

# quality in organizations large and small

by Bob Siegel

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Aren't we all just a little bit tired of the endless discussions of quality? In the child care industry, you can get away with almost any statement if you simply invoke the phrase "to increase quality." That doesn't mean that any of us, including me, are not passionately committed to doing our very best for young children and their families. However, constant discussion about quality doesn't make it happen. Additionally, simply leaving it in outside hands doesn't assure it will always be so.

Child care (provider) organizations have invested a great amount of time, effort, and funds into creating and refining systems of externally measured and



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President of his own training and consulting company, Partners in Professional Development. In addition to his current position, Bob has worked as a preschool teacher, long-time child care director, graduate school teacher, children's museum director, ECE management consultant and trainer. As a national expert, he often provides training and consultation in the areas of inclusion, staff development and supervision, and the business aspects of the child care industry.

mandated quality assurance. For over two decades, we have participated in accreditation systems operated by NAEYC, NAC, and others. In recent years, many of us have also been involved in the efforts to integrate a method of rating quality (QRS) for consumers into our states' child care systems. These are all fine efforts and many of them are absolutely excellent systems. It is not my intention here to quarrel with any of them. As a matter of fact, we need these kinds of external systems to help bring out the best in all of us. The richness and complexity of these accreditation guidelines and QRS standards represent work that none of us personally, nor our organizations, could have done by ourselves. Perhaps of even greater importance, these umbrella organizations and their quality systems provides each of our child care companies with a method of gaining an external validation of the quality of our services. This external validation is important for several reasons:

- It's someone else saying we're great. In an era where every company trumpets what they're doing as 'the very best,' we gain a large upside in the marketplace when that marker of

excellence is bestowed on us from *the experts*.

- As mentioned, none of us could have invented as good a system by ourselves and our services benefit from the good work of the field at large.
- Having attained this external statement of quality, our child care companies can use this to increase our prominence and status to the outside world. Some organizations can then leverage this status to grow services, increase revenue, successfully approach foundations, or simply increase enrollment.
- We do not need to expend our own resources to devise a similar system within our own companies, thus siphoning off those resources (time, money, oversight) away from our essential day-to-day operations.
- It offers our stakeholders at the center some reinforcement for what they do everyday and for their efforts in gaining national (or statewide) accreditation. There is a positive effect that comes with this achievement for our

staff, especially the classroom teachers. One of my strongest memories from the first year of the NAEYC Accreditation Academy is attending the Association's Annual Conference with some of my faculty.

One of our lead teachers found me late in day one of the conference and shared her experience attending her first national conference. She raved about the experience but then relayed her feelings about our center being (only) in the self-study phase of the accreditation process. She said, "We know how good we are and you know I'm passionately committed to excellence, but don't you be sending me back here next year without that yellow ribbon attached to my name badge." That yellow ribbon said 'Accredited Program.' She wasn't questioning what we did or our commitment to quality — she just wanted to make sure we got credit for it.

Hopefully, by now, I've shown my belief in, and commitment to a system of quality assurance from an outside entity. That teacher proudly wore her ribbon through every moment of the conference the next year. In 1999, I went to work for the Easter Seals headquarters where I was hired to launch a Network of inclusive model child development centers that would serve children of all abilities. One of the very first criteria that we set for Network membership was that a center must operate by national accreditation guidelines from the beginning and then achieve that accreditation within its first three years. We started with 18 centers that first year; now Easter Seals operates over 80 centers nationally. Still, we insist on that external measure of quality assurance.

Fortunately for vending machines and for child care companies, there are two sides of every coin. In this context, externally operated systems of quality are only one side. Each of our center sites must have, not only the passion

