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better beginnings

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UAMS

EVALUATING ARKANSAS' PATH
TO BETTER CHILD OUTCOMES

Executive Summary

Find out what Research says about
the **NEW Quality Rating & Improvement System**
for child care.

Prepared for DCCECE | by Partners for Inclusive Communities, UAMS

QUALITY CHILD CARE

Child care is more than a basic custodial duty. It is an important educational function with the potential to improve long-term individual and social health. Research in brain function and early learning shows that more rapid development takes place from birth to age 5 than at any other stage of life. Young children are more vulnerable to risks in their caregiving environments. Fortunately, they are also more resilient and responsive to intervention.¹

★★★★★★★★★★
Similar to other
state rating systems,
Better Beginnings
draws on elements
common to successful
preschool models.

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Evaluators of early model preschool programs have persistently followed participants into adulthood. They offer alluring evidence that high quality child care confers long-term cognitive and social-emotional benefits. Model programs share common elements: well-educated, well-paid staff; good teacher-student ratios (usually 1:3 for infants/toddlers and up to 1:6 for preschoolers); extensive education, training, and involvement of parents; and curricula with a strong theoretical basis.²

Some states have amplified or enhanced minimum licensing standards, but most do not come close to guaranteeing that all children experience these elements.

The reauthorization of federal funding for Head Start and the establishment of state-funded Arkansas Better Chance for School Success (ABC) programs represent a societal shift towards acknowledgement of the importance of quality early care and education. However, legislative bodies, citizens, and parents, have not yet been willing to allot the level of funding necessary for the widespread implementation of comprehensive, intensive programs. Thus, a number of states are exploring less costly alternatives to enhance the quality of care and education for all children. Quality Rating Systems (QRS) or Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are such alternatives.

“A QRIS is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, QRIS award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their State’s QRIS, early and school-age care providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. Even providers that have met the standards of the lowest QRIS levels have achieved a level of quality that is beyond the minimum requirements to operate.” (National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center)³

¹ Shonkoff, J. P., D. Phillips, et al. (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: the science of early childhood development. Washington, D.C., National Academy Press.

² Yoshikawa, H. (1995). "Long-term effects of early childhood programs on social outcomes and delinquency." *The Future of Children* 5(3): 51-75.

³ <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/qrresourceguide/index.cfm?do=qrabout#1>. Accessed 9/7/2010.

Similar to other states, Arkansas' Better Beginnings QRIS draws on elements common to the successful model preschool programs when deemed feasible for local providers. It includes standards for the education and training of staff, parent involvement, and use of a curriculum.

To aid in understanding possible effects on children's development, we classify each Better Beginnings standard according to the type of measure: **structural** (regulatable components of child care that form the foundation of good quality care), **process** (interactions that directly involve the child, such as presentation of activities and materials to children, behavior management, and the teacher's responsiveness or sensitivity to a child's needs), or **global** (both structural and process features of care such as the Environmental Rating Scales). In many studies, process measures are most capable of predicting child outcomes. Like many state-wide systems, Better Beginnings primarily contains structural measures.

COMPONENTS OF BETTER BEGINNINGS

There are five components of the Better Beginnings system: 1) Administration, 2) Qualifications and Professional Development, 3) Learning Environment, 4) Environmental Assessment, and 5) Child Health and Development. We review general findings and recommendations for each of the sections separately.

ADMINISTRATION

To capture a multi-dimensional picture of a program's quality, Better Beginnings incorporates two standardized instruments to measure leadership and management functions in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs: *The Program Administration Scale (PAS)* for center-based programs and *The Business Administration Scale (BAS)* for family day care.⁴ These are the first published instruments that focus solely on the administrative processes of early childcare programs. While these processes are intended to enhance the experiences of children, they are established and staged outside of the classroom. Thus, both scales are categorized as *structural* measures.

The PAS and the BAS are reliable, valid instruments that approach the quality of early childhood programs from a different angle than other scales used in the system. The PAS and the BAS will highlight strengths and weaknesses of business functions and steer administrators toward positive changes. The rationale behind these administrative scales is strong, but the instruments are relatively new. To date, PAS and BAS scores have not been analyzed alongside child outcome variables in general research or in evaluations of state quality rating systems. Also, they have not been validated for use in school-age programs. In centers, there is limited evidence that administrative support moderates teacher-child interactions.

⁴Talan, T. and P. Bloom (2004). *Program Administration Scale*. New York, Teachers College Press.

Talan, T. and P. Bloom (2009). *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care*. New York, Teachers College Press.

