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A Blueprint for Early Care and Education Quality Improvement Initiatives



As Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) continue to launch and mature across states, questions emerge from stakeholders about how to design and implement effective quality improvement (QI) initiatives that accompany a QRIS.¹ Funders, policymakers and program developers with limited resources are looking to invest in activities that will be most

successful in supporting early care and education (ECE) program quality improvement and ultimately improving outcomes for young children. **The purpose of this report is to address questions about effective QI initiatives by proposing a blueprint of quality improvement practices and design considerations generated from a synthesis of the existing research literature and input from national experts in ECE quality improvement.**

The research literature on QI initiatives in ECE is limited because few studies use designs and methods that permit examination of specific features or dimensions of QI initiatives. In addition, evaluation of quality improvement in QRIS is still a relatively new endeavor. Given these limitations of the research literature, the strategy for this report is to propose a blueprint for effective QI initiatives that builds on the features included in QI initiatives that have been linked to positive outcomes for teacher practices and/or children's developmental outcomes. This blueprint goes beyond existing literature and resources to suggest not only features, practices, and supports to include in a QI initiative, but also to propose key considerations for implementation and for situating the QI initiative in the broader ECE system to ensure quality improvements

are meaningful and sustained. Because the research literature on QI initiatives is still in an early stage, it is expected that the recommended practices and features included in the blueprint will be refined and updated as new research becomes available.

The practices and considerations included in the blueprint are based on the extant literature as well as input from national experts on QRIS-related QI initiatives. Figure 1 displays the key features of the blueprint for QI initiatives. First, the top of Figure 1 highlights the importance of an established connection between the QI initiative, the broader ECE system, and adequate financing² to ensure common standards for quality improvement, access to system resources that can support quality improvement (e.g., coaching, consultation and other technical assistance; coursework; training) and motivation for participation (e.g., recognition in a QRIS, eligibility for participation in state pre-kindergarten program). If the QI initiative is attached directly to a QRIS, this connection to the ECE system is likely in place already, though intentional efforts are needed to ensure the strength and effectiveness of the connections.

