

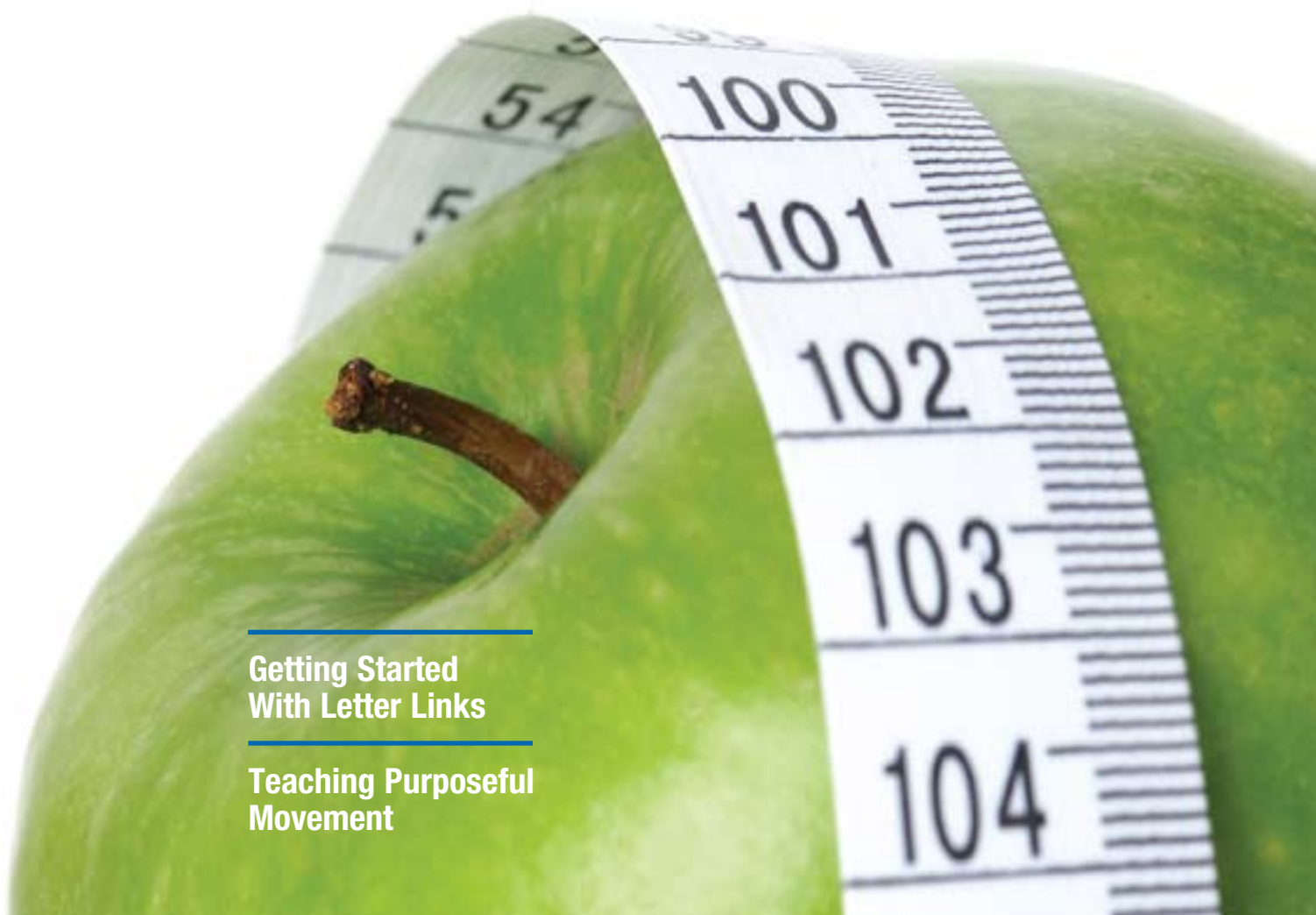
ReSource

HIGHSCOPE'S PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT

*Using the Preschool PQA to Make and
Measure Program Progress*

Getting Started
With Letter Links

Teaching Purposeful
Movement





Dear Readers:

Early childhood educators understand the importance of high-quality

preschool, and they know it takes ongoing training, commitment, and reflection to achieve that goal for the young children and families they serve. HighScope provides a research-based curriculum, professional training, and resources to assist teachers and administrators in creating quality in their classrooms.

