



RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE:
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM REGIONAL QRIS IMPLEMENTATION | BRIEF 2

DEVELOPMENT OF A QUALITY EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM



Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership

First 5 Alameda County | First 5 Contra Costa | First 5 San Francisco | First 5 San Mateo County
| First 5 Santa Clara County | First 5 Santa Cruz County

In 2011, California was awarded a 4-year, \$75 million, Federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant to improve early childhood education systems and better serve children and families by enhancing the quality of programs, developing quality standards, and aligning disconnected systems. Sixteen counties in California received funding to develop a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) to achieve this goal. In the Bay Area, six First 5 County Commissions created the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership to pilot a regional QRIS approach. The following brief is a product of their experience implementing QRIS locally and as a regional partnership from 2012-2015.

By participating in California’s Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) pilot and coming together as a regional partnership, the six Bay Area First 5 Commissions have been able to collaborate effectively develop a quality early learning system through QRIS implementation.

The foundational vision for the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership’s collective work on QRIS was that quality should be the priority for all early learning, that QRIS would be built as the vehicle for improving quality, and that a common QRIS system should be developed across the Bay Area Region. This has been the basis for the counties’ investments in local and regional infrastructure to support QRIS. However, as it currently stands,

there must be improvements to QRIS requirements and the development of statewide quality early learning infrastructure in order to achieve a quality early learning system.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEVELOP QRIS AS PART OF AN EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

- 1. The QRIS matrix must demonstrate that higher tiers correspond to improved child outcomes.** QRIS is built upon the concept of a tiered rating matrix that indicates different levels of quality among educators and incentivizes them to improve their quality in order to achieve higher ratings. Although a study is currently underway, California’s matrix has not yet been validated to show that higher ratings meaningfully contribute to higher quality and better outcomes for children. First 5 Santa Cruz Executive Director David Brody points out that “We need to ensure that there’s a basis for each element of the matrix—that goes beyond just an assumption that the element impacts child outcomes.” Validation of the matrix and a compelling child outcomes study are essential to full implementation of the system, and necessary to achieve the trust, buy-in, and investment of QRIS implementers, educators, and parents.
- 2. Appropriate tiered incentives should be established to recognize quality.** Once the matrix has been validated

“The level of coordination and collaboration of the Bay Region in the local implementation of the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge is an exemplar in how QRIS can build upon existing infrastructure in California and help create a common framework across counties.”

**SARAH NEVILLE-MORGAN, DEPUTY DIRECTOR,
FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA**

“QRIS should open the doors to quality in all of the modalities that are caring for kids.”

**JOLENE SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
FIRST 5 SANTA CLARA COUNTY**

and ratings have been shown to contribute to child outcomes, the Partnership recommends establishing appropriate tiered incentives, above and beyond adequate base compensation, to recognize educators for increasing levels of quality. This will support ongoing efforts to improve quality among educators and foster lasting educator engagement in QRIS.

- 3. There must be a place for all types of educators in a mixed service system.** Currently, the QRIS pilot has elements largely geared toward subsidized programs such as state preschool programs, and there are barriers

to participation for other types of educators. Among other things, these barriers include specific matrix elements that are disproportionately difficult to implement for non-subsidized programs. For example, the matrix requires the use of DRDP Tech to upload child observations over the internet in order to receive a high score on the child observation element, a time- and resource-intensive investment for educators. The matrix requirements should be assessed for barriers such as this. Similarly, the matrix should consider equivalency options, for example NAEYC accreditation. QRIS “should open the doors to quality in all of the modalities that are caring for kids,” says Jolene Smith, Executive Director, First 5 Santa Clara County.

Furthermore, to help meet the ultimate goal of having quality in all early learning settings, accessible supports must be in place. QRIS leaders and policymakers should ensure that there are opportunities for educators to access quality improvement resources, even if they aren’t ready to participate fully in the QRIS.



CAPACITY BUILDING IN SAN MATEO COUNTY

The QRIS pilot effort has shown the need for strong relationships between QRIS leads and other organizations who have early learning capacity and can contribute their expertise to the quality effort.

