

# GREAT START TO QUALITY



## Stakeholder Engagement Findings Community Report

### WHY QUALITY CARE?

The evidence is clear – experiences during the first few years of life have a profound and lasting impact. During the period from birth to age three, the developing brain forms more than one million new connections per second. These neural connections form the basic architecture of the brain and the foundation for all future learning and development.<sup>1</sup> Further research demonstrates that the brain development process occurs in the context of – and is guided by – each young child’s environment and experiences. Positive early childhood experiences – especially within high-quality early childhood programming – are linked to short-term benefits such as children’s health, well-being, and kindergarten readiness, as well as lifelong benefits such as higher earnings, improved health, lower participation in social service programs, and lower chances of involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons, it is essential that families are able to ensure that all children can access early childhood experiences that lead to success, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or any other social factor.

1 Interview on Michigan Radio (November 14, 2012). Retrieved April 17, 2013, from <http://stateofopportunity.michiganradio.org/post/five-things-knowabout-early-childhood-brain-development>.

2 Barnett, S., Belfield, C., Montie, J., Nores, M., Scheweihart, L., & Xiang, Z. (2005). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age Forty. National Institute of Early Education Research. Retrieved from [http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/specialsummary\\_rev2011\\_02\\_2.pdf](http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf).

# MAKING QUALITY PROGRAMMING ACCESSIBLE TO FAMILIES

States have used Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to monitor and improve the quality of early childhood programming. In Michigan, Great Start to Quality (GSQ) supports families identifying the best quality licensed early childhood program for their children. In 2016, researchers concluded that GSQ was overall a reliable system, meaning that the rating system measured quality, and ratings aligned with the state's standards for quality; however, it was recommended to revisit which aspects of the rating system were most critical to improve program quality and support children's overall development and learning.

The Office of Great Start (OGS) contracted with School Readiness Consulting (SRC) to facilitate a stakeholder engagement process across Michigan, to listen and learn from families, providers, and community members about their experiences with GSQ and their recommendations for how the system could be strengthened to better serve children and families across Michigan. Through these conversations, the project team highlighted themes that arose based on the experiences of families, providers, and community members. The purpose of these engagements is that OGS will consider themes from what was heard in reimagining GSQ to better serve children and families across the state.

## HOW DID WE LISTEN AND LEARN?

**SRC engaged stakeholders in a variety of ways across Michigan:**

### **21 FOCUS GROUPS**

With families, providers, resource center staff, and licensing specialists<sup>3</sup>

### **10 INTERVIEWS**

With various early childhood professionals and leaders

### **1 SURVEY**

Distributed through Office of Great Start and the Great Start to Quality Advisory Council to individuals and networks statewide, with 3,596 completed survey responses

<sup>3</sup> The focus groups consisted of six family-focus groups, three resource center focus groups, five licensing center focus groups, and seven provider focus groups (including family-child-care/home-based providers/group-home providers/non-GSQ-participating). Participants completed an exit survey at the conclusion of the focus groups to gain a better understanding of demographics of those who participated. While no language translation services were requested, the option of a translator was offered in outreach efforts.

It is important to note that voluntary participation by families, providers, support staff, and community leaders was impacted by COVID-19. Focus groups were meant to take place in person and across the various regions of the state; however, amid the recruitment of focus group participants (April–May 2020), communities were dealing with closures of child care, schools, and the overall economy, as well as the threat of infection, particularly within communities of color, who continue to experience the overlay of racial inequities and higher infection rates. To ensure the safety of Michigan communities and to adhere to social distancing rules and regulations, all stakeholder engagements happened virtually. Regionally trusted community organizations and GSQ Advisory Council members supported recruitment efforts for focus group participants to inform this effort. Families and providers who chose to participate were given gift cards to thank them for sharing their time and perspective with us.

## WHAT DID WE HEAR?

**Across all forms of engagement, four major themes emerged:**

### EQUITY

**We heard** that stakeholders emphasize the importance of a QRIS intentionally designed and implemented to be inclusive of the diversity of Michigan’s children and families.

Stakeholders, especially families, value well-informed providers, inclusive learning environments, and a system that reflects and takes into account the diversity of children and families served. Providers value flexibility in offering learning experiences that are reflective and respectful of the culture of families and children. All stakeholders value a culturally diverse and responsive workforce to support children’s learning and development.<sup>4</sup> However, stakeholders noted the importance of building a pipeline of diverse professionals entering the field and creating more opportunities to diversify the GSQ leadership.