Our lead feature in this issue of *ReSource* describes one of the best efforts we've seen to improve program quality throughout a community — the Early Years Count Initiative in St. Joseph County in northern Indiana. The 2009 David P. Weikart Achievement award recipients Sue Christensen and Ann Rosen lead the initiative and tell us about their experiences using HighScope's Preschool Quality Assessment (PQA) to improve program quality in their county. Every year, this initiative assesses over 50 Head Start, prekindergarten, and child care classrooms with the PQA and provides data-guided training to 400 early childhood teachers. This initiative has demonstrably improved the quality of the early childhood programs of St. Joseph County.

Of course, improving program quality calls for leadership, and early childhood expert Julie K. Biddle addresses this topic using a paradigm that defines leadership in terms of practice rather than power. One element of this kind of leadership, as Biddle explains, is "reciprocal learning," in which teachers, children, and other members of the learning community share a common purpose and build knowledge collectively. She contrasts this leadership approach to the more traditional "factory" model in which leaders are the supervisors who tell those they manage what to do or the teachers who tell children what and how to learn. The result of reciprocal learning is that everyone — students, parents, colleagues, and so on — is engaged in the teaching and learning process; thus, everyone is engaged in leadership.

Also key to quality is a research-validated comprehensive curriculum model that addresses all areas of early childhood development. In this issue, we look at one component of the HighScope Curriculum in the content area of language, literacy, and communications. With the recent addition of an online version of letter links — our name-based letter-learning system in which a child's printed name is paired with the picture of an object that starts with the same letter and sound — teachers have an additional HighScope resource with which to

support children's early literacy development. Nancy Brickman explains how letter links help children begin to understand the alphabetic principle and set the stage for reading and later literacy skills.

Another set of teaching practices that contribute to the quality of early childhood programs relates to young children's physical development. HighScope's Movement and Music Director Karen S. Sawyers offers an article excerpted from the forthcoming book *Moving With Purpose: 54 Activities for Learning, Fitness, and Fun*, which she wrote with Ellen Colley and Linda Icaza. The importance of contributing to children's physical development has been highlighted by recent attention to the high rate of childhood obesity in this country. HighScope's Education Through Movement program offers a way for teachers to integrate physical development into their overall educational program.

The articles in this issue of *ReSource* reveal some of the many ways HighScope can help you improve the quality of your program for young children. We hope you are able to take advantage of what we offer.

Larry Schweinhart
President

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THE HIGHSOPE FOUNDATION is an independent, nonprofit organization founded by David Weikart in Ypsilanti, Michigan. HighScope's mission is to lift lives through education by engaging in curriculum development, research, training, and publishing and communication.

Tackling Program Quality

THE EARLY YEARS COUNT INITIATIVE USES HIGHSCOPE'S PQA TO MAKE QUALITY CHANGES IN THE CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY

by Sue Christensen and Ann Rosen

Sue Christensen and Ann Rosen, co-directors of the Family Connection of St. Joseph County, Inc. in South Bend, Indiana, received the David P. Weikart Achievement Award at the 2009 HighScope Annual International conference, held in early May in Ypsilanti, Michigan. HighScope presents the award annually to a recipient (or recipients) who has made outstanding contributions to the field of early childhood care and education. Rosen and Christensen have coordinated the major components of the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County's Early Years Count Education Initiative since its inception almost a decade ago. As a result of their work, some 400 local early childhood teachers (including the entire staff of the St. Joseph County Head Start program) have received extensive training, mentoring, and support in the HighScope Curriculum.