San Mateo County provides one example of this. The San Mateo County Office of Education Early Learning Support Services Division (SMCOE) has a strong capacity in early learning, managing and administering diverse funding sources through local, state, and federal grants. SMCOE has been an integral partner of First 5 San Mateo County in the development of the county’s QRIS, serving as the QRIS administrator.

A number of factors have enabled SMCOE to develop a strong early learning program with 16 staff that is able to successfully administer large-scale early learning efforts such as QRIS:

- **Supportive human resource policies.** This includes a classified management track that allows non-credentialed early learning specialists to move into higher levels of administration.
- **Strong grant writing and grant administration.** This includes strong accounting support and fiscal technical assistance to manage the many funding streams that are woven together to provide early learning services.
- **Willingness to advocate.** Data is used to demonstrate the effectiveness of early learning programs and initiatives, as well as communicate successes within the organization. Staff is also strong advocates for early learning, both locally and at the state level, and have served on numerous state boards and councils.
- **Collaborative approach.** SMCOE’s early learning division seeks to partner with local organizations on most of their work. Grants are seen as opportunities to bring the county together, and they and their partners believe that being financially intertwined in collective work has led to greater accountability and trust across the county.
- **Longstanding partnership with First 5 San Mateo County.** The early learning division’s capacity was originally built through a large grant from First 5, and the relationship between the two organizations has been strengthened through the funding and administration of several large community initiatives over 10 years. SMCOE is able to provide content-level expertise that adds value for both organizations and extends beyond what First 5 funding could impact with just its own investment.

Kitty Lopez, Executive Director, First 5 San Mateo County, attributes the success of their effective collaboration to the fact that “...it is truly a partnership; our County Office of Education has expertise and the willingness to partner on these things with First 5.”

4. **An adequately resourced and integrated statewide QRIS must be developed.** This means that there is a consistent and comprehensive framework for QRIS across all counties and that this framework is integrated with all of the state systems contributing to quality, including child care licensing, health and behavioral health services, and others. Robust resourcing for adequate infrastructure development is critical to this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE INFRASTRUCTURE TO DEVELOP AN EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

QRIS has the potential to raise the quality of early learning through the quality improvement supports it offers and the increased awareness about quality that accompanies the program. However, the Partnership also recognizes that QRIS is just one piece of the early learning system. There are limitations to what can be achieved through QRIS alone; therefore, state and local investments in QRIS must be coupled with efforts to develop a comprehensive early learning system and address systemic barriers to universal quality.

1. **Existing statewide early learning systems must be aligned to properly support quality early learning.** Child care licensing, resource and referral agencies, higher education, and other systems with critical roles in early learning are not aligned around quality. For example, California has some of the weakest licensing standards and oversight in the United States. Raising licensing requirements, particularly in regards to teacher early childhood training and the provision of learning activities that address specific developmental domains would help raise the minimum level of quality of California's early learning programs. Janis Burger, Executive Director of First 5 Alameda County asks, "Are we pushing on the right things? Would licensing and credentialing be better places to push to achieve quality?"
2. **Early learning must be developed as an aligned and cohesive system that is connected to and can articulate into the K-12 system.** Nationally, there is considerable energy and focus on developing systems that align early education with K-12 education, often called pre-K to third grade or birth to eight systems. However, successfully achieving this aligned system is challenging, as early learning is too often disjointed, with uneven quality and limited access for families. As Ingrid Mezquita, Senior Program Officer, First 5 San Francisco, states, "Right now we are trying to align pre-K *programs and initiatives* into a K-12 system. . . We have to align pre-K horizontally before it can be aligned vertically."
3. **Building an early learning system requires state-level legislation and policies with sustained birth-5 funding streams.** The effort to create an aligned pre-k system requires significant changes to how early



THE ROLE OF DATA

Data is critical to building a quality 0-5 early learning system. There is universal agreement among the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partners that validation of the QRIS matrix to determine that matrix standards show differentiated levels of quality and that higher scores on the matrix lead to higher child outcomes is essential to the sustainability of the QRIS initiative. Furthermore, data showing the positive impacts of high quality early learning is a key tool to advocating for funding and policies that support early childhood. This means that it is critical to collect data across the state to track QRIS efforts and measure child outcomes.

