



Broadening Policy for Mixed Delivery: Incorporating Montessori Programs in State Quality Improvement Systems



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Introduction

The landscape of the early care and education world is complex with many different pedagogies, funding sources, program standards and approaches to quality improvement. The work of aligning all of these to create equitable systems is challenging for states seeking common metrics to identify and support ECE programs in a continuous improvement journey. The industry is struggling with a workforce crisis, supply and demand issues, and the challenge of providing enough variety to give every family the opportunity to choose a quality program they feel is the best fit for their individual child and family context. States are making significant advancements in their Quality Improvement Systems (QIS) as they look for solutions to widen the aperture and fully embrace a mixed delivery system that will best serve children, families,

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and the early care and education workforce. To that end, it is important that QIS rubrics become more flexible in creating different pathways to quality to include a variety of established, high-quality delivery models. [The Montessori Public Policy Initiative](#) (MPPI) and the [BUILD Initiative](#) have partnered on this document to support states as they work toward including successful and long-standing pedagogically driven models such as Montessori.

With over 3,000 Montessori programs across the country, including child care centers, charter schools, and magnet and district schools, the Montessori community is a vital part of the early childhood ecosystem and is committed to ensuring that all children have access to this evidence based, whole-child, high-quality approach to early

childhood education. Longitudinal research has demonstrated that high-quality Montessori programs erase the income opportunity gap over a three-year span (Lillard, A.S., 2017) and that Montessori students are more likely to have met or exceeded state standards in each of four subjects when compared to non-Montessori public school students with similar demographics. In addition, when comparing students with similar demographics in public Montessori vs. non-Montessori students, “Montessori students experienced greater achievement growth in ELA [English Language Arts], math, and social studies. Further, the benefits of Montessori extend beyond standardized test scores, as Montessori students also demonstrated better school attendance and behavior” (Culclasure et al 2018).

QIS rubrics often have components that are not aligned with Montessori pedagogy. As a result, Montessori programs either choose not to participate or cannot rate highly even though they are providing high-quality early care and education. Since states often require QIS participation for providers who accept public funding, Montessori is not an option for lower SES families in many places. Below we identify several areas where minor modifications to QIS rubrics can ensure that quality is correctly captured for Montessori programs and help expand the availability of high-quality ECE for ALL children in your state.



① Career Lattices and Workforce Registries

Challenge: Many QIS include teacher qualifications as part of the quality rubric and use their state's workforce registry or

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career lattice to evaluate teacher qualifications. To address both workforce shortages and equity issues in workforce preparation, many states are expanding their pipeline of qualified early childhood teachers by recognizing multiple pathways

to higher levels within their workforce registries or career lattices.

Montessori teachers are an excellent example of highly qualified teachers who are often unintentionally overlooked in pathways. At a minimum, Montessori teacher preparation requires the equivalent of 32 credit hours of coursework and includes a robust mentored and supervised student teaching experience. At the time of publication, several states including DE, FL, MI, SC, and WA already recognize a Montessori credential with an unrelated bachelor's degree as equivalent to a bachelor's in ECE on their career ladder and several more are in the process of updating to include Montessori credentials at this same level.

Recommendation: Examine the state's career ladder, lattice, or equivalent and place individuals with a Montessori credential plus a bachelor's degree in any field at the same level as individuals with a bachelor's in ECE, or for states using the Unifying Framework, designate them as ECE III. MPPI can provide supporting information, correct language, and examples from other states for this recommendation.



② Approved Curricula

Challenge: States want to ensure that children are learning through and engaging with a high-quality curriculum. Several states include Montessori or other research-based curricula in their approved curriculum options.

This inclusion is critical as in several states, child care subsidy payments, universal pre-K, and other public funding sources are tied to QIS ratings that are contingent on using an approved curriculum.

Acknowledging that Montessori's comprehensive approach meets or exceeds state criteria for curriculum will open up options for families who rely on public funding to enroll their children.

Recommendation: Add Montessori to the list of approved curricula. Work with MPPI and your state's Montessori advocacy group if you require a specific application or alignment with your state's early learning standards.

Many states already list Montessori as an approved curriculum for ECE programs including DC, FL, GA, IL, MD, MI, MN, SC, TN, VA, WA.



3 Classroom Environmental Assessments

Challenge: Observational assessments can be a valuable tool for coaching and obtaining data for continuous quality improvement, but it is important that these tools account for the fact that quality can look different in different settings. The observational assessment tools that are typically used in early childhood environments were developed based on research and practice in conventional early childhood settings. Montessori classrooms align with some, but not all, of the measures in these assessments, yet lack of alignment does not indicate lack of quality or absence of positive child outcomes.

Recommendation: Work with MPPI and your state Montessori association to identify the ways that your state can implement policy on learning environment assessments that will accurately reflect program quality in Montessori schools. MPPI can support this work by sharing clear information about the specific areas of these tools that are not compatible with Montessori classroom environments and how policy can be written to accommodate those philosophical difference while supporting strong child outcomes.



