



RESEARCH BRIEF

Directors Implement and Reflect on a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

Alex Zepeda, MPH

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LAUP conducted focus groups with directors from early learning programs to get their opinions about their experience participating in Los Angeles County's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early learning programs. The QRIS contains several elements that serve as measures of program quality and are intended to help programs focus on areas that need to be improved. The following were the key findings that emerged from the focus group discussions:

- Directors felt that the QRIS elements provided them with the principles needed to develop quality early learning programs.
- Coaching support was effective in helping teachers make program improvements.
- Directors valued the feedback from the ratings; they were able to use the feedback to improve the quality of their programs and therefore provide better programs for the children they serve.
- However, directors questioned the validity of the overall quality rating and the assessments.
- Directors were concerned that coaching and funding support for QRIS would be discontinued; they felt this support was necessary to maintain and improve quality.

Overview

In 2016, Los Angeles County will be adopting a single countywide Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early learning programs. It is based on the Quality Continuum Framework developed under the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a federal grant intended to improve the quality of early learning programs and to ensure children enter kindergarten ready to learn. The Quality Continuum Framework includes seven elements that are used to rate the quality of early learning programs. The elements include: 1) child observations, such as the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP); 2) developmental and health screenings, such as physician health reports, Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) and Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social Emotional (ASQ-SE); 3) teacher-child ratios and group size; 4) director qualifications; 5) lead teacher qualifications; 6) environmental rating, including the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) Early Childhood Rating Scale (ECERS) for centers and Family Child Care Environment Scale (FCCERS) for family child care homes; and 7) effective teacher-child interactions as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). An early learning program receives a rating of 1 to 5 on each of these elements. These are used to calculate an overall quality rating of 1 to 5 for each program. Through coaching and/or training opportunities, programs are encouraged to make improvements and move up the quality continuum.

In preparation for this change, focus groups were conducted to find out how early learning programs in LA County were responding to QRIS and the Quality Continuum Framework. Program directors included in the focus groups were familiar with QRIS and the framework through their participation in the RTT-ELC grant or as an LAUP funded program. LAUP had already adopted several of the QRIS elements and introduced the complete framework to programs.

Directors felt that all the elements of the framework were “essential,” “building blocks,” “the foundation” for quality early learning programs.

The assessments were described as tools that helped them improve in several different ways, including increasing communication with parents of children in their program, being more reflective as directors, and getting needed materials for quality programs and training for their staff.

“The ECERS is an excellent tool and we need it because it’s given us the foundation to have a high quality program.”

- Director of an LAUP program

Coaching and training were viewed as effective in helping their staff grow professionally and make program improvements.

Specifically, directors indicated that coaches have helped teachers become more reflective about their teaching practices and have served as knowledgeable resources for the teachers to consult.

“The coaches have been invaluable... They have made teachers more receptive to making small changes.”

- Director of an RTT-ELC program

Directors welcomed the feedback they received from their program’s rating/assessments and utilized the information for continuous quality improvement.

The information helped directors identify areas that they needed to improve and to develop a plan of action to address those areas. Most directors prioritized making improvements based on feedback from the environmental ratings and CLASS. Directors were interested in making changes and providing quality programs that would benefit the children most.

Directors noted that the quality rating should not determine the amount of funding a program receives.

If a program’s rating decreased under the LAUP model, the funding for the following year also decreased. Directors felt that tying their program’s quality rating to their funding was punitive. This was seen as a loss of resources that could have been used to improve their program’s quality and rating through purchasing of materials and/or additional training for staff. Without those resources, directors felt limited in what they could do to improve their quality when and where they needed to improve most. Directors indicated that they needed to be able to count on a base funding amount for program planning.

Directors questioned the validity of the quality ratings and the validity and reliability of the assessments included in the overall ratings.

As a result, some directors were reluctant to publicly display their overall quality rating. They felt that a “5 Star program” might not actually be a better program than a “4 Star program.” Directors questioned the scores they received on assessments. Specifically, some directors indicated that the ECERS was subjective and too rigid and did not allow for the flexibility required when working with children. Directors felt that assessors seemed to have a limited understanding of young children and the workings of early learning programs. Some thought that one assessment a year may not accurately represent what occurs within a program on a daily basis. Another reason the assessments were viewed as unreliable was due to the errors in the assessment reports containing scores and feedback for directors. In some cases, details of the program mentioned in the reports did not correspond to their program. Lastly, directors did not feel that parents were interested in the quality ratings, and instead were interested in what their children would be doing and learning to prepare them for kindergarten.

Submission of documents was challenging for directors.

Several documents were requested from programs in order to determine the program’s quality rating. The challenges included understanding which documents were needed and why, the number of documents requested, and organizing the documents. Several programs did not have staff available to devote time to this administrative work. Direct contact with programs via the telephone or in person was the most effective way to help directors with submitting all necessary documents.

Some directors noted the need to improve communication between the coaches supporting their staff and themselves.

Directors often felt that they did not know what coaches and teachers were working on. Better communication would allow directors to support their staff more effectively as they implement new practices and to track their progress.

Directors were concerned about state and/or federal commitments to QRIS and the Quality Continuum Framework.

In order to sustain quality and continue to make program improvements, directors felt that extending coaching support and funding would be necessary.

Lastly, directors recommended three elements to be added to the Quality Continuum Framework.

A research-based **curriculum** was one element directors felt was missing from the framework. More than 75% of the 38 state QRISs include curriculum or alignment with state early learning foundations as an element. Another element was having parent input in the program via a **parent exit surveys**. About 93% of other state QRISs have an indicator for family partnership. This indicator often includes parent surveys (Hawkinson, Quick, Muenchow, et al, 2015). Directors recommended **teacher compensation** to be added to the existing elements. While wages, compensation and/or benefits are mentioned in several other state QRISs, only a few have indicators that are targeted at improving salary and benefits. Only one QRIS specifies that programs should aim to increase compensation for their program staff. Early learning programs need to receive additional funding in order to support increases in compensation that are needed to attract and retain a highly qualified workforce (Austin, Whitebook, Connors & Darrah, 2011).

Conclusion

During the focus groups, directors discussed several benefits and challenges of participating in LA County's QRIS. Directors believed that they improved their program's quality by using QRIS elements as a guide and receiving effective coaching and training. However, they expressed some doubts about the validity of the overall rating and they faced some challenges with the process, from submitting documentation to communication between directors and coaches.

Some of the challenges directors had will be addressed with the changes within the LAUP model for the 2015-2016 school year.

- LAUP's new model includes Program Leadership Consultants that will meet with directors to support them in making system improvements and increase their knowledge of the work of the coaches and teachers.
- LAUP's model also includes a researcher who can provide the programs with technical assistance in management of the data and documents that need to be submitted for the quality rating.

The following recommendations can help address the directors' doubts about the validity of the program quality rating.

- Provide directors with information about the validity of QRIS and reliability of the assessments.
- Ensure the reports disseminated to directors provide accurate information.
- Review training of the assessors for sensitivity to working with young children.
- Inform parents about what it means to be a QRIS-rated program, what the different ratings mean and how the elements benefit children and families.

Improving directors' trust in the quality rating and informing parents can increase support for a countywide QRIS among early learning programs and parents.

References

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For more information about this evaluation please contact researchmail@laup.net.