



## **RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE: ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM REGIONAL QRIS IMPLEMENTATION**



**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

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	3
BRIEF 1: THE BAY AREA REGIONAL QRIS PILOT .....	5
BRIEF 2: DEVELOPING AN EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM .....	8
BRIEF 3: EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT .....	12
BRIEF 4: COACHING IN QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS .....	16
BRIEF 5: ASSESSMENT IN QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS .....	19
CONCLUSION .....	21





## INTRODUCTION

The Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership is a collaboration of six First 5 Commissions in the Bay Area that takes a regional approach to the development of local quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS).

Quality early learning is a critical piece of early childhood development that has been shown to have long-term benefits for children. A quality rating and improvement system is intended to raise the level of quality of early learning programs by developing quality standards, providing quality improvement supports, and aligning disconnected systems.

As part of a QRIS, early learning programs are rated using a matrix that provides a common set of quality standards. Higher ratings indicate higher quality. A QRIS rates programs' quality, shares that information with parents, and uses the rating information to provide appropriate quality improvement supports. Across the nation, nearly every state has a QRIS in place or is piloting or planning to develop a QRIS.

### *QRIS in California and the Bay Area*

As part of the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT), California was awarded a 4-year, \$75 million grant to help the state improve early childhood education systems to better serve its most vulnerable children through QRIS development.

California's QRIS pilot takes a local approach: sixteen counties in California received funding to develop a QRIS. The counties have the shared goal of improving quality early learning using the Quality Continuum Framework, which consists of a 5-tier hybrid rating matrix and quality improvement pathways. With the exception of Los Angeles, each of the counties has one lead QRIS agency, which may be a First 5 Commission, county office of education, or a similar agency. (Los Angeles has two different agencies that lead QRIS efforts.) Each lead entity brings together local early learning organizations to form a consortium that contributes to local QRIS decision-making and governance. The Quality Continuum Framework is shared across California, but counties have flexibility to add local indicators to two tiers of the matrix to reflect local priorities.

The Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership is a collaboration of First 5 Alameda County, First 5 Contra Costa, First 5 San Francisco, First 5 San Mateo County, First 5 Santa Clara County, and First 5 Santa Cruz County. The Partnership enables these six counties to leverage the RTT grant and reach the shared goal of increasing the quality of early care and education for children across the region through consistent and efficient QRIS implementation. They have developed QRIS locally and as a regional partnership since the beginning of the RTT grant in 2012.

## *Vision for the Future of QRIS*

At the onset of the Partnership, the participating counties established a shared vision for their work: “Make quality the priority for all early learning.” This vision is supported by a growing body of research that indicates that it is the quality of early learning experiences that most impacts children’s long-term outcomes.

To achieve the Partnership’s vision, QRIS was identified as the vehicle for organizing early learning quality efforts. Since that time, significant resource and time investments have been made by the Partnership to implement QRIS. However, as the original RTT grant funding nears its conclusion, the Partnership recognizes that QRIS and quality improvement efforts in California are at a turning point. Sustained investments are needed to successfully continue QRIS development, but significant systemic changes to the early learning system are also needed to ensure that those investments can have a lasting impact on quality. “All a parent should have to do is choose the care location that is the closest to home. Quality should be a standard. Think about Common Core in K-12. It is not for some kids. It is for all kids,” says Sean Casey, Executive Director of First 5 Contra Costa.

While QRIS can be a vehicle for early learning quality, the current participation requirements need to be revisited. Furthermore, QRIS alone is insufficient to change all aspects of the early learning system. Making quality the priority for all early learning will require a comprehensive system that includes all factors that contribute to quality and ensures that quality is accessible in all early learning settings.

The Partnership believes that counties implementing QRIS, as well as state policymakers and funders, must approach quality and QRIS work from this systemic viewpoint and make intentional effort to align and develop all early childhood systems.

## *About this Report*

This report was prepared by VIVA Strategy + Communications on behalf of the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership. It summarizes regional findings, recommendations, and lessons learned from 2012-2015 in implementing Early Learning Race to the Top Challenge Grant (RTT). In addition to working with partners during regional QRIS implementation, VIVA conducted individual interviews with the leadership of each First 5 Commission participating in the Partnership. These findings were used to inform five topic-specific briefs.

Each brief includes information about the Partnership’s work and lessons learned through their collaborative and individual processes. In addition, regional QRIS implementation has led the Partnership to identify numerous recommendations for changes that are needed to support the vision of quality and next steps for the Partnership’s own efforts. These recommendations and next steps can be found in each brief.

