

where are we headed with center accreditation?

Trends in quality assurance

by Roger Neugebauer

With a new administration in Washington, DC poised to expand federal support for early childhood services, it is important that our profession take a close look at how we can assure parents that we are providing the high quality early childhood services they need and deserve. In this *Exchange* Trend Report, we will examine the role of center accreditation in providing this assurance. We will take a brief look back at historical developments, review where we now stand, and look ahead at what the future holds.

A brief history of quality assurance in the United States

Over the past five decades, there have been a variety of efforts to provide markers of quality . . .

■ **In the 1950s and '60s**, the only measure of quality was licensing standards for child care programs. Not only was the bar for quality set very low by most of the state and local standards, but there were also many gaps — family child care, after school programs, part day programs, and church operated programs were either exempt or ignored in many licensing standards.

■ **In the 1970s**, two new attempts at measuring quality were explored. The new Head Start program required local programs it funded to adhere to federal Program Performance Standards. These Standards, though periodically updated, are still in effect today. At the same time, early childhood advocates promoted Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements to be applied to all programs receiving federal monies. At a time when 'deregulation' was popular and when early child care advocates argued in public over these requirements, they were never enacted by the federal government.

■ **In the 1980s**, NAEYC pioneered a new approach to quality assurance when it launched its Early Childhood Program Accreditation project. For decades, as centers in large numbers achieved NAEYC accreditation, it became the *Good Housekeeping* Seal of Approval for early childhood programs. Over the years, a number of alternative accreditation systems were launched.

■ **Around the turn of this century**, a new approach for monitoring quality came into vogue — quality rating and improvement systems. According to

the National Child Care Information Center, today 17 states have state-wide quality rating systems in place. Usually these systems benchmark all licensed programs against specified levels of quality. Center accreditation is typically incorporated into these systems as a means of achieving the highest levels of quality.

What accreditation options do centers have?

For a decade after its launch in 1985, NAEYC accreditation was practically the only show in town. However, in recent years, a variety of organizations have launched new accreditation systems. In conducting research for this report, we found references to nearly 20 different systems. At the end of this report, we have listed those systems which are most active and visible.

Of course, all accreditation systems are not equal — they vary considerably in terms of standards assessed, procedures for assessment, numbers accredited, types of programs served, and cost. Many of the newer accreditation systems are targeted at specific niches in the field. For example, NAFCC accreditation is designed specifically for family child care programs; NAA accreditation for

school-age programs; AMS School Accreditation for Montessori schools; and ELEA Early Childhood Center Accreditation for centers in certain Lutheran churches.

Accreditation systems enjoy varying levels of acceptance by states. For example, Florida accepts 14 different accreditation systems to qualify centers for 'Gold Seal Quality Care' designation; Oklahoma accepts six; Kentucky seven; and Pennsylvania four. A number of states accept only NAEYC, NAFCCC, and NAA.

A good comparison of many accreditation systems can be found on the Florida Department of Children and Families web site (Gold Seal). However, readers hoping for a definitive ranking of these systems are in for disappointment. While research has consistently demonstrated a correlation between NAEYC Accreditation and elements of quality (McDonald), to date there is no definitive study comparing the rigor of all these systems.

We did survey some key early childhood trend watchers in our field on their views on the options now available to programs. The general consensus was that NAEYC accreditation is still the preeminent accreditation system, but that recent revisions have made it nearly unattainable for a significant segment of the provider population. Examples of observations . . .

Gail Conway, Chicago Metro AEYC: "In the state of Illinois, NAEYC Accreditation is a choice in the QRS system. . . . Yes, some centers are overwhelmed by the new NAEYC accreditation (time and expense). Some centers have chosen other accreditations because of the rigor and expense. Yet, NAEYC accreditation is still considered the gold standard in the field."

