



RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE:
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM REGIONAL QRIS IMPLEMENTATION | BRIEF 1

THE BAY AREA REGIONAL QRIS PILOT



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.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, five First 5 county commissions were awarded funding to develop quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) as part of California’s Race to the Top (RTT) Early Learning Challenge grant: Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and San Francisco. In 2012, these counties elected to collaborate on their QRIS implementation efforts, building on strong existing relationships between these First 5 commissions. In 2014, San Mateo County joined the regional QRIS efforts. Collectively, this group is called the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership. The Partners will continue to work together through the RTT grant extended deadline of June 2016.

The Partnership’s work is centered around these shared goals:

- ✦ Establish a common definition of quality
- ✦ Ensure that QRIS ratings are consistent across the Bay Area
- ✦ Increase their operational efficiency
- ✦ Learn from each other’s experience

Their partnership is unique in California: from the beginning, they developed a formal regional governance structure, established a shared vision for their work, and pooled funds to support regional coordination.

Participants in the regional effort agree that developing the regional governance structure and appropriately resourcing its coordination was key to success. Additionally, each year the structure has been revisited and refined to ensure it is appropriate for the current needs.

The work did come with challenges, however. The regional effort took more time than anticipated. It also required continual balancing of regional versus county-level interests and needs, as each county has its own budget, infrastructure, and Consortium with specific goals and priorities. In part, this balance was achieved by always considering whether a component of implementation would be best addressed at the regional or county level, and focus on areas that were most important to address regionally.

“Make quality the priority for all early learning.”

VISION OF THE BAY AREA QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

REGIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Partnership has been beneficial for each of the counties involved. Four accomplishments stand out as significant achievements of working together:

- ✦ The region developed a network of support that benefited both the Executive Directors and the staff by creating a platform for sharing and building upon their diverse



STRUCTURE OF THE BAY AREA QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

The Partnership’s structure was revisited and refined each year to ensure that it met the current needs and priorities.

Year 1: Three-tiered governance structure included an Executive Cabinet (executive directors), Coordinating Council (staff members from each county), and task groups (staff and representatives from non-First 5 agencies who were involved in implementation, split into focus areas including implementation, professional development, assessment, higher education, coaching, communications, and data system implementation.) Task groups developed formal charters with work plans. Members of these groups were diverse and included staff from county offices of education, resource and referral agencies, higher education, early learning educators and directors, child care planning councils, and other content experts.

Year 2: The Executive Cabinet was complemented by a Leadership Team (executive directors plus one staff member from each county). The development of the Leadership Team was a beneficial shift in year two because it brought together executive directors and key staff members to collectively tackle both implementation and policy issues. The Coordinating Council continued to meet, and structured task groups were replaced with ad hoc groups that met as needed. Often, the Coordinating Council identified regional opportunities or challenges that were then discussed in detail in ad hoc groups. Recommendations resulting from the discussion then went to the Leadership Team for further discussion and vote by the Cabinet.

Year 3: Similar to the structure in year two, most work is done at the Leadership Team level, with ad hoc groups continuing to convene as needed. The Coordinating Council has been eliminated, and the Executive Cabinet will meet more frequently to discuss key findings and recommendations for early learning efforts.

experience and knowledge. “We have so much expertise in the Bay Area. We have been able to learn so much from the other counties about what was and wasn’t working as we each implemented QRIS,” says Cally Martin, Deputy Director of First 5 Contra Costa.

- ✦ The region was able to find efficiencies in QRIS implementation. Examples of this include:
 - The development of regional assessment protocols
 - The creation of standard coaching guidelines
 - Collaboration on outreach efforts, including regional fact sheets
 - Convening of higher education representatives
- ✦ The region was able to successfully leverage the expertise of industry partners as part of the task groups.
- ✦ The region developed a regional database to collect common data across the region.
- ✦ The region was able to advocate with a united voice at the state level. Because the state did not develop a statewide QRIS infrastructure, “counties have been able to test and refine and then push [their learnings] up,” according to First 5 San Francisco Executive Director Laurel Kloomok. By agreeing on shared positions and recommendations, the Partnership has been able to advocate more effectively on key issues, such as matrix elements and assessment protocol, than each county could have on its own. This included speaking with a united voice at statewide meetings and writing regional recommendation letters specific to the QRIS effort.

REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The Partnership’s experience has shown that QRIS implementation can be enhanced by counties coming together to collaborate and share aspects of implementation. As the RTT pilot nears completion and the QRIS effort enters its next phase, the Partnership has the following recommendations for its own work and for that of other entities implementing QRIS:

1. **Grow and expand regional and local systems to support quality.** New funding streams for quality and QRIS mean that new potential partners are entering the QRIS space. At the regional level, more counties in the greater Bay Area are building local QRISs. The Partnership sees an opportunity to provide guidance and share its lessons, with the potential to expand the Partnership to include additional counties.

“The regional effort’s biggest gift has been bringing the combined talent pool of the counties all together to the table.”

**MALIA RAMLER,
SENIOR ADMINISTRATOR,
FIRST 5 ALAMEDA COUNTY**

2. **As new funding streams emerge, build local and regional systems to support quality.** The Partnership can engage further with early learning stakeholders to improve data sharing, develop technical assistance offerings, and more. First 5 Commissions' roles as conveners and capacity builders can serve them well in bringing together partners to take on active roles in QRIS and in supporting the institutionalization of QRIS as a central driver of quality early learning.
3. **Continue to focus on advocacy and policy to achieve the Partnership's vision of quality early learning.** As QRIS continues and grows beyond the pilot phase, there are concerns about the scalability and long-term sustainability of the system due to the lack of investment at the state level. All of the counties in the Partnership are deeply invested in the development of a high quality system of early learning that includes QRIS, but also incorporates many other avenues of early learning and development. The achievement of such a system will require state-level policies and support (financial and structural). Regional advocacy at the state level has proven to be effective in addressing concerns about the RTT matrix and QRIS implementation guidelines. The Partnership can increase its focus on advocacy, including finding new advocacy partners and avenues for sharing its expertise, to help bring about changes that support the goal of a quality early learning system.
4. **Serve as a resource to support the formation of multi-county regional QRIS partnerships across California.** The Partnership's joint effort has led to increased efficiencies and economies of scale in key areas of QRIS implementation, and could provide a model for other counties who are interested in adopting a regional approach to QRIS implementation.

“The Bay Region work has informed considerable components of the QRIS work statewide. We drew on their collaborative model to help design aspects of First 5 IMPACT and the concept of the Regional QRIS T&TA Hubs.”

**CAMILLE MABEN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
FIRST 5 CALIFORNIA**

The Partnership can provide guidance to counties exploring the development of regional infrastructures elsewhere in the state.

5. **Provide support to help parents understand, be good consumers of, and advocate for quality.** Parents are key partners in promoting quality early learning; however, there is a gap in knowledge of what quality looks like and how to find it. The Partnership can offer support and education to parents to foster their understanding of quality early learning, help them find quality care, and empower them to advocate for quality in their communities.

These recommendations and next steps can guide QRIS work and help bring about the shared vision of making quality a priority for all early learning.

THE PARTNERSHIP'S REACH

Snapshot of Rated Early Learning Programs in the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership

Breakdown of sites in low tier vs high tier



Bay Area Regional RTT-ELC Common Data Elements Tables, January – June 30, 2015. High Tier sites are defined as sites with a rating of 3, 4, or 5. Low Tier sites include those sites that received a rating of 1 or 2.