

## Continuous Quality Improvement: An Overview Report for State QRIS Leaders

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*This report summarizes information gathered through interviews with state and national key informants regarding continuous quality improvement in quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS).*

Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) are a “method to assess, improve and communicate the level of quality in early care and education settings.”<sup>1</sup> Research shows that high-quality early childhood experiences have an impact on improving the cognitive, academic and social skills of all children, particularly those most at risk for school failure later in life.<sup>2</sup> States are using QRIS as a driver to enhance the quality in early childhood education settings, and the aim of this strategy is to improve child outcomes.

More than half of states now have QRIS that are operational, recently launched or piloted.<sup>3</sup> Much of the initial work was focused on ratings, accountability and monitoring of early learning programs. However, in recent years there is an increased focus on the quality improvement strategies and supports.

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### Continuous Quality Improvement

Continuous Quality Improvement is a process to ensure programs are systematically and intentionally improving services and increasing positive outcomes for the children and families they serve. CQI is a cyclical, data-driven process. It is proactive, not reactive. A CQI environment is one in which data is collected and used to make positive changes – even when things are going well – rather than waiting for something to go wrong and then fixing it.

CQI is an ongoing process that involves the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle.<sup>4</sup> CQI is related to the internal “owning” of a process by the team in the program. It is going beyond meeting the externally applied regulations and standards – and moves the lever for change internally, under the control of the program participants themselves.

This is where the excitement and joy of creating a learning, growing, vibrant organization lies. The support infrastructure (professional development in its broadest sense, and other supports) should be focused on providing programs the resources, supportive policies and practices to be able to attain and maintain this level of continuous learning that is able to respond to research, promising practices and innovation.

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, A. for United Way Success by 6. (July 2005.) Stair Steps to Quality, A Guide for States and Communities Developing Quality Rating Systems for Early Care and Education. P.4. Retrieved from: [http://www.earlychildhoodfinance.org/downloads/2005/MitchStairSteps\\_2005.pdf](http://www.earlychildhoodfinance.org/downloads/2005/MitchStairSteps_2005.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Child Trends. (May 10, 2010.) Quality Rating and Improvement Systems for Early Care and Education. *Early Childhood Highlights, Volume 1, Issue 1, p.1*. Retrieved from: [http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child\\_Trends-2010\\_05\\_10\\_HL\\_QRIS.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2010_05_10_HL_QRIS.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation an Office of the Administration of for Children & Families. (October 15, 2011.) Quality and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and Family-Sensitive Caregiving in Early Care and Education Arrangements: Promising Directions and Challenges. Retrieved from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/quality-rating-and-improvement-systems-qris-and-family-sensitive>

<sup>4</sup> FRIENDS National Resource Center. (n.d.) What is CQI? Retrieved from: <http://friendsnrc.org/continuous-quality-improvement>



Most states use coaching or technical assistance provided by an external, third party professional, to support quality improvement in early care and education (ECE) programs. However, research suggests<sup>5</sup> that reflective practice, guided by a leader focused on deepening the teaching and learning process, is most likely to result in improved child outcomes. And reflective practice leadership led by a center director or other in-house staff, guided by core values and focused on continuous quality improvement (CQI), is most likely to result in lasting change.

To learn how states think about and implement CQI strategies as well as what resources are dedicated to this work, the BUILD Initiative's QRIS National Learning Network (NLN) conducted interviews focused on state CQI efforts with 29 key informants from seven states and nine national entities.

Interviews revealed that key informants believe CQI in QRIS is:

- grounded in human relationships;
- focused on enduring change, which may feel significant and scary for early learning professionals;
- labor- and time-intensive; and
- likely to result in a process of incremental improvements in teacher practice and program quality over a long trajectory of time versus immediately.

<sup>5</sup> York-Barr, J., Sommers, W., Ghere, G. Montie, J. (2006). Reflective practice to improve schools. 2nd edition. Ch 1, 2, 6 and 7. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

To be effective, CQI needs to be embraced at multiple levels, including:

- the early childhood program level, which includes both program staff (e.g., providers and teachers) and leadership (e.g., director, curriculum coordinator);
- the implementing partner level (e.g., professional development and technical assistance coaches or practitioners, higher education institutions, and regional QRIS managers like child care resource and referral agencies); and
- the state system level, which can encompass different state agencies, statewide organizations, policymakers, private funders and contracting entities.

### Program-Level CQI

The majority of CQI work is focused on the early childhood program level. Examples of strategies states use to strengthen CQI practice at the program level include:

- practitioners and directors using core body of knowledge combined with aligned teacher observation and evaluation, self-evaluation, reflective supervision and goal setting to improve their skills and knowledge through relevant higher education coursework, workshops and embedded coaching for early learning professionals;
- adding a process standard in the rating part of the QRIS about the program developing and implementing a CQI plan;
- using self-assessments, environment ratings, and other sources of evidence to inform the creation of CQI plans which are unique to each individual program;
- providing support from consultants, coaches and mentors to programs in order to support progress in all requested areas of the program's CQI plan;
- establishing cohorts or communities of practice as venues for practitioners and directors to internalize the change process, learn from peers and engage in continued learning;
- providing financial incentives for early learning professionals to complete higher education coursework or attain a degree as part of their ongoing striving for improving skills and knowledge;
- offering grants and financing to programs to support implementation of the facility CQI plan such as physical improvements, the purchasing of classroom

- supplies and activities, purchasing technical assistance and professional development (e.g., professional development and accreditation facilitation projects); and
- creating professional development and supports for early learning program administrators around leadership, appreciative inquiry and reflective practice, growing skills and knowledge in the art and science of teaching and learning and CQI specifically so they have the tools to lead the CQI process in their program (including how to write and implement an effective CQI plan).



