

**Recommendations and Issues relating to the Planning  
Phase for Implementing a Quality Rating and  
Improvement System in Washington State**

By Jared A. Lisonbee, Ph. D.  
Prepared for the Washington State Department of Early Learning

December, 2007

# Recommendations and Issues relating to the Planning Phase for Implementing a Quality Rating and Improvement System in Washington State

## *Introduction and Overview*

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented in several states throughout the US (see summaries of programs and additional information at the NCCIC website: <http://nccic.org/poptopics/index.html#qrs>). As Washington moves toward developing and implementing one statewide QRIS, several issues need to be addressed. The pilot implementation entering the design phase (November 2007 – June 2008) provides an opportunity for community entities and stakeholders in children’s learning and welfare to come together to address these issues in preparation for the pilot implementation of the QRIS in 5 communities beginning in July, 2008. This report develops definitions and provides recommendations to consider in preparing for and designing the pilot implementation of the QRIS. Additionally, this report includes recommendations for time frames for incremental successes throughout the design and pilot phases of the QRIS implementation; how to involve communities in defining “success” for the QRIS; what questions communities should answer during the pilot phase; what elements the Department of Early Learning (DEL) should include to help communities answer questions regarding the feasibility and success of the QRIS; and recommendations for how to measure success in both the design and pilot phases.

## **Section 1: Definitions and Development of Terms**

The request for proposals invites contractors within potential pilot communities from across Washington to submit proposals for carrying out two related phases of the test implementation of the QRIS. These phases are the *design* phase and the *pilot* implementation phase. The design phase (November 2007 – June 2008) consists of the contractors working with stakeholders in the community affected by or invested in quality of care (parents, schools, employers, and educators) to conduct an environmental scan to identify community resources and needs necessary for the development and success of the QRIS. Along with conducting the environmental scan, contractors and stakeholders will develop criteria for establishing quality standards; identify methods to objectively assess the quality standards; identify strategies and incentives to encourage early educators to participate in the QRIS; and establish or identify resources to assist early educators as they strive to document, improve and communicate quality of care and education provided, particularly for parents.

The *pilot test phase* (July 1, 2008 – June 2009) of the QRIS will involve implementing the quality rating system in the community. Contractors will

continue to work with parents, educators, policy makers, and other community stakeholders to implement quality improvements. The pilot phase of this project also should allow for continued communication among QRIS implementers from all five pilot sites to identify strengths and weaknesses of the QRIS implementation and, ultimately, revise the QRIS as necessary in preparation for anticipated, potential statewide implementation.

### *Definitions and Recommendations for the Design Phase*

**Design phase:** The period of the QRIS project consisting of planning and developing necessary resources and infrastructure to adequately prepare for implementing the QRIS pilot.

#### *Design*

The “design” phase of the QRIS refers to the preliminary plans and framework that DEL will ask the contracting entities to respond to as they develop methods to implement the QRIS in the pilot communities. Contractors must work closely with parents to identify the primary needs (e.g., availability and affordability of quality learning environments) as well as resources available for improving quality of care. As the primary consumers of early education and care programs, parents (and their children) stand to reap the greatest benefit from quality improvement. With parents and other stakeholders (e.g., schools, employers, policy makers), contractors will need to conduct a *community environmental scan* to identify available community resources and solicit the collaboration of community stakeholders impacted by the implementation of the QRIS. In addition to identifying community resources and stakeholders, contractors also should identify existing and potential collaborative connections between stakeholders and coordinate these community resources to maximize the effectiveness of the QRIS for the stakeholders (see Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Vooshis, 2002). Finally, the design plan should identify or establish communication pathways within and across communities for receiving and processing information and recommendations to facilitate the implementation and improvement of the QRIS during the field test phase.

The design for carrying out the “environmental scan” (i.e., community assessment) for the QRIS should include identifying community resources currently available along with additional community resources needed to maximize the participation in and effectiveness of the QRIS. The environmental scan design should identify categories of resources typically available in all (or at least most) communities throughout the state, while providing an opportunity for individual communities to highlight unique resources inherent in their community that could potentially be implemented to benefit the larger state population. At the core, the environmental scan design needs to account for the early care and education needs and available resources of multiple components of the community (e.g., families, teachers, preschools/child care centers, family child

care homes, schools, employers, media, government, and the general population).

The design phase should identify and address the following components in relation to implementing the QRIS.

