

Grow NJ Kids: *First Steps Toward Quality Child Care*



Introduction

As New Jersey families struggle to find and afford quality child care, the state is embarking on an effort to improve and rate the quality of care young children receive.

This effort promises to give working parents more information when making one of the most important decisions of their children's lives — where their kids will spend their days during their most formative years. Known as Grow NJ Kids, this new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), will also help child care providers to improve quality through a variety of supports.

While high-quality early care and education is essential to every child's development, the quality of care in centers and family homes varies greatly and parents have limited access to information about the care offered in these settings.

Grow NJ Kids is aimed at changing that.

With a new 4-year, \$44 million federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant, New Jersey is now beginning to implement a statewide "quality rating and improvement system" (QRIS), similar to those in place in 36 states and the District of Columbia.

This is great news for New Jersey's children, parents and the early care and education workforce. Advocates for Children of New Jersey, through the work of the Build NJ Initiative, a coalition of child care and preschool providers, has been championing the



Giving Every Child A Chance

development of such a system in New Jersey for more than a decade. However, to return real results for children, it is imperative that these funds be used strategically.

This brief examines New Jersey's proposed implementation plan for *Grow NJ Kids* as outlined in the Race to the Top application and makes recommendations to ensure success so that all children get off to the right start.

What is QRIS?

In general, the goals of such systems are to:

- Expand parents' awareness and use of quality information when selecting care;
- Reward child care providers that improve quality with incentives to participate in the program, such as tiered reimbursement, quality awards or bonuses, scholarships, wage enhancements and retention bonuses;
- Support training and professional development of the early childhood workforce;
- Expand the supply of quality child care, especially those serving low-income children.
- Give young children early learning experiences that can help form the foundation they need for school success.

As many states implement these systems, most agree that the following components are critical:

- Encompass all types of early education settings, including home- and center-based care, preschools, Head Start and Early Head Start.
- Create meaningful incentives for child care providers and their staff, including higher reimbursements for providers that meet high-quality standards.
- Make professional development a cornerstone of quality improvement; and
- Support parents as their child's first teachers.
- Engage early care and education providers in efforts to improve quality.



Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Over the past 15 years, "Quality Rating and Improvement Systems" (QRIS) have gained national momentum as a way to improve child care quality, helping to give more children the right start during their critical first years.

Currently, 36 states and the District of Columbia operate a state-wide quality rating and improvement system. Nearly all other states, including New Jersey, are in some phase of development.

This system provides a roadmap for improving the quality of child care and preschool in all settings and for all ages of children served. Through the use of research-based tools, these systems measure child care quality and assign a rating, giving parents a consistent and reliable way to assess quality when choosing care for their child.

These systems also hold programs receiving public dollars accountable for providing early child care and education.

There are many QRIS models. Though some components may look similar across states, the existing systems have as many differences as they do similarities. Stakeholders in each state determine which quality indicators should be measured and which tools to use to measure quality, as well as how programs will be rated.

Studies have shown that some approaches work better than others and states have modified their approaches to incorporate this new knowledge. Additional research is still needed to determine which quality measures will help us better understand the most effective approaches to preparing young children for school success.

The recent infusion of federal funding through the Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge grants to states like New Jersey to help build quality rating systems should ultimately result in better care and education for our youngest children.

Improve quality in all child care settings

New Jersey is currently piloting *Grow NJ Kids* in 56 early learning programs, according to the state's federal grant application. This will be expanded to 1,790 programs by 2018. About 22 percent of New Jersey's 8,000 early care and education programs will be participating in *Grow NJ Kids* by the end of the 4-year grant period.

The roll-out is expected to continue after grant completion, until all publically-funded early learning programs are participating, which is projected by 2022, according to the state's application.

New Jersey's plan is expected to result in roughly 72,000 children with high needs being served in early learning settings participating in *Grow NJ Kids*, with half of them attending programs that have actually achieved strong ratings. New Jersey identifies high-needs children as low-income children, children with special needs, children with a home language other than English, migrant and homeless children. In addition, about 10,500 children without high needs will participate.

While this is a good step forward, the state is initially targeting programs that are already required to meet high standards and plans to include a very small percentage of providers offering care in their own homes — the least regulated form of child care in New Jersey.

Initially, most of the participating programs will be state-funded preschools and Head Start/Early Head Start, which are already required to meet higher standards set for these

types of programs. Less than one quarter of other private centers that serve high-needs children will participate in *Grow NJ Kids* during the first four years.

These are precisely the centers that need the most assistance, according to ACNJ's recent policy brief, ***Raising Quality in New Jersey's Child Care System: A Front-Line View***. These providers struggle with inadequate funding and supports to improve the quality of care they deliver to young children and their families.