### ACCESS AND UTILIZATION

Highly effective QRIS are designed to support participation across diverse program settings staffed by providers working to deliver learning experiences families need and value. Too often, systems are designed to support center-based programs while smaller community-based programs struggle to meet expectations and navigate entry points.

**We heard** that stakeholders value a system that includes pathways and guidelines that facilitate participation across all early childhood education settings.

<sup>4</sup> Across all stakeholder types, the majority of survey participants responded that cultural competence and inclusive practices are important for identifying the level of quality of a program.

All stakeholders value efforts to “level the playing field” by creating pathways within GSQ that reflect and support providers in all settings, as many providers and other stakeholders shared that they feel GSQ is more focused on center-based than home-based programs.

Home-based providers feel that curriculum requirements are a barrier to participation. Providers need more options to fit the realities of home-based care and wish GSQ would allow more flexibility for implementing curricula that meet the needs of infants and toddlers, diverse learners, and mixed-age groups. Providers report feeling coerced by the current system to implement required curricula. Providers and other stakeholders also state that current curriculum options are written for center-based providers and that the cost of approved packaged curricula, accompanying child assessments, and required training are too costly for home providers.<sup>5</sup> Family child care and home-based providers value benchmarks and assessments that allow them to “see themselves in the system.” For many providers, including home-based-providers, on-site assessment is a major deterrent to seeking higher star levels.

## ALIGNMENT AND COMMUNICATION

When expectations, standards, and regulations are aligned “on the back end” of a QRIS, providers are better able to better navigate multiple systems of oversight and accountability, and ultimately provide a more seamless, high-quality early childhood experience for children and families. In Michigan, **we heard** stakeholders note the importance of improving cross-agency communication and building more consistency and alignment in expectations and terminology across those who are monitoring and supporting providers. Stakeholders note better alignment and communication could go a long way to reduce duplication of effort and support improved program quality.

Providers value hearing consistent terminology from support and monitoring staff and note that having a common set of terms and references could help them navigate separate systems and reduce current levels of confusion. Providers and other stakeholders value ongoing communication between licensing and resource center staff as a way to ensure more consistency in their work with programs and would welcome more established channels for coordinating support.

## AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Effective outreach and communication increase family understanding and demand while expanding provider participation. Past studies have found, however, that broad awareness or understanding of QRIS is limited and, for parents and providers who have been engaged, the process is often confusing and overwhelming. **We heard** stakeholders report that awareness of GSQ among families and providers is uneven. Families and providers alike often lack the understanding of what GSQ is and how to use it.

Families generally have positive experiences and feedback about GSQ as it relates to their child’s care and the staff they encounter; however, some families have limited knowledge of the star rating system and how it works, while others place a higher value on other criteria for selecting a program.

<sup>5</sup> Only 25% of FCC staff survey participants responded that an approved curriculum is very important for quality, compared to 49% of Child Care Provider staff. Based on survey responses, the top three curricula concerns for FCC staff were: cost, applicable to home-based setting, and address multiple age groups. For Child Care Provider staff the top three were: address all learning domains, available training, applicable in multiple settings.



# WHAT MIGHT BE NEXT?

Stakeholders shared insights and considerations for finalizing and rolling out the revised system, as well as some considerations for what it will take to fully implement components of the revised GSQ.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Communication and engagement during revision and rollout

*Create an iterative rollout process that provides opportunities to authentically engage providers and families and keep them informed through ongoing outreach and communication*

Stakeholders encouraged the creation of a rollout process that includes targeted communication and engagement strategies that allow providers, families, licensing and resource center staff, and others to be informed and provide input. Stakeholders stressed the importance of maintaining platforms for communication and engagement, developing messages that clearly describe the quality improvement process and make ratings more transparent to families. Taking an iterative approach to rollout that facilitates understanding and community feedback will reduce confusion, ensure broad-based buy-in and participation in the new system, and increase a sense of ownership.



“I can’t stress enough two things. One, communication, and two, collaboration. Yeah, I think those are things that we have a lot of room for growth in and need to think outside the traditional boxes of what communication looks like and collaboration looks like.”

