



Improving the Quality of Early Childhood Education through System-Building

Children's early experiences and development profoundly influence their future growth and potential. Researchers have long documented the positive outcomes of high-quality early childhood education, including readiness for school, greater academic achievement, higher rates of school completion, lower rates of incarceration and higher incomes.¹ Labor economists point to the substantial economic benefits of investing in early care and education (ECE).² Such outcomes, however, remain elusive without high-quality programs. As city and state lawmakers pursue initiatives to promote better outcomes for children, a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) must be high on the policy agenda.



This brief examines the elements and current status of quality in early childhood programs; provides a scan of quality initiatives across the country and in New York State; and highlights the origins, progress, and promise of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, including New York State's proposed QualitystarsNY. The brief also provides a series of recommendations for policymakers as they seek improved outcomes for our youngest citizens and their families.

WHAT WE KNOW

- High-quality early childhood programs, staffed by a well-trained, stable, and well-compensated workforce, produce better child outcomes, viable future citizens, and therefore, substantial returns on public investment.
- The majority of ECE programs are mediocre, or worse, compromising children's emotional and intellectual development.
- Staff qualifications and professional development constitute the core of program excellence.
- Although the accreditation system of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has been a powerful driver of quality improvement, accreditation is pursued without public support by individual programs on a voluntary basis.
- Forty-eight states have embarked on quality improvement initiatives—including accreditation and professional development systems—with a birth-to-five focus.
- Nineteen states and the District of Columbia have implemented statewide Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), the majority with public financing.
- The success of a QRIS depends upon a comprehensive, well-funded professional development system.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure adequate public financing to support higher program standards, teacher preparation, ongoing professional development, and compensation.
- Create and support policies and initiatives that promote program accreditation by NAEYC and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC).
- Align NYS's Early Learning Guidelines with components of the professional development system and QRIS program standards.
- Develop creative financing strategies that generate new public investment and redirect existing resources for the implementation of a comprehensive professional development system and QRIS in NYS.
- Identify top-level state leaders who can serve as champions of comprehensive ECE systems development.
- Develop an inventory of cost models for state ECE systems to guide sustained quality improvement.
- Design a public engagement initiative to increase understanding of, and societal investment in, quality improvement.

The Quest for Quality

Researchers measure quality by observing teaching and the actual experiences of children in the classroom; documenting “structural” characteristics, such as child-adult ratios, group size, and teacher education; and assessing the health and safety provisions of centers and family child care homes.³ Children have been observed to be happier and more cognitively engaged in settings with lower child-adult ratios.⁴ Studies have shown that children educated by more highly educated teachers with specialized training in child development and early education are more sociable, exhibit more sophisticated use of language, demonstrate greater perseverance, and perform at higher levels on cognitive tasks than those cared for by less-qualified adults.⁵ Consistency, stability, and sensitive interactions are also important hallmarks of quality, resulting in children’s positive cognitive, social, and emotional development.⁶