In family child care, regulatory status, which is linked to provider adherence to good business practices, showed a relationship to time spent with peers and in level of play but not to other cognitive and social outcomes. Strong leadership and well-informed administrative practices contribute to the global quality of a program, which supports child development.

In the interest of encouraging wider Arkansas center participation, Better Beginnings does not require programs to be assessed on PAS items 22-25 that address administrator and teacher qualifications. Also, PAS items 5 and 6 rating staff benefits, staffing patterns, and scheduling will be assessed but not counted in the program's overall score. However, omitted PAS items may impact the measure's usefulness for Better Beginnings.

Using data collected as part of the Evaluation of the Arkansas Early Childhood Professional Development System (AECPPDS), the evaluation team compared the original scoring with the Better Beginnings scoring of the PAS. We found the original scoring of the PAS and the Better Beginnings scoring of the PAS (BB PAS) to be similarly related to the ERS and to Arnett Caregiver Interaction (CIS) subscale scores. In all cases, correlations between the BB PAS, ERS, and CIS scales were weaker than with the original scoring of the PAS. The original PAS scoring was significantly related to teacher behaviors that support children's cognitive development and school readiness. The BB PAS scoring was not. These behaviors include engaging the children with open-ended questions and encouraging children in the use of symbolic/literacy materials, numbers and spatial concepts, and problem solving. Better Beginning's exclusion of PAS items may have a negative effect on the measure's validity.

Using the Better Beginnings scoring of the PAS, the evaluation team determined whether cut scores for the system were meaningful. Better Beginnings' Levels 1 and 2 do not require PAS observations while Level 3 requires a minimum score of 4. Analysis of the AECPPDS data demonstrates that programs scoring lower than 4 on the scale have teachers who are less sensitive, more detached, and less supportive of socio-emotional development and classrooms with lower overall global environmental quality ratings.

The second component of the Better Beginnings Administration section requires program leaders to learn about and take actions to reduce child abuse and neglect. Administrators will use the Strengthening Families self-assessment tool and strategy developed by the Center for Study of Social Policy.⁵ Strengthening Families is a national initiative to equip early childhood programs with knowledge and practices to prevent child abuse and neglect. The initiative's logic model was based on research highlighting five protective factors in families that correlate with greater child protection and on observations of model child care programs. The goal is to implement strategies used by model child care programs to enhance the factors that provide protection for children (parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete supports in times of need, and children's social and emotional development). The vast majority of items addressed in the self-assessment are focused on organizational policies, parent training,

⁵ Center for the Study of Social Policy (2008). "Strengthening Families online resources: Guidebook and self-assessment." Retrieved 05/11/2010, from http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net/index.php/online_resources/guide_assess/category/self_assessment/

and communication with parents. These things generally occur outside of classroom interactions with children. Therefore, the Strengthening Families self-assessment is best classified as a structural measure.⁶

Research related to Strengthening Families suggests that sustained increases in protection for children are likely if 1) parent involvement and supports are comprehensive, intensive, and sustained, and 2) non-maternal care is comprehensive, sustained, and of quality exceeding the highest level of Better Beginnings. We would expect use of the Strengthening Families model to heighten awareness and to improve relational help-giving skills, such as listening and demonstrating respect and empathy for the family, if all staff members, not just administrators as currently designated, receive more intensive training. It is unlikely that a webinar and self-assessment for administrators will increase the amount and quality of participatory helpgiving, which is individualized, includes the family as active participants in achieving goals, and is more tightly linked to change in family functions and behaviors.

Empirical evidence suggests that webinar training, self-assessment and adoption of one or even a few of the Strengthening Families strategies is unlikely to produce detectable significant changes in child abuse and neglect. If administrators extend their training to teachers and adopt the Strengthening Families practices comprehensively, improvements in parental understanding of child development and parenting behaviors are likely.

⁶ The section, Children's Social and Emotional Development, does contain a few items that instruct the type and quality of interactions between teachers and children. We ruled out a classification of SF as a global measure because these child interactions items are outnumbered by structural items not only in the grand scheme of the self-assessment, but also within that particular section.

QUALIFICATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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The ECE field is shifting from clock hours to college hours.

