

# California Advances Comprehensive Early Learning System Reform



High-quality early learning programs get children ready to learn and succeed in school, and can help close the achievement gap. Research shows that children who attend high-quality preschool are less likely to drop out of high school, be placed in special education or be held back a grade and more likely to score better on reading and math achievement tests. As adults, children who attend high-quality early learning are also more likely to attend college, be employed and less likely to be involved in crime.

## Quality Matters

Only high-quality programs produce these improved child outcomes. In fact, poor quality programs can exacerbate the school readiness gap and may be unsafe and unhealthy, causing harm to our youngest children.

- Unfortunately, less than a quarter of all preschool-age children – and just 13 percent of low-income children – in California are currently enrolled in the types of high-quality early learning programs that promote school readiness and later school achievement, according to research by the RAND Corporation.

- Although one million children ages birth to 5 are in some type of early learning and child care program outside their homes, no statewide system currently exists to measure the quality of programs. Even California's basic licensing system has one of the lowest inspection rates in the country.



Due to the importance of quality in early learning programs, California urgently needs to both develop a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) that builds on our effective programs and redesign our health and safety monitoring system, according to a new report by the California Early Learning Quality Improvement System (ELQIS) Advisory Committee.

- Senate Bill 1629 (Steinberg) – passed by the state Legislature and signed by Gov. Schwarzenegger in 2008 – established the committee to develop the policy and implementation plan for the system.

## What is a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)?

- A quality rating system supports and rewards early care and education programs that achieve higher quality standards that are shown to result in improved child outcomes.
- A QRIS is a uniform set of ratings, graduated by level of quality, to assess and improve early learning and care programs.
- The goal of a QRIS is to increase the number of early learning programs that have features shown to improve child outcomes, including school readiness and success in life.
- Parents can use QRIS ratings to make the best choices for their children, and policymakers can use the information to increase accountability and invest in effective programs.
- A comprehensive QRIS would provide workforce development, financial incentives and other supports to improve quality.
- A state advisory committee recently approved five quality elements for a QRIS structure:

- o Ratios and Group Size
- o Teaching and Learning
- o Family Involvement
- o Staff Education and Training
- o Program Leadership



For more information, visit [www.preschoolcalifornia.org](http://www.preschoolcalifornia.org)



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## California Advances Quality Improvement System Planning

- The recent ELQIS report identified key policy opportunities and proposed a design for a QRIS that would provide easily accessible, objective ratings about the safety, health and quality of early learning programs.



- Key policy opportunities include:

- o Establish unified objective quality standards, that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, that can be used to inform program design as well as quality environments for providers, families and policymakers;
- o Strengthen health and safety oversight for the early learning and care licensing system;
- o Pilot the quality review system and design incentives to support the system and encourage innovative models;
- o Strengthen the links between early educator professional development and effective teaching to improve child outcomes; and
- o Establish a comprehensive data system to measure the impact of early learning and care programs and support future statewide evaluation and research on the program's design.

## Building Momentum for Quality Improvement

Developing a statewide quality rating and improvement system provides us with an opportunity to align local and state quality improvement efforts. It is also part of a larger, national movement toward raising the quality of early learning programs.



- Twenty-three other states have already adopted these systems, and California is one of at least 20 more in the process of planning them.


- California has already received \$10.8 million in federal stimulus funds for this work, and developing a quality rating and improvement system will make us even more competitive for potential future federal funding.

Several models for Quality Rating and Improvement Systems already exist in counties across California.

- First 5 California funds Power of Preschool projects in Los Angeles, Merced, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Ventura and Yolo Counties. These projects illustrate many elements of a broader quality rating and improvement system. They emphasize continuous improvement and rewarding, evaluating and supporting programs.
- Among First 5's Power of Preschool projects is Los Angeles Universal Preschool's (LAUP) Five Star rating system, which represents the largest, longest-operating early learning quality improvement system in California. LAUP's Five Star System has demonstrated significant increases in student achievement, according to a recent kindergarten readiness assessment. The results showed that LAUP children made significant improvements in the cognitive, social and emotional skills needed to do well in kindergarten, and the gains were especially pronounced for English language learners.

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