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Staff Preparation, Reward, and Support:

Are Quality Rating and Improvement Systems
Addressing All of the Key Ingredients
Necessary for Change? Executive Summary

Lea J.E. Austin, Marcy Whitebook, Maia Connors, and Rory Darrah

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Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Institute for Research on Labor and Employment
University of California at Berkeley
2521 Channing Way #5555
Berkeley, CA 94720
(510) 643-8293
<http://www.irle.berkeley.edu/cscce/>

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Staff Preparation, Reward, and Support: Are Quality Rating and Improvement Systems Addressing All of the Key Ingredients Necessary for Change? Executive Summary

Lea J.E. Austin, Marcy Whitebook, Maia Connors, and Rory Darrah

Introduction

Research documenting the negative effects of the mediocre quality of most early care and education settings on children's learning and development underlies nearly three decades of debate about the most effective strategies to improve services for young children in the United States.¹ While strategies focused on increased professional development and education for individual members of the workforce have historically dominated policy and practice, in recent years more comprehensive approaches to quality improvement, those which focus on the program as a whole, have garnered increased public attention and resources.

Beginning with the implementation of Oklahoma's Reaching for the Stars in 1998, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) have rapidly emerged as a leading strategy for improving the quality of early care and education programs and significant investments of public dollars have been devoted to their development and implementation. Today, 26 systems are in operation, with at least an additional eleven systems in the development or piloting phase. In addition, the federal Office of Child Care, Department of Health and Human Services, recently announced its plan to create a national technical assistance center to support states as they "build quality improvement systems that create pathways to excellence for child care providers."² Such growth demonstrates the focus on QRISs as the key quality improvement strategy, and thus, highlights the critical need to understand and examine how such systems define quality, the benchmarks used to indicate quality, and the opportunities in place to support improvement.

The degree of attention in a given QRIS paid to the workforce itself through such factors as staff education and professional development, compensation and benefits, and work environments – factors which have been linked to program quality improvement and sustainability³ – may determine how practitioners invest their energies to enhance programs for young children, how public resources are prioritized and allocated for quality improvement, and the ultimate success of the QRIS strategy itself. In this brief, we report on our investigation of both quality rating and improvement system supports for professional development and on rating rubrics related to staff formal education, compensation and benefits, and adult work environments in center-based programs.



Findings

Staff Qualifications

Our investigation found that the professional development of practitioners is universally recognized in QRISs as a key ingredient to improving the quality of early care and education. Not surprisingly however, given the complex and varied nature of early care and education professional standards and pathways, QRISs vary in how they set qualifications for similar roles and in how they define the range of roles included in their benchmarks. Iowa, for example, requires teachers at the entry level to meet licensing standards – which include training hours and, though college-level education can be substituted for training, education is not required.⁴ Ohio requires programs at the entry level to have at least one lead teacher with an associate’s degree in early childhood education or the state equivalency of this.⁵ We found that less than half of the QRISs we examined specifically identify qualifications for assistant teachers, while other systems refer more generally to teaching staff in their benchmarks, like Indiana, which requires programs at the entry level to have twenty-five percent of their teaching staff with a CDA, early childhood degree or the equivalent.⁶

Financial Incentives for Professional Development

QRISs typically offer two types of financial incentives to promote quality improvement. One type focuses on incentives to *programs* to improve or enhance quality, to encourage participation in the QRIS, and/or to reimburse a program at a rate influenced by their quality rating.⁷ The second type of incentive is directed toward *individuals* working in programs to promote their education and professional development. Scholarships for higher education classes are the most common way in which QRISs use individual financial incentives to support teachers and directors to attain education and training, with 18 systems including scholarships.⁸ Typically QRISs build upon existing professional development systems to support efforts to improve staff qualifications by offering a financial incentive, though the amount of and eligibility for incentives vary considerably across systems, and incentives are sometimes waived if adequate funding is not available.

Direct Compensation

Despite the fact that studies show time and again that compensation is one of the most important determiners of quality of staffing,⁹ the direct compensation – including both salary and benefits – of practitioners receives much less attention in QRISs when compared to the focus on staff qualifications. Although 18 QRISs include mention of wages, compensation, and/or benefits,¹⁰ the type of benchmarks varied widely, and closer examination revealed few benchmarks related to improving salary or benefit level. Only two systems offer specific guidance on what salary levels should be. When QRISs do include benefits in their quality indicators, there is great variation in how they are addressed, and often programs have the ability to reach the highest ratings without meeting direct compensation benchmarks.