1. Existing or needed community resources
2. Needs of children
3. Needs and recommendations of parents
4. Needs and recommendations of teachers
5. Involvement of centers and care providers
6. Professional development
7. Teacher compensation and benefits
8. Public school system involvement
9. Involvements of employers
10. Involvement of policy makers
11. Media and community involvement

*1. Identifying community resources.* Contracted entities should identify broad categories of resources available in the community or needed in the community (i.e., resources for involving parents in early education decision making processes) while highlighting specific resources available or needed within the community that make up the broad resource category. This broad/specific resource identification strategy will make it possible for communities to compare similarities while identifying potential specific resources that may be beneficial for implementing across other communities.

Although community environmental assessments should include broad categories of resource areas shared across communities, community assessments should take into account cultural (Dumas, Rollock, Prinz, Hops, & Blechman, 1999), economic, and regional differences experienced by children, families, and care providers across the state to address unique needs of individual communities. This information will be beneficial in fulfilling the “pilot” role of this project when the QRIS implementation is taken beyond the communities participating in the pilot evaluation.

*2. Identifying children’s early learning needs.* Ultimately, the environmental assessment should focus on the needs and experience of the children who will receive the most immediate benefit of improved early education quality. In order to identify means to benefit children, the design plan should include considerations for how the multiple components of communities are affected by and contribute to early learning.

*3. Parents.* Parents and children stand to receive the most proximal benefit of early education quality improvement. As such, parents should be heavily involved in all aspects of the design and implementation of the QRIS. First, parents should

be involved in identifying and defining early learning quality as well as making recommendations for how to improve quality. Parents' identification of quality in early education can be matched with or incorporated into existing definitions of quality to assure that parents, educators, and policy makers have a "shared language" for promoting quality. Additionally, means should be identified that can raise parents' awareness of what makes "quality" early education (e.g., child focused and child-directed learning in which the materials and activities in the classroom reflect the developmental abilities, interests, and needs of the children in the classroom). Raising parents' awareness of early education quality can improve the education that children receive from parents in their homes as well as inform parents about what quality out-of-home care environments look like and why they are important for children's long-term development. This seems like an essential component for the long-term success of the QRIS, because changing parents demand for high-quality care can increase the likelihood of early education environments making the effort to improve classroom quality in order to meet the demand. Parents may fear that increases in quality may raise costs (Scarr, 1998). Involving parents in the decisions relating to improving quality may help parents understand the challenges involved with funding quality early learning programs and may empower parents to lobby for funding initiatives to support early education. Possible community resources for raising parents' awareness of early education quality could include collaborations with local media, community or regional newsletters (possibly in collaboration with school systems), or through existing or expanded parent components already in place in Head Start or the Early Childhood and Education Assistance Program (ECEAP) or through early education and care providers.

Additional needs and considerations for parents in the QRIS include exploring ideas for making high-quality early education opportunities affordable for more parents. A large portion of many families' incomes is spent on child care expenses (Washington State Childcare Resource & Referral Network, 2007). Increasing the affordability of quality childcare can make it possible for families who unknowingly or unwillingly select lower quality care arrangements because of economic necessity, scarcity, or availability to have more encouraging options. Additionally, measures to make high-quality care more affordable may stimulate the economy as a result of reducing the amount many families pay for quality care.

Simply subsidizing parents' expenses, however, has not been found to be the most optimal choice (Blau & Hagy, 1998). Efforts to reduce the expense of care for parents through tax incentives to the parents tends to result in increased demand for care, but does not provide incentives for caregivers to increase quality. In order to increase demand for high-quality care, financial incentives should benefit both providers and consumers (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

*4. Centers/care providers.* Community assessment plans should include identifying resources available or needed to encourage the target population

(e.g., centers, care providers, home care providers – although not all target populations need to be included in this phase of QRIS planning) to participate in the QRIS. Special focus should be given to identifying resources that can be used to increase QRIS participation for early education environments that appear to be on the lower end of the quality spectrum, for example, centers that have had difficulty meeting existing health and safety requirements.

Many incentives for QRIS participation could benefit for-profit and nonprofit centers. For instance, financial incentives such as *tiered reimbursement* tied to *state-subsidies* for children in education settings that show quality improvements would benefit any center serving state subsidized children. Both types of centers could benefit from being able to provide information about high QRIS quality ratings for the benefit of parents making decisions about early learning arrangements for their children. Additionally, both types of centers could benefit from incentives, such as scholarships for college courses or continuing education units, for teachers in classrooms meeting or showing progress toward meeting QRIS quality standards. Quality improvement grants could be made available specifically for centers with limited resources who document a need for funding to improve quality in specific areas.