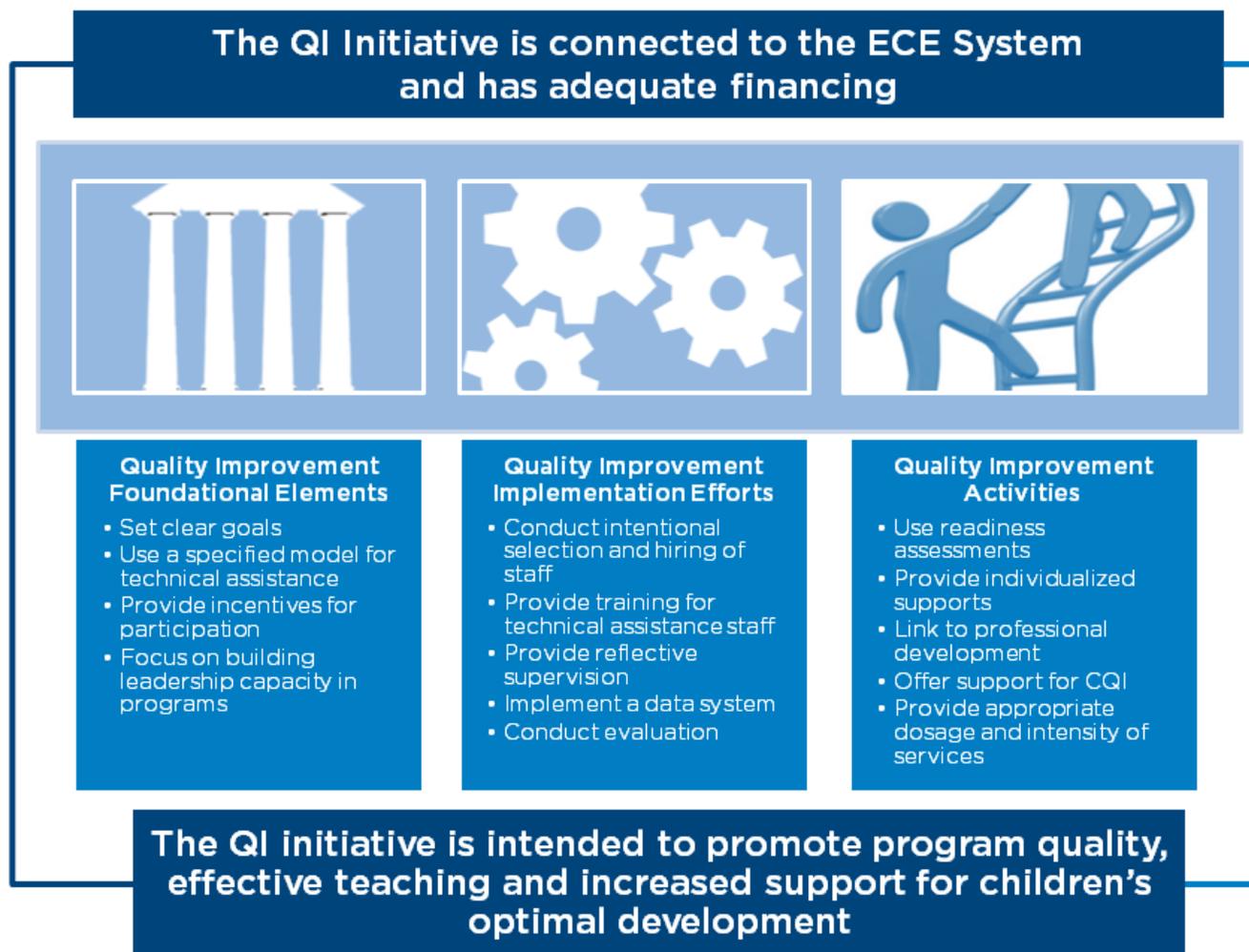
The bottom of Figure 1 displays a second critical feature in a QI initiative: setting a priority to target ECE program quality improvements (including interactions between teachers/caregivers and children) that will ultimately increase support for children's optimal development. This priority on children's development can serve as a guidepost for decision-making, goal-setting and outcome measurement.

Within the anchor points of system connections, financing, and a priority on supporting children's development, the middle of Figure 1 outlines recommendations for specific practices and features to include in a QI initiative. To facilitate discussion of these practices, they are divided into three sets: Quality Improvement Foundational Elements, Implementation Efforts, and Activities. Note, however, that the distinctions between the three sets are not rigid. For example, depending on how a certain feature is discussed, it could fit under Foundational Elements or Activities. This potential permeability in the model should not diminish the usefulness of the blueprint but rather points out the need for further research to build a better understanding of how features of QI initiatives work together most effectively.

1. In this report, a QI initiative is defined as a specific and organized collection of activities designed to help ECE programs make progress in a QRIS. The activities may be embedded directly in a QRIS or they may be companion initiatives designed to support ECE programs in making quality improvements that will lead to higher QRIS ratings

2. We acknowledge that issues related to financing and supporting the true cost of quality improvement are critical. A full literature review and analysis of ECE financing is beyond the scope of this paper.

Figure 1. Blueprint for QI Initiatives in ECE



Recommended practices and considerations

• **Quality Improvement Foundational Elements-** The first set of practice recommendations provides a base from which a QI initiative operates. Foundation practices include interconnected features such as the establishment of clear goals that are linked to specific aspects of quality and child outcomes, and the use of a specified model to ensure quality improvement supports are delivered with consistency. These features help set the stage for the clarity and focus of the initiative. Other Foundational practices such as the provision of incentives for participation and a focus on program leadership serve as strategies to

engage participants and build capacity for ongoing quality improvement. Development of a theory of change for the QI initiative that articulates how the QI components will lead to improved program quality, teacher practices and children's outcomes is a useful activity to engage in when planning the Quality Improvement Foundational Elements.

