

# EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

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 the role; the ECS must have a graduate degree in early childhood education or child development, five or more years of relevant job experience (such as working with young children in a group setting, program planning and implementation, program evaluation, staff supervision/development and program management), and specific professional development (such as curriculum development, program evaluation, program management and staff development). The ECS must have or acquire knowledge of the *Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Pre-Kindergarten (ECSQ-PK)*, achieve and maintain status as a reliable assessor in the *Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA)*, as well as formal training in the selected curriculum and child assessment and screening tools of the grantee.

Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) may employ/contract with a qualified ECS to carry out the requirements specific to GSRP or may allow some or all subrecipients to contract with a qualified ECS to carry out the requirements specific to the grant. One person may not be employed to fill both a lead teacher position and an early childhood specialist position. The local program administrator may be the ECS, if qualified.

The ISD must ensure one ECS for a maximum of up to 15 teaching teams, depending on such factors as distance between classrooms, number of classrooms per building, etc. In other words, responsibilities for one Full Time Equivalent (FTE) ECS may not consist of more than support to fifteen GSRP teaching teams. When an ECS has less than one FTE, a proportionate number of classrooms must be assigned. The ratio must be planned so the ECS has sufficient time to devote to the responsibilities of the position:

- The ECS is the educational leader for GSRP teaching teams. The ECS has a systematic process to observe and evaluate the program and support classroom staff to meet the goals set for the program and the children.
- The ECS attends meaningful professional development events, such as the Michigan Collaborative Early Childhood Conference and/or the HighScope International Conference.
- The ECS takes the lead on program evaluation and ensures that reports are shared with the ECC and GSRP Parent Advisory Committee(s).
- The ECS has opportunities to reflect on the ECS role and responsibilities with peers more than once per year.

## Data Based Decision-making

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? Have teaching teams received professional development on data availability, accessibility and use?
- 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?
- How 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 utilizing the OnlinePQA.

The ECS observes each unique teaching team using 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. One PQA Form B is completed for each subrecipient and includes assessment of parent involvement and family services, staff qualifications and professional development, and program management. Form B is completed by reviewing children's files and other documentation as well as through interviews that may include administrators, teachers, and parents. The ECS gives timely 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 assembles and leads a data analysis 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 OnlinePQA reports and ongoing child assessment results. This team sets and monitors goals for the continuous quality improvement of the program. It meets multiple times per year to monitor progress and reports program results to the local GSRP Advisory Committee, school or agency board, and the public. See the *Program Evaluation* section of this manual for additional information about program evaluation requirements and responsibilities of the data analysis team.

## Using the PQA throughout the Year

Both the ECS and classroom staff receive training in the use of the PQA, ensuring shared understanding of the elements of a quality program and how documentation is collected to determine accurate scoring. Only an ECS who is a certified PQA reliable assessor completes the observations, interviews and scoring of the OnlinePQA for the MDE. Each ECS participates in the PQA recertification process annually to maintain status as a reliable assessor. Refer to *PQA Documentation Notes for GSRP* in the resources for this section.

## Summer

The ECS designs a relevant and useful professional development (PD) plan each year, taking into account patterns in child data, individual needs of the staff, as well as the overall training needed to address aggregated data. PD is connected to the ECSQ-PK and the curriculum. Participatory child-learning requires intentional

teachers; think of this as the 'plan-do-review' sequence for adults! The best PD sessions are interactive, with time for collaboration and reflection, and with actionable take-aways for the teaching team. The PD calendar should address program orientation, how new staff members are mentored, developmental screener/curriculum/child assessment training, in-service training, monthly training topics, and contract PD days.

Effective approaches to professional development will include establishing professional learning communities (PLCs) among GSRP teaching teams, where the focus is on using data to support the continuum of teaching. In PLCs, teaching teams find support as they hear new ideas, encourage each other and discuss implementation issues on an on-going basis.

Though the PD plan may be created by the ECS, it should be presented annually to the local Advisory Committee for input; this ensures their support of the process. A *Sample Professional Development Plan* and *Recommended Program Evaluation Plan* can be found in the resources for this section. The ECS makes sure all materials needed to meet the goals will be in classrooms in time for the start of the school year, and that all training designated is included in the professional development plan for in-service and the upcoming school year.

## Fall

Shortly after the school year has started and the teaching team and children have adjusted, the ECS schedules a visit with each returning teaching team to review the results from the full PQA that was completed the previous spring when the program- and classroom-level goals were developed. An observation centered on those goals takes place. The ECS sets up a time, within two weeks, to meet in a comfortable place with the teaching team without interruptions to discuss the PQA results and child outcome data. Depending on the needs of the teaching team, feedback may be given on the whole PQA, partial PQA or by item in one/or multiple meetings. Strengths are discussed first and then areas for improvement. The ECS is objective, factual and keeps the child in the heart of all discussions.

A full PQA, Form A is completed to set a baseline for new teaching teams. It is especially important for newly hired teachers to receive multiple visits and feedback early in the school year. This will allow the ECS to positively impact classroom environment and habits of routine and interactions. These early visits set the stage for a strong collaborative relationship among the teaching team and ECS. Together, and with curriculum resources, an improvement plan is generated to support operating a high-quality classroom. An effective plan will:

- Identify the goal;
- Identify related PQA indicator or child outcome objective;
- Set strategies and activities to improve teacher knowledge, supply needed materials, and make changes in classroom(s);
- Include specific timelines and a person responsible for each activity; and
- Determine how progress will be measured (e.g., Will move from score of three (3) to four (4) on the PQA).

## Winter

During the academic year, the ECS should use the PQA at least once more to monitor progress toward meeting the goals. Feedback follows the same process as above, documenting strengths and any areas still needing improvement; the continuous improvement plan may be modified. Between November 15 and January 15, one PQA Form B (Agency Items) is completed per subrecipient, with data due into the OnlinePQA by January 31. Form B is usually completed during a team interview with the program supervisor, members of the teaching teams, and parents. The ECS gives timely feedback on PQA Form B results and ensures that Form B data is used by the data analysis team.

## Spring

Between March 1 and May 15, the ECS completes the final observation of each classroom using Form A of the PQA with data due into the OnlinePQA system on May 31. Each PQA item requires evidence and data except item III-E, Support for non-English speakers, which is completed as appropriate. Form A takes one full class session 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. Taking photos of the classroom environment is an efficient way to provide documentation for later scoring. During the Spring feedback session, the ECS and team set classroom-level goals and develop a plan for continuous improvement that may include professional development and modifications to the classroom environment.

The ECS ensures that data are available by classroom. When the end-of-year PQA is completed in the spring and beginning and ending child assessment data is aggregated, final progress toward the year's designated goals will be measured. This will provide gain scores which will be used to evaluate the success in meeting the designated program- and classroom-level goals. These data reveal program strengths and challenges to use as the basis to prioritize program improvement efforts. At this time, the team that analyzes data and sets goals will choose program-wide goals for the following school year and update or re-create a plan to reach those goals. The plan could include a facilitated, rich staff discussion around a journal article, or contracting with a trainer from the curriculum or child assessment vendor, and will also include supports for implementation such as observation-feedback, peer modeling, coaching, and self-assessment. Curriculum materials should be available, purchased or readily created to implement the strategies.

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, and the school board. Finally, the GSRP Early Childhood Contact (ECC) leads activities to aggregate subrecipient data, evaluating and sharing the success in meeting the designated program-level goals.

## **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.

\*Use of the term ECS throughout this document refers to a singular ECS or to the multiple members of an ECS team.