*“All a parent should have to do is choose the care location that is closest to home. Quality should be standard. ”*

**SEAN CASEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
FIRST 5 CONTRA COSTA**



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 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 maintaining 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





## 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.

a platform for sharing and building upon their diverse 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.



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

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 to 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 to 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 adequately 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**





RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE:  
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM REGIONAL QRIS IMPLEMENTATION | BRIEF 3

## EARLY LEARNING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



### 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

California's diverse early learning workforce plays a critical role in preparing young children for success in school and beyond. However, there are systemic challenges to ensuring that the workforce is stable, qualified, and supported professionally. Workforce development challenges are one of the largest barriers to universal high quality early education. The Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership views a qualified early learning workforce as one that is educated in early childhood social, emotional, and cognitive development; trained in research-based methods for interacting with children; and well-compensated, with professional standards and opportunities for career mobility. In short, the field must be professionalized. But with low compensation and less-than-ideal working environments, this vision is far from reality for most early childhood educators.

### THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF QRIS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The effort to develop quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) contributes to the establishment of workforce quality standards. The QRIS matrix rates teacher qualifications (early childhood education/child development degrees and/or units) and effectiveness of teacher-child interactions (through CLASS assessment scores). The quality improvement supports that the counties offer as part of QRIS have led to successes in supporting teachers in completing coursework and developing a better understanding of CLASS scores.

However, QRIS is insufficient to raise the quality of the workforce on its own. While the goal of QRIS is to provide a professional development pathway, there are systemic barriers to having a highly qualified early learning workforce that cannot be addressed by QRIS alone, including low compensation, challenging work environments, and limited opportunities for career advancement. In fact, it is extremely challenging for many educators to meet QRIS matrix requirements related to teacher qualifications, screening, assessment, and others.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEM CHANGES

Achieving the vision of a highly qualified early learning workforce will require a significant paradigm shift to view care of children 0-5 as a part of the education system and those who provide these services as education professionals. In addition to continuing to provide ongoing workforce development through QRIS and other professional development supports, the Partnership recommends the following system changes to achieve the vision of a qualified, professional early learning workforce:

1. **Raise the subsidy reimbursement rate to match the established 2014 Regional Market Rate.** California's child care subsidies are intended to cover the cost of care up to the 85th percentile of rates charged by early learning educators in their communities. However, these rates have long been out of date and, despite being slightly

increased in the 2015-2016 state budget, continue to be far below what is required for quality care. Inadequate reimbursement rates are contributing to substandard workforce conditions and pay for the teachers that California is relying upon to provide high quality early learning experiences for children while they are in the most significant stages of brain development.

**2. Raise early childhood education compensation to match K-12 compensation.** Salaries for early educators are significantly lower than their K-12 counterparts (see graphic on page 15). In some areas, local funding is used to supplement wages, but this is not sustainable nor scalable. The extremely low salaries of early educators destabilize the workforce and create a disincentive for prospective teachers to enter the early childhood education field.

**3. Develop a 0-8 teaching credential.** An early education credential would prepare new teachers to teach in both pre-kindergarten and early elementary grades. The credential would create a continuum of developmentally appropriate education and better prepare all educators of young children.

**4. Develop an early learning certificate program.** This certificate would create a solution to enhance early childhood understanding in the existing and already credentialed workforce. These teachers are currently instructing transitional kindergarten and other young students.



### WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY

First 5 Santa Clara County has made workforce development a priority of their QRIS effort, with multiple efforts underway to raise the quality of their workforce. Two examples include:

- + BA Cohort:** First 5 Santa Clara County has contracted with San Jose State University to support early childhood educators in obtaining their BA degrees. The 15 educators participating in the pilot cohort benefit from stipends, evening course schedules, and a supportive learning environment, and are making strong progress toward receiving their degrees.
- + SEQUAL (Supportive Environmental Quality Underlying Adult Learning) Study:** SEQUAL was developed by the University of California, Berkeley to measure how well the workplace supports teachers' knowledge and skills as they develop as practitioners. First 5 Santa Clara County administered the SEQUAL tool to sixty-eight teaching staff at early learning sites participating in the QRIS pilot. Most critical of the findings from Santa Clara were that the majority of respondents expressed worry about their financial well-being—including having enough money to pay their families' bills, routine health costs, and housing costs—as well as concern about losing pay due to illness or family issues. First 5 Santa Clara County is now collaborating with UC Berkeley staff to discuss strategies for addressing issues raised through the SEQUAL surveys.



