



QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF QRIS
STANDARDS WITHIN EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Quality education lays the foundation for a good society. Having a strong educational foundation helps a child grow and achieve at above average levels in their educational and personal careers (Bustamante, 2022). Children who receive a strong early childhood education are less likely to be placed in special education, more likely to graduate high school and receive higher salaries (Bustamante, 2022). By investing more money into setting children up for success now, we can spend less money down the road. Economic research shows that return on investment for early childhood education ranges between \$4- \$13 for every \$1 spent (Bustamante, 2022). Children who come from low income families and have access to quality education are more likely to graduate college and have bigger salaries at age 26 (Bustamante, 2022). Not just providing early childhood education, but high quality education is even more important. The following policy brief looks at the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), a general term used to describe a system that helps parents understand quality of childcare programs, and the benefits that come from federalizing this program.



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PROBLEM DEFINITION

Nearly every industrialized country recognizes the benefits of early childhood programs and offers high quality programs, except for the United States (Mongeau, 2016). Not only is there a lack of quality early childhood programs, but the programs that are considered 'high quality' come with large price tags. On average, early childhood programs can account for 30% of the median family income, while only 10% of programs are considered to be high quality (Manager, 2017). Costs for early childhood education programs can fall between, \$890 - \$1300. To help ease the burden of early childhood care costs the government issues childcare subsidies. Eighty percent of children who are eligible to receive federal funding do not because of a lack of federal funding (First Five Years Fund, 2022). Right now, parents are left to their own devices and judgment to assess if a program is high quality, as there is no strict set of rules.

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PROBLEM DEFINITION

There is also a huge lack of equity in who has access to early childhood programs. Dobbins states “40% of Hispanic and 36% white children were enrolled in center-based classrooms rated as “high,” only 25% of African American children were in classrooms with the same rating” (2016). In addition to this, it has been shown children of color reap the benefits of quality early education. Focusing specifically on low-income African American children, the long-term benefits included: higher test scores, increased graduation rates, and decreased rates of incarceration or illegal drug use (Dobbins, 2016). The Head Start, a Federal program that provides early childhood education to children in low-income families, alleviates some of these inequities, but because it varies from program to program we need to consider other alternatives (Morris, 2018). The primary difference being variation in programs in high income counties versus low income counties, and the levels of preparedness for kindergarten and grade school (Morris, 2018).

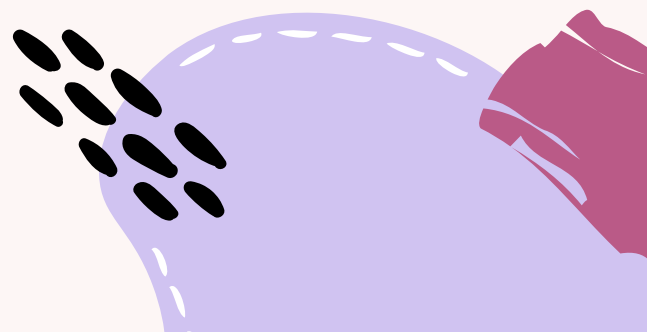
ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

It can be established that there are two prominent reasons why the addressed issue requires government intervention: education is a socially important good and implementing high-quality early education would produce positive externalities.

As stated previously, education is a socially important good, as it is something that benefits the general public. While the U.S government provides universal K-12 education, it does not for early childhood education or pre-k programs. However, implementing quality early childhood education and pre-k programs would aid the general education system. Providing quality, equitable education would facilitate the well-being of children, their families and respective communities.

In addition, implementing high-quality early education would produce positive externalities.

As stated within the abstract and problem definition section of the research, early education can generate school preparedness, higher-paying jobs and a reduction in incarceration rates and illicit drug use.