Some incentives may specifically relate to either nonprofit or for-profit centers. Nonprofit centers have been found to have higher rates of parent involvement in the programs (Kagan, & Newton, 1989), so incentives specifically targeting at or rewarding parent involvement may be beneficial. For-profit centers may benefit from incentives involving tax incentives for improving or maintaining high-quality.

*5. Teachers.* Because teachers are the ones most directly involved in *providing* quality interactions with children while in non-parental care, the evaluation design should include considerations for how to document and improve the quality of teacher involvement in the classroom (Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). This should include exploration of strategies to recruit and retain teachers who are sensitive and caring to the needs of children and who have at least a basic understanding of child development.

*6. Professional development opportunities.* As part of planning for QRIS implementation, organizations should identify resources in place to most effectively provide professional development opportunities for teachers to improve the early learning environment.

*7. Teacher compensation.* The preliminary planning assessment should explore resources that can be used to increase teacher pay and secure benefits for teachers (Barnett, 2003; Whitebook & Eichberg, 2002)—especially “expert” teachers who create high-quality learning environments. Ideally, this wage and benefit increase to reward and retain high-quality teachers should be supported through *policy interventions* and not through tuition increases (Ripple, 2000). Ripple (2000) states that potential options could include establishing a semi-

privatized system in which state education funding is used to supplement outstanding teachers' pay and support benefits being extended to teachers.

*8. Schools.* School systems are a key component to the success of the QRIS. Schools can provide key evaluations for measuring the success or shortcomings of the QRIS system through indications of what children know and are ready to do such as "School Readiness" and "Ready to Learn" (some of the learning goals in place through "Washington Learns," "Thrive by Five," and OSPI, among others). Additionally, schools can enter into the dialogue with parents and care providers about what "quality" early education is and how schools can maintain a "learner focused" approach in the early years of formal education to build on the successes fostered by high-quality early education environments before school entry. Schools potentially stand to reap tremendous benefits from improving early education quality (Barnett, 1992). As such, school systems, expert teachers, and administrators may be a beneficial source for providing professional development and training for teachers in early education settings (as long as a child-focused learning model is maintained).

*9. Employers.* Employers can play an important role in the QRIS conversation. As employers are educated in the benefits of quality early learning, increased public-private partnership initiatives may be fostered. Employers also should have an interest in quality care as a means for increasing productivity through fewer lost days for employees resulting from care instability relating to care quality (Friedman, 1986). Additionally, employees may be more productive if care arrangements are stable and satisfactory to the employee (Shellenback, 2004). Finally, employers can benefit from the long-term benefits that have been identified as results of economic studies of high-quality early learning environments (better trained future workforce, reduction of crime etc. see Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Masterov, 2004)).

*10. Policy makers.* Local and state governments have a stake in the potential benefits of QRIS and are a key component of the success of QRIS. Additionally, QRIS is an opportunity to increase quality of care for all children and share information about quality with parents. The QRIS also can be seen as an intervention to reduce long-term costs associated with need for social service expenditures. All children deserve quality learning experiences. Longitudinal research (Perry Preschool, Abecedarian, and Chicago Child-Parent projects) suggests that children who are most at risk may have the most to gain from high-quality early learning (Heckman, 2006). The QRIS model provides an opportunity to target children's long-term success through improving quality and informing and involving parents in the learning process.

*11. Media/components of the community at large.* Several notable models are already in place (e.g., Thrive by Five/Born Learning public service messages) to increase public recognition of the importance of children's learning and development in the preschool years. This public awareness can contribute to the

success of QRIS by increasing demand for high-quality early education experiences as well as driving social and political change as children's early experience becomes a more focal part of policy decisions on the local and state level.

### *Construction and Identification of "Quality" Standards and QRIS Structure*

The contractors will be involved in the design of the actual structure of the QRIS. As such, they will recommend what elements the QRIS ratings should include and how the hierarchical quality distinctions could be identified. Specific questions to be answered by the contractors will include establishing the lowest level of quality assessed. Typically, states have used basic minimum licensing standards as the baseline and then progressed incrementally to higher quality settings. Frequently, the highest quality level is associated with accreditation by a national agency, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or at least meet the accreditation criteria.