How soon can you come to do my PQA?
This is a question we're hearing more and more often as we work to improve early childhood programs in our community. When teachers are on a quest for high quality, the Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA), developed by HighScope, is an integral component of their journey. They count on their Preschool PQA not only to measure quality, but also to mark



HighScope's PQA assesses key aspects of program quality with 63 items in 7 domains, including Learning Environment.

their progress, identify strengths, pinpoint challenges, expose barriers, and provide solutions. Simply put, the PQA is an information powerhouse. We couldn't tackle quality without it.

Our PQA journey

In 2001, the Community Foundation received \$5 million from the Lilly Endowment to improve education in St. Joseph County. With the launch of the Early Years Count Education Initiative, our goal was to provide high-quality early childhood education to disadvantaged children to help prepare them for school success. We wanted to give these children a fair start — academically, socially, and emotionally. As a first step, we invited HighScope to conduct a Program Quality Assessment of our county's Head Start program and to give us a baseline quality measure. No one was surprised that scores were low across the board.

Follow-up assessments conducted in 2002, after training in the HighScope approach, told us we were making headway. The PQA was our marker for progress.

In 2004, the Community Foundation learned about an initiative in New York called the Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership. Their goal was to improve child care across their community through assessments coupled with mentoring. A team from Rochester, including the director of the Children's Institute, was invited to give a presentation in South Bend. Early childhood providers and stakeholders attended and came away inspired to adapt and implement this model in St. Joseph County. Shortly afterwards, the Early Childhood Assessment Project (ECAP) was underway as part of Early Years Count. And, unbeknownst to us, we turned a PQA corner.

The goal of ECAP is to improve quality in early childhood settings through a year-long process of assessments, feedback, mini-grants, training, and support. Each fall, our team of assessors visits over 50 early childhood classrooms in Head Start programs, child care centers, preschools, and registered ministries throughout the county to conduct a classroom PQA. We also meet with more than a dozen program directors to do an Agency PQA.

The Preschool PQA

The Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA)

is a rating instrument designed to evaluate the quality of early childhood programs and identify staff training needs. The Preschool PQA is reliable and valid and is appropriate for use in all center-based early childhood settings, including but not limited to those using the HighScope educational approach.

The Preschool PQA is an all-in-one program evaluation system

- Assesses key aspects of program quality
- Reflects research-based and field-tested best practices in early childhood education and care
- Can be aligned with the Head Start Program Performance Standards
- Provides reliable, scientifically validated assessment proven in a wide range of early childhood programs and settings
- Can be used as a basis for program accreditation, reporting, monitoring, and training

What does the Preschool PQA assess?

The PQA covers 63 dimensions of program quality in 7 domains: learning environment, daily routine, adult-child interaction, curriculum planning and assessment, parent involvement and family services, staff qualifications and development, and program management.

How does the Preschool PQA work?

Raters observe the program and interview the appropriate staff members. They record supporting evidence for each row (component) of every item. They read the indicators (definitions and examples) for that row and check the one box per row that best reflects the supporting evidence. Then, using the scoring rules they circle one item rating for the item as a whole. (See Box, opposite page.)

What do I need to get started?

There are three pieces to the Preschool PQA Starter Set:

- Administration Manual
This book tells you how to use the PQA.
- Form A — Classroom Items
This form is used to evaluate items on the classroom level.
- Form B — Agency Items
This form is used to evaluate items on the agency level.

Replacement forms can be ordered individually.

For more information on the Preschool PQA, see catalog page 23, or visit our Web site at www.highscope.org, and click on Assessment.

At the start of ECAP, we regarded the PQA simply as our measure of quality and marker for progress. We selected the PQA as our primary assessment tool for the following reasons: 1) It is a nationally-known and highly regarded rating instrument for measuring quality in center-based programs; 2) We had already established a baseline using the PQA in our county's Head Start program; and 3) For centers that had adopted the HighScope Curriculum, it was a good measure of implementation.