### BUILDING COLLABORATION WITH HIGHER EDUCATION

In March 2015, the Partnership jointly hosted “Advancing Early Learning: A Dialogue on New Opportunities for the Field of Early Childhood Education,” a convening of higher education institutions from all six counties. Forty-six higher education faculty attended. The event opened a dialogue with these key partners. Presentations provided information on the QRIS matrix, the Partnership's findings about workforce needs and gaps based on 1.5 years of QRIS implementation, updates on state and federal early childhood policies and funding, and an overview of the University of Washington's Early Childhood and Family Studies online bachelor's degree program.

The event also provided time for county-specific conversations about quality and the role of higher education, harnessing regional momentum to build local relationships focused on quality and the workforce that the First 5 commissions could continue to foster following the event.

## THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education is a critical component of the effort to develop a qualified early learning workforce. Institutions of higher education provide coursework and associate's and bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and child development. This coursework is key to providing educators with knowledge and understanding to help them be effective teachers, in addition to being aspects of achieving high quality ratings. However, there are numerous barriers to educators already in the field accessing higher education, including course scheduling, affordability, and language requirements.

The result of this is that many educators are not trained to QRIS standards, and significant investments must be made by First 5 Commissions and other agencies both to support educators in completing early childhood coursework and to provide intensive ongoing professional development and coaching to fill significant knowledge and training gaps. With First 5 Commissions facing declining revenue, it is imperative that other sectors and institutions be involved in preparing and supporting the workforce.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

To achieve the vision of a highly qualified early learning workforce, higher education must undergo a shift so that it is an equal partner in preparing that workforce. Two recommendations to support this are:

- Higher education institutions should offer accessible degree coursework in early childhood education that is aligned to quality standards and adequately prepares students to successfully achieve high QRIS ratings.**

Specifically, they could:

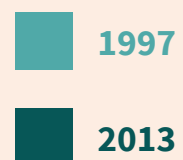
- Offer courses that accommodate full-time workers, such as evening, weekend, and distance learning opportunities, in order to be accessible to the existing workforce.
- Provide adequate supports, such as language-specific learning cohorts, ECE advisors, professional development plans, and scholarships to help students successfully complete their degrees.

### LOW COMPENSATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION Hourly Wages for Child Care Workers and Preschool Teachers

#### CHILD CARE WORKERS



#### PRESCHOOL TEACHERS



#### KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS



Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <http://www.irl.berkeley.edu/cscce/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ReportFINAL.pdf>



- c. Collaborate with nearby colleges to align coursework across institutions.
- d. Work with local QRIS Consortia and educators to ensure that curriculum includes QRIS matrix components and prepares students to use the tools and techniques that will be required of them when working in the field.

The Partnership and other QRIS leaders across the state can contribute to the workforce efforts by convening local higher education institutions, communicating the matrix expectations, and serving as a bridge between the higher education system and early learning program employers who see gaps in training and knowledge among their teachers.

**2. Statewide policy barriers to early education degree attainment must be eliminated.** There are a number of statewide policies that make it difficult for the early education workforce to attain degrees. State-level organizations working on early childhood should engage with the governing bodies of higher education to collectively change these policies, including:

- a. Make unit-bearing classes available in languages reflective of the workforce. Completing general education classes in English is a barrier for educators who lack proficiency in English, but who otherwise would be able to complete early education courses—and who serve a central role in educating children as California’s linguistic landscape becomes increasingly diverse.
- b. Increase the availability of scholarships to support those seeking early childhood degrees, including non-English speakers.
- c. Offer four-year early childhood education degrees at community colleges. A pilot program approved in 2015 will enable 15 community colleges to offer four-year degrees in a range of fields that are underserved by four-year institutions. Expanding this pilot to include four-year early childhood degrees would help create an accessible, affordable option for educators who can’t readily obtain such degrees at four-year colleges.
- d. Formalize the connection between licensing and higher education to shift the expectations for both the workforce and the higher education system. This can be done through two steps:
  1. Require AA and BA degrees as part of teacher and administrator credentialing.
  2. Align AA and BA degree program requirements with credentialing requirements.



