On December 14, 2010, the Board of Early Education and Care adopted EEC’s proposed revised Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Standards to be used for the implementation of QRIS in January 2011. Once these QRIS Standards are implemented, EEC will continue to review, analyze and/or revise them, if necessary, to ensure consistency, clarity and alignment. The importance of a quality improvement system for child development, and an overview of the purpose and structure of the QRIS, is outlined below.

Ensuring a Prosperous Future for the Commonwealth:  
A Quality Improvement System for Child Development Settings

Introduction

In challenging economic times, it is tempting to focus on short-term needs and solutions. But if our Commonwealth is to enjoy a bright and prosperous future, we must ensure that we are also keeping an eye on the long-term—by fostering the health and well being of the next generation.

Sooner than we think, today’s children will become tomorrow’s citizens, workers and parents. When we provide the Commonwealth’s children with what they need to build a strong foundation for healthy and productive lives, we are making an investment that will be paid back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. When we fail to provide children with what they need to build a strong foundation for healthy and productive lives, we put our future prosperity and security at great risk.

This is particularly important to remember in today’s increasingly complex global society, one in which a highly skilled workforce is an imperative. Further, as the population ages, and the number of full-time contributors shrinks, we must ensure that every citizen is ready to participate fully in the economy and in civic life. In essence, child development is a foundation for community and economic development.

What Science Teaches Us About Child Development

Fortunately, an explosion of research in neuroscience and other developmental sciences helps us understand, what children need to become capable contributors. For one, we know that the basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood.

Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundation, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence. Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. This is why it is essential to ensure high-quality experiences for our young children.

How the Brain Gets Built

It is the interactive influences of genes and experience that literally shape the developing brain. The active ingredient is the “serve and return” relationships with the adult caregivers in the family and community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction, healthy development is facilitated when adults interact in kind.

Moreover, we now know that the human brain is a highly sophisticated organ and that all aspects of
development—cognitive, social, emotional and physical—are inextricably linked throughout the life course. In other words, one can’t focus on the development of one part of the brain without paying equal attention to the other parts. For example, language acquisition relies on hearing, on the ability to differentiate sounds—and also on the ability to pay attention, regulate emotions, and engage in social interaction.

These new findings are relevant for all environments in which children spend their waking hours: preschool, school, after-school, home and the larger community. As the Commonwealth works toward achieving the highest standards of quality in all of its child-related settings, we must heed the science and adjust our practices and resources accordingly.

How Quality Programs Shape Development

In the past decade or so, scientists and practitioners have been drawing on lessons learned to define the specific characteristics of a “quality” program, one that is attuned to the developmental needs of all children. They have been able to measure what they call the “effectiveness factors” that often make the difference between programs that work and those that do not work to support children’s healthy development. In other words, some children can spend just as many hours in a program, but not show many positive outcomes.

Moving Toward Quality in Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, we can benefit from these new understandings to build a system ensuring that all of the settings for young children in the Commonwealth are of the highest quality. The Commonwealth’s new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a key tool, among many, that Massachusetts is developing to help families, communities, and policymakers understand what constitutes quality.

The QRIS also guides professionals in child development settings on a path toward quality, recognizing that higher expectations of programs must be matched with higher supports for those programs, including better articulated career lattices, financial incentives, education and training that is grounded in the science of child development, and extensive technical assistance.

The QRIS has been shown to work in numerous states around the country. Oklahoma, North Carolina and Pennsylvania, in particular, have conducted comprehensive evaluations of their systems that demonstrate overall quality improvement and better child outcomes related to reading and math in school. These studies offer encouraging results, and are also an important reminder of the time and resources required to realize widespread gains.

Key Components of Quality

Building on a strong foundation of licensing, the QRIS applies to all ages (birth to 13) and settings in school and community, family childcare programs and after-school and out-of-school time programs. Programs are evaluated on a scale of 1-5, based on their level of integration of child development principles and practices—from basic awareness, emerging practice and focused development (Levels 1-3, respectively) to full integration, best practice and demonstrable child growth (Levels 4 and 5, respectively). Specifically, program must demonstrate quality across the following five key domains:

- **Curriculum and Learning**
  
  This domain includes the development and assessment of developmentally appropriate curriculum, the “serve and return” interactions between teacher and child, and attention to children with special needs and diverse language and cultures. Indicators of high quality include daily and weekly lesson plans, ongoing professional development and feedback to ensure fidelity to the curriculum model, built-in planning time,
along with reflective teaching practices for staff through coaching, mentoring and structured peer interaction. Standards, curriculum, assessment, teacher preparation, family involvement should be aligned for children from birth to 9, or into the 3rd grade to ensure the strongest outcomes for children.

- **The Environment**

  Program environments provide the framework for children’s learning and development. They support the implementation of the curriculum through the use of space, materials and opportunities for children to experiment, practice their skills, analyze, socialize, and problem solve. Quality environments also provide support for the health, safety and nutrition of young children. Indicators of quality include the designation of both indoor and outdoor place spaces that are used on a daily basis; a large quantity and variety of materials for nature and science, math and number activities, art, and fine motor activities, and the integration of health and social services with early education and care.

- **Workforce Qualifications and Professional Development**

  To ensure healthy development, the workforce must have formalized training in early childhood education and content knowledge, along with ongoing professional development that is linked to classroom activities. Indicators of high quality include lead teachers with bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education, and regular teachers who hold associates’ or bachelor’s degrees with a minimum of 15 college credits in early childhood education--or a minimum of 36 college credits in early childhood education.

- **Leadership, Management and Administration**

  High quality programs require effective leadership with management and administrative practices that ensure a stable environment, fiscal accountability, evaluation of the program's practices and policies and the development of relationships within the community. Indicators of quality include a clear business plan that is developed by staff and advisors, and is reviewed periodically for updating. Other indicators include a system of technology that allows for data collection and tracking of children's health, services, absenteeism and educational information, staff qualifications and professional development and financial record keeping. In addition, high quality programs ensure that staff salary and benefit scales reflect educational levels, experience and performance levels, with evaluations conducted annually.

- **Family Involvement**

  High-quality programs recognize the interconnectedness between the child, the family, the community and the program itself. Relationships with families are built on mutual trust, respect and a willingness to involve them as full partners, while providing them with information, resources and support. Indicators of quality include the presence of an active parent Advisory Board; the capacity of the program to connect families to resources, including adult education and job training, and to assistance around children's development, early literacy, math, and approaches to learning.

**Our Shared Responsibility**

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is committed to continuing the long tradition of shaping its own destiny through continuous learning and innovation—and through recognizing that our fates as citizens are entirely shared. By creating a quality rating system for child development settings that engages programs, families and communities in the quest for what’s best for our children, we can ensure that, over time, our vision becomes a reality. The Massachusetts QRIS is one important step in this direction, as we work to secure a bright and prosperous future for the generations to come.