

## QRIS Pilot & Professional Learning Community

In the 2012-13 QRIS pilot, centers conducted a self-study using *professional learning community* tools to map the program's strengths and areas for growth in a center-selected QRIS standard. Participating centers receive a stipend for quality improvement planning using a professional learning community model.

### What is a Professional Learning Community?

School culture is formed by the values, goals, and commitments made by individuals within a school. In an effective school community, the culture is one of shared values and goals, interdependency, and mutual understanding about the school's mission.

Individuals committed to and involved in continuous improvement, working in a learning community, value collective inquiry, collaboration and shared responsibility for student learning.

Sustainable improvement is not a top-down process. Sustainable improvement requires staff to be committed to and involved in continuous improvement and take collective responsibility. Individual goals and professional development activities are aligned with school goals and priorities for professional development. Sustainable improvement is a result of staff at all levels of the organization sharing accountability and working in a transparent, supportive setting that promotes *their* improvement. Teacher improvement leads to gains in student achievement and social-emotional development.

While the majority of research on PLCs was conducted in K-12 education settings, early childhood settings can also benefit from the lessons learned about how effective PLCs drive school improvement.

This research provides several important lessons:

**Lesson 1: A PLC is a way of operating.** It's not a "thing" that you do at a staff meeting, but rather, a way of functioning. When staff work and learn within professional learning communities, continuous improvement becomes an embedded value. The success of a PLC is not dependent on any one person. It requires the director and staff to embrace the value and take on new roles.

**Lesson 2: Change requires learning and learning motivates change.** In centers that operate as PLC's, the focus on teacher learning is a program value: staff are continuously engaged with one another in inquiry about their effectiveness and teachers are provided the support and development they need for their own learning to improve their classroom practice. Thus, the most logical and effective way to begin developing a professional learning community is to bring the professionals together to learn. Without the critical link between school

#### Fundamental Assumptions of Professional Learning Communities:

- We can make a difference and our schools can be more effective.
- Improving our people is the key to improving our schools.
- Significant school improvement will impact teaching and learning.

-Adapted from *Learning by Doing*

development and improvement and teacher development and improvement, little will change toward bringing quality learning experiences to the classroom.

**Lesson 3: PLC's require trust, collaboration, and collective inquiry.** The goal of a PLC is authentic collaboration, which engages staff at all levels in the organization in inquiry both to search for best practice for helping all students learn at high levels and an honest assessment of the current reality regarding teaching practices and student learning.

Using data, the team explores questions such as: *What is it that our students should learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when they don't learn? What will we do when they already know it or can do it? What can we learn from each other to improve our effectiveness?* Trust is important because teachers and administrators will be sharing information about practices which may or may not be working, making recommendations, and providing feedback. It's essential to establish that team members are not being judged.

**Lesson 4: Dedicate time for collaboration, inquiry and shared learning.** It is important to carve out time during the paid school day for staff to collaborate. Expecting collaboration without creating space and time is unrealistic and adds pressure to teachers who participate. One of the ways that leaders demonstrate priorities is allocation of resources-- time is one of the most precious resources available to teachers. One of the first things that teams can do is to think of creative solutions for prioritizing time to meet.

#### **The Intersection between QRIS and PLC:**

Early childhood programs now have more accountability and reporting requirements than ever before. Some programs report to multiple funders such as Head Start and California State Preschool, or are maintaining standards set by NAEYC and NAFCC accreditation, for example.

When standards and high stakes accountability are thrust upon staff working in a culture of isolation, limited opportunity for input into decisions, and competing directives, the result may be unanticipated, and often negative, consequences for teachers' relationships with one another, lack of interest in trying innovative practices, and a general sense of professional apathy, stress, burnout or turnover, all of which impede optimal student learning.

However, when the same standards and accountability are introduced into a culture of collaboration and inquiry, reciprocal accountability, shared understanding and commitment to the vision and mission of the school (a professional learning community) then staff, collectively, are more likely to overcome the barriers to student learning.

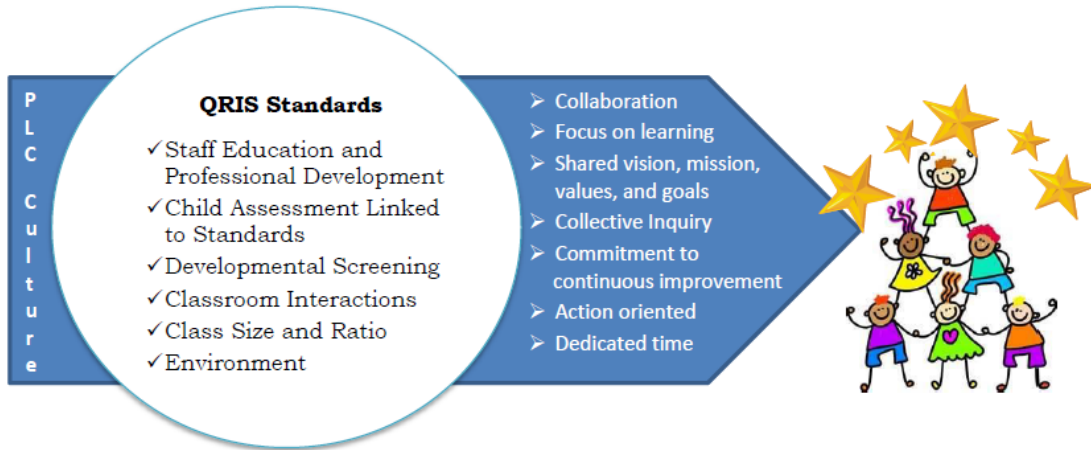
QRIS can be considered another system of accountability. Because of the public nature of the QRIS rating system, it is a market-driven approach to improving the level of quality in early education program. Ideally, families will choose an early childhood program based on its quality rating. Competition like this can be stressful for programs struggling to stay afloat.

*“Collaboration is more about the process of “unlearning” than learning. In order for a collaboration to be beneficial for all parties involved, the collaborators must first let go of their preconceptions about the others’ processes or professions. In my opinion, this step is the most difficult to overcome, but it is only after it is overcome that the learning can begin.”*

*“Collaborative learning is having a posture that is open to the question that is being considered and not letting established boundaries limit the possibilities for the search for truth.”*

- Teachers in PLCs

Thus, it is more important than ever to create school culture where use of assessment, focus on student learning, collaborative inquiry and shared accountability, and continuous improvement are already the goal. In this way, QRIS and PLC go hand in hand.



*Contra Costa's QRIS system is implemented by a Consortia of community agencies led by First 5 Contra Costa and including community colleges, County Office of Education, EHSD Head Start, Contra Costa Child Care Council, school districts, and early childhood education providers. Contra Costa's QRIS is an outgrowth of existing quality improvement efforts and aligns with state and regional direction. Local efforts merge Preschool Makes A Difference (PMD) priorities with Professional Development Program supports into a system that reflects the Race to the Top Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) standards of quality.*