



Systems for Early Childhood

The Lead Teacher, the Program, the State: Whose Interest is Primary?

The Lead Teacher's View

Sharon is 35 and the mother of three children ages 11, 8 and 5. She has taught for more than 15 years in an early learning program for children birth to 5. Although she entered college after high school, she did not complete her degree. Her mother became ill and she quit school to care for her mother and began working in the early childhood program.

Now, 15 years later, the state college will not accept the credits she earned earlier (primarily in basic courses such as English, math and science). Sharon is told she must begin her degree from the beginning, requiring over 120 credit hours. The early learning program where she works now requires that she get her degree to keep her lead teacher status, that she participate in ongoing professional development to meet QRIS standards, and that she learn a new formative assessment system.

The college coursework is not reinforcing the skills she needs right now to plan individualized instruction based on her student's assessment results or support those students whose home language is different than her own. Dealing with her own children and their activities, full-time work and the demands of college, Sharon is trying to decide what's most important. She has not missed any time at work, but is often tired. She is using every break in the day to prepare for night courses. She has less planning time than ever before: the program is using planning time to provide additional information on the new formative assessment. The program does not have private space for teachers to plan or take breaks. Sharon expects at this rate she won't finish college for another six years. She wonders if she can keep up this pace.

The Program View

The program began providing childcare in 1980 with a strong focus on health and safety. Never having received a licensing violation, the program has now served multiple generations of children in the community. The program has 9 classrooms: three infant toddler, five preschool and one afterschool summer classroom for children up to 8. The program had class ratios of 1:15 for children over two. However, to participate in QRIS the ratios are now 1:10. The location in the community is good, with both bus access and easy on and off access to the nearby highway.

The program serves many low income, high needs children supported in part by the state subsidy. About 1/3 of children are from families who pay the full price or a sliding scale established by the program. While financially stable, the program works with very thin margins and has no reserves.

When QRIS was introduced six years ago, the program was an early adopter but found it faced multiple structural barriers including:

- Resources (money and human capital) to change the benefit structure for teachers;
- Adequate planning time for teachers while maintaining low student child ratios;
- Need for introduction and training on the use of formative assessment;
- Lack of a health care consultant;
- Need for increased engagement and access to community resources to support the needs of children and families;
- Multiple new requirements for staff professional development; and
- Lack of an administrative structure to both manage the process and coach individual teachers to meet the requirements.

Many of the staff have been with the program over 10 years and some for more than 20 years. Recognizing the changes happening in the field of early learning that began in 2007, the director just completed her bachelor's degree in 2015. The director has a number of worries about her current situation including the negative perceptions of families if the program doesn't achieve the highest levels in the state QRIS system. She also fears competition from public schools who don't participate in QRIS as they can offer services to families at no cost for six hours and already have teachers with bachelor degrees in their preschool classrooms. She also worries about her program's ability to financially support the required shifts, and about her ability to sustain the morale and energy of staff who are facing multiple pressures.

The State View

The federal government is requiring that all children funded under the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) should be in high quality programs. The state implemented five years ago a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) which defines high quality early learning programs. The program standards require that at the top two levels all lead teachers serving children birth to 5 must have a bachelor's degree in addition to specialized knowledge and competencies in early learning and development.

The state has a scholarship fund for educators who have worked at least one year in an early childhood program. Over the last three years, the scholarship has supported 18 credits a year per applicant or two courses per semester. The fund has not been able to support students to attend school in the summer due to demand in winter and spring.

Programs will not receive the highest ratings until all classrooms meet this requirement. Two years ago, programs who met the higher levels began to receive additional compensation for the children they serve. This tiered reimbursement was the first rate increase in six years for childcare programs serving low income children.

All licensed programs are required to participate in QRIS and, at the lower levels, receive access to regional professional development targeted at training individual teachers.

The National View

A recent national report on "Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation" states that states should transition to a minimum requirement of a bachelor's degree with specialized knowledge and competencies for all "lead" educators working with children birth to 8.