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DOCUMENTED BRIEFING

How Would Programs Rate Under California's Proposed Quality Rating and Improvement System?

Evidence from Statewide and
County Data on Early Care and
Education Program Quality

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Sponsored by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation



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Summary

In 2010, the California Early Learning Quality Improvement System (CAEL QIS) Advisory Committee recommended a structure for a voluntary quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that could apply to the state's 11,000 licensed centers and 36,600 licensed family child care homes (FCCHs). The proposed design consisted of an unweighted block system with five tiers, in which all quality criteria in each tier must be met in order to obtain a rating at that tier. The rating structure provided for five quality elements: ratio and group size, teaching and learning, family involvement, staff education and training, and program leadership.

The aim of this study was to conduct an initial examination of some key aspects of the proposed QRIS design. By capitalizing on two existing data sets that included several of the quality elements in the proposed QRIS rating design, the work highlights some relationships among these quality elements, examines the ways in which different measures of these elements proposed in the QRIS design relate to each other, and provides information about the likely distribution of program-level ratings across the proposed rating tiers. This work provides California QRIS planners and other stakeholders with important information about some fundamentals of the proposed QRIS rating scheme that could inform California's QRIS design in advance of field-based pilot efforts.

Study Approach

The study relied on two existing data sources to achieve two primary objectives:

- Assess the likely distribution of early care and education (ECE) programs across the five rating tiers in the QRIS proposed by the CAEL QIS Advisory Committee.
- Identify the implications of the findings for California's QRIS design and for future pilot studies.

To fully analyze the proposed QRIS, the ideal data source would include information on all five quality elements for a representative sample of center-based providers and FCCHs serving infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. The two sources of data available to us provide much, but not all, of this information:

- The first includes a representative statewide sample of center-based programs serving preschool-age children observed as part of the RAND California Preschool Study, with measures of program quality corresponding to three of the five quality elements in California's proposed rating structure.
- The second includes a set of programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children in centers and FCCHs that participated in San Francisco County's Gateway to Quality (GTQ) initiative, with observation-based data on one of the five proposed QRIS rating elements.

The RAND statewide data consist of a set of providers that is more representative of all providers in the state than the set of providers that might be expected to

participate in a voluntary QRIS would be; voluntary QRISs tend to attract higher-quality providers. The data do not include FCCH providers or programs serving infants and toddlers. The GTQ data may better reflect the set of center- and home-based providers that would agree to participate in a QRIS targeted at programs receiving subsidies, as well as the effect of technical assistance (TA) on quality. Neither data source allows us to fully estimate the distribution of ratings under the proposed QRIS because we do not have the quality measures associated with all five quality elements. Despite these limitations, the two data sources provide information about the range of provider types expected to be covered by the proposed QRIS and allow us to examine key dimensions of quality that are likely to be included in a rating system for California.

Following the study objectives, these two sources of data were used first to determine the distribution of single quality elements in the QRIS and then the distribution of multiple quality elements taken together, the latter to replicate the QRIS as closely as possible. The data were also used to determine the expected share of programs that would fall into each tier of the rating system given specified cut points. The analyses further examined the relationship among different quality elements and pinpointed the elements that are likely to suppress a program's ability to improve its rating in the block system that underlies the proposed CAEL QIS design.

Key Findings Regarding Provider Ratings

Our analysis of the statewide data set, which pertains to a representative sample of center-based programs serving preschool-age children, demonstrates the following:

- **Given the proposed cut points in the QRIS design, center-based programs would score better on some quality elements than others.** Most programs (upward of 80 percent) would reach Tiers 3 to 5 (out of the proposed five tiers) on the ratio and group size quality element. About half of programs would reach Tier 4 or 5 for the staff education and training quality element where the proposed standard is an associate's degree (Tier 4) or bachelor's degree (Tier 5). In contrast, just one in four programs would reach Tier 4 or 5 based on the teaching and learning quality element, measured by either the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ECERS-R) or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).
- **The teaching and learning element would constrain programs from reaching higher rating tiers more than the ratio and group size or the staff education and training elements.** Expectations in the design phase that quality elements will be highly correlated may not always hold. We found, for example, that having staff with levels of education that qualify for the highest tiers does not necessarily ensure that a program will score at that same level on the relevant environment rating scale (ERS) or on the CLASS.
- **Overall, given the proposed cut points and the three quality elements examined, few programs would initially reach the highest rating tiers.** Our

estimate that fewer than 10 percent of center-based programs would reach the top tier (Tier 5) is consistent with the CAEL QIS Advisory Committee's goal of making the upper tiers aspirational.