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Within the past decade, a movement calling for a minimum of a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (ECE) classrooms has gained considerable traction. Advocates of this shift point to evidence that college programs focused on ECE or child development improve classroom quality, that teacher education is a better predictor of quality than years of experience, and that higher teacher education is related to better child outcomes.⁷ This widespread appeal for degreed teachers represents a general policy shift from one that emphasized in-service training and annual clock hours to one that favors pre-service training. Head Start and the National

Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) have a timeline to increase the number of teachers with a bachelor's degree: 50% required by Head Start by 2013, and 100% required by NAEYC by 2020.⁸ The early childhood debate about the importance of well-educated teachers is less applicable to school-age programs. As we reviewed the research and recommendations from leaders in the field, we found highly qualified staff to be considered a basic and necessary requirement for high-quality programs.⁹

Arkansas' current minimum licensing standard for staff (a high school diploma or GED and 10 hours of in-service training) is far-removed from the field's best practices. However, only rewarding providers who can afford to make the substantial leap from simply hiring teachers with high school education to hiring teachers with four-year degrees in all classes would alienate many from the QRIS. Moreover, private providers who must pay more for better educated teachers would pass costs on to consumers, which might force lower-income families to choose informal or lower quality forms of child care.¹⁰ To maximize inclusivity and to encourage provider participation in the quality improvement process, Better Beginnings calibrated its standards to existing levels in Arkansas. The Administrator/Staff Qualifications/Professional Development component of Better Beginnings encourages increased levels of training for teachers and administrators but with more emphasis on clock hours than on formal college hours. Requirements for school-age providers are identical to the center-based standards. Requirements are slightly lower for family child care providers. Primary caregivers in family child

⁷ Howes, C., M. Whitebook, et al. (1992). "Teacher characteristics and effective teaching in child care: Findings from the national child care staffing study." *Child and Youth Care Forum* 21(6): 399-414. Snider, M. H. and V. R. Fu (1990). "The effects of specialized education and job experience on early childhood teachers' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 5(1): 69-78. Zill, N., G. Resnick, et al. (2001). *Head Start FACES: Longitudinal Findings on Program Performance. Third Progress Report.*

⁸ Time line for implementation accessed on 10/4/10 at

http://www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/Time%20Line%20for%20Meeting%206_A_05.pdf

⁹ Bodilly, S. and M. K. Beckett (2005). "Making Out-of-School Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda." Accessed 06/24/2010, from http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG242.pdf. Committee on After-School Research and Practice (2005). *Moving Towards Success: Framework for After-School Programs*. Washington, DC, C. S. Mott Foundation. Miller, B. M. (2005). *Pathways to success for youth: What counts in after-school*. Massachusetts after-school research study (MARS) report. Wellesley, MA, National Institute for Out-of-School Time.

¹⁰ Kelley, P. and G. Camilli (2007). "The impact of teacher education on outcomes in center-based early childhood education programs: A meta-analysis." NIEER Working Papers.

care homes must have 30 clock hours at the lowest level and an additional 15 clock hours plus 10 hours of ongoing professional development annually for the highest level.

Minding the gap between the quality of Arkansas programs and research-based quality indicators is a complicated task. Touting the merits of teacher education is one thing; paying for tuition subsidies, enhanced professional development programs, and increased wages for a better trained workforce is another. Yet, our evaluation team concludes that the Better Beginnings scale is tipped substantially more toward status quo than toward the field's best practices. In light of ECE research and state comparisons, the professional development and qualifications standards are likely insufficient. Incentive grants available to programs participating in Better Beginnings to help pay for college credits and credentialing are likely to prove more effective for promoting increased professionalism for teachers and optimal support for child development.

Research suggests that advantages for child outcomes begin at the Intermediate levels of the Arkansas Early Childhood Professional Development System, Traveling Arkansas Professional Pathways (TAPP), not at the Foundation levels emphasized in Better Beginnings. Findings are mixed about whether a particular level of specialized college education enhances teaching practices and child outcomes. However, we find general agreement that ECE college courses are better at preparing teachers to create developmentally appropriate environments and to interact with children in ways that promote their development than workshops or in-service trainings.

Short, one-day workshops, such as those required for Better Beginnings, are not likely to be effective. Multi-day workshops lacking a fixed curriculum and offered at a large number of sites without customization for each group of participants are also unlikely to produce results. We recommend that professional development efforts continue to open avenues for college credits. As an intermediate step, proposed higher levels of Better Beginnings could require longer trainings, such as Pre-K Early Literacy Learning in Arkansas and Pre-K Social Emotional Learning for Young Children. These trainings already exist, meet more of the research-based criteria for effective trainings, and address teacher-child interactions.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Better Beginning's Learning Environment section evaluates the level of planning and intentionality programs devote to developmental domains through four components of the Learning Environment section: planning and curriculum, portfolios, interest centers, and developmentally appropriate physical activities. The amount and quality of research conducted for each component varies across the three types of care. Findings related to the after-school environment are markedly different. We classify most of the Learning Environment standards as structural measures because they specify *what* tools are to be present, but they do not specify or observe *how* the tools are used to facilitate child development or peer and teacher-child interactions.