### **BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY**

The Contra Costa Community College District is one of the largest multi-college community college districts in California, consisting of Diablo Valley College, Contra Costa College, and Los Medanos College. First 5 Contra Costa County contracts with each college to provide educational advising and professional development supports. Faculty-qualified advisors support teachers working towards a Child Development Teacher Permit, an Associate Degree in ECE, or BA transfer requirements. In addition, advisors provide academic supports and incentives to early educators to achieve higher levels of professional development and education. Academic supports include individual advising and educational planning, Child Development Permit application assistance, “Cohort” classes in Math, ESL/English/GE study groups and tutoring, textbook loans, and “Lost Wages” scholarships for students participating in a practicum that takes them away from their work. Advisors also offer reflective practice seminars as a companion to some college courses, in order to help teachers apply coursework concepts into classroom practices.



RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE:  
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM REGIONAL QRIS IMPLEMENTATION | BRIEF 4

## COACHING IN QUALITY RATING & IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS



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

Coaching plays a significant role in the Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership's quality improvement efforts both locally and regionally. Coaching supports teachers' professional development by providing a coach who has specialized learning knowledge and skills and who builds teachers' capacity through a process of reflection, goal-setting, and achievement. Coaching is viewed as one critical piece of an effective quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), and there are opportunities to further develop coaching as a formal part of the effort.

The QRIS matrix measures quality through a number of elements that focus on teacher and program effectiveness, including the utilization of child observation tools to inform curriculum planning, effective teacher-child interactions, and the program environment, including materials, schedule, curriculum, and interactions. Coaching is used to improve teachers' quality in these and other areas.

### LOCAL COACHING EFFORTS

Counties in the Partnership have found that coaching is most successful when it is personalized and educator driven. This means a significant investment in coaches and coaching programs. Each county in the Partnership has a model for providing coaching to educators that, in most cases, preceded the QRIS effort. Coaching has typically been funded through a range of different grants and programs with different goals and strategies. With QRIS, counties have been able to map their coaching efforts and identify

efficiencies in distributing and sequencing different coaching resources, as well as use data from the QRIS rating components to determine coaching needs. This has helped to ensure that educators are able to focus on improvements in one priority area of practice at a time.

Counties have also worked to better align their different coaching streams to ensure that coaching is consistent regardless of funding source. Coaching collaboratives that bring coaches together on a regular basis to share and adopt best practices have been helpful tools for providing consistent—yet personalized—experiences to teachers.

Still, coaching is an intensive and costly quality improvement intervention, and counties are exploring other models to make it more efficient without losing effectiveness. First 5 Santa Clara County has piloted a video coaching model that utilized videos and conference calls to provide more cost-effective coaching. The initial pilot showed improvements in CLASS scores among participants and will be expanded to gather additional data on its effectiveness.

An additional goal of the Partnership is to finalize a shared data system that can provide insight into the types and dosages of coaching that are having the most impact on quality improvement across the counties. With this data, the Partnership will be better able to determine effective coaching types and dosages. (For more on data, refer to the "Development of a Quality Early Learning System" brief.)



### COACHING IN ALAMEDA COUNTY: A MENU OF SERVICES

First 5 Alameda County has created a coaching model that provides a menu of services to educators based on their unique needs:

- + Sites rated at 4 or 5 develop quality improvement plans (QIP), links to resources, and light case management. Depending on their QIP, they may also choose specialty consultation such as ASQ support, CLASS team coaching, or mental health consultation.
- + Sites rated at 1, 2, or 3 receive support from a generalist coach to create and implement a quality improvement plan. After basic environmental and structural goals are met, the plan may move on to specialty consultation.
- + Family child care home educators and Title 22 sites receive pre-coaching prior to the assessment & rating.



### COACHING IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY: A FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

First 5 Santa Cruz County developed a coaching model as part of its QRIS work, focusing on equity, CLASS, and powerful interactions. The model complements existing successes that the county has had in utilizing the SEEDS of Early Literacy program, which contributed to improved CLASS scores as a result of its focus on helping teachers create language-rich classrooms. In addition, coaches are also participating in a monthly professional learning community that allows for follow-up and reflection on areas of training focus.



### COACHING IN SAN FRANCISCO: A CITY-WIDE APPROACH

First 5 San Francisco County braids funding from multiple sources to create a comprehensive structure for city-wide technical assistance which includes supports to over 140 centers and 230 family child care sites participating in the city's QRIS. Coaching is provided through San Francisco Quality Partners, seven professional development organizations who are charged with improving the quality of centers and family child care programs, targeting those who serve children furthest from opportunity. Cross agency collaboration and coordination of mental health, inclusion and instructional coaching services are strengthened through the utilization of a common quality improvement data system, individualized quality improvement planning, and shared capacity building opportunities for technical assistance specialists.

