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

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR QUALITY EARLY LEARNING EFFORTS IN CALIFORNIA

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. The Partnership's work is centered around four shared goals: 1) Establish a common definition of quality, 2) Ensure that QRIS ratings are consistent across the Bay Area, 3) Increase their operational efficiency, and 4) Learn from each other's experience.

The Partnership has released a series of briefs that review and share the achievements and lessons learned implementing QRIS locally and as a regional partnership from 2012-2015. This booklet summarizes the Partnership's recommendations from the briefs for policy and systems changes to support QRIS and quality improvement efforts. The full report as well as the briefs can be found at www.bayareaqualitypartnership.com.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE INFRASTRUCTURE TO DEVELOP AN EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM:

1. **Existing statewide early learning systems must be aligned to properly support quality early learning.** This recommendation includes child care licensing, resource and referral agencies, higher education, and other systems with critical roles in early learning.

2. **Early learning must be developed as an aligned and cohesive system that is connected to and can articulate into the K-12 system.** This requires aligning the many disjointed programs and initiatives that currently serve 0-5 year olds.

3. **Building an early learning system requires state-level legislation and policies with sustained funding streams.** Continuity and coordination of policies and funding from statewide leaders 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.** 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 and aggregated.

5. **Implement a universal kindergarten readiness assessment and build a unique identifier system.** This will enable critical statewide conversations about early learning, as well as provide teachers with reliable measures to support students.

6. **Quality efforts must address the whole early childhood system.** As an early learning system is developed, all areas, including health, parent education and engagement, social-emotional support, early learning, and income disparity, must be included and supported.

7. **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.

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.** 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 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.

3. **There must be a place for all types of educators in a mixed service system.** The matrix requirements should be assessed for barriers to participation, including elements that are disproportionately difficult to implement for non-subsidized educators, as well as equivalency options such as NAEYC accreditation.

4. **An adequately resourced and integrated statewide QRIS must be developed.** The Partnership recommends the development of a consistent and comprehensive framework for QRIS that supports all educators, is integrated with all of the state systems that contribute to quality, and is robustly resourced.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEM CHANGES TO SUPPORT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:

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 creating substandard workforce conditions and pay for the teachers that California is relying upon to care for children while they are in the most significant stages of brain development.

2. **Early childhood education compensation must be raised to match K-12 compensation.** 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. **A 0-8 teaching credential should be developed.** This credential would prepare new teachers to teach in both pre-kindergarten and early elementary settings, serving to create a continuum of developmentally appropriate education.

4. **An early learning certificate program should be developed.** This certificate would create an intermediary solution to enhance early childhood understanding in the already credentialed elementary workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:

1. **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.** This could include offering more flexible course schedules and options; providing language, scholarship, and professional development supports; collaborating to align coursework across institutions; and incorporating instruction to students on QRIS and its tools.

2. **Statewide policy barriers to early education degree attainment must be eliminated.** State-level organizations working on early childhood should engage with the governing bodies of higher education to collectively change these policies, including making classes available in languages reflective of the workforce, increasing the availability of funding to support those seeking early childhood degrees, and offering four-year early childhood education degrees at community colleges. The connection between licensing and higher education should be formalized by requiring AA and BA degrees as part of teacher and administrator credentialing and aligning AA and BA degree program requirements with credentialing requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF COACHING IN QRIS:

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 is adequate workforce development through higher education and hands-on training, so that teachers are appropriately prepared when they enter the field. The role of coaching should be to enhance the skills of an already educated workforce.

2. **Coaching should be embedded into quality improvement initiatives.** High quality coaching should be built into future quality early learning initiatives and funded appropriately.

3. **Coaching should remain a flexible and personal component of quality improvement.** Funding for coaching should be incorporated into an early learning system, but it shouldn't be tied to specific coaching types or requirements.

4. **Statewide guidelines on coaching should be developed.** These 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, but should not prescribe coaching types, focuses, or dosages.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR QRIS ASSESSMENT SUSTAINABILITY:

1. **The California Department of Education and First 5 California should allocate funding and staff time to conduct a collaborative statewide review of assessment with QRIS counties.** The focus of this should be to gather data on assessments and outcomes; define the appropriate use, periodicity, and role of assessment in the matrix and the quality improvement pathways; and evaluate the sustainability and cost effectiveness of using proprietary assessment tools.
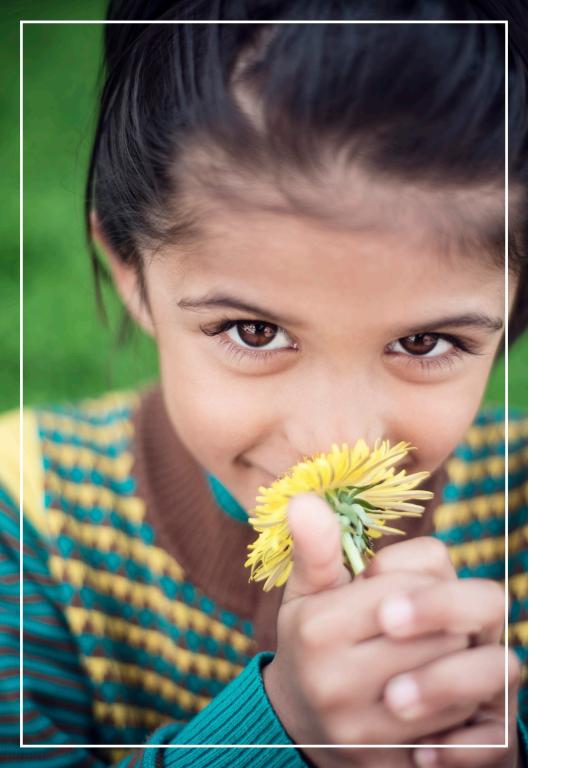
NEXT STEPS FOR THE BAY AREA QUALITY EARLY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP:

The following are next steps that the Partnership has identified for their own work to continue the development of QRIS and quality early learning systems in the Bay Area Region.

1. **Grow and expand regional and local systems to support quality.** The Partnership sees an opportunity to provide guidance and share its lessons with neighboring counties, with the potential to expand the Partnership to include additional participants.

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.

3. **Continue to focus on advocacy and policy to achieve the Partnership's vision of quality early learning.** 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 quality goal.

4. **Serve as a resource to support the formation of multi-county regional QRIS partnerships across 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.** 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.

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