Better Beginnings designers intended each level of the Learning Environment category to indicate increasingly complex levels of intentionality, starting with routines and working up to daily planning. Although a quality rating system should address levels of quality above those expressed in a state's minimum licensing regulations, Better Beginnings language regarding routines is redundant of minimum licensing. We suggest clarification.

With the exception of curriculum use, we found minimal evidence that child outcomes are tied to items for the Learning Environment section. Absent of a curriculum, general planning is not associated with enhanced child outcomes in center-based care. One study suggested that family care teachers who make daily plans have better interactions that help children feel more secure and play better. For school-age care, one study found that daily plans may be associated with better academic outcomes.

The number of interest centers in a program has been linked to global quality but not to child outcomes. The kind of materials placed in the interest centers and how teachers guide children to use them are related to child cognition and social competence. For school-age children, if materials are adequate and accessible to youth, a sufficient variety of activities may be more related to outcomes.

Portfolios may be used for assessment to determine atypical development and/or to individualize care and instruction. Validation studies have identified problems with using portfolios for assessment purposes. We did not find studies examining whether the use of portfolios to individualize instruction helps children. We recommend that Better Beginnings define the intent of portfolio use. As currently written, this item may not discriminate between programs using portfolios with a developmentally appropriate intent from those arbitrarily collecting products or recording behaviors without further reflection. For school-age children, the Better Beginnings intent should also be clarified. If portfolios are to be considered a tool for tracking individual development, this standard contradicts the exemption of school-age programs from developmental assessment. If the intent is for portfolios to track individual progress and plan further programming, training will be necessary to ensure staff intentionality and consistency with a method unfamiliar to many school-age providers.

If programs are to be observed or inspected for compliance in planning and implementing developmentally appropriate physical activities, we classify Standard 2.C.3 as a process measure with greater influence on child outcomes. The school-age literature presents strong evidence that physical activity in care is associated with better outcomes. Literature related to physical activities and fitness for ECE is sparse and suggests that physical activity will have to increase above the amounts typically introduced in interventions and be combined with dietary education and parental outreach to curb current trajectories of children's weight gain.

The Learning Environment standard with the strongest ties to child outcomes requires a written curriculum plan. Curriculum use has been linked to global quality and to child outcomes more than any other item. The type of curriculum chosen will affect children in different ways, with the traditional nursery school approach being the least likely to produce academic, cognitive, and social outcomes. Curriculum is a distinguishing characteristic between poor and adequate care and is misplaced at the highest level of Better Beginnings. For school-age children, we would add that coordination with participants' schools is equally important to outcomes.

There is strong evidence that **curriculum use** relates to developmental gains.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Of all Better Beginnings components, Environmental Assessment is the strongest because it utilizes the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) including:

- *Early Childhood Environment Scale, Revised Edition (ECERS-R),*
- *Infant/Toddler Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ITERS-R),*
- *Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition (FCCERS-R),* and
- *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS).*¹¹

These instruments measure the quality of care in a variety of settings. Over a period of 30 years they have become the most widely used quality measures in ECE practice and research. Empirical evidence has validated the relationship of ERS quality to child outcomes in child care research around the world. Findings are not always consistent and are modest in strength.

● ● ● Environmental Rating Scales lend strength to the QRIS in that they rely more on information collected by an independent observer than on provider reports. ● ● ●

Each ERS is a global measure. A global measure combines items rating structural aspects of the program—for instance, the physical layout of the space or staff qualifications—with observations of processes that directly involve children. ITERS-R and ECERS-R scores are modestly associated with child outcomes. Quality in the low range has been linked to children’s elevated stress, anger and defiance, and setbacks in vocabulary and applied math development. Recent large, multi-state studies with sophisticated controls indicate that the higher the ERS quality, the greater the effect on child outcomes.

Better Beginnings is similar to other QRIS systems in permitting self-assessment for entry-level quality ratings. It diverges from other states by permitting scores in the adequate range for upper tiers of quality. The Missouri rating system evaluation found that all children lost social skills, and children in poverty lost vocabulary when enrolled in centers with lower ERS ratings. The lower quality ratings in Missouri are comparable to Better Beginnings Levels 1 and 2.

