



Child Care Connection

Testimony to the NJ Council for Young Children January 30, 2015

Thank you to members of the Council for providing an opportunity to give testimony. My name is Beth Gardiner, Director of Professional Development and Referral Services at Child Care Connection and the project director for the *Steps to Quality* Family Child Care initiative. Before I begin, I would like to also thank DOE and DFD for having given us the opportunity to participate in the development of the *Grow NJ Kids* family child care tool.

As the *Steps to Quality Family Child Care Initiative* is now ending its first year, I would like to comment on the program's successes and lessons learned, with the intention of informing future early care and education efforts addressed by the Council. This project, funded through The Nicholson Foundation (with additional support from The Schumann Fund), serves as the pilot for the *Grow NJ Kids* Quality Rating Improvement Scale for Family Child Care (*Grow NJ Kids* FCC) as we move into 2015. Child Care Connection leads the project, in collaboration with two other county-based child care resource and referral agencies (Programs for Parents and Community Child Care Solutions).

This initiative serves 36 state-registered family child care providers in targeted low-income areas in Essex, Mercer, and Middlesex counties. Participating providers must serve at least one infant and/or toddler and child on a subsidy and are required to obtain liability insurance and a criminal background check, in addition to joining the New Jersey Registry (PINJ). The network employs a multi-faceted approach to quality improvement and includes:

- Assessment, using a checklist that field tests components of *Grow NJ Kids* FCC and the *Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale* (FCCERS)
- On-site technical assistance visits
- Group training
- Equipment and learning material incentive grants
- Professional development opportunities totaling 20 hours per year

Project collaborators are dedicated to promoting quality child care programs for the children of New Jersey, and recognize family child care as a viable option for families. As the family child care landscape in New Jersey evolves, it remains clear that this type of care continues to be a valuable system for providing care to the children of New Jersey. The *Steps to Quality Family Child Care Initiative* staff considered national early care and education research in the program design.

The initiative was successful in recruiting and maintaining the targeted number of 36 family child care providers serving low income families in three counties throughout the project year. After the initial assessment was completed, providers (with the support of Early Childhood Specialists), began working towards goals identified on individualized Quality Improvement



Action Plans. As data is being collected to begin analyzing the results of quality interventions, program staff have identified and documented certain components that can inform future efforts, especially those related to the launch of the *Grow NJ Kids* FCC as a part of the state's *Race to the Top* Early Learning Challenge Grant. Lessons learned during these initial stages can be organized into the following three categories:

1. **Planning for language needs must be considered:** The biggest challenge to date has been meeting the needs of Spanish-speaking providers. Twenty of thirty-six providers initially enrolled speak Spanish as their first language. This has required more staff hours for translating training materials, as it has been a challenge to locate materials available in Spanish. Another challenge was accessing FCCERS raters to conduct assessments in Spanish. With a large number of family child care providers speaking Spanish throughout the State, resources must be located and/or developed to effectively meet the needs of those providers.
2. **Family child care providers need individualized support:** The unique nature of family child care calls for a wide range of quality improvement supports and interventions. Varied education and literacy levels, along with a range of technological capacity and computer literacy levels have required a great amount of individualized assistance from the specialists. Even basic components such as registering for a program (e.g. liability insurance, NJ Registry, fingerprint background checks) require a great deal of time and support. Raising the bar of quality in family child care programs requires planning and allowances for adequate staff support.
3. **A multi-faceted approach attracts providers and increases the likelihood of quality improvement:** Provider feedback surveys indicate that motivation for joining the network was not due to one aspect of the program, but the combination of opportunities offered. Participants value the group training, the individualized on-site supports, and the equipment and learning incentive grants equally. This variety of interventions also allows for multiple ways to make effective quality changes in programs and should be included in any future endeavors with this population.

The *Steps to Quality* team has submitted a proposal to The Nicholson Foundation for funding to support a second year with this cohort, along with a plan to add new providers to the network. Working closely with the Division of Family Development and the Department of Education (in support of the *Race to the Top* grant) we will continue to evaluate and document project activities. It is our intention to continue to make policy and programmatic recommendations as the State rolls out the new *Grow NJ Kids* FCC tool in 2015.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our findings; we ask that the Council keep in mind the particular needs of the family child care provider population as they continue to develop and refine systems to support high quality early childhood programs. Thank you.

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Steps to Quality