Status of ECE Quality

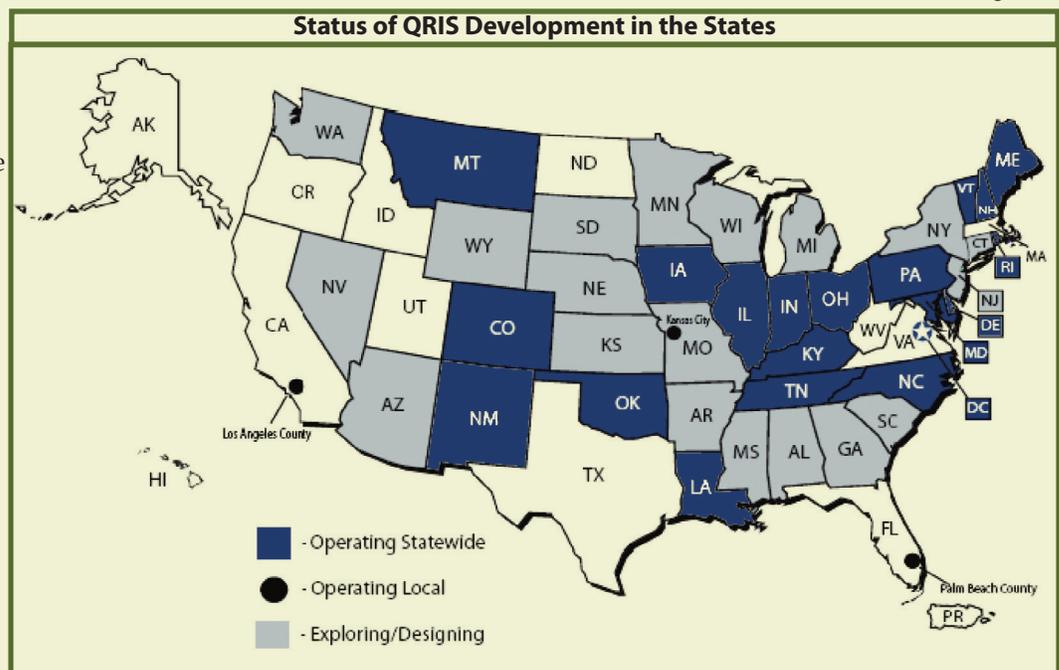
Today, the quest for quality has been invigorated by a dramatic shift in national policy. The research is driving unprecedented federal support for early childhood quality initiatives, which promises to move the field forward in ways that were previously unimaginable. Historically, however, the United States has not demonstrated an appreciation of the integral value that ECE plays in a dynamic society. Despite the evidence that quality matters, our programs have remained inadequate. Studies have shown that the majority of ECE programs are of fair quality, and some are poor enough to compromise children’s emotional and intellectual development. Few states have adopted regulatory standards consistent with best practice.⁷ Recent research documents an overall decline in educational attainment levels across various sectors of the early childhood workforce.⁸ Turnover within the field is rampant, with the annual rate ranging from 25 to 40 percent.⁹ In addition, current financing does not support higher levels of quality.¹⁰ Investments in workforce development, the foundation for higher quality, have been particularly meager. Low-cost, low-intensity interventions have produced only marginal improvements in quality, insufficient to ensure stable, well-educated staff.¹¹

Quality Improvement Across the Nation

With quality improvement’s ascent to the national agenda, many states have taken up the charge. Most of these initiatives have been supported by quality set-aside funding through Child Care Development Block Grants (CCDBG) from the Child Care and Development Fund, the major federal source for child care.¹² Improving workforce quality has been a major goal of many of these initiatives, with most states working to build systems of professional development and a good number providing incentives for increased compensation, educational attainment, and retention. Concurrent with these efforts, national professional organizations have developed ECE accreditation systems, for which some states and communities provide technical assistance and quality-improvements grants.

Additional fuel for quality improvement and system-building has come from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) grants, now supporting work, with a birth-to-five focus, in 48 states.¹³ Some of these states—Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Washington, and, most recently, New York—are also part of the Build Initiative, an ongoing national effort supported by a number of foundations through the Early Childhood Funders’ Collaborative.¹⁴ The most recent infusion of child care funds, appropriated under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA, or the “stimulus”), offers greater support and promise for state system-building efforts.¹⁵

Figure 1



Adapted from map created by the National Child Care Information Center, November 2006.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

This past decade has seen the rapid proliferation of quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS). Designed to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early childhood settings, they serve as an “engine” for states’ efforts to bring together existing programs, systems, funding streams, and structures into a comprehensive ECE system.¹⁶

Quality rating systems emerged from grassroots efforts by state child care administrators and advocates for children, who sought to improve quality and simplify the process for parents of choosing better-quality programs. In the 1990s, states began developing tiered reimbursement policies, paying higher rates for accredited programs. They soon began to take a broader look at effectiveness and outcomes, which led to a more strategic approach, linking the offerings of the professional development system, for example, to the requirements for ECE staff in licensing regulations. By the end of the decade, the first quality rating initiatives had been established: Oklahoma’s, which was state-sponsored, in 1998, and Denver’s, a private initiative, in 2000.¹⁷

North Carolina, Ohio, and Tennessee were also among the early pioneers.¹⁸ Today, 19 states and the District of Columbia have implemented statewide quality rating and improvement systems. Most of the remaining states, including New York, are planning or piloting a QRIS. (See Figure 1.) Senior state leaders are among the key champions. Indeed, a recent report by the National Center for Children in Poverty on the status of comprehensive ECE system-building indicated that governors or cabinet-level officials in 36 states were involved in ECE systems development.¹⁹

What is a QRIS?