The evaluation team’s validation analysis of Better Beginnings criteria for ERS scores identified some concerns. Findings from ITERS data collected as part of the national evaluation of Early Head Start (in which one of 17 sites included children in Arkansas) show a loss of emotion

¹¹ Harms, T., R. Clifford, et al. (1998). *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition*. New York, Teachers College Press. Harms, T., D. Cryer, et al. (2003). *Infant/toddler environment rating scale, Revised edition*. New York, Teachers College, Columbia University. Harms, T., D. Cryer, et al. (2007). *Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition*. New York, Teachers College, Columbia University. Harms, T., E. Vineberg Jacobs, et al. (1996). *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale*. New York, NY, Teachers College Press.

regulation and engagement skills for very young children at the lowest levels. Over time, children attending programs scoring lower than 3 on the ECERS had less optimal language, math, and social-emotional development. These findings were echoed in data collected from family child care programs in the national evaluation of Early Head Start. Children in family child care centers with scores lower than 3 had significantly lower cognitive, math, and language skills. Most worrisome, children in the lowest quality centers, regardless of program type, scored more than one standard deviation below the national average in cognitive, math, and language scores.

We found less evidence related to environmental quality in school-age children's development. A 2010 study showed that elements of SACERS scores are associated with growth in language, math, and social skills.¹² In lieu of the SACERS, Better Beginnings allows school-age programs to use the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA) or the Younger Youth Program Quality Assessment (Younger Youth PQA).¹³ The SACERS is a global measure that observes a program's structural and process features. Youth PQA and Younger Youth PQA focus more on process components. They emphasize staff-youth interactions, the socio-emotional climate of the program, and youth engagement. Data of SACERS, Youth PQA, and Younger Youth PQA were not available, so we could not validate Better Beginnings Levels for school-age children.

CHILD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Better Beginnings standards to improve child health and development involve sharing information with parents and documenting the implementation of medical and educational plans. Sharing information with parents is a structural measure. Level 1 programs share information on ARKids First and on child development and health. Level 2 programs share information regarding medical homes and on the stages of child development. Level 3 programs share information on nutrition and physical activity for children. Even when children are in pediatric care, children's developmental issues are often not adequately addressed by medical providers.¹⁴ Because child care providers have daily contact with parents and children, they are in a unique position to fill this gap.

Better Beginnings topics are appropriate to the needs of children, and there is some empirical precedence from ECE and pediatric literature to suggest that anticipatory guidance in the form of print information about child development or medical conditions increases use of medical and preventive care as well as parental willingness to communicate with providers. Some studies find that written information alone produces results. Others find that written guidance coupled with conversational guidance is more effective.

¹² Pierce, K., D. Bolt, et al. (2010). "Specific Features of After-School Program Quality: Associations with Children's Functioning in Middle Childhood." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 45(3): 381-393.

¹³ Adams, K., Brickman, N., & McMahon, T. (Eds.). (2005). *Youth program quality assessment, Form A*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press. Adams, K., Brickman, N., & McMahon, T. (Eds.). (2005). *Younger youth program quality assessment, Form A*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

¹⁴ Schuster, M. A., N. Duan, et al. (2000). "Anticipatory Guidance: What Information Do Parents Receive? What Information Do They Want?" *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 154(12): 1191-1198.

For young children in center-based care, Arkansas does not require screening as an element of care independent of the assessment of administrative practices (using the PAS/BAS). There is a requirement at the lowest level of Better Beginnings that “medical and educational care plans involving a child are written and on file, and implementation is documented” (1.E.3). In other words, programs need to adhere to an individualized plan (IFSP/IEP) for children with identified delays/disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Within any system, there is the opportunity for improvement. The evaluation team recommends refinements and revisions to reduce redundancy among components and to strengthen the influence of Better Beginnings on child outcomes. In making recommendations, we are mindful that changes to a system already implemented should be minimized to prevent possible resentment.

1. Reduce Redundancy

There are many elements of family involvement documented in Better Beginnings. There are items of the Strengthening Families training materials that are being assessed as part of the administrative and environmental assessments. We recommend that the Strengthening Families component be modified to exclude content areas already gauged with the PAS and ERS assessments.

2. Use Measures as Written and Tested

Better Beginnings should assess and score PAS items that are currently excluded. Teacher education measured by PAS is related to more optimal classroom practices. We recognize that providers may have difficulty achieving high scores on the items, but the original scaling of the instrument outperforms the scale with the excluded items. The state has already invested in the PAS and should take advantage of its validity and reliability testing.