POLICY CONTEXT

The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a systematic approach dedicated to assessing, improving and communicating quality within early childhood education. The system was first developed in the 1990s. When the program was first introduced, providers who were high quality received higher subsidy reimbursement rates, however few providers were able to achieve accreditation. Contemporarily, QRIS is not universally implemented, as only half the states in the U.S have issued statewide QRIS (*QRIS Resource Guide, 2022*) However the majority of the remaining states have implemented some QRIS measures and the number of states that have adopted QRIS has grown rapidly within the last 15 years (Manager, 2017) QRIS varies state to state but universally addresses things such as teacher licensing, health and safety, learning environments and family engagement, all of which contribute to improving quality within early childhood education centers.

POLICY CONTEXT

The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA) is a relevant organization committed to supporting the implementation of quality within early childhood education. More specifically, the NCECQA advocates for strong health and safety standards, quality assurance systems through the use of technology and state quality initiatives, including QRIS (*National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2022*)

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a federal and state partnership program. The CCDF is the primary federal funding source devoted to assisting low-income families finance child-care and improving quality with early childhood education (*What is the Child Care and Development Fund, 2016*)



POLICY ALTERNATIVES

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From the previous sections, it becomes apparent quickly that the addressed issue requires government intervention. Furthermore, there are several measures that federal and state governments can enact in order to increase quality and improve equity within early childhood education.

1. INCREASE FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

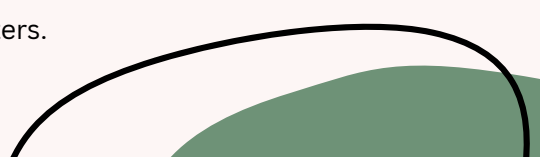
First, it should be recognized that almost 85% of QRIS programs offer some form of financial incentive to centers that implement QRIS standards (Manager, 2017) These financial incentives can appear in the form of quality awards, improvement grants, staff scholarships and more (Manager, 2017) In order to increase the number of centers who adopt QRIS standards, it is necessary that state governments increase these incentives via the CCDF. This would encourage centers, particularly those require more resources, to implement QRIS.

2. TEACHER CERTIFICATION AND EDUCATION

A second and following approach would be for centers to devote more attention to teacher certification and education. As of 2022, only 36 out of 63 state-funded pre-k initiatives had a teacher degree of a BA or higher. In addition, only 19 out of 63 QRIS had an assistant teacher degree (Friedman-Krauss, 2022) Devoting more attention to hiring higher quality teachers, along with providing resources to improve the education of existing teachers would allow centers to increase their ratings. In effect, centers that improve their rating may receive more financial support, providing them with resources to improve the overall quality of their centers. This alternative works in correspondence with the NCECQA's support of enhancement of standards.

3. FEDERALIZE QRIS

Finally, the last but perhaps most effective method is for the NCECQA to federalize QRIS standards. Currently, it has been noted that while 49 states and the District of Columbia may have either statewide or regional QRIS, participation rates of centers in implementing their respective system are low. QRIS reports have shown that in 17 states, less than 50% of child care centers participate (Manager, 2017) Among family childcare providers, participation is less than 50 percent in 23 systems (Manager, 2017) Federalizing QRIS would require all childcare providers and centers to adopt their respective QRIS system in addition to preexisting child care licensing regulations. This alternative would increase participation rates, improving the overall quality of early childhood education centers.



POLICY

RECOMENDATION

The following research proposed three policy alternatives; increasing financial incentives, devoting more attention to teacher education and federalizing QRIS. It is recognized that increasing financial incentives would increase participation. It would also allow underfunded centers greater access to financial resources that could be used to improve the quality of their centers. Devoting more attention to teacher education would duly increase participation rates. However, it can be argued that the most effective way to ensure participation is for the NCECQA to federalize QRIS standards. This measure would ensure that all centers provide high quality education to all eligible participants, regardless of demographic and income-level. Federalizing QRIS standards would address the two most prominent issues raised within this discussion; improving quality and ensuring equity within early childhood education.



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