

## PROJECT BRIEF

### California Child Care Research Partnership: Are You In? Family Child Care Providers' Experiences in Quality Improvement Initiatives<sup>1</sup>

#### Project Team:

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#### Project Description.

As large numbers of children regularly attend child care settings, many states have struggled to provide enough high quality spaces to meet children's needs. Recent policy investments at the state and federal levels have focused on Quality Improvement (QI) initiatives to improve the quality of care available to children and families. One such effort is the California Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a program funded by a competitive federal grant (2011 to 2016). Our research partnership examined when and how child care providers engaged in QI – as related to RTT-ELC.

Our research focused on licensed family child care (FCC) for two reasons. First, although many of the most vulnerable children can be found in FCC, most research has focused on center-based child care settings. Second, FCC homes are a particularly flexible segment of the workforce but it is a sector that is shrinking across many states, including California. If system-building efforts like the California RTT-ELC and new statewide efforts to continue and extend QRIS do not take into account the unique characteristics of FCC homes, FCC providers may opt out of systems created for them or stop operating.

Our research examined two types of QI. Some initiatives provide coaching, technical assistance and professional development to improve quality, called Quality Improvement Systems (QIS). Others also include public ratings to help parents identify high quality child care, called Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). California's QRIS

context is unique in the nation because it began as county-based and could differ across counties. One goal of the California RTT-ELC was to maintain the county-level capacity to adapt to locally-specific needs while supporting increased consistency across counties in the system.

This partnership examined quality improvement activities among FCC providers across three different counties implementing QRIS in the context of RTT-ELC. Through a combination of survey and in-depth qualitative methods, the project examined providers' experiences in two regions operating with different QRIS. In addition, follow-up visits to FCC providers two years after an initial baseline visit documented changes over time during RTT-ELC implementation.

#### Research Questions.

1. What are the similarities and differences among providers who are "in" and "not in" QRIS in working conditions, beliefs, and daily routines?
2. How do FCC providers' needs and barriers align with the QI available?
3. How do knowledge of QRIS and desire to participate/remain in the child care workforce change over time as the RTT-ELC is being implemented?

#### Sample.

Three groups of providers were targeted for sampling: "in" RTT-ELC QRIS, "in" QIS, and "not in" coach-directed QI. A regional survey mailed to all or subsets of providers in targeted service areas provided a "snapshot" of needs and barriers faced by FCC

<sup>1</sup>This project was funded under the title: Are You In? A Systems-Level Mixed-Method Analysis of the Effects of Quality Improvement Initiatives on Participating and Non-Participating Providers



providers in targeted regions followed by in-depth Case Studies. During Year 1, 54 Case Studies were completed in Los Angeles County (QRIS = 20; QIS = 18; Not In = 16) across the three groups. During Year 2, 30 additional providers from Sacramento County were interviewed from the “in” QRIS and “not in” groups<sup>2</sup>.

### **Methods.**

Our mixed-method approach included a variety of methods.

- Brief Regional Surveys provided information about needs, barriers, and satisfaction and served as a recruitment tool for the Case Studies.
- Case studies included:
  - A researcher visiting the FCC when children were present, documented in a Field Note.
  - Providers taking photos of activities.
  - Providers completing a survey with questions about themselves, their economic situation, attitudes and beliefs, and their FCC.
  - A conversational interview (the adapted Ecocultural Family Interview) about daily life, beliefs and working conditions, how the provider obtains information about operating a FCC, and a discussion of the photos taken.
- Focus groups with selected providers who are not in coach-led QI activities explored providers’ awareness of and views about local QRIS.
- Interviews with QRIS Administrators provided the context of the QI available in each county.

### **Implications for policy/practice**

One key challenge facing the California RTT-ELC has been engaging FCC providers in the voluntary QRIS. Results point to great diversity among FCC providers in their background, training and needs, and suggest that programs may need to offer flexible “menus” of options and ensure that the QI opportunities they provide are appropriate for providers in different phases of their career, home settings, mixed age groups, and other features commonly found in FCC. The most consistent topics of concern were: finding a steady supply of activities that engaged children across a range of ages, finding opportunities for professional learning appropriate to their level of experience (e.g., newly licensed, mid-career, “seasoned”), and maintaining predictability and stability in enrollment and assistance.

### **Implications for research**

Preliminary analyses suggest that providers varied in how much they engaged in professional development and quality improvement, but that most FCC providers were taking active steps to seek out information to improve or maintain the quality of their FCC. However, providers also varied in how they organize daily routines that offer children opportunities for learning and development and that are sustainable and fit with their local ecology. The interview protocol we developed proved an effective tool for learning about engaging in QRIS as related to the many interrelated facets of daily life in FCC.

### **For more information, including an archive of presentations and publications, visit:**

<http://www.areyouinpartnership.com/>

#### *Publications:*

California Child Care Research Partnership Team.  
(2016). Who Cares? Characteristics of Licensed Family Child Care Providers. Fact Sheet Number 1. Los Angeles, CA: California State University, Northridge.

California Child Care Research Partnership Team.  
(2016). Licensed Family Child Care Providers and Quality Improvement: Interests and Barriers. Fact Sheet Number 2. Los Angeles, CA: California State University, Northridge.

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<sup>2</sup> First 5 California has funded a second group of Case Studies to be completed in El Dorado County during 2015.