

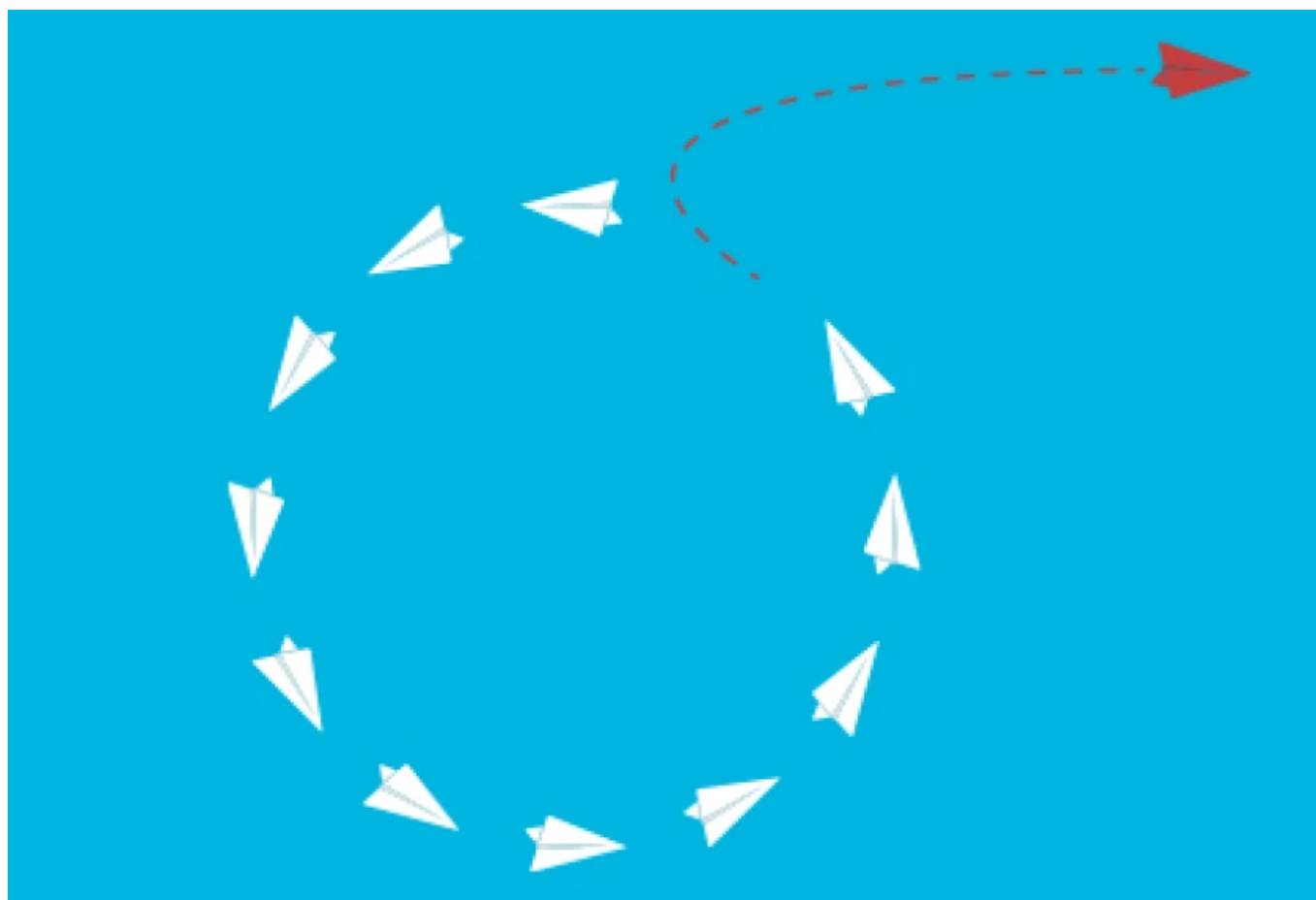
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EARLY CHILDHOOD OPINION

What Early-Childhood Accountability Can Learn From K-12's Mistakes

We need to stop going around in circles in education

By Thomas S. Dee — August 26, 2019 ⌚ 5 min read



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The 1993 movie “Groundhog Day” has become an enduring classic partly because of an engaging plot line in which the protagonist has repeated opportunities to make better decisions. In early-childhood education, state and local stakeholders currently have a compelling “Groundhog Day” opportunity of their own. Versions of the controversial accountability reforms that have become commonplace in K-12 schools over the last 30 years have recently and quietly spread throughout the early-childhood sector. These recent reforms present a fresh new chance to get it right and to avoid the missteps that have vexed K-12 accountability systems.