When teachers are on a quest for high quality, the Program Quality Assessment is an integral component of their journey.

Over the past four years of the assessment project, however, we've come to appreciate the extensive power of the PQA not simply to measure quality, but to *impact* quality as well. Today, in addition to measuring quality and

In this training workshop, participants discuss how to observe and rate the quality of teaching practices with the PQA.



marking progress, we value the PQA as an excellent tool for strengthening teaching practices, a key ingredient in a “plan-do-review” approach to quality improvement, and a guide for our own work within the community and beyond.

The PQA Impact

The opportunity to improve on the quality of teaching practices begins once an assessment is completed, scores are entered into a database, a full copy is made for our files, and a feedback session is scheduled. Our PQA feedback is grounded in two strong convictions: that all teachers want to do the best for the children in their care and that there is always room for growth, no matter how good the teacher. In the feedback session, the completed assessments are returned to the teachers (or directors for an Agency PQA). This allows them to see not only the evidence of their scores, but also the PQA descriptors that help guide them towards higher quality. Rich conversations often emerge as they work to reconcile their understanding and actions with the quality levels described. For example, during one feedback session, a teacher questioned her score on item I-I in the domain of Learning Environment: “Child-initiated work is on display.” The display consisted of work children created during a small-group-time activity in which this teacher had placed torn paper, glue, feathers and corks on the table for children to use. Because she had allowed

I. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Circle **one** indicator level for this item based on the scoring rules on page 4.

I-F. Classroom materials are varied, manipulative, open-ended, and authentic and appeal to multiple senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste).

1 2 3 4 5

Check here if not observed or reported.

Level 1 Indicators

Most of the materials in most of the interest areas lead to pre-scribed outcomes (e.g., art cutouts, lotto games, work-sheets, coloring books, commercial toys—McDonald's figures).

The classroom does not provide manipulative materials in any of the areas.

Materials include many toy replicas in place of "real" items (i.e., toy plates and cups in place of real dishes; small plastic tools).

Many materials do not appeal to all the senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling).

Level 3 Indicators

Some open-ended materials are available in some interest areas (e.g., boxes, paper, beads, paints).

The classroom provides some manipulative materials in some areas.

Materials include some toy replicas in place of "real" items (e.g., toy register, toy broom).

Some materials appeal to multiple senses (e.g., stuffed animals, musical instruments, play dough).

Level 5 Indicators

Most of the available materials in all interest areas are open-ended (e.g., blocks, books, sand, water, corks, dolls, scarves, toy vehicles, paints, shells).

The classroom provides many manipulative materials in all areas.

Materials include many "real" items in place of toy replicas (e.g., dog dish, firefighter boots, steering wheel, gardening tools, suitcases, briefcases, pots and pans, hammer and saw, telephone).

Many materials appeal to multiple senses and include both natural and manufactured materials (e.g., materials include items with hard and soft textures; snacks with many smells and tastes; objects made of wood, fabric, metal, paper, liquid).

Supporting Evidence/Anecdotes

This page from Form A — Classroom Items of the PQA is used to record supporting evidence and anecdotes in the Learning Environment domain — assessing a teacher's use of classroom materials.

the children to choose how to use the materials, the teacher considered the work they produced to be child-initiated. The face-to-face feedback discussion provided an opportunity for the teacher to reach a deeper understanding of the term "child-initiated" and its importance to quality. Projects that stem from children's own interests and ideas, rather than the adult's, are truly "child-initiated" and help to build children's self esteem, honor their ideas, and foster a sense of independence. The very specific PQA item and related indicators helped zero in on the teacher's misunderstanding and paved the way for an improved learning environment.

We find that most teachers value the concrete examples documented in their PQA. One teacher wrote about feedback in her evaluation of a recent HighScope workshop on using encouragement rather than praise to support the children in their classroom: "Thinking about praise as it relates to my job makes me think of my supervisor, who is quick to say 'You're getting the job done!' It's her way of saying 'Good job!' 'Keep it up!' but it's not always specific. When I get feedback on my PQA results, it is specific, concrete information collected by

observing us in class. [Your] encouragement makes me feel good and challenges me to keep working at my teaching abilities. This kind of encouragement is meaningful because it is genuine and individualized. It keeps me thinking and striving rather than just settling for a job well done."