4 Montessori Accreditation and Recognition

Challenge: Because Montessori classrooms approach early childhood education differently than many non-Montessori approaches, QIS rubrics are generally not set up to recognize quality in a Montessori classroom. As states revise their QIS rubrics, it is in their interest to ensure that all high-quality ECE programs are recognized as such. This will be beneficial to families and enable all high-quality programs to participate in their mixed delivery system.

*States that recognize
Montessori accreditation:
AR, CO, ID, IL, ME, MN,
PA, TN, WA, WI*

Recommendation: Just as some states assign a high-quality rating to programs that are NAEYC accredited through an alternate pathway approach, recognizing the expertise of national organizations that already set benchmarks and recognize quality in Montessori schools can streamline the state's process of assigning a quality rating to Montessori schools. States will have assurances that the school will be continuing to address and improve quality, as that process is already embedded in those accreditation/recognition systems.

The [Association Montessori International](#) and the [American Montessori Society](#) are two excellent examples of national organizations whose Recognized and Accredited schools must demonstrate adherence to strict standards. MPPI can provide states with various options to easily identify fully implemented Montessori programs to encourage their participation in QIS and ensure that policy exceptions are limited to schools that incorporate all the essential elements of Montessori pedagogy.



5 Child Care Licensing Regulations

Another area that can impact QIS participation is the way in which Montessori standards are or are not incorporated into child care regulations. Below are two examples of licensing barriers that can impact QIS participation.

Challenge #1: Child care licensing regulations

Some states require providers to participate in their QIS in order to be approved to care for children who qualify for certain public funding streams. Many QIS systems require programs to hold a child care license. Yet, child care licensing regulations themselves often contain terms that are not compatible with Montessori standards, such as not allowing the three-year mixed age groupings, classroom materials, or group size/ratios that Montessori standards require. Therefore, many Montessori programs use available licensing exemptions to preserve the integrity of their pedagogy, and thus cannot participate in QIS, making these excellent programs unavailable to families who qualify for public funding.

CO, DC, MD, TN, OR, WA have all incorporated regulations adjusted for the way the Montessori classrooms are designed

Recommendation: Revise licensing regulations to allow accredited or verified Montessori programs to implement their pedagogy in full, while maintaining the quality and integrity of their pedagogical approach. If your state has legally license-exempt programs, investigate how they could still participate in the QIS, especially if they have oversight from a different group such as Department of Defense, tribal child care, or Montessori accreditors such as the American Montessori Society (AMS) and the Association Montessori International (AMI), (both of which are also DOD recognized accreditors).

Challenge # 2: Ratios and Group Sizes

An issue that arises in licensing and continues into the QIS is adult:child ratios and group size. A Montessori classroom has several essential pedagogical components, including higher ratios and group sizes along with three-year mixed age groupings and highly qualified teachers, that work in concert with one another to create the high-quality environment and produce the excellent outcomes for which Montessori is known. The Montessori approach embeds child-initiated activities, continuous teacher observation, and individualized instruction, and yields a high level of engagement in learning activities - the very components that drive desired student outcomes, according to research. Because they are so integral to the Montessori approach, larger class sizes and higher ratios are core components of accreditation standards for Montessori schools.

Recommendation: Create an allowance for accredited Montessori early childhood programs to have group sizes up to 30 and adult:child ratios up to 1:15. Several states have already added increases to group sizes and ratios specifically for Montessori programs where the staff meet the required qualifications and the other aspects required in Montessori programs are met. MPPI can support states that want to ensure that programs are implementing all the core components of the Montessori method that support the larger class sizes and ratios.



Conclusion

Montessori education represents a permanent and expanding part of the early childhood ecosystem. Montessori's unique characteristics in certain areas have precipitated some challenges with fitting well into state QIS systems. As states seek to elevate the quality and availability of publicly funded early childhood seats, revising their QIS rubrics to include pedagogies such as Montessori will enable families relying on public funding to have greater choice and enrich the quality dialogue within the early childhood community. Early childhood care and education will remain in the public eye for the foreseeable future. As we advocate for increased public funding and support for this work, this is a critical time for states to be examining the flexibility of their approach to quality and ways to enhance access to the widest variety of programs so that each family has the power to choose what is best for its needs.



About MPPI and BUILD



MPPI
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MPPI envisions a world enriched and made equitable through widely accessible Montessori education. To make this vision a reality, MPPI champions a policy landscape that expands equitable access to high-fidelity Montessori education. MPPI works in over 40 states and uses

its expertise to achieve policy changes around several issues impacting Montessori program quality and accessibility. MPPI's state level work focuses on advocacy for more inclusive policies in universal preschool, QIS rubrics, child-care regulations, public-school policies, and more.



The BUILD Initiative is a national effort that advances state work on behalf of young children (prenatal through five), their families, and communities. BUILD staff partner with early childhood state leaders focused on early learning, health and nutrition, mental health, child welfare, and family support and engagement to create the policies, infrastructure, and cross-sector connections necessary for quality and equity. BUILD provides consultation, planning, and tailored implementation assistance, learning opportunities, resources, and cross-state peer exchanges. These efforts help state leaders improve and expand access to quality and promote equitable outcomes for our youngest children.



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