A quality rating and improvement system is a strategy for assessing, improving, and disseminating information about the level of quality across the full continuum of ECE programs, including school-based pre-kindergarten, Head Start, and center- and home-based child care. (Some states include school-age programs as well.) The approach is market-based, creating an industry-wide standard for quality assurance and a framework for improving consumer knowledge and influencing choice. The system awards quality ratings to programs that meet a defined set of standards. All QRIS have five components: standards; accountability; program and practitioner outreach and support; financial incentives; and parent/consumer education.²⁰

- **Standards:** States typically use child care licensing regulations as the foundation of the system, including two or more levels of quality criteria beyond this baseline, and allowing for progression to the highest level of quality as defined by the state. The standards used to assign ratings are based on research about the characteristics of programs that indicate quality

and are linked to positive outcomes for children. Common indicators of quality include professional development and teacher qualifications; accreditation; parent/family involvement; learning environments; administrative policies and procedures; and financial management. Standards may be aligned with a state’s early learning guidelines, and are based on widely accepted existing quality standards for programs and practitioners, such as those developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Head Start, and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC). In many states, programs that have been accredited by NAEYC, or NAFCC, in the case of family child care, automatically receive the highest rating.

- **Accountability:** Accountability and monitoring processes are used to determine how well programs meet QRIS standards, assign ratings, and verify ongoing compliance. Monitoring provides a basis of accountability for programs, parents, and funders by creating benchmarks for measuring quality improvement. In most states, the licensing agency takes on this role, either alone, or in partnership with the subsidy agency or a private entity, such as a child care resource and referral agency or an institution of higher learning. Most often, licensing agencies designate separate QRIS staff who are responsible for monitoring; the majority of states check annually, and some more frequently.
- **Program and Practitioner Outreach and Support:** Most states have professional development systems that organize training opportunities, recognize practitioners’ achievements, and create quality parameters for available training. A QRIS builds upon and integrates the existing infrastructure, raising the bar for quality. Support for providers, such as training and mentoring, as well as technical assistance for programs, promote participation and movement along the continuum of quality standards. North Carolina, for example, has linked the early childhood coursework offered by its community colleges to the credentials specified in its rated license. Oklahoma established early childhood scholar coordinators in each community college to counsel and support ECE staff pursuing coursework and degrees.²¹ Pennsylvania redesigned its professional development system to integrate on-site technical assistance, creating a program improvement system aligned with its QRIS and establishing a database to track the provision of technical assistance.²² Maine has created data links between its QRIS and the state’s practitioner registry.²³
- **Financial Incentives:** All of the existing QRIS offer financial incentives to support programs and providers. Financial support, linked to compliance with quality standards, can

Figure 2

States' QRIS Financial Incentives		
Tiered Subsidy Reimbursement		
Colorado Indiana Louisiana Maryland New Mexico Oklahoma Tennessee	DC Kentucky Maine Montana North Carolina Pennsylvania Vermont	Example: New Mexico increases its subsidy reimbursement rates per child as a center gains more stars (2 stars=\$45 increase; 3 stars=\$70 increase; 4 stars=\$104.50 increase; 5 stars=\$132 increase).
Quality Grants, Bonuses, and Awards		
Delaware Iowa Montana Pennsylvania	Indiana Kentucky New Hampshire Vermont	Example: Iowa provides achievement bonuses, ranging from \$800 to \$2000, to programs based on their size and level of quality.
Scholarships		
Delaware	Oklahoma	Example: Oklahoma gives child care providers in programs with at least one star access to scholarship coordinators to help them find funding for their education.
Tax Credits		
Arkansas Maine	Louisiana Vermont	Example: Louisiana offers School Readiness Tax Credits to teachers, parents, businesses, and eligible child care centers.
Loans Linked to Quality Ratings		
North Carolina		Example: North Carolina converts loans for improvements into grants for centers that increase their stars during the loan period.
Wage Supplements		
Maryland Pennsylvania	Oklahoma	Example: Pennsylvania offers ongoing education and retention awards of between \$1,000 and \$4,000 to each staff member of 3-, 4-, and 5-star programs.

