



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



The cycle of self-assessment and continuous improvement

One of the key objectives of the *National Quality Framework (NQF)* is to promote continuous improvement in the quality of education and care services.

Services throughout Australia are undertaking self-assessment against the *National Quality Standard (NQS)*, completing their Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) and using these as tools to guide improvement. Management, educators and families in each service are analysing the expectations of the standards and elements of the NQS, acknowledging what the service is already doing well and identifying the areas that require attention.

Keeping families in the loop

Families are encouraged to be part of the self-assessment process and it is respectful to keep everyone informed about how the service is progressing in working towards achieving the identified goals.

Services are communicating with families in various ways, such as through newsletters or emails and displaying their current QIP in the foyer.

Powlett Reserve Children's Centre and Kindergarten realised that displaying the QIP in its template form wasn't attracting the interest of families. They decided that they would make a visual display that showed the months ahead with the various steps or strategies included. This not only had a beneficial effect of informing families about the QIP and helping them understand aspects of the NQF but it also alerted them to the goals being worked on.

Another service, Waratah Drive Child Care Centre in Manunda, Queensland decided to create a poster to celebrate the successful achievement of one of their identified goals for improvement. Their goal (Element 3.2.1) was to ensure that the natural environment was well-maintained and safe. The steps they used to achieve the goal included arranging to have termites treated, unsafe limbs removed from trees and foliage thinned by 50 per cent to allow more light into the garden. The poster included a description of harvesting the mangoes before the lopping occurred, having more light in the cubby house now that the branches have been removed and comments about the beauty of the canopy through which they could see the sky again. Families showed a lot of interest in the poster, stopping to look and discuss it with their children.





Once quality improvements have been completed they should be removed from the current QIP as they are not something that is currently being worked on.

However, 'It is recommended that previous versions of the service's Quality Improvement Plan are also kept to demonstrate the service's achievements and progress.' (*Guide to the National Law and National Regulations*, p. 42). Some services have set up separate 'QIP Achievements' files on the computer and in a hard copy for families and visitors to see so that everyone can celebrate the progress being made.

Updating the QIP

Regulation 56—Review and revision of Quality Improvement Plans

(1) The approved provider of an education and care service must review and revise the quality improvement plan for the service having regard to the *National Quality Standard*:

- (a) at least annually; and
- (b) at any time when directed by the Regulatory Authority.

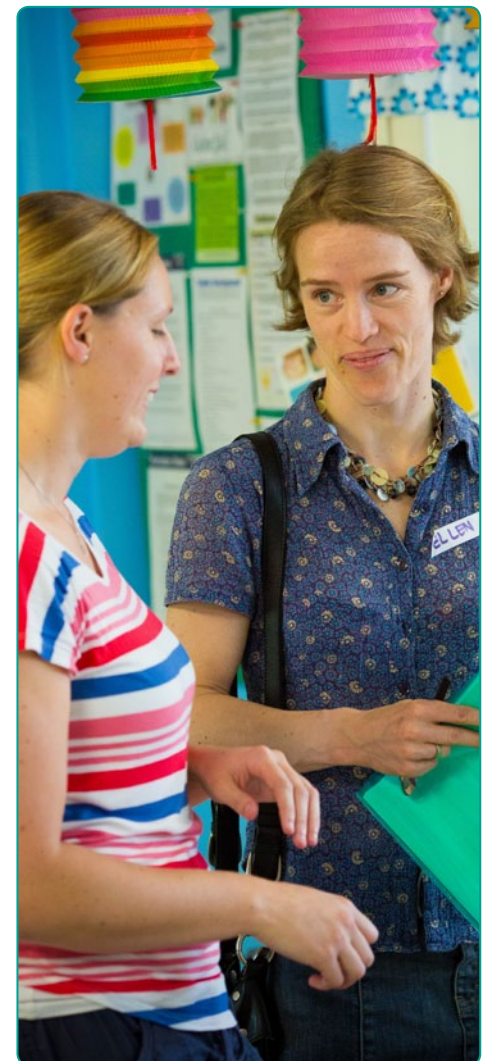
Education and Care Services Regulations (December, 2011) p. 77

While the Education and Care Services Regulations require that QIPs are reviewed at least annually, services are encouraged to regard their QIPs as dynamic, evolving documents and to continuously review, adapt and update them.

A first step is to ensure that the progress column in the QIP template (*Guide to Developing the Quality Improvement Plan*, Appendix 2: Quality Improvement Plan template) is kept up-to-date as steps towards achieving the improvements are implemented. Reflecting on what has been achieved, what still needs to be worked on and reviewing the strategies and timelines, keeps the QIP a 'living' document. Some services have found it useful to have one goal per page in the template so that there is room in the document to add the reflections on progress.

Services have been using various prompts to ensure that this regular updating occurs such as:

- including a 'Review of the QIP' on the agenda at every team meeting
- using a calendar reminder on the computer or in a diary to remember when expected timelines for various goals in the QIP have been estimated for completion
- delegating various team members to carry out the steps or strategies towards improvement and report back by an agreed date so that the progress column can be updated.