Findings from the GTQ initiative data set, which includes programs that received various types of state or local public funding, illuminate the distribution of program-level ratings that might result when certain programs are targeted, as well as the likely variation in ratings across provider types and by the ages of children served. In particular, we found the following:

- **Compared with the universe of providers, program-level ratings may be higher if the QRIS targets programs with public funding.** More center-based programs in GTQ—in which programs receiving public subsidies are targeted—would score high enough on the ECERS-R to reach Tier 4 compared with the programs included in the statewide data—which contain a representative sample of all providers. This difference may reflect the selectivity of the programs in GTQ, which includes publicly funded programs with higher quality standards, such as California State Preschool and other Title 5 programs, as well as Head Start. Quality may also be higher in the GTQ sample as a result of the quality improvement supports that GTQ provides. Even so, like the statewide data, few GTQ programs would reach Tier 5.
- **Quality ratings are likely to vary by the ages of children served and the setting type.** In GTQ, center-based classrooms serving infants and toddlers scored somewhat lower on the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ITERS-R) than rooms serving preschool-age children evaluated using the ECERS-R. FCCs evaluated using the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale–Revised (FCCERS-R) scored considerably lower than center-based programs scored on the ECERS-R.

It is important to note that the available data did not allow us to fully replicate the ratings that would result if the QRIS proposed by the CAEL QIS Advisory Committee were implemented. On the one hand, if all providers were rated (i.e., no selectivity), our estimates of rating distributions across tiers based on the statewide sample of center-based programs can be viewed as an upper bound on how programs would likely be distributed. This is because, in a block system, programs cannot be rated any higher on all five quality elements than they score on the three elements we considered. On the other hand, because it is reasonable to assume that only those programs with higher quality or higher ambitions would choose to participate in a voluntary system, the share of programs in the upper rating tiers in such a system likely would be higher than our statewide estimates. The share in the upper tiers would also be expected to increase over time as supports for quality improvement embedded in the proposed QRIS design help programs improve their quality.

Implications for California’s Quality Rating and Improvement System Design and Future Pilot Efforts

These findings regarding program ratings under the proposed QRIS have implications for the design of the QRIS, as well as for future pilot efforts. With respect to design, the findings show that the proposed design is likely to result in a small share of programs initially reaching the highest rating tiers; this allows more room for quality improvement over time, although it may risk lower participation if programs believe they are unlikely to achieve the highest rating. The results point to the value of standards. Programs currently score highest on those quality elements for which standards are already in place (e.g., ratio and group size) and suggest that the broader set of standards in the proposed QRIS would lead programs to improve on the other QRIS elements as well. The data also suggest that programs are likely to need the most assistance with improving their scores on the relevant ERSs (e.g., ITERS-R, ECERS-R, or FCCERS-R and the CLASS if it is included). Another concern is how to generate meaningful center-level ratings for programs for which rating elements may vary across classrooms serving children in the same age group or across classrooms serving younger versus older children in the birth-to-five age range.

The study findings point to the value of using existing survey or administrative data sets in advance of more-extensive and more-costly field pilots to examine key aspects of a QRIS rating scheme. The statewide and county data examined here reveal the degree to which different quality elements are related (e.g., which rating elements may constrain program ratings more than others) and how closely the assumptions made by designers accord with the realities of how programs operate (e.g., that high levels of staff education and training will necessarily be associated with high ratings on a given ERS). However, the data available for this study did not measure several key quality elements included in the California QRIS design—namely, measures of family involvement and program leadership. It would be important to launch an early pilot effort to measure those quality elements and assess the implications of their inclusion in the rating system. Piloting the proposed QRIS as a whole would also provide more information about the likely distribution of programs in a voluntary system or one that targets certain providers (e.g., those receiving public subsidies).