## REGIONAL COACHING EFFORTS

Coaching has been a focus of the Partnership's work from the beginning. Counties have benefited from sharing their experiences and successes with different coaching models, enabling each county to refine its own model to be more effective. Additionally, a professional development ad hoc group was formed to define regional agreements, activities, and share resources related to coaching and professional development. As part of this work, a coaching inventory was conducted to assess how each county was utilizing and supporting coaching. The result of this was the development of a Regional Standard for Coaching Qualifications, which has the following objectives:

- + Better define qualifications in the evolving field of training and technical assistance.
- + Provide a guide for prioritizing potential regional coaching supports and services in order to strengthen the overall efficacy of the field.

- + Be used as fields to map the capacity of individuals who are providing coaching and technical assistance in the Bay Area.

The intent has not been to create a minimum requirement for coaches, but rather to provide guidance for coaches' own professional development and capacity-building efforts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF COACHING IN QRIS

Coaching is a significant part of the QRIS effort; it is an important component in raising the quality of the workforce in key areas of the matrix. The Partnership has four recommendations to help address coaching-related challenges and ensure that coaching can remain an effective and sustainable part of quality improvement efforts:



*“Coaching is a meaningful part of quality improvement and one of the most effective parts of the system—but you do need a system around it.”*

**DAVID BRODY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY**

- 1. Coaching needs to be part of a broader network of quality improvement supports to most effectively contribute to raising quality.** Most critical among these, as relates to coaching, is adequate workforce development through higher education and hands-on training. Sean Casey, Executive Director of First 5 Contra Costa, says, “The workforce needs to enter with the right skills and be prepared. Coaching should be about enhancing effectiveness, not providing the basic skills.” (To learn more about the need for early learning workforce development, read the Partnership’s brief, “Early Learning Workforce Development.”)

The regional vision is that coaching serves to enhance the theoretical and practical training that teachers receive prior to entering the workforce and to provide targeted support in areas where teachers want to improve based on their teaching experiences. In order to achieve that vision, teachers must enter the field with adequate knowledge and preparation. In turn, teachers need to be adequately compensated.

- 2. Coaching should be embedded into quality improvement initiatives.** As noted above, the personalized and relationship-based approach to coaching that has been most effective is expensive to provide and scale, a cost that is currently outside of state and federal quality improvement funding streams. The Partnership recommends that high quality coaching be built into future quality early learning initiatives and funded appropriately. This includes providing teacher release time to receive coaching. Embedding coaching into quality improvement initiatives will support the long-term sustainability of successful coaching models.
- 3. Coaching should remain a flexible and personal component of quality improvement.** Ingrid Mezquita, Senior Program Officer, First 5 San Francisco, cautions that “the state should be hands-off with coaching—not prescriptive.” Counties in the Partnership have seen improvements in areas of the QRIS matrix even when teachers were not coached directly on those areas. For

example, First 5 San Francisco saw increases in CLASS scores following inclusion-focused coaching. It is believed that this is because many of the skills developed through coaching are transferable—and because coaching can help create a culture of improvement that extends beyond specific practice areas. The Partnership recommends that while funding for coaching should be incorporated into the system, it shouldn’t be tied to specific coaching types or requirements.

- 4. Statewide guidelines on coaching should be developed.** Like the Partnership’s Regional Standard for Coaching Qualifications, the state guidelines should standardize the way in which coaching is defined so that the field has a common language and shared understanding of the purpose of coaching in a QRIS without prescribing coaching types, focuses, or dosages.



RACE TO THE TOP – EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE:  
ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM REGIONAL QRIS IMPLEMENTATION | BRIEF 5

## ASSESSMENT IN QUALITY RATING & IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS



**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

Assessment is a significant requirement of California’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). The QRIS matrix includes assessments using two specific tools for programs to score above a 3 rating: the Environment Rating Scales (ERS), which measure teaching environments, and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which measures teacher-child interactions.

In particular, use of the ERS assessment tool requires outside assessors who are anchored and reliable in the ERS scales to conduct the assessments. Training and maintaining assessors is costly and time-intensive, so counties across California have faced challenges finding enough assessors to meet their assessment needs, as well as resourcing the assessment requirements.

### THE REGIONAL ASSESSMENT EFFORT

The Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership identified assessment as an area of focus from the beginning of its collaboration. An assessment task group was convened to identify existing county resources and determine specific ways the Partnership could collaborate effectively around assessment. Key achievements of their collaboration include:

- **Regional Assessment Protocol:** A common regional protocol for assessment was developed to ensure that ERS and CLASS scores that are used for QRIS ratings are

valid and reliable across the region. Regionally consistent assessment data also enables the Partnership to compare results and share a regional story about quality and the impact of their efforts.