Our PQA feedback is grounded in two strong convictions: that all teachers want to do the best for the children in their care and that there is always room for growth, no matter how good the teacher.

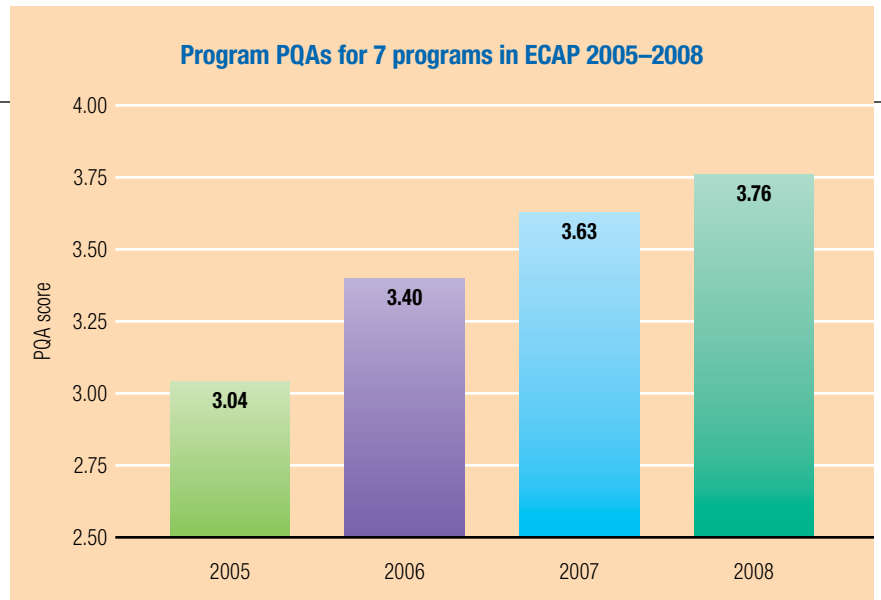
After the feedback session, teachers and directors receive a mini-grant packet to apply for materials, mentoring, and/or college-level courses that will help improve scores — and

thus quality. As with feedback, the PQA also lies at the heart of the mini-grant process. The mini-grant application, while simple in form, invites more complex thinking about the assessment feedback. Teachers choose specific goals for their next year's PQA scores (e.g., move from a 1 to a 3 in "child-initiated displays," a 3 to a 4 in "peer interaction"). They also have the option to fill out a planning sheet that moves from their PQA goals to an array of strategies to specific action steps they want to take. A teacher might, for example, decide to work on PQA Item I-B: "The space is divided into interest areas." Her strategy to rearrange the classroom could include the following action steps: 1) Look at what materials are in the room and how they might be logically grouped; 2) Think about children's interests and how they might fit with different areas; 3) Make a room plan with mentor; 4) Purchase shelving as needed; 5) Set time to make move and enlist help; 6) Make a plan for introducing new areas to children. Teachers must answer questions that address why they think the resources they are requesting will help them reach their goals and how a mentor might help them.

Thus, applicants need to reflect on their practices and identify areas for improvement; they need to think through the specific steps they want to take to meet their goals and the kinds of support they will need to make it all happen. They also need to be able to justify their plan in writing. The follow-up PQA we conduct each fall starts the process over. Through this “plan-do-review” approach, the PQA consistently opens doors to new learning challenges and opportunities.

The PQA not only gives new teachers an overview of their upcoming journey, it also acts as a roadmap — something akin to having a personal GPS that guides them to their quality destination.