Source: *Financial Incentives in Quality Rating Systems* (National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, 2009)

be a powerful motivator for participation in the system. Among the most common incentives are tiered child care subsidy rates; wage bonuses, quality grants or merit awards; tax credits; loans linked to quality ratings; priority to applications for practitioner wage initiatives; scholarships for providers; and other professional development supports.²⁴ In Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, and Vermont, for example, programs can receive a one-time cash award when they reach each star level. Montana offers both mini-grants (up to \$1,500) and larger grants (up to \$15,000) linked to their QRIS and other quality improvement efforts. Indiana provides financial support for the accreditation process for providers who have reached the third level and would like to progress to the highest level.²⁵ (See Figure 2.)

- **Parent/Consumer Education:** A QRIS provides a solid framework for empowering parents to make informed decisions, supporting their innate desire to provide the best for their children and encouraging their advocacy for higher quality early care and education. Most systems award easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to

programs, indicating their level of quality. Easy and widespread access to information is crucial to successful implementation. Many states post ratings on dedicated websites, while others promote their systems through traditional media, posters, banners, certificates, decals, pins, and other items displayed by rated programs. Child care resource and referral agencies, whose core mission includes parent support and education, also play a vital role in disseminating information. Colorado's QRIS was featured in a cover story on ratings in a Denver magazine, increasing calls from 300 to 15,000 per month. Television stations in the four major media markets of Tennessee ran a feature highlighting individual ECE program ratings.²⁶

QRIS and Professional Development

Staff qualifications and professional development constitute the core of quality improvement. The quality of early childhood settings, research confirms, is inextricably linked to the quality of their staffs.²⁷ Outcomes are better for children educated by teachers with a bachelor's degree and specialized training in child development and early education.²⁸ Other teacher characteristics, including the sensitivity and consistency of their interactions with children, are potential predictors of early care and education quality.²⁹ Administrative practices also set the context for high-quality programs; directors' formal education, specialized early childhood training, and experience and education in management and leadership are all linked to quality.³⁰

The different state QRIS models reflect the importance of staff qualifications as an indicator of program quality in the criteria they have developed for their standards. Interestingly, however, only eleven states and the District of Columbia (DC) include specific criteria related to director qualifications. Five states require a minimum of an associate's degree at one or more levels of their QRIS, six states and DC include training in program administration in their criteria, and only four states consider management experience. Wisconsin's quality rating and improvement system, which has not yet been implemented, will allocate points to directors who obtain their associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degrees.³¹ Director credentials, which recognize the specialized knowledge, skills, and experience that define competence for program administrators, are included as a quality indicator in only four states.³² (See Figure 3.)

A well-functioning, comprehensive professional development system is an essential component of an effective QRIS.

Standards must reflect the field’s core body of knowledge and best practice; funding sources and infrastructure must be aligned, data systems integrated, and access to professional development and technical assistance for programs must be assured. Early research has shown a positive relationship between QRIS ratings and professional development. Studies of North Carolina’s Star-Rated License System, for example, have demonstrated that higher rating scale scores are associated with higher levels of teacher education in center-based programs and family child care homes.³³ In Oklahoma’s Reaching for the Stars system, better-educated directors and teachers in programs with higher quality ratings had lower turnover rates and higher pay.³⁴

that children who attended NAEYC-accredited programs performed better than those in non-accredited programs on readiness indicators, regardless of parent educational attainment.³⁶ A study of child care centers in California found higher levels of program quality and teacher sensitivity in programs that were accredited by NAEYC.³⁷

Currently, 16 states link their QRIS to NAEYC accreditation, with some states offering financial incentives to support the process. Kentucky offers grants to child care centers to help defray fees, as does Maryland. New Mexico pays for initial accreditation costs, and Vermont offers a number of benefits to accredited programs, including a one-time financial incentive and a \$1,000 bonus for accreditation,