Quality Rating and Information Systems (QRIS) are state programs that measure, improve, and publicly share the [quality of early-childhood care and education](#) . Much like the now-defunct federal No Child Left Behind Act, these state-level accountability systems rely on explicit standards and corresponding performance measures to produce an overall summative rating for participating programs (communicated, for example, through the number of “stars” a program receives). In lieu of the student tests used in K-12 accountability systems, QRIS rely on diverse measures reflecting staff training, staff-child ratios, the use of developmentally appropriate curricula, and the quality of faculty, classroom environments, and interactions.



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With federal encouragement through the Obama-era [Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge](#), these early-childhood accountability systems have expanded to almost every state over the last decade. This widespread adoption is a clear response to a substantial policy challenge: We have a broad consensus that high-quality early-childhood care can be transformative in the lives of children, but we know comparatively little about how to promote such high-quality programming at scale. QRIS seek to meet this challenge in part by providing feedback to practitioners, coupled with various improvement supports like access to professional development and financial incentives. At the same time, the public ratings can inform parents about the quality of particular care settings, empowering them to seek out higher-quality programs.

Are QRIS actually successful in promoting improvements in center quality? There is still

much to learn about the impact of the accountability systems in different states, but early evidence is promising. A [recent study](#) published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* by Daphna Bassok, Scott Latham, and myself provides initial evidence that the incentives created by QRIS can drive statewide improvements. We studied one of the earliest of these accountability systems, the Star Rated License program in North Carolina, and found credibly causal evidence that the ratings incentivized child-care centers to improve on a broad measure of classroom quality and also influenced parents' decisions about enrolling their children.

However, encouraging early evidence of impact provides no guarantee that a policy innovation will be thoughtfully refined or maintain its political consensus. The fate of K-12 school accountability systems provides a cautionary tale.

There once seemed to be a bipartisan consensus on how to revise and improve on NCLB. However, other policy challenges like the Great Recession and health-care reform soon eclipsed and delayed the law's reauthorization.

This legislative torpor effectively ceded authority for reauthorizing NCLB to the executive branch, which controversially began issuing its own waivers from certain NCLB proficiency requirements to states implementing the Obama administration's reform vision.

A [2011 report from the National Research Council](#) grudgingly concluded that NCLB had indeed led to modest improvements in student outcomes, recommending that policymakers pursue "promising new models that use test-based incentives in more sophisticated ways as one aspect of a richer accountability and improvement process."

But by the time Congress finally took up the reauthorization of NCLB, increased partisanship and cynicism had taken root. The resulting reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act, has been legitimately criticized as a [paper tiger](#) that has abandoned a fundamental federal responsibility by [allowing most states to implement accountability plans](#) that ignore their most vulnerable students.

So, what can we learn from school accountability that can provide sensible guidance to QRIS? First and foremost, state leaders should engage multiple early-childhood stakeholders—including practitioners, parents, and researchers—in robust partnerships that identify, implement, and assess refinements to their accountability systems on a

rapid-cycle basis. Embracing such continuous and problem-focused inquiry with honest ambition and humility can guide meaningful improvements of the first-generation accountability systems and keep them from becoming expendable pawns in larger political battles as we saw with NCLB.

The need for refining and streamlining these accountability measures is all too apparent. The links between children's developmental gains and their program's QRIS ratings are weak and inconsistent across developmental categories. For example, QRIS ratings often reflect teacher education levels, which are a poor proxy for teacher competence. Similarly, these systems often incorporate observational ratings that [recent validation studies](#) indicate can fall short of identifying what features of early-childhood classrooms genuinely matter for later child outcomes.

Practitioner input should play an important role in these necessary research developments. The literature on incentives shows that the most effective accountability measures will also be ones that practitioners both recognize as valuable and feel that they can clearly influence.

Active cycles of inquiry can also improve QRIS in at least two other dimensions. They can help states identify how accountability incentives, supports, and underlying theories of change intersect across distinctive community contexts. For example, we found that QRIS incentives in North Carolina appeared less effective in more rural settings where parents had fewer child-care alternatives.

They can also promote the critical buy-in of practitioners and parents necessary to expand these systems and avoid reform fatigue. In many states, participation in these accountability systems is voluntary and sometimes quite low. To be truly effective, QRIS participation almost certainly needs to be substantially higher, if not universal.

A laudable goal—broad access to high-quality early-childhood programs—has motivated the rapid and widespread implementation of QRIS. State and local leaders should embrace the opportunity to build on the early promise of QRIS through broad partnerships that can guide their ongoing refinement while sustaining their bipartisan political support.

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