- **Uber anchor:** The region invested in two ERS “uber anchors” (assessors trained in all ERS tools and who are able to train other assessors to be anchors, re-train existing assessors, and train new assessors), eliminating the need to send new assessors out of state for ERS training. By sharing this cost, the region built its capacity to more efficiently recruit, train, and anchor assessors.
- **Regional assessor pool:** To further reduce the cost and time required to recruit and train assessors, the region gathered a common pool of assessors from which to draw and shared the costs of training and anchoring them. Through this process, the Partnership ensured that each county in the region had sufficient assessment coverage and that selected assessors had the desired skill sets and approaches to assessment.

Counties in the Partnership report that the coordinated network of peer support across the Bay Area region has been especially helpful in the area of assessment. Regional collaboration has deepened their understanding of the assessment tools and their ability to conduct assessments.



## REGIONAL ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL

The Regional Assessment Protocol governs the use of the ERS and CLASS assessments for the purposes of QRIS rating, where protocols are not established by statewide Consortia Implementation Guide. The Regional Assessment Protocol guides practice in the following areas:

- + Qualifications and Requirements of Assessors
- + Establishing and Maintaining Assessor Reliability
- + Scheduling Observations
- + Site Orientation and Preparation for the Site Visit
- + Classroom Observation Methodology
- + Calculating Substantial Portion of the Day for ERS
- + Scoring Modifications



## SAN FRANCISCO'S ROLE IN ASSESSMENT

First 5 San Francisco has been utilizing the ERS assessment for 15 years, and their assessment capacity and understanding of the benefits and challenges of this tool were critical to the Partnership's work in this area. The ERS anchor contracted by First 5 San Francisco became the regional "uber anchor," a critical component of the Partnership's increased capacity. First 5 San Francisco also provided key input on desired assessor skills, including the need for bilingual assessors, and shared modifications they had made to the tool to make it more responsive to their needs.

## CHALLENGES RELATED TO ASSESSMENT IN QRIS

Though the Partnership's efforts have had significant positive impact on the counties' assessment capacities, assessment-related challenges still exist. The high cost of the assessments is a concern, as is the sustainability of the current assessment requirements. As the number of counties developing QRISs in California increases, the demand for anchored and reliable assessors will also increase.

Furthermore, although the study is underway, there is not yet data on the California matrix to support the current assessment requirements as leading to differentiated child outcomes. It is critical that the information gained through these assessments is beneficial to educators' quality improvement efforts. (For more on the need to gather data on the California matrix, refer to the Partnership's brief, "Development of a Quality Early Learning System.")

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR QRIS ASSESSMENT SUSTAINABILITY

The Partnership has the following recommendation to support assessment sustainability as part of QRIS:

1. **The California Department of Education and First 5 California should allocate funding and staff time to**

## conduct a collaborative statewide assessment review process with QRIS counties to:

- a. Gather data to fully understand how the current assessment requirements relate to outcomes.
- b. Review the current assessment tools and requirements and define the appropriate use of assessment in the matrix.
- c. Determine the best periodicity for administering assessments.
- d. Evaluate the sustainability and cost effectiveness of using proprietary tools with strict anchoring requirements.
- e. Evaluate whether assessments should be placed as rated elements in the matrix or placed into the non-rated quality improvement pathways guiding professional development.
- f. Update California Department of Education's use of assessment tools as part of their state preschool program visits to enable CDE field staff to accept assessments from QRIS consortia.



## CONCLUSION

Achieving quality early learning in California will take time, resources, and leadership effort. QRIS implementation through the Race to the Top Early - Learning Challenge has provided participating counties and the state with an understanding of the level of effort and investment that is required to build and pilot a system for organizing early learning quality. California has an opportunity to utilize the shared learning through the pilot and other connected efforts to develop an aligned quality early learning system. This includes refinements to California's QRIS matrix and requirements, a consistent and sustained investment in statewide QRIS infrastructure, and significant changes to the other systems that feed into quality early learning.

The Bay Area Quality Early Learning Partnership hopes that its experiences, lessons, and recommendations, as shared in this report, will prompt and support efforts to create a system of quality early learning across California.



[WWW.BAYAREAQUALITYPARTNERSHIP.COM](http://WWW.BAYAREAQUALITYPARTNERSHIP.COM)