Figure 3

Director Qualifications in State QRIS Standards					
	Minimum of AA required	Specialized ECE/CD required	Specialized management training	Administrative experience	Director credential
Colorado	●	●			
DC		●	●		
Indiana		●			
Iowa			●		●
Kentucky		●	●		●
Louisiana	●	●		●	
Maine	●	●		●	
North Carolina		●	●	●	●
Ohio	●	●			
Oklahoma			●		
Pennsylvania	●	●	●		●
Tennessee		●	●	●	

Source: *States Efforts to Integrate Measures of Leadership and Management in Quality Ratings Systems* (McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University, 2007)

QRIS and National Accreditation

Accreditation is another critical piece of quality improvement. National accreditation standards are high, and the criteria that elaborate them cover most, if not all, of the criteria for QRIS. Nearly all QRIS, therefore, include national accreditation, commonly the top level of the system. In some states, programs with the highest ratings can be nationally accredited or meet the QRIS performance standards at that level. Some states, such as Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, require that additional criteria beyond accreditation be met to achieve top-level status. Colorado and Vermont, on the other hand, assign points for accredited status along with points assigned to other quality criteria.³⁵

NAEYC’s voluntary, national early childhood program accreditation system—initiated in 1985 and revised in 2005—has been a powerful driver of quality improvement. Research has consistently shown higher quality levels for NAEYC-accredited programs and improved outcomes for the children they serve. A recent study of programs in Minnesota found

credentials, and renewals. Indiana’s Accreditation Project is aligned with the state’s QRIS, providing financial support for each phase of the process.³⁸ Evaluations of existing QRIS confirm the value of accreditation. A study of Pennsylvania’s Keystone STARS, which looked at the scores of individual classrooms whose quality was assessed using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), found that NAEYC-accredited centers had scores equivalent to or higher than scores of the top-rated centers in the system.³⁹

Financing QRIS

The major source of funding for the design and implementation of a QRIS is federal (CCDBG and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and funds committed by individual states to early childhood programs. (See Figure 2 for *States’ QRIS Financial Incentives*.) States have also relied on private funding from corporations and foundations, such as the United Way, a prime mover in supporting quality improvement.⁴⁰ Kentucky has used a combination of CCDBG and Tobacco Settlement funds to cover administration costs. Colorado’s QRIS, though funded by the private sector, has drawn down CCDBG funds matched with private dollars from a state school readiness act.⁴¹

The price tag of a QRIS varies, depending upon the administrative structure, the standards set and the improvement costs. Administrative costs are driven by the system standards, the mechanisms for measuring compliance, and the frequency of monitoring. More frequent assessment requires greater investment, as does validation of the

QRIS.⁴² While new investment is critical, redirecting existing resources is an effective financing strategy, as many states have discovered. A QRIS that builds on and incorporates the standards and policies of existing systems, including child care, Head Start, pre-K, Early Intervention, and national accreditation, can tap into the resources that those systems provide.⁴³

Quality Improvement Efforts in New York State

While New York State has not been in the vanguard of quality improvement and ECE system-building, the state is well positioned to benefit from earlier efforts across the country. The past few years have seen dramatic progress in New York, as promising initiatives have emerged on both the state and local level, including the design and development of a quality rating and improvement system.

Local Initiatives

Even in dormant times, communities across the state have sought to improve quality. Partnerships of school districts, social service agencies, pediatricians, Head Start, child care resource and referral agencies, foundations, and institutions of higher education, these local initiatives have had a considerable impact and are inspiring the next generation of work.

The Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership (RECAP), a pioneering quality improvement initiative, targeted pre-kindergartners and established an integrated data system to track teacher training, program quality, and children's performance. Chemung County's School Readiness Project focused on all regulated ECE programs in the county, providing nurse home visits, parent education, and environmental assessments of all centers with universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) contracts. Professional development is at the core of Building Brighter Futures for Broome, an initiative that has provided opportunities for college credits and 135-hour certificates for infant/toddler caregivers in home- and center-based settings. Buffalo's Success by Six has focused on accreditation, providing technical assistance, training, and individual mentoring to 175 family and group family providers. And Westchester County's efforts, through Early Care and Education Forward, involved improving business management; facilitating collaboration with school districts on UPK; and developing and providing technical assistance for program quality improvement plans.⁴⁴