A service may need to update their QIP after the assessment and rating visit. Depending on the rating allocated, the Regulatory Authority may request the service to revise the QIP to ensure that quality improvement occurs for a particular Standard. The NQS Assessment and Rating Report provides clear direction about what is needed in each area.



Continuous self-assessment

As well as maintaining work on their QIPs, services need to continue the cycle of self-assessment to identify additional improvements.

No service stays the same over time and changes in practice are triggered in various ways:

- New enrolments and therefore new families may require changes to orientation, communication strategies or documentation.
- Changes in staffing may mean that new educators need further support or bring new ideas for practice that should be incorporated.
- New resources based on current research, such as the latest edition of *Staying Healthy in Child Care* may signal a review of practice.
- Accessing the NQS PLP and professional learning opportunities provided by the Professional Support Coordinators and other organisations may highlight the need to consider a different way of working.

Standard 7.2 requires a commitment to continuous improvement. The *Guide to the National Quality Standard* (the *Guide*) describes how Standard 7.2 contributes to quality education and care:

Under Element 7.2.3 'services are reminded that in order to be effective they need to regularly monitor and review their practice to guide their planning. Ongoing self-review that results in informed judgment about performance against the *National Quality Standard* is fundamental to an effective cycle of quality improvement.' (p. 184)

The cycle of review might look like this:



Some services look at their overall situation first, identify the big picture improvements that might be required and then go to the *Guide* to refer to the fine detail of the requirements. Others start at Quality Area 1 and work through to Quality Area 7. Whichever approach is used it is important to review current practice against all of the Quality Areas over time.

Methods being used to gain everyone's input include:

- identifying the particular standard or element to be reviewed at the next staff meeting and providing the relevant pages from the *Guide* so that everyone has a chance to read, reflect and prepare for the discussion
- putting the particular standard or element in the centre of a large sheet of butcher's paper displayed in the foyer and inviting everyone to provide comments then discussing them at a staff meeting
- delegating elements to small working groups to review, seek input from children and families, identify strengths and improvements required and lead the discussion at the next team meeting.

Element 7.2.3 reminds services that it is important that the self-review includes how the service is working with the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (or other approved learning frameworks) as well as the outcomes for children.

Services have been using the learning outcomes to track children's learning, to summarise their progress and to plan for further learning. However it is important to continue to stay focussed on all the elements of the EYLF.

One way to do this is to include a regular focus on the Vision, Principles and Practice at team meetings.

- Use team meetings effectively for reflecting on practice. Notify everyone before the meeting about the topic to be discussed so that they can think about it beforehand and come prepared to contribute.
- Place reflective practice high on the agenda so that house-keeping matters don't take priority over the time available.
- Use a 'talking stick' or toy microphone to hand around so that everyone has the opportunity to contribute.
- Encourage everyone to be open to new ideas.
- Identify changes to be implemented.
- Identify a date to review the outcome of the changes.

To look is one thing. To see what you look at is another. To understand what you see is a third. To learn from what you understand is still something else. But to act on what you learn is all that really matters.

Talmud (Reflective Practice—VCAA Early Years Exchange.)



One service reflected on their communication with families. Their philosophy statement included a focus on collaborative partnerships and fostering cross-cultural communication, however they were aware that this was not happening with *all* families. After brainstorming the possible barriers they realised that there were some families with whom they found it more difficult to communicate and others who did not respond warmly to them. They identified ways that their communication with these families could be improved such as always greeting and smiling (even if there is no response), taking time to check the family's understanding when sharing information and using more visuals and less text in their communications. When reviewing whether these actions had been effective, the service agreed that it is amazing what positive outcomes can be achieved with small steps.

Continued focus on self- assessment and reflective practice throughout the year will:

- support changes that may result in positive outcomes for children
- keep all educators focussed on best practice
- demonstrate to families that the service is continually striving to provide the best possible experience for their children
- help meet the requirements of the NQS.

Maintaining a focus on the continuous improvement model will maintain quality outcomes for children's wellbeing, learning and development.

Heather Barnes

Early childhood consultant and trainer

Author Biography

Heather Barnes is based in Victoria and works as a consultant and trainer. She travels all over the country delivering professional development training sessions to educators. She is a passionate advocate for the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the stronger focus on quality improvement that is a key aspect of the *National Quality Standard*.

Coordinating Editor

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and 2012 and has been responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the series since 2012.

References

- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011). *Guide to the National Quality Standard*. Sydney: ACECQA.
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011). *Guide to Developing a Quality Improvement Plan*. Sydney: ACECQA.
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011). *Guide to the Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations*. Sydney: ACECQA.
- Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs. (2011) Education and Care Services Regulations. <http://acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/national-regulations/>
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. (2010) Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, *Early Years Exchange* No. 2, February. http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/eye/EYE_No2b.pdf

Acknowledgements

- Powlett Reserve Children's Centre and Kindergarten, East Melbourne, Vic.
- Waratah Drive Child Care Centre, Manunda, Qld.



An Australian Government Initiative

The NQS Professional Learning Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.



Brought to you by

Early Childhood Australia

A voice for young children