• **Quality Improvement Implementation Efforts-** The second group of practices promotes effective implementation of QI initiatives, and is based on features identified in implementation research.³ Supports for implementation of the QI initiative are a critical but often-overlooked component. These

2. Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network. (FMHI Publication No. 231).

“drivers” of QI implementation include elements such as the intentional selection, initial and ongoing training, and reflective supervision of technical assistance (TA) providers; use of data systems to monitor progress; and evaluation of QI initiatives to assess effectiveness.

to support ongoing ECE program improvement and achievement of outcomes for children and families. The report contains a summary of the blueprint components that can be used to guide review, reflection, planning and revision of new or ongoing QI initiatives.

- **Quality Improvement Activities-** The third set of practices are the heart of the QI initiative and include the direct connections between the QI initiative staff, QI components (e.g., training, coursework, coaching) and ECE programs. ECE program leadership (directors/principals/education directors/family child care providers) and staff are engaged in QI through the activities, so the relevance and effectiveness of activities are vital for success. Activities include the following: assessment of program readiness for the QI initiative; provision of individualized, on-site technical assistance to support development of engaging learning environments and effective teaching and interactions (using a variety of strategies such as modeling, observation and reflection); linking technical assistance to activities that support knowledge-building such as training and coursework (bridging knowledge and practice); and providing support for continuous quality improvement, as well as delivering the QI initiative components with a dosage and intensity of services matched to the goals of the initiative.



One potential use of the blueprint is for developers and implementers of QI initiatives to use it as a “worksheet” against which they can assess the components of their program (see Figure 2 for a summary of key dimensions for QI initiatives with questions to guide reflection, planning and revision of QI initiatives). Though recommendations included in the blueprint are not prescriptive, they provide guidance and considerations for QI initiatives that can help promote a focus on the most likely candidates for supporting effective practice.

The practices and considerations proposed in this report are supported by both emerging empirical evidence and expert consensus in the field as promising components of a successful QI initiative that accompanies a QRIS. While it is important to remember that the blueprint will need updating in the future as the knowledge base expands, it serves as a concise articulation of the key investments to consider for the design, implementation and evaluation of QI initiatives

3. Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network. (FMHI Publication No. 231).

Figure 2. Blueprint for QI Initiatives in ECE: Summary of Key Dimensions and Questions to Guide Planning and Design

Dimensions		What is it?	Why is it important?	Questions to guide revision and planning
ECE System Financing and Connections	Access to adequate financing and connections between the QI initiative and the ECE system	Financial supports at all levels (system, programs, workforce and families). Linkages between the QI initiative and ECE system through formal or informal partnerships.	Stability and adequacy of funding are critical to QI initiatives. Connections between the QI initiative and the ECE system ensure common standards for quality improvement, access to system resources that can support quality improvement (e.g., coaching, consultation and other technical assistance; coursework; training) and motivation for participation (e.g., recognition in a QRIS, eligibility for participation in state pre-kindergarten program).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which external partners are engaged in the QI initiative? What are their roles, and how do they connect the initiative to the ECE system? • How does the initiative leverage support from other projects (e.g., training, coaching, and incentives)? How can linkages be strengthened? • What financial supports are available for the QI initiative? Are they adequate and sustainable?
	QI Foundational Elements	Clear goals for quality improvement	A clearly articulated theory of change for how a QI initiative supports program quality, effective teaching and children's development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the theory of change for the QI initiative? How does the theory of change connect activities to improved program quality, effective teaching and children's development? • Does the initiative allow for individualized goal development?
	Specified model	The use of a well-specified model (either formal or project-developed) to guide the delivery of QI supports	A specified model is critical to ensure that quality improvement supports are delivered with consistency. The model may be a formal, evidence-based model or it may be a project-developed approach that blends components of various models or theories and aligns with the goals of the initiative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the model used for the QI initiative align with goals? • Does the QI initiative have a manual to guide service delivery with programs?
	Incentives for participation	The financial and non-financial incentives offered at the program- or provider- level to motivate participation and improvement in the initiative.	Incentives are a helpful and straightforward method for engaging participants in a QI initiative. It is important to set parameters around how incentives may be used, align incentives with the goals of the QI program, and support programs in accessing the incentives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What incentives (financial and non-financial) are available to participants in the QI initiative? • Are the incentives aligned with the goals (e.g., are quality award amounts sufficient for programs to make meaningful investments in materials or training)?
	Focus on leadership	A focus on supporting and developing the leadership capacities of directors or program administrators.	Directors play a central role in ECE programs. Research has shown that their education, experience, and training directly influence their ability to facilitate quality improvement and maintain a high quality program. Given the vital role of the director and the growing body of literature on leadership, it is important that QI initiatives provide activities that are designed to support and develop the leadership skills and capacities of program directors or administrators.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the director's/ administrator's role in supporting quality improvement articulated in the theory of change? • What supports are in place to help directors/administrators act as change agents and to promote capacity building in their programs?