– STAKEHOLDER

“You have to pay attention to the demand side, and engage families in the process, in the development, and get their reaction. They are a huge driver, and if we don’t take an opportunity to bring them along, then we won’t increase the number of programs that are participating. Their families are the reason that they’re there.”

– STAKEHOLDER

## Transition process that ensures providers are supported and informed

*Provide guidance and institute a phased-in process to support providers in transitioning to the new system.*

While stakeholders overwhelmingly approved of the decision to move to a quality improvement approach, they recognized that providers and those who support them will need careful guidance to implement the new system. Stakeholders recommended the use of a phased-in approach to implementation that would both allow for OGS to assess and monitor issues and challenges and make midcourse corrections, and also allow more time for providers and support staff to successfully make the shift. Of high importance now is the need to create transition procedures and support structures to ensure shifting to the new system does not cause backward movement overall and in particular in relationship to new COVID-related licensing requirements.

“I do think it’s going to take guidance. This whole shift in transition is going to take a lot of careful planning, but also careful phasing iteration and transparency as well as pausing in between phases and reflecting, ‘Okay, what tweaks do we need to make?’ That’s been one of the biggest and loudest lessons I have pulled from other states who have gone through this process.”

– STAKEHOLDER



## Family voices and choices

*Ensure family feedback and insights on program quality and priorities for their children are integrated into the implementation and program support efforts.*

Families are very clear about how program quality is defined and have strong opinions about what they want their children to learn and what they look for when selecting programs for their children. Considering family priorities will be important as the revised GSQ is rolled out and implemented.

“We want our children to be able to express themselves, express their feelings and make sound decisions and know their worth. I think that’s beautiful -- the foundations and fundamentals of childcare and social-emotional development.”

– PARENT

## Clarity and accessibility of revised documents

*Provide clear definitions of terms and explanations of the scope and intent of domains and indicators.*

In reviewing proposed revisions, including the new set of domains, stakeholders expressed some confusion with regard to some terminology and called for clear and concise definition of terms and statements of intent or expectations reflected in the indicators.

“Are they going to give us specifics? Because otherwise, if we don’t get specifics, then we’re left in the dark. I mean, that’s how I feel. And then we’re grabbing at straws and I’m like, ‘Oh, that’s not the right thing. You should have this.’ And that causes too much confusion. That would not go well.”

– HOME-BASED PROVIDER

## Tools and resources including additional training and technical assistance needed to meet benchmarks of quality

*Consider what will be needed to adequately implement new quality benchmarks in practice.*

Stakeholders recognized that in order to implement new expectations and meet quality benchmarks, providers may need additional training and technical assistance in certain topic areas, programs may need additional resources and coaching supports, and resource center staff may need to adjust time commitments and responsibilities to meet the need for additional and longer-term consultation and onsite support.

“I know we have the structure in place, I’m not quite sure the elements within that structure are really what is needed. So, taking a closer look at what the quality improvement consultants [QIC] [can do], and the amount of time [they have] ..., I know the one in southeast Michigan reduced the amount of time the QIC [can] stay. And I do think that was a state mandate. So now they only work with them for three months, nobody can change their quality in three months.”

– STAKEHOLDER





## Assessment tools and procedures that align with a quality improvement approach

*Ensure assessment strategies address some of the barriers encountered with the current system and implement new approaches that support continuous quality improvement.*

When asked to comment on the transition from a rating to a quality improvement approach, a number of stakeholders reflected on the current validation process and noted a number of challenges or barriers – including aligning the assessment tool to program practices and curriculum – that could potentially be eliminated as GSQ moves to a new process.

“I think that instructional quality is not as robust an element, again, because I know we couldn’t use both tools when we designed [GSQ]. The state couldn’t afford to have the PQA [Program Quality Assessment] and CLASS [Classroom Assessment Scoring System]. And so I think that it’s the other missing element.”

– STAKEHOLDER

“I guess I’ve kind of had issues in the past regarding curriculum with Great Start to Quality because it appears that the tool that Great Start to Quality uses is High Scope. Not everyone uses High Scope. And it doesn’t appear to be an even playing field if you choose to use another curriculum that you may not score as high in the area with the points, if you are not getting assessed with another curriculum.”

– LICENSING STAFF