff turnover can slow down or deflate the CQI processes across all sectors, and bringing new staff into the CQI learning community can be difficult. Finding the funding to offer the kind of worthy wages and compensation that can reduce turnover is even more challenging for most program leaders. While increasing staff wages enough to retain staff may not always be feasible, there are other things directors can do. Creative directors can offer benefits that make a difference, like paid birthday and holiday leave, and paid time to attend conferences. It's important to do climate surveys and find out what staff truly value and need and to share this information with parents, the board of directors, and funders.



Program improvement is a developmental process. Programs are the most successful when we adjust the improvement process and supports, like training and TA, to their readiness level."

Susan O'Connor
National Institute on
Out-of-School Time





Many climate improvements aren't dependent on funding. Staff want to know "we're in this together," one participant noted, and it's useful to take the temperature of the program climate regularly and to "meet them where they are." Knowing how to support staff is a baseline for readiness for change. It's essential to approach each director and staff with a process that will work for them based on how they deal with change. Technical assistance providers who are learning about their own change process are better able to figure out how to approach their clients effectively. "Innovation is one of the most important domains of organizational climate. The norm of innovation is linked to successful CQI."

This kind of leadership takes time, which is often an obstacle for leaders on all levels. Having leaders complete a time audit to take stock of how they currently spend their time, and clarifying the percent of time spent on administrative versus instructional leadership tasks, can lead to conversations about delegation or routinization of some work. As Lindsay Allard Agnamba noted: "The value of shared leadership and creating an aspiration around instructional leadership can help leaders prioritize teaching and learning activities."



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Lindsay Allard Agnamba
School Readiness Consulting



What questions do we still need to explore?

Using a CoP format to bring together a wide range of professionals from across the country through five meetings and exposure to a wide variety of resources related to CQI fostered deeper understanding and connections with colleagues. One member summed it up this way: “I joined the BUILD CoP to learn what CQI practices others are using to strengthen ECE systems and to build relationships with others doing this work. This was accomplished, but I want more. I really loved the opportunity to network on this topic.” The power of collegial process and scaffolding off the work and experience of others was powerful, and CoP members agreed that many questions were raised in the process that still need to be addressed, such as:

- Given high levels of turnover, how do we bring new team members into the program’s CQI practice?
- Is it a problem that quality interventions “end?”
- What are the measures of success over time?
- How can systems such as QRIS, pre-K and OST initiatives incorporate and best support CQI as part of their standards and resource allocation?
- What role do equity and cultural relevance issues play in CQI, including access to resources and supports, determination of success, establishment of standards and who is at the table making decisions?
- How can we best incorporate ideas of rapid cycling of changes, sustainability, and collective impact?

Copies of meeting presentations along with an extensive resource library are available on the Landing Pad at <http://bit.ly/buildCQICOP>.

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