Regionally, the Partnership has invested in building a shared data system with a few important goals:

- + Compare rating data across counties to improve implementation and inform decisions about which types of professional development, coaching, and other interventions are most successful.
- + Understand the ongoing needs across the system in order to advocate to key stakeholders, including state policymakers, private funders, and higher education.

The effort to build a shared data system has been one of the most challenging aspects of the Partnership's collective work. Key lessons learned during the process include:

1. Building a data system takes significant resources and staff time. Because this effort was not properly resourced from the outset, there have been delays and other challenges in achieving a functional system. Moving forward, the Partnership is investing in a full-time data coordinator to manage the deployment and ongoing maintenance of the system.
2. It is important to make upfront decisions about what needs to be tracked and to determine a common language for inputting data, so that data across counties can be effectively compared.
3. The ultimate goal of the system should be established and clearly communicated from the beginning of the process. Having outcome goals in place can help the system developer achieve the highest priority objectives.

Ultimately, the completed data system should support the Partnership's understanding of how the local and regional QRIS efforts are contributing to quality and enhance its ability to advocate for a quality 0-5 early learning system.



THE INTERSECTIONS OF QRIS AND LICENSING

California ranked 50 out of 52 for child care center program requirements and licensing oversight in a 2013 Child Care Aware of America report that reviewed child care program licensing standards of all states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense. The breakdown below compares California to Tennessee, which ranked 10 out of 52.

California:

Program Standards Score: 51/110

Oversight Score: 0/40

California scores low on educator training requirements, group size requirements, and curriculum/learning activity requirements. Additionally, California does not meet any of the standards for oversight, including inspection frequency, qualifications of licensing staff, and availability of inspection reports. There is currently no link between licensing and California's QRIS.

Tennessee:

Program Standards Score: 78/110

Oversight Score: 28/40

Tennessee's licensing standards are linked to its QRIS: every educator is evaluated on several key indicators of quality as part of the annual process of renewing a license and receives a report card with their evaluation results. On a voluntary basis, educators can choose to receive QRIS stars tied to their evaluation, which appear on their license to indicate that they meet a high standard of quality.

“Three states (California, Idaho and Nebraska) are in the bottom 10 for both program requirements and oversight scores.” – We Can Do Better 2013 Update, Child Care Aware of America

learning is currently organized and funded. Currently, early learning stakeholders must navigate a complicated web of short-term or narrowly focused grants and programs, weaving together multiple funding streams with different requirements and expectations. Even the state-funded programs and their regulations, such as Title 22, Title 5, and CalWorks, do not have common quality standards. Continuity and coordination of policies and funding from the top are needed to allow for the development of an aligned system that provides universal access to high quality early learning experiences.

- 4. Data must be harnessed to make system-building decisions.** Data is an important piece in understanding quality improvement factors and measuring long-term outcomes in order to develop an early learning system that is aligned across educators, throughout the state, and with K-12 education. The California Department of Education and First 5 California should play a strong role in creating a consistent set of data quality standards and a data dictionary so that intervention, dosage, and outcomes can all be quantified consistently. Additional specific recommendations to support the collection of informative data include:

- a.** Implement a universal kindergarten readiness assessment to measure early learning outcomes at the transition to kindergarten.
- b.** Build a unique identifier system to track students from early learning settings through the K-12 system.

- 5. Quality efforts must address the whole early childhood system.** Quality cannot be achieved without addressing the whole early childhood system, including health, parent education and engagement, social-emotional support, early learning, and income disparity. These intersecting aspects of early childhood must all be high quality—and all affect each other. As an early learning system is developed, each of these areas must be included and supported.
- 6. Income eligibility guidelines to qualify for subsidy care programs need to be expanded and updated.** Current income ceilings to qualify for California State Preschool and other subsidy care programs exclude many needy families and do not take cost of living into consideration. This increases the divide for children with access to high quality preschool and other early learning programs, and contributes to an already troubling school readiness gap.

“Are we pushing the right things? Would licensing and credentialing be better places to push to achieve quality?”

**JANIS BURGER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
FIRST 5 ALAMEDA COUNTY**