

CASE STUDY

Virginia's Star Quality Initiative: Careful Planning and Infrastructure Development

Now in its third pilot year, the Virginia Star Quality Initiative is a Quality Rating and Improvement System designed to promote improvements in programs serving young preschoolers and provide consumer information to parents. The Star Quality Initiative was initiated in 2006 under the leadership of Governor Tim Kaine's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives and its Alignment Project. Beginning in 2007, pilots were underway in 15 communities, encompassing over 300 participating programs supported by local community coalitions. All center-based programs may participate in the voluntary system. Currently focused on center-based programs serving two-, three-, and four-year olds, the Star Quality Initiative intends to include infants in center-based programs and incorporate family child care settings in the near future.

Planning and Decision Making: Designing a System that Highlights the Importance of Interactions

The Alignment Project was tasked with developing a research- and market-based approach to evaluate and encourage quality in early learning settings across a wide range of public and private settings. The Star Quality Initiative assesses programs across five star levels on four standards: teacher qualifications, learning setting and instructional practice (assessed using Environmental Rating Scales (ERS)), structural elements such as group size and teacher-child ratio, and teacher-child interactions (assesses using the CLASS[™]). When deciding how to weight the four standards, the committee chose to recognize the paramount consequence of effective teacher-child interactions to child outcomes by making the CLASS[™] the centerpiece of the Virginia Star Quality Initiative. CLASS[™] scores are weighted more heavily than any of the other three standards, accounting for more than one-third of a program's total quality rating score.

Strategic Partnerships can Produce Buy-In, Infrastructure Support, and Additional Resources

The Star Quality Initiative infrastructure is undergirded by a private-public partnership between the Virginia Department of Social Services and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) and a partnership with the state's multi-university-based Training and Technical Assistance Center Network (T/TAC). Partnership with T/TAC brings additional operational capacity and federal IDEA 619 dollars from the Virginia Department of Education's special-education unit, which was eager to integrate inclusive teaching practices into the new QRIS. Additionally, the 15 communities that are piloting the QRIS bring local dollars that support participating programs in their jurisdiction. Finally, the initiative is advised by a Star Quality Advisory Team of diverse stakeholders who provide guidance on implementation issues. Collectively, these partnerships promote a broad and diversified base of funding and "buy in" that is helping expand awareness of the CLASS[™] and its potential to elevate the quality of teacher-child interactions experienced by children on a daily basis.

Infrastructure Development

The 2009-2010 academic year represents the new system's third pilot year. During this time, focused attention has been given to building the infrastructure necessary to launch, grow, and sustain the initiative. The importance of careful attention to building a strong implementation infrastructure is underscored by the fact that two of the people central to putting this infrastructure in place recently departed from their positions. Had Virginia not made the effort to involve multiple organizations at

multiple levels, these departures might have resulted in greater setbacks in the implementation of the state QRIS.

Effective Partnerships Can Allow Each Agency to Use Strengths and Distribute Workload

The Star Quality Initiative is delivered through the public-private partnership between the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the Virginia Department of Social Services. The Virginia Department of Social Services handles operational logistics. It coordinates participation, data entry, assignment of raters to programs, and the recently launched Web site for parents. The VECF is responsible for the system's accountability. It has been anointed the "standard bearer" for guarding the integrity of the QRIS metrics. It oversees the training of trainers and raters (organized by the Virginia Commonwealth University T/TAC) and inter-rater reliability. It assigns star ratings to programs and handles program appeals. The Foundation also assumes responsibility for marketing and promoting the QRIS.

Recognizing the Importance of Investments in Training

Because of the centerpiece status that the CLASS[™] holds in the state's QRIS, intensive training on the CLASS[™] is required of all trainers, raters, and mentors. Individuals in each of these roles are required to have a deep understanding of the CLASS[™]. Raters must be trained to reliability and annually attend drift training. Mentors and trainers are required to attend week-long refresher training annually. Trainings across the state also are being developed for center-based and home-based staff to bolster their understanding of the tool and the contributions it can make to program quality.

Lessons Learned

- Implementation efforts in terms of going to scale advanced more slowly than anticipated. We've come to see our pilot approach as a strength of our process. It permitted QRIS implementation leaders to be more thoughtful and methodical in their planning and implementation. Specifically, it allowed us to learn from our initial implementation efforts and make changes to strengthen the QRIS structure and process. A strong private-public partnership brings a level of accountability to the effort that is politically useful and increases the initiative's viability.
- Understanding and support for the QRIS and CLASS[™] has to be built systematically. We traveled across the state talking about the initiative and responding to questions, and this exhaustive effort of going to others' communities and inviting them into the discussion is paying dividends in terms of buy-in from programs and communities. We also realize that building support in state government and with policy makers, communities, and practitioners needs to be an on-going effort.
- Be flexible about exploring new partners; states should be open to innovative and creative ways to make QRIS and use of the CLASS[™] work.
- It is important to formalize the relationship between and among partners and to carefully articulate the roles and responsibilities of each. This process facilitates shared understanding, increases efficiencies, and assists with sustainability.

References:

Virginia Star Quality Initiative. (n.d.). Development of the Virginia Star Quality Initiative. Retrieved September 16, 2009 from <http://www.smartbeginnings.org/index.asp>

Virginia Star Quality Initiative. (n.d.) History of The Virginia Start Quality Initiative: A Quality Rating System. Retrieved September 16, 2009 from <http://www.smartbeginnings.org/index.asp>

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