

A Statewide System for ECE Quality Improvement: Your Ideas Needed!

By Jean Tepperman

This is a critical moment for the future of early education in California. This year and next year, a state committee is designing an “Early Learning Quality Improvement System” (ELQIS). Such a system can be “a powerful driver of needed improvements in professional development, quality improvement interventions and funding. . . promoting broader systemic changes along with improvements in program quality,” says a [RAND report](#) on five other states’ “quality rating and improvement systems” (QRIS).

Growing public awareness of the importance of early experience has prompted more than a dozen other states to develop QRISs. And, there’s plenty of evidence of the need for quality improvement. [RAND’s 2008 study in California](#), for example, found that fewer than a quarter of the children in their sample attended programs ranking 5 or higher on the ECERS-R, one-third attended programs in which the lead teacher had not completed any post-secondary degree, and fewer than half attended programs that used a nationally recognized, research-based curriculum.

But wait—are those the right indicators of quality? Who decides on the standards? Who does the evaluation? What will be the consequences of high or low scores? The way California’s ELQIS answers these questions will have a powerful impact on the future of ECE in the state.

Since it’s a common observation that what’s measured improves, it’s important for early childhood educators to take advantage of all the opportunities for public input in the ELQIS process.

Opportunities for Input

The Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee, jointly appointed by the legislature and the Schwarzenegger administration, is holding public meetings around the state, also accessible by videoconference from four remote sites. Three meetings have already been held, with two more scheduled for this year on Oct. 29 and Dec. 2. The committee plans to host public hearings in 2010.

Subcommittees, says CDE consultant Roberta Peck, have “open membership, so interested people can join any time.” The subcommittees will develop recommendations on five topics: Design Ideas for Licensing, Quality Rating, and Improvement Systems; Finance and Incentives, Including Funding Models; Workforce and Professional Development and Quality Incentives; Data for Program Improvement and Research; and Engagement and Outreach for Families, Providers, and Public.

The knowledge, experience, and viewpoints of everyone involved with the care and education of young children are necessary to help this committee find answers to fundamental questions:

What's Quality?

The RAND study of state QRIS systems found that all include “child-staff ratios, group size, staff training and education, and some assessment of the classroom or learning environment.” Yes, but which assessment? Despite the growing hegemony of the Environmental Rating Scales, for example, many feel they give too little weight to adult-child interaction, perhaps the most important quality of all. And what kind of training should be required? Preferred?

Is there an objective standard of quality? Can it be determined solely by research? Or does it depend partly on one's values and goals for children? Might differing values and assumptions affect even rigorous research—what questions are asked, how studies are designed?

If goals and values enter into our definition of quality, then it's all the more important to ensure an inclusive process for setting quality standards.

Whose Quality?

“It's not necessarily possible for one set of quality indicators to work,” said California First 5 Executive Director Kris Perry at the Water Cooler conference last February. “We have so much diversity in California.”

How can we make sure that a statewide quality standard is broad or flexible enough to include the differing perspectives of the cultures that make up California? Some excellent suggestions are listed in [Quality Rating and Improvement Systems in a Multicultural Society](#) a report that the CDE, to its everlasting credit, includes as a resource on the [ELQIS web page](#).

But beyond using a checklist, the authors argue, cultural inclusion must be the method, not just the goal. Creating standards that are “culturally responsive, language appropriate, and provide access to children from multicultural and multilingual communities. . . can best be achieved with strong, ongoing involvement of parents and community members in their design and implementation.”

Whose Children?

Beyond the common items in states' quality standards, reports the RAND study, “States differ in whether to include and how to weight parent involvement.” Some are troubled by the question of how to evaluate programs' relationships to parents.

What about asking the parents? A paper-and-pencil or online questionnaire would not work in many communities, but if someone is going out to administer the ECERS, for example, that person could invite parents to provide input. Of course this would only really work if the person is familiar with the language and culture of the families.

While they're at it, what about asking parents how *they* assess the quality of the place their children spend the day—and taking their views into account?

RAND reports that when researchers have compared experts' and parents' ratings of child care quality, “they have found that parent and observer quality ratings are generally unrelated, suggesting that parent ratings are not driven by actual child-care quality. You might want to think about the assumptions behind

that statement. Does quality include making a child's parent feel liked and respected? Does quality include flexibility when a family can't pay this week or pick up their child on time today? Does quality include that gut feeling when you pick up your child at the end of the day, that he or she is in good shape? Should a parent's views have any weight, or is quality only a matter for "experts?"

Who Does the Rating?

As we know, current funding for the state's child care inspection system, Community Care Licensing, is only enough to permit one visit every seven years. Training for CCL "analysts" is minimal and providers frequently complain about their judgments and inconsistencies. RAND recommends that any quality assessment system be integrated with the state's licensing program. How will California create a system that is well staffed and well educated enough to rate something as complex and subtle as ECE program quality?

Then What?

California has carefully omitted the word "rating" from the title of its effort, putting the emphasis on quality improvement. The idea is not just to label child care programs with a letter grade, like restaurants in Los Angeles, but to provide a system of support for quality, including:

- Higher subsidies for higher-quality programs. These funds could be used to raise pay for our seriously underpaid workforce—but will the increased funds really go to higher pay for staff? Will there be any guidelines or special support for staff pay?
- Training and technical assistance. What form will this take? Will child care providers and staff have a role in deciding what kind of quality assistance would be most helpful for them?

See <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/sb1629committee.asp> for information on the ELQIS process, including contact information for subcommittees.