Excerpts from an Arizona Child Care Association Discussion Document (Arizona): "ACCA recognizes NAEYC and other national accreditations as measures of high quality. Recently, various local and state groups have discussed using the number of NAEYC accredited centers as a primary benchmark of increasing the number as a major goal. ACCA has consistently expressed support for several types of national accreditation, including NAEYC, NAC, and NECPA, but is concerned when achieving national accreditation is mentioned as the only significant measure of quality. This concern prompted an informal review of the types of centers that are accredited. . . . It is clear that it would take a massive infusion of resources into the early childhood system to achieve significantly larger numbers of NAEYC accredited centers. Based on this review it is reasonable to question whether it is practical to focus on a goal of increasing NAEYC accreditation for the vast majority of licensed centers and whether it should be a priority for resources versus other more realistic and achievable benchmarks of quality improvement."

Excerpt from NAEYC position paper on accreditation (McDonald): "For NAEYC accreditation to be truly effective, other elements of the early care and education system also must function at an optimal level. In addition to adequate licensing requirements, critical elements include the capacity of higher education institutions to provide high-quality teacher and staff preparation; the provision of meaningful ongoing professional development; the governance structures at state and local levels; affordable access for all families who choose out-of-home programs; and the financing of all parts of the system."

Luis Hernandez, ECE specialist, TTAS, University of Kentucky: "NAEYC sets the highest demands for quality; it challenges the field to go beyond the norm; it raises the bar to be the best for all

children . . . it requires work, effort, resources to meet that high bar of excellence which alienates some in the field. The real perspective is for us in the United States to do a comparison to other systems around the planet and recognize that our standards of care and early education are far behind. With NAEYC accreditation, a real comprehensive system for children, families, and staff has emerged."

Advocate in western United States:

"Since the day NAEYC announced its accreditation system I have been a real champion for it. However, after the latest changes I cannot in good conscience recommend it to centers in my state — it is too expensive and too time consuming, and, after completing the process, centers are not told specifically about areas needing improvement."

Marsha Engquist, Lake Shore Schools, Chicago, Illinois: "With the rewrite of NAEYC, schools able to achieve it will be 'elite.' Other accreditation systems will have to raise the bar for their accreditation or become 'the easy one.'"

Center accreditation and quality rating systems

With growing numbers of states enacting quality rating systems, where does this leave center accreditation systems? Do they fit hand in glove, with the lower levels of the QRS systems providing stepping stones on the way to the ultimate goal of accreditation, or will QRS gradually replace accreditation as the marker of quality? Here is what some of our trend watchers observed:

Bob Siegel, Easter Seals, Chicago, Illinois: "I believe the major thrust for the future will be the QRS systems, perhaps in concert with other accrediting bodies. They are simpler for the public to understand and fill a marketplace need. For the time being, accreditation will serve more as a professional incentive,

and does work nicely as such. . . . For accreditation to matter in the future, much more attention must be given to the marketplace. Right now, our field is in danger of creating not a system of quality, but one of elite centers that have the time, money, and resources to 'deal with accreditation' . . . not necessarily the same as doing a great job for young children and their families."

Anne Mitchell, Immediate Past-President of NAEYC: "QRIS were developed in many states in response to the large gap between licensing standards and NAEYC accreditation standards (state's tiered child care subsidy reimbursement systems often paid more to accredited programs). QRIS are a way to recognize centers' progress on the route to national accreditation and provide families with an understandable way to judge the relative quality of programs for their children. Different accreditation systems, because they are not equivalent, probably belong at different levels in a particular state's QRIS. QRIS are different from state to state. If they all put sound national accreditation into their systems, then there would be a way to equate QRIS from one state to another. That would be good for families who move and for policymakers who want to know how they stack up with other states. National accreditation is potentially more important now than ever."