However, many states with accreditation as the highest standard have reported great difficulty ensuring a majority of participating child care educators would reach that goal, and that educators would be appropriately compensated for their new quality standards (Gormley & Lucas, 2000). In response to these difficulties, at least one accreditation body (NAEYC) has recently resigned its accreditation criteria and processes, although the results of these improvements on QRIS efforts have not yet been reported.

### *Design Phase "Success."*

Design phase success will entail bringing together diverse community stakeholders who are interested in improving early education quality, into a "team" to prepare for QRIS implementation. The contractors should establish the infrastructure for communicating QRIS aims and procedures to parents, early education and care providers, and the broader community. Contractors must also coordinate and discuss with other community test sites reporting to DEL to pre-problem solve potential challenges for implementing the QRIS and successfully identify ways to overcome these challenges prior to QRIS implementation.

### *Design phase timeline recommendations.*

*November 2007:* Notification of awards to conduct QRIS planning.

*November-December 2007:* Compile resources and create community stakeholder groups for identifying and discussing QRIS implementation plans. **January 4<sup>th</sup>:** Submit planning approach and work plan for environmental scan, community stakeholder group list, and plausible plan for QRIS implementation. This planning does not need to include specific

measures, but ways in which early learning environments can demonstrate success in improving quality and outcomes.

*January - February 2008:* With community stakeholders, conduct environmental scan to identify needs and available resources for QRIS and quality improvement.

*March 2008:* Compile results from environmental scan to discuss with other community QRIS implementers and DEL—meet and discuss with other implementers and DEL. **Due March 15<sup>th</sup>.**

*April - May 2008:* Prepare and submit report of findings from environmental scan to DEL.

*May - June 2008:* DEL reviews reports and makes decisions for implementation.

## References and Supporting Resources

- Barnett, W. S. (1992). Benefits of Compensatory Preschool Education. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 27, 279-312.  
(outlines case for why preschool intervention is beneficial for benefiting public elementary education [and beyond]).
- Barnett, W. S. (2003). Low Wages = Low Quality, Solving the Real Preschool Teacher Crisis. *Preschool Policy Matters*, 3. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.
- Blau, D. M., & Hagy, A. P. (1998). The demand for quality in childcare. *Journal of Political Economy*, 106, 104-146.
- Dumas, J. E., Rollock, D., Prinz, R. J., Hops, H. & Blechman, E. A., (1999). Cultural sensitivity: Problems and solutions in applied and preventive intervention. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 8, 175-196.
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., & Van Vooshis, F. L. (2002). *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Friedman, D. E., (1986). Child care for employees' kids. *Harvard Business Review*, 64 (2), 28-32.
- Gormley, W.T. & Lucas, J.K. (2000). Money, accreditation, and child care center quality. *Working paper series. Foundation for Child Development*, 3-22.
- Heckman, J. J., & Masterov, D. V. (2004, October). *The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*. Paper presented at the Invest in Kids Working Group Committee for Economic Development.
- Heckman, J. J. (2006, January). *Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children is an Economically Efficient Policy*. Paper presented at the Committee for Economic Development/Pew Charitable Trusts/PNC Financial Services Group Forum on "Building the Economic Case for Investments in Preschool." Retrieved September 9, 2007, from [http://www.ced.org/docs/report/report\\_2006prek\\_heckman.pdf](http://www.ced.org/docs/report/report_2006prek_heckman.pdf)
- Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312, 1900-1902.
- Ripple, C. (2000). *Economics of caring labor: Improving compensation in the early childhood workforce*. New York: A. L. Mailmen Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development.

- Scarr, S. (1998). American child care today. *American Psychologist*, 53, 95-108.
- Shellenback, K. (2004). Child care and parent productivity: Making the business case. *Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Cooperative Extension*. Retrieved on September 14, 2007 from <http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/pdf/ChildCareParentProductivity.pdf>
- Vandell, D. L., & Wolfe, B. (2000, November). *Child Care Quality: Does it matter and Does it Need to be Improved?* Institute for Research on Poverty Special Report #78. Retrieved on September 10, 2007 from <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/sr/pdfs/sr78.pdf>.
- Washington State Childcare Resource & Referral Network, (2007, June). *Child Care in Washington State*. Retrieved on September 10, 2007 from <http://www.childcare.org/community/state-data-report.pdf>.
- Whitebook M. & Eichberg, A. (2002). Finding a better way: Defining policies to improve child care workforce compensation. *Young Children*, 57, 66-72.
- Zaslow, M. & Martinez-Beck, I (Eds., 2006). *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Professional Development*. Baltimore, MD: Brooks Publishing.