

Recommendations for Support of Site-Based Program Leaders

The Early Learning Council recommends that State agencies, particularly ISBE and DHS, strengthen supports for site-based program leaders to take ownership of quality improvement.¹

Background

The State's early childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), ExceleRate Illinois®, is designed to help parents choose quality programs and to help programs improve. Most states, including Illinois, use three primary strategies to help programs improve: (1) Publish standards of quality that go beyond licensing, (2) provide training and technical assistance on details of the standards, and (3) provide financial incentives (child care) or grant funding (Preschool for All) for meeting the standards.

Experience across the country has now shown this approach to be inadequate. The new field of Implementation Science demonstrates that simply knowing standards is not enough for programs to meet them. Site-based program leaders need help. Often, they ask technical assistance providers or consultants to come and prepare their programs for monitoring visits. In too many cases, however, program staff simply go back to their old habits after the visit. This pattern is known as "quality for a day." In contrast, technical assistance providers report sustained growth over time in programs with "cultures of improvement."

To determine what supports program leaders need, the ExceleRate Subcommittee of the ELC Quality Committee reviewed the literature on Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and prepared a draft outline called "What Does a Program Leader Do?" It then compared its outline with commonly used standards and instruments. Finally, volunteers interviewed program leaders at sites of various sizes and funding mixes. The final document, "Components of Site-Based CQI Leadership" is intended to guide support service providers and policy-makers (Appendix 1). The components fall into 8 categories, which are listed on a shorter one-page summary (Appendix 2). Using this list, the Subcommittee assembled an inventory of publicly-funded supports for the 8 categories and made detailed recommendations for strengthening or adding to those services (Appendix 3). This "Inventory and Recommendations" document is offered for use by ISBE and DHS in designing their FY 20 mix of funded supports.

As a result of this work, the Early Learning Council Executive Committee proposes expanded State support for helping program leaders take ownership of quality, build cultures of improvement and implement Continuous Quality Improvement practices. **Specific recommendations are outlined on page 2 of this document. The Appendices are attached for background and additional details if needed.**

¹ Site-based Program Leaders include center directors, school principals, various "coordinator" positions and others with responsibility and authority to develop organizational processes and cultures.

Program Leaders Need Support in the 8 CQI Component Categories

1. Lead by example
2. Establish time for communication
3. Develop teams; share leadership
4. Build professional learning into program improvement
5. Engage families and staff to shape program mission and values
6. Know program standards
7. Facilitate annual goal-setting
8. Lead weekly or monthly CQI cycles

Recommendations for Shaping Quality Improvement Initiatives

Illinois can improve the quality of its early care and education programs by moving in the following direction:

1. Support program leaders to take ownership of quality.
2. Focus on the 8 components of CQI (above) to build cultures of improvement.
 - Include supports for programs at every ExceleRate level (not just Gold).
 - Put a new emphasis on support service coordination to help program leaders weave the 8 components together in a complete CQI process.
3. Expand system capacity. Start bringing quality to scale.
4. Encourage service providers to vary CQI supports in response to local strengths and needs.

Recommended first steps

- Consider **scale** in FY 20 state budgets
For example, ISBE has fewer than 10 Principal Consultants to work with more than 600 PFA/PFAE/PI programs. DHS funds 32 Quality and Infant Toddler Specialists as resources for approximately 3,000 licensed child care centers and 7,000 licensed homes. Other support services might also be unable to meet the demand, including those for program leaders to implement CQI, as listed in Appendix 3, and those for other areas of program quality as indicated in data and needs assessments.
- Provide **flexibility** in FY 20 support service contracts around the means for supporting CQI, while holding service providers accountable for results.
In this emerging field, local program leaders are letting their service providers know what services work best to help them implement CQI. These might include Communities of Practice, cohort training models, direct consultation, etc. Service providers need the flexibility to respond to leaders' needs.
- In responding to critical workforce issues, find ways to link site-level CQI with college credit, career ladders and salary increments.

Conclusion

Program leaders are the gatekeepers to quality. Increased focus on their work, along with renewed State investment, are key to bringing quality to scale in early childhood settings.²

² The State's Program Improvement Support system is one of 5 systems needed to bring quality to scale. The others are Funding, Standards & Monitoring (incl. licensing), Workforce Preparation (higher education), and Community Systems.