Dimensions		What is it?	Why is it important?	Questions to guide revision and planning
QI Implementation Efforts	Selection and hiring of TA providers improvement	Qualifications for selecting and hiring TA providers, such as years of experience, education level, and prior training.	Empirical evidence is limited about the criteria for selecting TA providers and what their minimum qualifications should be. QI initiatives typically hire TA providers who have educational qualifications at higher levels than teachers and who have experience working in ECE programs, especially with the QI model used in the initiative. Job descriptions and the hiring process can emphasize skills in working with adult learners and demonstration of competencies using role playing and vignettes. The literature does suggest that minimum qualifications should be set and standardized across the initiative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the skills and competencies needed for TA providers in the QI initiative? Have these been described adequately in the job description? • If staff duties are being reassigned from another project, is a process in place to ensure that staff skills and competencies are aligned with the needs of the QI initiative? • Have role-play scenarios or vignettes been developed to facilitate a job interview?
	Training of TA providers	Ensuring that TA providers carry out the various quality improvement activities through provision of training and resources.	Training of TA providers and other staff in the QI initiative is an essential activity. It is important that staff receive initial training before they begin working with programs and ongoing training to ensure they stay up to date on QI practices that impact children's early learning and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What processes are in place to ensure that staff in the QI initiative receive relevant initial and ongoing training? • Does the training include opportunities for application of new knowledge to practices with programs? • Do TA providers have access to written materials and resources to support the training?
	Reflective supervision of TA providers	Supportive oversight of TA providers by a supervisor or agency.	Reflective supervision ensures that meaningful services are delivered and provides a means for TA providers to debrief, share resources, and problem solve. It is important that regular supervision occurs through meetings with opportunities for sharing and reflection, peer interactions, and direct observations in the field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the supervisor's role articulated in the QI initiative? What modifications can be made to enhance the role of supervision? • What is the caseload of supervisors? Does it permit field observations? What changes can be made to allow field observations to happen?
	Data systems and case management	A method of collecting, tracking, storing and analyzing information related to the QI initiative.	Data systems can support decision-making and program management. Data systems should include the following: 1) unique ID numbers for programs to facilitate linkages with other data systems; 2) case management features that allow TA providers to enter service delivery information and track their caseloads; 3) historical tracking of information to facilitate evaluation of effective strategies; and 4) access to a variety of users so the work of the QI initiative is informed by common data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What process is used to track data in the QI initiative? Are resources available to create a data system or to link to an existing system? • What is the staff capacity to support a data system and to train other staff and programs on appropriate use of the data system? • Do different data users (administrators, supervisors, TA staff, ECE program staff) have access to the data?