Adult Learning Environment

There is only minimal focus in QRISs on the work environments in which early childhood practitioners attempt to implement new or improve upon existing practices. In part, this minimal attention may reflect the limited evidence base and the lack of consensus on the factors that contribute to an early care and education workplace as a learning environment for adults.¹¹ Most of the research on teacher effectiveness focuses solely on the contribution of individual teachers to child outcomes.¹² Seldom addressed are the contexts in which teachers operate and the extent to which these environments support or undermine their ability to apply the knowledge and skills which lead to improved practices. In QRISs, the adult learning environment, if addressed at all, was most often treated as part of another category rather than a freestanding category of indicators. Rather, indicators were typically located in administrative or staff qualification categories. A small number of systems explicitly acknowledged the importance of the adult learning environment. The Los Angeles County QRIS, for example, has a section of their guide labeled “qualifications and working conditions,”¹³ and includes indicators such as paid planning time, release time for professional development, and staff stability. A section of the Pennsylvania QRIS guide is labeled “staff communication and support” and includes an indicator related to paid planning time for teachers and assistant teachers.¹⁴

Implications

This review of QRIS indicators reflects the consensus throughout the early care and education field that staff knowledge and competency gained through formal education and professional development are critical to quality improvement, and that incentives to support this are this important. It is noteworthy that a pre-existing mechanism for offering scholarships and other financial incentives was operative in most states including them in their QRIS design, suggesting that a well-established professional development system maybe an essential building block for advancing staff education and professional development.

This review also reveals the limited attention paid by QRIS developers to improving direct compensation of early childhood practitioners in child care programs. For more than twenty years, research has demonstrated the importance of direct compensation in stabilizing programs and enabling employers to recruit and retain skilled staff,¹⁵ and for at least a decade the role of staff stability as a precondition for improving and sustaining quality has been understood.¹⁶ In the context of this evidence, the absence of universal recognition of direct compensation benchmarks in QRISs is striking.

Similarly, missing in nearly all QRISs reviewed is consideration of the context in which those working with young children must apply what they have learned and make changes in their practice. This lack of attention to the adult learning environment in QRISs may reflect an assumption on the part of those developing systems that indicators of a productive adult learning environment are routine and included in practice. However, given the explicit naming of other indicators, such as the presence of bulletin boards, types of interactions between teachers and children, and reiteration of labor laws requiring paid breaks, it seems more likely that the role of the adult learning environment as an important factor or priority in improving program quality is not yet widely understood. The early care and education field has yet to develop consensus of the key elements of work environments that are necessary to support adult learning and improved practices. However, quality improvement is about asking adults to learn how to do things in new ways or to hone their skills. Adults, like children, need supportive environments

that allow them to experiment, test new approaches, receive guidance, and acknowledge their accomplishments. The collaborative nature of working with young children requires time for adults to communicate, reflect, and plan what they do together. QRISs should be the vehicle for articulating the domains that matter to adult learning and establishing benchmarks for practice and policy.

Incremental by design, QRISs encourage programs representing a wide range of quality to engage in efforts to enhance their services, offering varying levels of technical assistance and financial resources to assist them, depending on the state or jurisdiction. Yet, QRISs operate in a climate of competing demands and scarce resources. As such, limited attention to compensation, benefits, and work environment benchmarks may stem less from a belief that salary, benefits, and work conditions are irrelevant to quality improvement and sustainability, and more from being confronted with the challenge of how to finance the achievement of these benchmarks in an early care and education system that is severely under-resourced. Nonetheless, if QRISs decouple higher qualifications and financial reward and neglect the work environment, the exit of the most qualified early care and education staff away from direct service or into K-3 classrooms will continue. As a consequence quality will continue to be compromised, and the anticipated improvements for children may not be forthcoming.¹⁷ Alternatively, a broad commitment across QRISs to explicitly include better compensation and improved work environments in their ratings and benchmarks could direct new and existing QRIS resources more toward the accomplishment of these goals.

As new QRISs are developed and existing systems revised, there is an opportunity to strengthen QRISs' contribution to the discourse among policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders about the limits of the current system to provide better compensation and work environments for staff. If benchmarks related to these key ingredients for program improvement were more universally aspirational, QRIS data would demonstrate that, absent a fundamental change in how we prioritize and finance the early care and education system, our nation's ability to guarantee all children access to high quality early learning environments will continue to remain an elusive goal.

Endnotes

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