Craft a conceptual framework for the state that demonstrates how the cross-sector CQI is related to the rating and monitoring work.

Two other strategies that are designed to improve CQI practice at the program level but are targeted at state QRIS administrators and implementing partners are listed below.

- emphasizing the “why” behind all the sets of standards (e.g. for learning, programs, early learning teachers, and professional development practitioners) with implementing partners and ensuring there is an on-going focus on this and an ability to articulate it to the program level so that the program level personnel can link the importance of high-quality early learning to the program improvements they make as part of the program’s CQI plan.
- crafting a conceptual framework for the state that demonstrates how the cross-sector CQI is related to the rating and monitoring work. This includes articulating how all the initiatives, professional development, and financing efforts come together to support ongoing program reflection, assessment, and improvement. This framework and idea must be supported and communicated by all implementing partners and state quality administrators.

Examples of CQI efforts at the implementing partner level include the following strategies that target technical assistance and professional development practitioners<sup>6</sup>:

- contracting and partnering with agencies and individuals that have established, thoughtful mechanisms in place to continuously learn, reflect on practice and improve services and results;

- providing aligned supports and mechanisms to assist partners in this work by establishing hiring qualifications and dispositions, core knowledge, competencies, and career pathways which reflect personnel oriented to a CQI approach in their work;
- using methods of supervision, evaluation, observation of practice and assessment that institute a cycle of reflection, learning and improvement that result in improved performance and outcomes;
- developing appropriate professional development and ongoing educational opportunities (including credentials and certifications) informed by research and promising practices, that reflect and build on the knowledge and skills of the individual and is driven by a quest to continue to improve as a practitioner;
- creating interdisciplinary communities of practice and opportunities for reflective practice; and
- establishing mechanisms and processes to use data and feedback loops from multiple sources to inform service improvement.

Additionally the use of data, evaluation, and research at the implementing partner level to inform continued development of research-based strategies and promising practices are general strategies aimed at improving the global quality of early learning programs as well as outcomes for children and families.

### State-Level CQI

For the state system level, CQI practices are less formal than the CQI efforts at the program level and include:

- forming cross-sector partnerships between partners in different government and outside agencies that are not only routed in compliance with external standards but focused on a CQI approach to strengthen the quality early learning systems building (this includes



<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this report, the term professional development practitioners refers to professional development instructors, coaches, consultants, and mentors who work with child care centers (small, large, and corporate chains), family home child care owners, Head Start, Early Head Start, and state Pre-K.

relationships maintained through goodwill and more formal arrangements such as advisory boards and memorandum of understanding);

- systematically using available data and feedback from the early learning community as well as employing research to inform QRIS protocol and policy improvements; and
- including the concepts and deliverables related to a CQI approach in subcontractor request for proposals and contracts.

Other actions taken at the state system level that impact the various levels of the QRIS system include:

- creation of a CQI coordinator position in one state to have intentional focus on strengthening CQI practice at all levels of the system;
- crafting articulation agreements that make cross-program participation in QRIS streamlined, acknowledge the oversight and monitoring of other systems, and relieve programs of some administrative burdens; and
- establishing a feedback loop between programs and the QRIS administrator that is two-way, collects on-going feedback from programs, and leads to improvements in QRIS at the program and implementing levels.

The areas of CQI states identified as needing continued focus are:

- ensuring all levels of program staff as well as program Boards and families are involved and supported in CQI work. This includes encouraging and/or providing incentives for program directors to become educational leaders and create a positive workplace environment for early learning providers and teachers to constantly reflect on and improve their practice.
- finding ways to sustain QRIS in general and CQI supports specifically. For instance, using data to effectively target limited state and private investments in the CQI supports with the highest returns. And, learning more about implementation science in early childhood settings to ensure training and professional development are implemented effectively at the program level.
- striking a balance between aspiration and reality. QRIS standards and CQI should reflect and promote high



levels of quality. Yet in order for states to achieve the participation levels they desire, early learning professionals must see QRIS and CQI as an important and worthy endeavor with attainable steps. This means aiming quality standards at the highest possible level that is financially and programmatically realistic for both the state and programs. State leaders are concerned about the unintended consequences of shifting the financial costs of achieving higher quality to programs and families who may already be stretched to make financial ends meet. Thus, it is important for providers to be able to “see themselves” in QRIS and want to participate.

### Identifying Key Themes

The interviews helped identify key themes related to the different layers of the system, strategies to focus quality improvement efforts, expectations and roles of different stakeholders, roles of measurement tools and data, and the opportunities and challenges with CQI.