Dimensions		What is it?	Why is it important?	Questions to guide revision and planning
QI Implementation Efforts (cont.)	Evaluation	Systematic collection and analysis of information to inform decisions, and increase understanding about how the program is working.	Evaluation is crucial for shaping QI program design and implementation, promoting accountability, determining effective strategies that lead to quality improvement, and informing continuous improvement of the QI program. An evaluation plan can articulate a “wish list” of short- and long-term evaluation questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the staff capacity to conduct evaluation in-house? • What are the opportunities for engaging evaluation partners in the QI initiative?
	QI Activities	Readiness assessment process	An assessment to determine whether a program has the capacity to engage in a QI initiative (or component of the initiative).	Assessment of a program’s readiness to engage in quality improvement activities is useful for identifying needs and targeting resources. QI initiatives may use a formal observation of the environment, a checklist during an intake interview, or other informal methods to gather information about a program. Information from the tools can guide decisions about whether programs need additional supports before beginning their participation.
	Strategies used to meet the individualized needs of programs	Activities used to individualize technical assistance to meet the distinct needs of programs/providers.	The heart of individualized work with programs is the flexibility to use different strategies to support the needs of programs, classrooms and teachers in meeting the goals for improvement. Specific TA strategies include modeling, observation, assessment, reflection and provision of feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the QI initiative offer TA providers flexibility to use different TA strategies (within the parameters of the QI model)? • Is training provided to support TA providers in their use of different strategies?
	Linking on-site technical assistance with other PD	Linking on-site technical assistance with other professional development, such as training, coursework, group meetings, or resource sharing.	Research confirms that adults learn best when they have the opportunity to practice applying new knowledge and skills in the presence of a supportive coach or consultant who can scaffold their learning. Promoting continuity between the TA provided on-site and other professional development opportunities can foster new skills and practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What opportunities exist in the QI initiative to link on-site technical assistance with training, coursework or learning communities? • What new partners could be included in the QI initiative to support these linkages?
	Focus on continuous quality improvement (CQI)	A program culture that promotes reflection, goal-setting, positive change and continual assessment of strengths and needs.	CQI is a data-driven process used to create an environment that supports ongoing reflection and change that can support program improvement and build program capacity over time. While there is strong consensus among experts in the field regarding the importance of CQI, the literature on CQI within the ECE field is limited.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What opportunities exist in the QI initiative to build in training and tools that would incorporate a focus on CQI? • What new partners could be included in the QI initiative to support the inclusion of these tools?

Dimensions		What is it?	Why is it important?	Questions to guide revision and planning
QI Activities (cont.)	Dosage	The amount or quantity of technical assistance that is provided to a particular program, center, teacher or director in a QI initiative.	The ECE literature does not specify the amount of support needed to achieve positive outcomes; however, some studies have found positive associations related to a higher dosage of support. It is recommended that dosage for on-site support be matched with the specific goals of the initiative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the dosage of technical assistance match with the goals of the QI initiative? • What opportunities exist to increase the dosage to support harder-to-change skills and practices?
	Assessment of intensity	A calculation of the dosage (i.e., frequency and length of sessions) of on-site support and the duration of the intervention over time.	The limited ECE literature indicates that QI initiatives with higher intensity are more effective at producing better outcomes. Similar to dosage, intensity should be matched to the goals and needs of the program and initiative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is technical assistance delivered to programs across time? • What opportunities exist to support programs with higher intensity services at the beginning of their participation in the QI initiative?
Improved Outcomes for Programs, Teachers and Children	A focus on outcomes for programs, teachers and children	A priority to focus on improvements to program quality and teaching that will support children's development.	It is important to ground quality improvement work in changes that have the potential to promote meaningful gains in children's skills and competencies across developmental domains. The QI initiative should also take into account the unique context and population of children and families in the initiative and articulate how the work will support children from different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds as well as children with special needs. Development of a theory of change for the QI initiative can help articulate how the initiative will target children's development through direct and indirect pathways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the QI initiative support children's development? What are the direct and indirect pathways? • What features of the QI initiative can be strengthened or reframed to promote a greater focus on children's development? • What contextual and system features (e.g., QRIS quality indicators) need to be addressed to improve the focus on children's development?