Debra Sullivan, President of Praxis Institute, Seattle, Washington: "I think we need both accreditation and QRS. I see accreditation as providing a 'stamp of approval,' so to speak, that lets parents know that a program meets certain standards. I think QRS should always be QRIS with the 'I' standing for improvement. A good quality rating and improvement system helps programs increase quality — with the final standard being accreditation. And, I'd prefer that there be more than one accrediting institution. When there is only one, or a very few, there is always the possibility of creating gate keepers instead of gate

Early Childhood Program Accreditation Systems

NAEYC Accreditation

Sponsor: National Association for the Education of Young Children
Launched: 1985
Accredited programs: 7,831
Contact: www.naeyc.org

NAFCC Accreditation

Sponsor: National Association for Family Child Care
Launched: 1987
Accredited programs: 825
Contact: www.nafcc.org

Accredited Professional Preschool Learning Environment

Sponsor: Florida Association for Child Care Management
Launched: 1997
Accredited programs: 750
Contact: www.faccm.org/apple.asp

NAA Accreditation

Sponsor: National AfterSchool Association
Launched: 1989
Accredited programs: 606
Contact: www.naaweb.org

NECPA

Sponsor: National Early Childhood Program Accreditation
Launched: 1993
Accredited programs: 465
Contact: www.necpa.net

National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC)

Sponsor: NACCP
Launched: 1992
Accredited Programs: 439
Contact: www.nacaccreditation.org

COA

Sponsor: Council on Accreditation
Launched: 1977
Accredited programs: 345
Contact: www.coastandards.org

AMS School Accreditation

Sponsor: American Montessori Society
Launched: 1999
Accredited programs: 162
Contact: www.amshq.org/schools_accreditation.htm

National Lutheran School Accreditation

Sponsor: Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
Launched: 2003 (early childhood portion)
Accredited programs: 86
Contact: www.necpa.net

ACSI Accreditation

Sponsor: Association of Christian Schools International
Launched: 1997
Accredited programs: 40
Contact: www.acsi.org

ELEA Early Childhood Center Accreditation

Sponsor: Evangelical Lutheran Education Association
Launched: 2005
Accredited programs: 20
Contact: www.eleanational.org/accreditation.html

welcomers. Accreditation should not become so elitist or scarce that no one can get it."

While it is too early to tell if quality rating systems will replace or support accreditation systems, there are two areas where quality rating systems appear to offer significant advantages . . .

■ **They are visible.** One of the major criticisms of all accreditation systems is that they are not household names to parents. In *Exchange* surveys, center directors frequently cite the positive

impact on staff motivation from participation in the self-study portion of accreditation. Yet they nearly unanimously observe that being accredited has not attracted any parents to their center. On the other hand, since quality rating systems rate all centers in a state, parents soon seize upon this as a quick way to judge center quality (whether they consider this a key factor in their final selection is not so clear).

■ **They incent programs to improve.** In many states, being accredited by

certain of the accreditation systems enables programs to receive a higher rate of reimbursement. In most states with quality rating systems, centers receive increasing levels of reimbursement through all the steps in the process, thus offering some incentive to centers who may not be able to achieve accreditation.

An upbeat prognosis

It is the American way to “let a thousand flowers bloom.” Instead of decreeing one right way of doing business, we let the market work things out. Beta and VHS technology competed for years before VHS eventually became the defacto standard.

Having dozens of quality rating and accreditation systems in play at the same time is certainly confusing. And, it splinters quality enhancement efforts in a number of directions. But if we view this as a grand experiment, we are testing out a range of avenues for broadcasting quality. In time, cumbersome, ineffective systems will fall away and we will start reaching consensus on which systems are most useful.

As statewide quality rating systems are refined and coordinated, they will be seen as the way to provide a convenient, across the board, rating of programs. But for monitoring quality at the highest level, program accreditation systems will continue to provide the truest, in depth assurance of quality for parents, regulators, and funders.

References and resources

Arizona Child Care Association. “An Informal ‘Look Behind’ at NAEYC Accreditation in Arizona.” www.azcca.org/index.html
“Gold Seal Quality Care Program: A Side-by-Side Comparison of Florida Approved Accreditation Programs.” www.dcf.state.fl.us/childcare/goldseal.shtml.

McDonald, D. “Elevating the Field: Using NAEYC Early Childhood Program Accreditation to Support and Reach Higher Quality in Early Childhood Programs.” www.naeyc.org/policy/state/pdf/NAEYCpubpolReport.pdf

“Systematic Approaches to Improving Quality of Care.” *Child Care Bulletin*, Issue 32, <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/topics/topic/index.cfm?topicId=43>.