If the PQA was solely a benchmark for progress, we’d be mightily discouraged if scores declined. Yet they sometimes do — for individual teachers, for programs, even for the whole community. For us, dropped scores, while disappointing, offer opportunity and impetus for change. For example, when one teacher’s scores went down, it was only a matter of days before she recognized that in order to make the quality gains she was striving for, she’d need to move from making small changes to big ones. Soon she was dragging everything out of her classroom and putting it back together with an intentional focus on quality. She even decided to leave her cherished teacher desk behind. When Head Start scores dropped across the board in the fall of 2006, some of the causes could be



Program Quality Assessment scores improved steadily for seven ECAP programs over a four-year period.

traced to administrative actions that we were able to rectify for the coming year. For example, several classrooms scored low on the item “Children have an appropriate amount of time for each part of the day.” The underlying cause was bus scheduling that kept children waiting in lines for too much of their day. With this in mind, the Head Start director worked with transportation to adjust bus schedules for the following year. Even excellent teachers are susceptible to backsliding on quality, and the PQA is a consistent nudge to get them back on track. As one teacher said to us, “I know I can be a better teacher than that.”

The PQA results also inform our Early Years Count planning and decision making. When teachers request mentoring, we do our best to match their PQA goals to mentor strengths. We also dig deep into the collective scores to understand which of the distinct components are creating challenges to quality. For example, for classroom materials, it’s the real, everyday items and natural objects that are often lacking,

so we have explored strategies to help boost their presence in classrooms, such as allowing teachers to shop at the local dollar store. When scores on Item II-I, relating to children’s choices during transition times, ranked low throughout the community, we scheduled a day-long intensive workshop with HighScope trainer Betsy Evans (author of *I Know What’s Next! Pre-school Transitions Without Tears or Turmoil*) to develop more effective strategies for this part of the daily routine, such as “circling up” rather than lining up.

For programs and teachers new to ECAP, the PQA provides a valuable starting point in the discussion about quality. It’s a way to bring them quickly on board as part of the larger “team” working toward delivering high-quality programs to children and families. The PQA not only gives new teachers an overview of their upcoming journey, it also acts as a roadmap — something akin to having their own personal GPS to guide them directly to their quality destination.

We’re also seeing broader quality implications through the PQA. Our state has recently initiated Paths to Quality, a rating system for early childhood programs. Both the Classroom and Agency PQAs are well-aligned with state expectations, which include indicators such as 10.2: “The teacher supports children’s development by gathering information through child observations that is used to guide lesson planning” (PQA item IV-D: “Staff record and discuss anecdotal notes as the basis for planning for individual children”) and 9a.5: “Displays of children’s art are available at children’s eye



Family Child Care PQA



The Family Child Care PQA is a validated instrument designed to measure the quality of family child care programs and identify provider training needs. It consists of standards for best practices that can be scored by outside raters or used as a self-assessment tool by providers.

**SC-P1388SET \$29.95
(includes Administration Manual and Assessment Form)**

One Teacher's Path to Quality

After two years with ECAP and training in the High-Scope approach, preschool teacher Laura Allison shared reflections on changes in her students and herself at a recent annual meeting of the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County. Here's what she had to say:

I have been teaching for 13 years. My class of approximately 18 preschoolers was in a very small room that didn't allow for much more than rote learning. They sat, I taught. We focused on what the children didn't know or couldn't do. It was our mission to bring them up to appropriate standards. We didn't have time to waste on play unless their work was done or it was recess. They had to be ready for kindergarten. Paper was limited for the daily dittos. Art supplies were only used for those cookie cutter art projects. There was a time-out chair and we used it. Our kids lined up in straight lines going and coming to class and they were quiet. In fact, teachers did most of the talking. Then our center heard of a way to get free stuff and all I had to do was let the Early Child Assessment Project observe my classroom. I said, "Sure." This would be the first step toward many wonderful transformations.

