

Invest in Kids Working Group Meeting Summary

Doug Price, Qualistar Early Learning

May 22, 2006

Many child care quality ratings and improvement systems (QRIS) have been developed by states and communities. But how can systems analyze and rank early education centers most efficiently? What are the benefits of many groups sharing QRIS data and methodologies?

Doug Price, of Qualistar Early Learning, answered these questions in his presentation “Working Together to Improve Child Care Quality: Developing a Consortium to Support Quality Rating Improvement Systems.” Doug, with Gail Zellman of RAND Corporation, explained how Qualistar developed a quality rating systems, RAND analyzed the ratings, and a collaborative consortium could take improving quality to scale.

Though many quality ratings and improvement systems (QRIS) share common elements, such as reviewing teaching credentials and monitoring regulatory compliance, challenges remain when trying to rate early education programs. For instance, it is difficult to develop classroom observational measures that are sensitive enough to capture teacher instructional quality and the emotional climate of the each class. Qualistar developed its own QRIS which includes measuring the learning environment of a classroom, the participation of parents, the training and education of the staff, the adult to child ratios and group size, and the school’s accreditation. The company has grown from rating and providing quality improvement services to 30 early childhood education and care centers in Denver in 1999, to over 350 centers statewide in 2006. The passage of Colorado House Bill 1297, which provides federal funding for over 200 child care programs to be rated statewide, provides incentive for centers to join Qualistar.

Recently, Qualistar chose RAND Corporation to validate its quality ratings and improvement systems. RAND analyzed the QRIS components, assessed the changes in QRIS ratings over time, found associations between QRIS ratings and process measures, and the established relationships between QRIS ratings and child outcomes. RAND found some of the criteria difficult to measure. For example, there is little literature on how to measure parental involvement. In addition, classroom ratios, such as student/teacher ratios, vary throughout the day.

RAND’s analyses revealed that there are limits to our knowledge about assessment of child care quality. Doug described how a multi-state consortium could improve our understanding. For example, linking data sets could create longitudinal databases with more statistical power. Furthermore, empirical studies could capitalize on naturally occurring variation in policies, resources, and demographics. A collaborative consortium would also reduce the costs of delivering ratings and quality improvement interventions at scale. The following are the key goals of a QRIS Consortium:

- Address scale-up challenges through empirical study of best practices and local implementation models
- Develop and validate new measures at greatly reduced cost to each participating entity
- Share database technologies, measures, and quality improvement interventions
- Enable cost efficiencies through application of common design principles across the state

The Invest in Kids Working Group discussed the following issues:

- Quality measurements: what is the difference between 3 and 4 stars? (It could be formal academic training of teachers, a different learning environment, or something else.) How many stars is enough to deliver a high-quality early education?
- Child outcomes: how are they measured? (They use PPVT, peer nomination, parent and teacher reports, Woodcock Johnson test; however, they have not found a lot of effects on outcomes yet.)
- Funding: So we need to focus more on where to spend the money, than what are the best assessments? (Qualistar spends 3 to 4 times more on interventions than assessment.)
- Preschool ratings: do people use ratings to choose centers?