In addition, the plan calls for just 180 home-based child care providers receiving state subsidies to participate — less than 9 percent of the 2,100 family child care providers. This type of care is widely used by families, particularly those with infants and toddlers.

The state plans to develop a similar tool to rate the quality of family child care homes that are registered with the state. The tool, however, is not scheduled to be piloted until the second year of the grant.

This is troubling as recent research from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) raised serious concerns about the quality of care provided in family child care homes registered with the state.

Recommendation: *Grow NJ Kids* should engage as early as possible those center-based programs and family child care homes most in need of support.

Early care and education programs with limited access to training and fewer financial supports need to be involved earlier in the process to raise overall child care quality in New Jersey.¹

Total Sites, Children and Classrooms Participating in Grow NJ Kids by 2018

Program Setting	Number of Programs in the State	Total Sites to Be Involved in Grow NJ Kids	Number of Children	Number of Classrooms	% of Total Sites
Family child care homes that receive public funding	2,100	180	720	180	8.6%
Center-based programs that receive public funding	2,342	494	25,688	1,976	21.1%
State-funded preschool	597	489	25,428	1,956	81.9%
Other Dept. of Ed- funded preschool	198	152	9,728	608	76.8%
Head Start/ Early Head Start (outside the state preschool program)	150	125	6,000	500	83.3%
Districts serving preschool disabled	350	140	4,480	560	40%
Other licensed centers (not necessarily high needs)	2,258	189	10,584	756	8.4%
Private schools for the disabled	55	21	672	84	38.2%
TOTAL	8,050	1,790	83,300	6,620	22.2%

Offer Meaningful Incentives

Meaningful incentives to encourage provider participation are critical to the success of quality improvement systems. Some incentives have been included in the grant to encourage participation, including:

- Classroom improvement grants ranging from \$500 to \$10,000. These grants can be used for classroom materials, equipment, substitutes or other needs. The actual number and amount of these grants will be awarded based on identified classroom needs.
- Scholarships to enable teachers, teacher assistants and family child care providers to participate in college courses. Plans call for providing \$12 million to pay for 1,500 scholarships that will range from \$1,000 per year for family child care providers to \$3,000 for center-based teachers.

While these are important incentives, the plan does not currently include increasing reimbursements for subsidized providers that meet higher standards — a critical piece to any effort to improve child care quality.

In ACNJ's recent survey of child care providers, lack of resources was identified as the primary barrier to improving quality. In both the survey and focus groups, providers said they struggle to maintain a stable workforce because of the inability to provide decent salaries to their teachers and aides. Teacher turnover lowers quality, which, in turn, affects young children's learning. They also cited an inability to afford improvements to their facilities, such as playgrounds, and other critical areas that affect quality.

The plan does call for securing funding for incentives beyond the grant period, saying the

state will hire a firm to assist in developing public private-partnerships to create sustainable scholarship and capital improvement funds for participants.

Recommendation: Provide a "tiered" reimbursement system so that early education programs that receive state subsidies and meet quality standards receive more funding.

Recommendation: Expand scholarship funding to cover related education expenses. From 2000 to 2007, New Jersey invested \$21.7 million in scholarships for roughly 6,600 preschool staff to return to school. This elevated the level of teaching in these classrooms. In addition to assisting with tuition, this successful model also provided teachers with funding for transportation and books. The same model should be used to improve the skills of early childhood educators, thus improving overall classroom quality and a child's first learning experiences.



Improve Professional Development

Qualified teachers are a cornerstone to quality early learning programs. To improve teacher quality, *Grow NJ Kids* promises to create a training academy to coordinate professional development and technical assistance.

This academy will be based at a New Jersey college or university, yet to be determined, and is expected to have three regional locations. The academy will employ nine certified trainers — three in each region of the state. These trainers will teach 78 early childhood professionals how to train an estimated 19,000 early childhood educators, aides and related staff throughout the state. The trainings will focus on research-based curriculum and the tools needed to implement *Grow NJ Kids*.

These trainings will be offered to staff in both programs participating in *Grow NJ Kids* and those not participating. While much of the free training will be provided on-site at the center or home by these 78 “quality improvement specialists,” the academies will also offer direct training.

The academy will be funded through a combination of Race to the Top dollars and existing state and federal funds, including state training money from the New Jersey Departments of Education, Human Services and Health.

The plan does not, however, address the need to provide some teachers and aides with basic skills in areas such as literacy to improve their ability to care for and teach very young children.