Changes: There is no time-out chair in my room. My room has defined, equipped areas that can expand out into our gym and even outside. I team-teach with my associate, based on children's interests. We share our new skill ideas with others. I take anecdotal notes to score in each child's COR (Child Observation Record). My children keep science journals, logging data they collect while tracking plant growth. They write books and do their own illustrations using some reference books. They wrote, directed, filmed, and starred in a video. Writing materials are everywhere. My kids make a daily plan and follow it. They teach each other on a daily basis. For example, if Billy needs pink paint, Suzy shows him how to make it.

Children in my classroom phonetically sound out two- and three-letter words. They love books, all kinds. We use real items in our play. Instead of quiet lines, we now sing and use creative motion to come and go. Our vocabulary grows daily. We use words like "diversity" and comprehend the meaning. Parents have become my partners in education and my biggest resource.

Bottom line: My children are ready for kindergarten. They have a broad foundation on which to build the learning and life skills that will serve them and our community for a lifetime.

Today, Laura is a certified — and very enthusiastic — HighScope teacher.

level and show that most art work is exploratory and unique to each child" (PQA item I-I: "Child-initiated work [work designed and created by children] is on display"). As one director put it, "Because we've regularly had PQAs, I felt absolutely on track when I met with the state mentor."

Why the PQA works

The PQA is not a single, stand-alone solution for quality; it's part of a broader system that includes training and a variety of supports, including mentoring, materials, "refresher" workshops, and more. But, as we said in the opening paragraph, we couldn't tackle quality without it.

The PQA is a reliable, valid, research-based assessment, and that's important to us. It is well-aligned with Head Start Performance Standards, NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards, and Indiana's Foundations for Young Children, and that's important to the teachers and directors with whom we work. The teaching potential of the PQA is enhanced by a layout that is simple and easy for teachers and directors to understand. Its items provide clear descriptors of what excellent, sufficient, and poor practices actually look like in the classroom and in the agency. There is ample room for anecdotes that are specific and objective, so the teacher or director can understand exactly what the assessor saw and how scores were determined for each particular item.

The goal of assessment is to acknowledge strengths and identify areas for improvement. We travel side by side with teachers and directors as we all strive to make quality better.

The integrity of the PQA helps keep the feedback nonjudgmental. The focus is on observable and measurable events, and evidence is required for every score. When we conduct an assessment for a new program or a new teacher, the PQA gives us a context within which to discuss quality in a straightforward way. If there is such a thing as a positive

"teaching to the test," then the PQA results offer that opportunity. Its rich data set, collected authentically in the course of a classroom day, presents the teacher and the mentor with a clear conversational starting point.

We trust the PQA as a consistent indicator of quality. We know that if classrooms and programs score well, quality is present. Each PQA item represents an important indicator of quality, each PQA section reflects an essential piece of a well-functioning classroom, and the PQA as a whole presents a clear snapshot of best practice. The PQA sets a high bar for quality and backs up our own high standards. We like having the quality measures for HighScope teachers and program certification clearly defined by PQA scores. It gives our teachers and directors something concrete to strive for in their quest for high quality, and it gives everyone something to celebrate when that bar is achieved.

Because the PQA is neither judgmental nor high-stakes, it is "safe" — that is, teachers and directors are comfortable knowing that the goal of assessment is to acknowledge strengths and identify areas for improvement. We travel side-by-side with teachers and directors as we all strive to make quality better. Everyone is learning together in this partnership — learning about change and how it happens, learning that setbacks do not mean failure, learning how magical and rewarding the road to quality can be. We want teachers and directors to feel safe about taking risks, trying new ideas and approaches, and challenging their status quo.

In summary, the PQA works for us because it is action-oriented, not just information-based. What we learn is relayed back to teachers and directors for planning, acted on by mentors, and integrated into the quality improvement system at all levels in the community. The instrument itself is both simple and profound. In our office, items on the PQA are discussed, dissected, and digested on a daily basis. We live and breathe the components. Simply put, the PQA is the backbone for all we do.

We'd *never* tackle quality without it. ■

Sue Christensen and Ann Rosen are codirectors of The Family Connection, and project directors for the Early Years Count Education Initiative of the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County, in South Bend, Indiana.