COMMENTARY

Quality Matters More Than Ever in Times of Crisis

Does the California Quality Rating and Improvement System Predict Child Outcomes?



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While campaigning for the governorship, Governor Newsom committed to improving both access and quality in early childhood education (ECE). While he made a substantial down payment on fulfilling those promises in his first budget, most of these gains were erased in the revised budget reflecting the state of the economy caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Given the limited resources for ECE, it is imperative that we identify, measure, and deliver dimensions of quality that matter most for children. High quality is all the more important given the poverty, stress, and food insecurity that substantially more children in the state are experiencing as a consequence of the pandemic. Ensuring quality will require re-examining the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS, referred to as Quality Counts California), which currently rates program elements to assess overall program quality. An important question is: Are we assessing the right dimensions of quality with measures that predict children's learning and development?

Improving QRIS

QRIS ratings are based in part on assumptions that the quality of programs can be measured and that quality ratings are associated with meaningful differences in learning outcomes for children. But what program elements predict child outcomes and how best to measure these are matters of debate.

A new PACE report examines QRIS validation studies of seven states and other research on four elements contained in the California's QRIS: teacher qualifications, program environment, teacher–child interactions, and child-to-teacher ratio and group size. The goal of such ratings is to identify areas that need improvement, but this review finds mostly weak and inconsistent associations between child outcomes and all of these program elements.

Strategy Recommendations

The weakness and inconsistency of the research findings reviewed in this report suggest that substantial work needs to be done before QRIS ratings can be expected to predict children's learning and development consistently.

The following strategies are suggested to move Quality Counts California towards a valid assessment of program quality:

1. An investment needs to be made in developing a classroom observation measure that is better aligned with desired child outcomes.
2. Research designed to validate the QRIS needs to include more comprehensive measures of children's literacy and math skills than are currently used.
3. A more nuanced measure of teacher qualifications, including the nature and extent of courses in ECE and supervised practice teaching, should be created.
4. California should investigate alternative variables to include in its QRIS that are associated with quality—such as staff pay, staff reports of working conditions, the implementation of research-based curricula, and opportunities for high-quality professional development.
5. Adjustments should be made to ensure the appropriateness of quality ratings for children of different ages and in different settings.
6. Studies should examine different rating rubrics and different cutoff scores for awarding points to determine which strategies are the most predictive of child outcomes. Cutoffs for awarding points should be informed by extant research on the measures used.

In the coming months and years, California and its school districts will have difficult choices to make around allocating resources to different programs. It is critical that,in making those decisions, policy makers and school administrators work from the best possible data as to what dimensions of programs matter for children and that we apply scarce resources to improving those critical dimensions.

Read the complete report here.

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