Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge
Program Quality Measure Development Project Overview

Overview and Intent of the Measure

North Carolina is leading a consortium to develop a new program quality measure for use in a Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS). The consortium, led by faculty from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, working with collaborators in Delaware, Kentucky, and Illinois, is developing this new measure to allow for a broader understanding of quality in early care and education programs than is captured with measures currently in use. Although the conceptualization of items and measurement process has a foundation in children's experiences, both classroom and program practices known to promote optimal development and learning will be the focus of the measure; current measurement approaches often emphasize the classroom as the unit of analysis with little attention to the programmatic systems that underlie classroom performance.

The new measure is grounded in Early Learning and Development Standards as well as current child development theory and research, leading to a focus on practices that support important developmental outcomes valued across multiple States. It includes administrative/program level items; items across infant, toddler, preschool age classrooms; and will be relevant for the broad range of programs included in TQRISs, including centers, family child care homes, public school programs, religious-affiliated programs, and Head Start. The measure is designed to take into consideration multiple sources of evidence from programs, teachers, and classrooms, through multiple methods of data collection including program self-assessment/document review, interviews, and observations and it will allow for continuous improvement over time. Programs will submit materials for document review prior to a verification and observation visit. The program visit will include observations in classrooms across the age ranges within each program, interviews with directors and teachers, and additional document review. The assessment will result in a program level portrait showing program strengths and areas for improvement.

Alignment with Implementation Science

Implementation science provides a framework for conceptualizing the foundational processes necessary to support high quality practice in early care and education programs. Using the program as the primary unit of analysis, the new measure will embed competency, organizational, and leadership drivers as components of the infrastructure supporting practice and as mechanisms to promote effective practice over time (Metz, Halle, Bartley, & Blasberg, 2013). The competency drivers focus on developing and sustaining necessary skills within the organization, the organization drivers focus on systems that will sustain an effective environment, and leadership drivers focus on facilitation and problem solving within the organization (Metz, et al., 2013). These drivers are interconnected and work together to frame the program perspective of the measure.

Guiding Principles

Overarching **Guiding Principles** provide a comprehensive definition of quality to guide the organization of the measure. These guiding principles have emerged from the literature and a review of best practice and evidence-based practices to promote positive outcomes for young children and their families.

Guiding Principle 1: The promotion of positive child, family, and staff well-being guides the design, implementation, and evaluation of the overall program and is evident in the organizational climate.

Guiding Principle 2: Children in the program spend their time in indoor and outdoor environments that support play-based learning and promote belonging.

Guiding Principle 3: Children engage in interesting, meaningful, and individually and culturally appropriate learning opportunities across curriculum areas and classroom contexts/settings.

Guiding Principle 4: Children experience positive, supportive, motivating, and meaningful interactions with teachers and their peers. These interactions are viewed and implemented as central processes for children's learning.

Guiding Principle 5: Children experience multiple benefits of having family members involved in meaningful ways in their learning opportunities.

Overview of Key Practice Areas and Practice Profiles

Seven key practice areas have been identified that include the activities, elements, skills, materials, and dispositions at both the administrative and classroom level that create positive and supportive contexts for children, families, and practitioners. Grounded in implementation science, practice profiles reflect the critical components for a particular construct (e.g., child care quality) and then provide a rationale followed by a matrix outlining the continuum of practice relative to the critical component. Below you will find the critical components and brief rationales for each of the practice areas identified for this initiative. The matrices are still under development.

The practice areas are intentionally broad to include various settings and ages, and to allow programs to demonstrate individual examples and strategies based on program priorities. Additional sub-levels of indicators are currently in development; these will help programs and assessors evaluate each practice level.

Administrative Level
Key Practice Area 1: Organizational Climate and Program Operations
Key Practice Area 2: Family & Community Partnerships
Key Practice Area 3: Support for Children's Learning and Development

Classroom Level
Key Practice Area 4: Planning and Assessment
Key Practice Area 5: Daily Interactions & Routines
Key Practice Area 6: Learning Opportunities
Key Practice Area 7: Materials and Space

Key Practice Area 1: Organizational Climate and Operations (Administration)
The essential tenets of a supportive organizational climate include creating a sense of community and purpose; communicating program operations in clear and positive ways; engaging families, staff and community partners to improve services and provide culturally competent practices; as well as providing and maximizing resources to support the program's overall goals. Foundational to high quality programming is a system of hiring, supporting, and providing professional development for early childhood staff employed in the program. In day-to-day practice, program staff are better able to meet

the needs of children and families when they themselves feel encouraged and inspired. In order to create a climate where staff can be and do their best, administration and leaders need to create a climate and culture that holds high standards and supports staff in meeting those standards. In addition, early care and education programs that create and sustain relationships with community and state partners build internal capacity to meet the diverse needs of children and families as well as strengthen programmatic infrastructure for continuous quality improvement. When programs connect with community-based programs, such as libraries, parks, and local businesses, it enhances the learning opportunities for children, families, and staff.

