
New Kids on the Block:

Findings from the First Year of California's State Preschool QRIS Block Grant

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Executive Summary

In June 2014, Governor Brown signed into law a budget act and related trailer bills that made new investments in California's education system. Included in those provisions was the creation of an Early Learning Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Block Grant, an annual and ongoing Proposition 98 grant in the amount of \$50 million awarded to counties to build their QRIS through California State Preschool Programs (CSPP). Quality rating systems have been developing in California for more than a decade, and have grown substantially since 2011 with the injection of federal dollars through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC). As RTT-ELC funds drew to a close in 2015, this Block Grant represents a significant contribution to maintaining a system of quality improvement in the state, and constitutes the Brown Administration's first financial commitment to expanding California's quality system.

The CSPP Block Grant is one of two major funding sources for QRIS in the state. The intent of the CSPP Block Grant is to allow counties to award local block grants to providers rated at the highest levels of quality to maintain their high rating, and help improve programs not yet rated as high quality.

Findings from the First Year of Block Grant Applications

- According to county applications, the use of grant dollars will lead to significant expansions in the number of programs engaged in QRIS: 1,272 new programs will be enrolled into QRIS, and an additional 1,031 programs are expected to reach the top tiers of quality over the next three years. If successfully implemented, over 59,000 more children will be served by programs with the highest quality ratings. In 23 counties, 100 percent of CSPP providers will be served by the QRIS.

- Counties proposed to spend **\$15.4 million** in direct grants to CSPP providers rated at a Tier 4 or Tier 5 to maintain or deepen the quality of their programs.
- Over half of the total \$50 million (**\$25.5 million**) was targeted to boosting the ratings of lower-performing providers not yet rated at Tier 4 and helping top tier programs maintain their high-quality rating. Counties planned to use these funds on staff training, stipends and incentives for professional development, and purchasing essential classroom supplies, among other activities.
- Counties planned to spend **\$7 million** of the \$50 million to improve awareness of and access to high-quality programs.
- Several large counties plan to use CSPP Block Grant funding to maintain or resurrect county-wide Centralized Eligibility Lists (CEL). CELs serve as a one-step process for families to sign up for all available local child care programs, and help counties quantify the number of children waiting for services. In 2011 state funding for CELs was eliminated due to budget cuts, making it more difficult for families to access information about subsidized care.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Governor Brown's proposed 2016-17 budget included a plan to merge the CSPP Block Grant, CSPP program funding, and Transitional Kindergarten funding into a new \$1.6 billion Targeted Play and Learning Block Grant. The grant would be disbursed to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to develop programs that prioritize services for each community's lowest-income and most at-risk four- and five-year-old children.¹ These proposed changes to the CSPP Block Grant raise concerns about the impact on California's quality rating system. The Block Grant is the only part of the state budget that supports quality improvement for early learning, yet with no specified standards for quality outlined in the proposal, the future of the state's involvement in quality improvement and rating remains unclear.

The Governor and legislature should remove the CSPP Block Grant from budget negotiations. As articulated by many early childhood and K-12 education advocates, the changes outlined in the Governor's budget proposal are large and consequential, and merit a longer process for negotiations and vetting than is possible within the timeframe of the state budget cycle.²

The legislature should codify its commitment to supporting quality interactions in a wide range of early childhood programs for California's children. Clear and consistent information about the components of high-quality interactions would ultimately help improve program quality and children's outcomes even if programs are not enrolled in QRIS.

For more information and to access the full report, please visit theopportunityinstitute.org/publications.

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