The eight key themes are listed below with brief descriptions and summaries of key informants’ opinions.

- 1. CQI can effectively address improvement on two levels: the whole program and the whole system of QRIS.** When CQI is valued, supported and embedded through the QRIS, it can be an effective strategy to improve quality at the program and systems levels. At the program level, leadership and staff (a) should be involved in CQI, (b) are equally important, and (c) are mutually reinforcing partners of CQI efforts. For the whole system of QRIS, CQI is less formal yet should involve cross-sector players and be informed by research, data and feedback from the early learning community, families, and stakeholders.

2. **There is a strong desire to see whether improved child outcomes correlate with higher quality levels of programs.** An emerging area of inquiry is how well states and programs are doing in terms of improving child outcomes, particularly for at-risk children, and whether or how CQI efforts in QRIS result in higher quality and better outcomes. Significant questions have been raised regarding what data can demonstrate results and whether those data currently exist.

3. **Data systems should be user-friendly and produce data that is valuable to different audiences, including practitioners themselves.** Data systems should be intentional, user-friendly, and serve functions beyond rating and accountability such as planning, improving services, targeting investments, making the case for sustainability and QRIS design modifications. Data is an important multifunctional tool. It should be communicated in an understandable manner to nontechnical experts like policymakers, funders, cross-sector implementation partners at state and community levels, and especially early learning program staff.

4. **CQI is highly valued but finite financial resources and implementation capacity are key sustainability considerations.** Five of the seven states interviewed for this project are federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge grantee states. Receipt of significant federal funds has enhanced QRIS and/or CQI efforts in these five states. Yet state public and private funding sources are seen as finite and human resources and capacity limited, largely at the program level but also at the implementing partners' level. In short, lack of financial resources, energy, and time is a concern for everyone, but particularly acute for early learning programs and implementation partners.

5. **Program staff must be empowered and supported, not over-burdened.** There is a tension between having QRIS standards reflect the pinnacle of quality or support incremental change based on a sophisticated understanding of the current market place. Examples of empowering programs include financial incentives that



support CQI, ensuring professional development is relevant and implemented in an effective manner, and encouraging and financially supporting management approaches that embrace pedagogical leadership (e.g., increased time for reflective supervision, shared service strategies). Other examples include building the capacity of programs to have more self-sustaining CQI practice, lifting administrative burdens, having user-friendly data systems that support the teaching and learning process, learning communities for teachers and directors, and establishing a venue for programs to voice concerns.



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6. **Balancing formal educational qualifications and leadership skills, with special emphasis on leading CQI, is an accountability challenge.** States are turning attention to the competencies, qualifications, and professionalism of practitioners who are engaged in QRIS coaching and technical assistance, and strongly desire help in thinking through and addressing these issues. Additionally, the culture of learning, the work place environment, designing effective adult learning, and potentially targeting a greater share of QRIS resources directly to programs are considerations when thinking about how to drive behavior change, focused on effective teaching and learning, in early learning programs.

7. **Implementation of CQI at the program level is seen as critical.** How CQI is implemented at the program level matters a great deal. Further study of

effective practice and implementation science as it relates to early childhood environments is seen as a way to increase CQI effectiveness. Also, addressing workplace factors (e.g., a punitive work culture, a director that does not value continued learning, etc.) that are not measured in QRIS but impact the effectiveness of CQI is an emerging area of concern and study.

**8. Cross-sector work and establishing a feedback mechanism for programs are seen as promising and best practices.** Continuous communication is a prerequisite for cross-sector collaboration and alignment, which are strongly valued and considered critical to the success and sustainability of CQI efforts. Staying connected with the early learning community is important and needs to involve two-way communication between programs and QRIS decision-makers; collection of ongoing feedback from programs; and lead to improvements in QRIS and CQI.

In closing, key informants think CQI is extremely valuable, see the “R” and “I” in QRIS as interconnected, and strongly believe CQI needs to be owned at the program level. While a number of questions were raised during the interviews, the three concerns most frequently noted by states include: 1) identifying practical, specific tools; 2) leveraging data and evaluation; and 3) connecting CQI with child and family outcomes. As CQI work continues, it is important for states to be intentional and comprehensive in creating CQI capacity.

Furthermore, creating a CQI culture that permeates all levels of the early childhood education and development system (and systems building efforts) will further strengthen the outcomes for children and families.

## About the BUILD Initiative and the QRIS National Learning Network

**The BUILD Initiative** helps states create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children’s health, mental health and nutrition, early care and education, family support, and early intervention. BUILD’s vision is at the center of an emerging and vibrant state-based policy movement in the early childhood development field. We work with those who set policies, provide services and advocate for our youngest children to make sure that they are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school.

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**The QRIS National Learning Network** was formed by a coalition of states and organizations. Network members are united in the desire to use rating and improvement strategies to elevate the quality of care in state early care and education systems, and to support and improve children’s development. We provide information, learning opportunities and direct technical assistance to states that have a QRIS or that are interested in developing one.

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April 2013