Additionally, programs for young children in the US are becoming increasingly diverse. As this occurs, the reflection of the individual cultures of children within program operations, as well as the importance of opportunities to gain knowledge and understanding of other cultural groups grows in significance. Statements from professional organizations and early childhood authors highlight the importance of providing opportunities for individuals responsible for educating young children to acquire sensitivity to their own perspectives and influences related to culture. In addition, the importance of including multiple and varying perspectives in the construction of practices for children's development and learning is recognized. Administrators and teachers within programs share the responsibility for increasing skills, knowledge and awareness of how to provide culturally responsive and competent practices in the education of young children.

Key Practice Area 2: Family and Community Partnerships (Administration)

Children benefit from early care and education programs that develop close and productive relationships with families. Family partnerships are of critical importance to children's social and academic success (Maccoby, 2000). As the primary influence on children's development, families are crucial stakeholders in their children's early education experiences, and research indicates that positive relationships between families and early childhood educators are associated with positive outcomes for children, families, and educators (Forry et al., 2012; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006). High quality early care and education programs engage in relationships with each individual family. These relationships involve reciprocal exchange of information about the child; including the family's cultural, ethnic, and social traditions; and the family's own goals. Additionally, early care and education programs interface with a variety of agencies representing health, mental health, education, and social welfare to ensure that children and families have access to needed services. Community partnerships assist programs in providing the most enriching experience possible for the children and families served.

Key Practice Area 3: Daily Program Guidance to Support Children's Development and Learning (Administration)

In high quality early care and education programs, administrators implement systems and supports to ensure that all enrolled children have daily access to enriching experiences that enhance their development and learning. Foundational to high quality programming is a system for ongoing daily guidance, support, and supervision of early childhood staff employed in the program. Program administration creates and implements a framework for gathering and using information to ensure effective operations at the classroom and program level. This includes supporting teachers in collecting child assessment information that can be useful in planning learning opportunities. This planning process sets the stage for high quality environments and is necessary in order to maximize the ongoing formal and informal learning opportunities offered to children. To support child development and learning, program administration develops and implements policies related to curriculum and

assessment. Administration also ensures that teaching staff are prepared to implement these practices in intended ways.

Key Practice Area 4: Planning and Assessment (Classroom/Provider)

Intentional planning and assessment help staff to meet children's developmental and learning needs and provide enriching and engaging experiences. Intentional planning for the daily schedule, learning activities, and environment is an important element of high quality practice in early care and education. Assessment includes using multiple methods (both formal and informal) to collect information on children's development and learning. This information is used to inform daily practice and planned learning opportunities as well as identify needs for additional resources and supports (Akers et al., 2014; Jarrett et al., 2006). Intentional planning utilizes information from child observation and formal assessment tools, early learning standards, and curricular goals. Planning incorporates collaborations with families to weave in elements of and address goals related to children's cultural backgrounds and family experiences. Daily and long term planning occurs at the individual child and classroom level. Planning is an iterative process – it reflects the current abilities and interests of the children, goals of their families, and is designed to support emerging skills.

Key Practice Area 5: Daily Interactions and Routines (Classroom/Provider)

Stimulating and responsive interactions and relationships with adults are considered central processes for children's learning (La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Warm and nurturing day-to-day interactions that occur within the learning community serve as the foundation for high quality experiences for young children in group care. Daily routines, such as eating, sleeping, and transitions, are an important part of children's time in care and often create the context for growth-producing interactions among children and their teachers. Relationships and interactions among peers in the group care setting provide opportunities for children to build their social development skills. Daily interactions and routines are often enhanced when children are given adequate time to move through their daily activities (Hyson, 2008).

Key Practice Area 6: Learning Opportunities (Classroom/Provider)

Intentional and engaging learning opportunities provide the framework for children's learning and development. Providing children with activities that span the domains of learning fosters foundational developmental and school readiness skills. Learning opportunities that occur across a variety of group sizes and learning formats (hands-on child exploration, adult guided, peer scaffolding) allow children to develop new skills and transfer skills to new contexts. High quality early care and education programs use play as a primary learning context for children, as sustained high-level play promotes children's learning and development (e.g., language, self-regulation, symbolic thinking, memory). Learning opportunities and curriculum are most meaningful when they are connected to the needs and interests of children and modified for individual children.

Key Practice Area 7: Space and Materials

The arrangement and design of space and materials in the early childhood environment, both indoors and outdoors, set the stage for children's play, learning, comfort and belonging. Careful design of space and selection of materials promote children's exploration and engagement across domains of development. Planful selection of materials support and extend learning experiences. Responsive

modifications to the arrangement of space and organization of materials help ensure that children's individual needs and interests are met. The environment reflects children's individuality based on culture, family background, community context, ability levels, and interests demonstrating intentional teacher decision making and planning.

References

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