

EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

Classroom-Based Model

The early childhood specialist (ECS) is the catalyst for continuous quality improvement for each Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). Specialized knowledge is needed to fulfill this role, as well as time allotted to devote to the process of observing and evaluating the program, and supporting classroom staff to meet the goals set for the program and the children. The ECS must have a graduate degree in early childhood education or child development, five or more years of relevant job experience, and specific professional development. The ECS must have or acquire knowledge of the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Pre-K* (ECSQ-PK), and have formal training in the *Preschool Program Quality Assessment* (PQA), as well as formal training in the selected curriculum and child assessment tool of the grantee.

Some grantees contract with a qualified ECS to carry out the requirements specific to the program and other grantees are fortunate to have the services of an ECS year-round. The grantee must provide one ECS for every 12-15 classrooms, depending on such factors as distance between classrooms, number of classrooms per building, etc. The ratio must be planned so the ECS can fulfill the requirements of the role. One person may not serve as both the lead teacher and the ECS, but the program administrator may be the ECS, if qualified. Use of the term ECS throughout this document refers to a singular ECS or to the multiple members of a grantee's ECS team.

GSRP requires that the program be evaluated to provide answers to a few key questions:

- What is working and what needs to be improved?
- What professional development does staff need to be fully prepared to carry out the program?
- What experiences need to be added or improved in the classroom for the children?
- Does the program get the results it should for the children?
- Are parents engaged as active decision makers for the program and in an exchange of information around goal setting and progress for their children?

The ECS sets the stage for answering these questions by observing classrooms using the PQA Form A as a tool to document evidence of practice in the areas of the classroom environment, daily routine, adult/child interactions, and curriculum planning and assessment. Form B is completed by reviewing children's files/documentation and through interviews that may include administrators, teachers, and parents. The ECS gives relevant feedback on PQA results to the teaching team and offers support for improvement. Additionally, the ECS mentors staff to carry out the curriculum and ongoing child assessment with fidelity. The ECS also designs a meaningful professional development plan for the year, taking into account the individual needs of the staff, as well as the overall training needed.

The ECS assembles and leads a team made up of lead and associate teachers (or representatives of those groups in a large program), the program supervisor, parents, and other relevant personnel. The team periodically analyzes program data including PQA scores and ongoing child assessment results. This team sets and monitors goals for the continuous quality improvement of the program. It meets several times per year to monitor progress and reports program results to the local GSRP Advisory Committee, school or agency board, and the public.

Using the PQA throughout the Year

While both the ECS and classroom staff receive training in the use of the PQA, only the ECS completes the observations, interviews and scoring of the online PQA for MDE. This ensures shared understanding of the elements of a quality program and how documentation is collected to determine accurate scoring. Data reveal program strengths and challenges to use as the basis for program improvement efforts.

To accomplish this, a program evaluation calendar should be designed. Though it may be created by the ECS and/or classroom staff, it should be presented annually to the local Advisory Committee for input. This ensures their support of the process. A recommended evaluation calendar can be found in the resources for this section.

In March/April the ECS completes the observation of each classroom using Form A of the PQA and one Form B for the overall program. Form B is usually completed during a team interview with the program supervisor, members of the teaching teams, and parents. Form A usually takes one full class period per classroom with a small amount of additional time when the team's attention does not have to be on the children to answer questions about items that weren't observed. When possible, taking photos of the classroom environment is an efficient way to provide documentation for later scoring. The ECS should set up a time to meet with the teaching team for feedback on the results within two weeks. At that time, the ECS and team can set classroom level goals for continuous improvement.

Once the school year has started and the teaching team and children have adjusted, the ECS schedules a visit to each classroom to review the results from the full PQA that was completed the previous spring when the program and classroom level goals were chosen. An observation with feedback centered on those goals takes place. Feedback is again given and support offered toward meeting goals and operating a high-quality classroom.

During the year, the ECS should use the PQA at least once more to monitor progress toward meeting the goals. If the results are less than expected in relation to program-wide or individual classroom goals, course changes can be put in place.

In March/April when the next full PQA is completed, it will provide data to measure final progress in meeting the year's designated Program Quality and Parent Involvement goals. Beginning and ending data should be aggregated from the ongoing child assessment tool. This will provide gain scores which will be used to evaluate the success in meeting the designated Child Development goal. At this time, the team that analyzes data and sets goals will choose program-wide goals for the following school year. Information relating to both the status of meeting the current year's goals and the goals set for the following year should be shared with local advisory committee, parents, staff, administration, the school board, and public.

The Role of the Early Childhood Contact

As part of administering GSRP, the Intermediate School District (ISD) will designate an early childhood contact (ECC) who will connect with the program through the ECS to work toward an ISD-wide plan for continuous quality improvement. In some cases that person may serve as the ECS. In others, the ECC will collect data on the curricula, screening and child assessment tools used in the area. The ECC will be able to access online PQA information which can be used to support those serving in the ECS role across the ISD. This information along with PQA results may inform the creation of an area-wide professional development plan.

When Goals are Chosen

When new goals are chosen, the ECS works with the team to ensure each one follows a format for success:

- Identify Goal
- Identify related PQA indicator or Child Outcome objective
- Set strategies/activities to improve teacher knowledge, supply needed materials, make changes in classroom with specific timelines for each activity
- Determine how progress will be measured (Ex. Will move from score of 3 to 4 on the PQA)

The ECS makes sure all materials needed to meet the goals will be in classrooms in time for the start of the new year, and that all training designated is included in the professional development plan for the upcoming year.

The ECS as Program Advocate

Another important role in program quality played by the ECS is that of advocate. As a person knowledgeable of the ECSQ-PK, GSRP requirements, the curriculum, ongoing assessment, and PQA results, the ECS advocates for the program when decisions are being made so all decision makers are aware of best practices for operating a high-quality program. Program data, the ECC, the *Great Start Readiness Program Implementation Manual*, and the ECSQ-PK provide the ECS with resources to best inform administrators and others making decisions.

Home-Based Model

An ECS or adult education specialist must be identified to administer or consult with each Home-Based program. The specialist must have a graduate degree with a background in early childhood education, child development, family life education, adult education, or a related field. He/she must have or acquire knowledge of the ECSQ-PK, interdisciplinary training in working with both young children and adult family members, and have formal training in the selected curriculum and program and child assessment tools of the grantee.

As in the Classroom-Based program option, the specialist is the catalyst for continuous quality improvement for each GSRP grantee. Specialized knowledge is needed to fulfill this role, as well as time to devote to the process of observing and evaluating the program, and supporting staff to meet the goals set for the program and the children. The specialist must use an appropriate tool to measure program quality that includes observations of home visits and cluster activities. A team consisting of the specialist, staff, and parents analyzes those data along with child assessment data to provide feedback to program staff, guide professional development decisions, and develop program improvement goals and activities.