## Strategic Steps Toward Quality for Multi-Site Organizations

- Review with all stakeholders the mission, vision, and values of the entire organization.
- Determine your core reason for being in the child care business:
  - How that connects to quality
  - Operationalize that core statement
- Begin the process of brainstorming your own standards of quality for the organization and each of its school sites:
  - External
  - Internal
  - Future
 and be sure to ask . . .
  - Do your quality standards meet your mission?
  - How do we now get organizational buy-in?
  - Who is responsible for that quality integration plan; and by when?
  - How will we know when we're succeeding? (and lastly)
  - What will happen if we do not succeed?
- Set up the definition of success. It's essential for your organization and for your people to ask and answer the question: *How will we know when we get there?*
  - This ability to have people self-define their own points of success will increase their investment. At some level, we all work harder and more passionately when we've set out our own goals. Now, we truly own those goals.
  - The process of having people discuss the details that actually operationalize a concept start to make it real for everyone. Now, it's something that we as a group decided for ourselves, not another rule, regulation, or standard handed down to us. Again, we own it.
  - Asking "How will we know when we get there?" is a conversational way of getting to measurable objectives and benchmark setting through a more comfortable conversation. You still get to those important junctures, but the ease and comfort of the conversation makes everyone a contributor . . . and owner.
  - Lastly, the final element of this step is asking the question; "Okay, I think we've got it. Now, what could possibly screw it up?" This becomes a tremendously robust query at the (perceived) end of this defining quality conversation. Then you list all the things that can get in the way and begin to brainstorm ways of defeating each of these obstacles. What a powerful process for a planning group and its members to go through!
- My favorite question during any planning and/or change process is "So what?". I ask this of entire organizations and of its individual members. It's a question that can be put to people at any stage of the process. For example: If we achieve all of our quality indicators . . . so what? What does it mean to the center? What does it mean to you personally? Let's take this to extremes . . .
  - "Well, Director Suzie, if we hit all of these quality benchmarks, so what? What would it mean to us?"
  - "Well, everyone will know that we are really good."
  - "So what?"
  - "Well, people will talk about us."
  - "So what?"
  - "Our enrollment might go up."
  - "So what?"
  - "We'll bring in more money."
  - "And, so what?"
  - "I'll look good."
  - "And . . . so what?"
  - "Maybe I'll get a raise!"

These types of discussions with group members help to make it real for everyone. They help each of the involved individuals create his/her own set of internalized reward structures. It can be how each person sees the ultimate payoff for doing the work and committing to the organization.

for quality, but a system to achieve it as well. We cannot, and should not, count on an outside body to be the only daily barometer of quality. If this is true for a single center, it is exponentially so for large, multi-site organizations; where we are concerned about achieving consistent quality for not 1, but for, perhaps, 25 or 90 or 850 separate centers. No outside system, no matter how good, can be there day to day, assuring excellence.

But even beyond that logistical limit, truly engaging and committing to quality must come from within. If we come from an aspect of how adults learn, we know that the things we know and do best are the things that we experience, and, where we are engaged in that learning. The areas that we perform our best are those that we are passionate about. The same can be said about organizations. No matter what is said and written, each of our child care organizations has its own culture, values, and mores. Why would we think that achieving quality throughout each of our large organizations can be achieved with a one-size fits all system — no matter how good that outside system is? To realistically attain that every day quality execution, we need our people to be engaged and passionate about what they are doing at their worksite — and for their employer. The Early Care and Education field speaks passionately and

profusely about diversity. Let's also honor this in the diverse ways that we all go about our work, and in being the best we can be . . . as individuals and as organizations.

It will be in the systemic marriage of external and internal standards and processes where we will accomplish our highest level of excellence. As in any marriage, there will have to be an on-going commitment by everyone. The path toward external accreditation is laid out very well. Internally, our organizations must also have a clearly laid out road map toward superior performance. Please allow me to recommend the process shown in the adjacent box. The five strategic steps listed are not intended to act as the entire planning process and action plan template for quality assurance. They are more a set of strategic recommendations to move your organization, and each of your centers, to a point of excellence. You have to decide if quality is best defined by the peak performers, a high degree of consistency, or marking where the lowest performers are. You have to decide who will be directly involved in the process; I suggest a very diverse group by level in the organization, years with the company, and the usual external factors of race, gender, socio economic status, and so on. The end result of the process will be higher quality services,

a stronger organization, and a more satisfied workforce.

I hope that I have convinced you of the need to combine both an external system with an internal process in trying to reach a high level of quality throughout your organization. In my speaking engagements for many years, I have often stated that the initial steps toward quality begin with two simple measures: 1) get rid of bad teachers, and 2) get more money. Fairly simple by definition, more difficult to realize in actuality, but still good starting points. The third part of this equation is what I've been advocating, i.e. combining the strength of an external system with your own internal company process. When done well, it will also help you reach those first two steps of money and great staff. Let me conclude by quoting my colleague, Linda Smith, the Executive Director of NACCRRRA who I heard say recently, "QUALITY IS NOT AN ADD-ON." It's not something to be added on top of other standards, regulations, and program guidelines. Quality is something that each organization commits to from the beginning. Quality is something that is part of everything we do and helps define who we are. When done well, children and families will benefit and that's the best 'so what' of all.