3. Designate Teacher-Child Ratios

A key component present in other state rating systems but absent from Better Beginnings is required teacher-child ratios. States and organizations seeking to improve child outcomes via research-based practices have adopted guidelines for limiting the number of children in a teacher’s care. Arkansas minimum licensing allows less optimal teacher-child ratios, especially for birth to two years, than most key comparison states, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and Head Start. Improving ratios is expensive. Within Arkansas, stakeholders have rejected attempts to adjust minimum licensing regulations. Nevertheless, in light of consistent evidence that ratios affect child outcomes, we recommend that Better Beginnings include requirements for teacher-child ratios that exceed those found in minimum licensing.

4. Incorporate Process Measures

The evaluation team recommends incorporating process measures because they are stronger predictors of child outcomes. There are structural measures in Better Beginnings that could be strengthened by altering how information is collected. One example that is strongly supported in the literature is use of a curriculum. There is evidence that relying on program-reported use of curricula will be less accurate than using independent observations of use. Developing methods to observe adherence to a curriculum during an assessment visit versus permitting self-report of curriculum is advised.

There is also strong evidence to support inclusion of teacher-child interactions assessments. The incorporation of a new instrument would be costly. As an alternative, Better Beginnings could more closely track teacher-child interactions already being observed with the ERS instruments. The evaluation team found evidence that children in programs with ERS Interaction subscale scores that do not meet the minimum criterion score for the overall ERS have less optimal cognitive and social development. These findings could be used to support revised Better Beginnings standards requiring programs to meet an overall minimum ERS score and also the same minimum for the Interactions subscale. Increased technical support for programs in the area of teacher-child interactions is warranted when scores on the Interaction subscale of the ECERS-R are substantially lower than the overall score.

5. Address Lower Levels of Quality

Analyses examining current cut scores on the ERS would lead us to caution accrediting programs with a quality rating when at least a minimum score of 3 has not been met. An implicit goal of Better Beginnings is to communicate to parents the importance of quality child care for their children's development. We recommend that Better Beginnings Level 1 be considered a "getting ready" level that invites participation but also communicates to parents that programs have not yet been assessed and may not reflect a minimal level of environmental quality.

6. Address Higher Levels of Quality

We recommend the development of levels beyond the current highest level of Better Beginnings to encourage programs to make improvements that promote optimal child development. The range of low scores typically recognized in other states' QRIS is either 3.0-3.75 (N=13) or 4.0-4.5 (N=6). The range of high scores is typically in the 5.0 – 5.5 range (N=13) or higher (N=4).¹⁵ Better Beginnings Level 3, the highest rating in the system, requires average ERS scores of 4, a substantial divergence from other quality systems. Analyses showed that children in higher quality programs (meeting cut scores of 5 and 5.5 that the UAMS evaluation team proposes for future Better Beginnings Levels 4 and 5) had higher cognitive and academic skill scores than children in lower levels. In awareness of print materials and phonemic knowledge, children in our proposed Level 5 fared even better than children in our proposed Level 4 programs.

¹⁵ Tout, K., R. Starr, et al. (2010). Compendium of Quality Rating Systems and Evaluations. Child Trends, Mathematica Policy Research.

7. Include Child Screening

At the lowest level of Better Beginnings programs must adhere to an individualized plan (IFSP/IEP) for children with identified delays/disabilities. However, Arkansas does not require screening as an element of care independent of the assessment of administrative practices. (In PAS and BAS, programs with good to excellent scores facilitate screenings for children in their care). We recommend that quality ECE programs implement efforts to identify children with special needs and make referrals for early intervention. Without screening, delays and disabilities can stay unaddressed for years. Furthermore, young children are more responsive to intervention than at any other time. Early identification increases the possibility that applied intervention will be effective, reduces education costs, and alleviates hardship for children and their families.



Better Beginnings includes some characteristics of an overall level of quality that have been found to contribute the most heavily to child outcomes in recent years. Better Beginnings draws on the elements common to successful model preschool programs when deemed feasible for local providers. It includes standards for the education and training of staff, parent involvement, and use of a curriculum, as well as global measures of program quality as rated by independent observers. Moreover, the component choices that were made in Better Beginnings were similar to those of the other states we reviewed. Empirical evidence tells us that the quality of child care affects children in various ways, and multiple determinants of quality are included in the Better Beginnings system.



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