New York City has been active and continues to accelerate its efforts in this arena. Since its inception in 2002, Quality New York (QNY), a comprehensive initiative supported by the United Way of New York City, has encouraged ECE programs to seek accreditation through NAEYC. A partnership of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, Child Care Inc. and Bank Street College of Education, QNY has worked with more than 150 of New York City's center-based programs, providing their staff with technical assistance, training, and mentoring, and serving as an example for other accreditation

projects throughout the country.⁴⁵ In addition, the city's visionary work on common standards and assessments has modeled extraordinary inter-agency collaboration, demonstrating the viability of community coalitions.⁴⁶

Figure 4



The Statewide Initiative

The quality of early childhood settings depends on the people who staff them. Indeed, the ECE workforce and the infrastructure to support their development constitute the core of quality improvement. As state system-building efforts accelerate, the alignment of the different components of a comprehensive ECE system—workforce, financing, standards, accountability, governance, and communication—will be essential. The state's emerging professional development and quality rating and improvement systems offer an unprecedented opportunity to move this work forward.⁴⁷ The publication this year of the *NYS Early Childhood Plan*, a product of the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative (ECCS),⁴⁸ the establishment of a Children's Cabinet in 2007, and the recent creation of an Early Childhood Advisory Council all testify to the importance accorded early childhood at the highest levels of state government.

Professional Development System

In collaboration with state partners, the New York State Early Childhood Professional Development Institute (PDI) has been designing the components of a comprehensive system of professional development. (See Figure 4.) A Trainers' Registry and Trainers' Credential have been established. Work on a Professional Development Record, a staff registry, and a Training Approval process is in progress, informing collaborative efforts to create a statewide Professional Development System. PDI has also created credit-bearing coursework that will lead to a credential designed by

the New York State Association for the Education of Young Children (NYSAEYC) for program administrators.

QUALITYstarsNY

New York State began considering the idea of a quality rating and improvement system in 2005, with a group convened by the New York State Child Care Coordinating Council (now the Early Care and Learning Council). After examining the quality rating systems and outcomes of 18 states, the group developed a set of common standards, which were then reviewed by more than 100 organizations and 300 providers and parents. Over the past two years, a smaller Design Group, with expertise in research on quality and child outcomes, has been working in partnership with various government agencies, including the Office of Children and Family Services, which has shown strong commitment to the establishment of a quality rating system for the state. While the planning continues, a website has been established to track progress in the development of the system, as well as to elicit feedback from parents, providers, professionals, and the general public.⁴⁹ QUALITYstarsNY will be field-tested later this year in 240 early childhood programs in 12 communities across the state, and implementation is anticipated for 2010. (See Figure 5.)

Toward a High-Quality, Comprehensive ECE System

New York State has made good progress in quality improvement and system-building. Unprecedented attention at the federal and state level offers a long-awaited window of opportunity to advance ECE system-building. The agenda is full, and much work remains. Implementation of a comprehensive, unified ECE system, however, will require a considerable commitment from the city, state, and the field. Sufficient public financing must be assured to support higher program standards as well as teacher preparation, recruitment, ongoing professional development, and adequate levels of compensation. The city and state must support policies and initiatives that promote national program accreditation. New York State's Early Learning Guidelines must be aligned with components of the professional development system and QRIS program standards. We must develop creative financing strategies that generate new public investment and redirect existing resources for the support of a comprehensive statewide QRIS. Both the city and the state must continue to provide strategic and financial support for the ongoing work of system-building, heeding the lessons of those states that have paved the way. And finally, ECE professionals, at all levels, across the spectrum of settings, must be strong advocates, articulating the value of the work that they do everyday and the pressing need to enhance quality through system reform.

In the current political climate, New York has its prime opportunity to build the system we have long been envisioning. Considerable resources already have been deployed, and if the profession can rise to the challenge,

Figure 5



additional resources and the highest quality of services for children will follow.

ENDNOTES

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New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute

Developing Adults Working with Developing Children

The New York City Early Childhood Professional Development Institute is a public/private partnership that brings together a range of city agencies, a consortium of private funders, and the nation's largest urban university to build a comprehensive system of professional development for individuals who work with young children in New York City.

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