Recommendation: Ensure that the trainings meet the specific educational needs of those who will participate. As this academy is developed, it is critical to ensure that the professional development provided is appropriate for New Jersey’s diverse early care and

education workforce. Strategies for how the state will address the varying language and literacy needs of this population were not specifically identified in the plan, but must be addressed before staff will benefit from these more advanced trainings.



Engage Parents

The plan calls for using a variety of methods to inform parents, families and communities about *Grow NJ Kids*. Plans include developing a family-friendly website to offer easy access to providers' quality ratings, as well as licensing reports and violations. The goal is to provide this information in multiple languages. The website is expected to be completed by February 2016.

Parents will be asked to provide input on the design of the website, according to the plan. State officials envision holding forums at Family Success Centers, which are community-based help centers for families located in all 21 counties.

The plan also calls for creating County Councils for Young Children in every county. These councils, made up of parents of young children, would be designed to give parents a voice in shaping practices, programs and policies in all areas of early learning. To date, however, only Cumberland County has such a council.

It is unclear if parents would receive incentives, such as child care or transportation, to support their participation in these councils. Such assistance will be vital to ensure parent participation.

In addition, the state plans to provide parents with information to help them make better early learning and development choices for their children. A marketing firm will be hired to help with a statewide education campaign.

Recommendation: As the state moves forward with the design of the parent website, the first step should be to post licensing inspection and violation reports online. New Jersey is one of few states that does not currently provide this basic information in a way that is convenient to parents.

Right from the Start

This report is part of Advocates for Children of New Jersey's ongoing Right from the Start Campaign, aimed at improving the safety, health and well-being of New Jersey's youngest children. This initiative examines issues and advances change to give children the strongest possible start.

A coordinated early care and education system, starting at birth and continuing into a child's early elementary years, is the foundation to ensure that children are reading on target by 3rd grade. This early literacy is key to long-term school success.

Solicit Feedback from Child Care Providers

While the grant outlines a plan to involve and educate parents, a similar strategy should be developed to conduct widespread outreach to the child care community. Their feedback is essential. It is critically important to gain insight from the people who work each day in the classrooms with New Jersey's young children. This must happen during the development — not implementation — stage.

New Jersey should follow the lead of the federal government's development of a national preschool expansion plan. Federal officials have opened a blog to allow early childhood educators to weigh in on how to most successfully implement this plan.

Also, ACNJ's research in the child care community has revealed that many providers, while excited about this new system, are unclear of the details. Not only is it important for state officials to engage the child care community, it is critical that they clearly share detailed information about the plan and the tools that will be used to assess quality.

Recommendation: Develop a plan to inform the child care community about the details of *Grow NJ Kids* and to solicit their feedback prior to implementation.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Alexandre, J., Makow, N., Jung, K., Barnett, S. (June 2013). The Essex Quality Improvement Project (EQUIP). National Institute for Early Education Research.
- ² Blagman, A. (April 2010). *Creating a Roadmap for Success: The Need for a Quality Rating and Improvement System in New Jersey*. Advocates for Children of New Jersey.

Child care is a critical piece of an effective early learning system, as is high-quality preschool and early intervention programs.

While New Jersey has some aspects of a strong early care and education system in place — quality preschools for some children and growing use of home visitation services — there is still much more to do before we can say that all children are getting off to the right start.

To learn more, visit www.acnj.org.

Grow NJ Kids

Since 2005, early learning stakeholders have been working on developing a comprehensive system to improve the quality of child care in New Jersey. The initial blueprint for a statewide “quality rating and improvement system” (QRIS) was created by the NJ Build Initiative, a coalition of early childhood educators led by Advocates for Children of New Jersey.

Using a rating scale developed by a NJ Build committee, a pilot QRIS was conducted in six centers in Trenton and Camden and four centers in Newark between 2007 and 2011².

For the past two years, the New Jersey Council for Young Children’s Program Improvement Committee, composed of key state agencies and stakeholders, drew on various sources of information to develop the current version of New Jersey’s Quality Rating and Improvement System — *Grow NJ Kids*.

These included:

- Findings from the Build pilots
- Lessons learned from the implementation of state-funded preschool
- Standards from national models for excellence
- Research and best practices from other states with a QRIS, most notably the Massachusetts Tiered QRIS

The existing instrument was designed for use by center-based providers, Head Start Centers and preschools operated by school districts. A similar instrument for family child care providers is still in development and is expected to be completed later this year.

Grow NJ Kids is organized as a progression of levels of program quality. “Level 1” programs



meet basic licensing standards, while “Level 5” programs must demonstrate higher quality practices in classrooms. These outcomes are determined by research-based assessment tools.

To achieve a high rating, programs must meet quality standards in five categories — early learning, family and community engagement, health and safety, workforce qualifications and program management.

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