Quality Matters

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT:
A GUIDE FOR LICENSED CHILD CARE CENTRES

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NOVA SCOTIA

Contents

What is Quality Matters?

Quality Matters (QM) is a province-wide initiative that will be used to improve and assess quality in licensed child care centres. It is based on international evidence regarding the importance of quality in early childhood education and care. It is also based on the concept of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), whereby quality improvements are made over time through a reflective and meaningful engagement process. This process involves licensees, centre directors, early childhood educators, families, and other key stakeholders, as appropriate.

Moving forward, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) will ensure that eligibility for provincial funding for licensed child care centres is directly linked to quality improvement and participation in QM.

All licensed child care centres that receive provincial funding must participate in QM. Participation is voluntary for centres that do not receive provincial funding.

A licensed child care centre that does not participate in QM must still meet all requirements of the province's Day Care Act and Day Care Regulations.

QM evaluates a centre's success in meeting specific goals with respect to the following components:

- **Compliance** with provisions of Nova Scotia's Day Care Act, Day Care Regulations, policies, and standards.
- **Accountability** for provincial funding, including compliance with the terms and conditions of the Funding Agreement. The child care centre must comply with the terms and conditions documents for all grants received. In addition, the child care centre must satisfy financial reporting and audit requirements of the EECD.
- **Program Quality**, which includes
  - implementation of the Early Learning Curriculum Framework
  - commitment to improving quality through a CQI process. This process requires the completion of a self-assessment tool, which will be used as a basis for developing goals for quality improvement in four key areas:
    - **Leadership:** professional, pedagogical, and administrative
    - **Staffing:** qualifications, professional development, human resources, and compensation
    - **Learning Environments:** high quality and inclusive
    - **Relationships:** interactions and partnerships with children, parents and families, staff, other professionals, and the community

Continuous Quality Improvement

Continuous Quality Improvement is a process to ensure programs are systematically and intentionally improving services and increasing positive outcomes for the children and families they serve. CQI is a cyclical, data-driven process. It is proactive, not reactive. A CQI environment is one in which data is collected and used to make positive changes — even when things are going well — rather than waiting for something to go wrong and then fixing it.

Smith, 2013, p.1

Although child care centres in Nova Scotia are familiar with the Nova Scotia Day Care Act, Nova Scotia Day Care Regulations, and the terms and conditions of funding agreements with the province, Quality Matters will introduce a new process called Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).
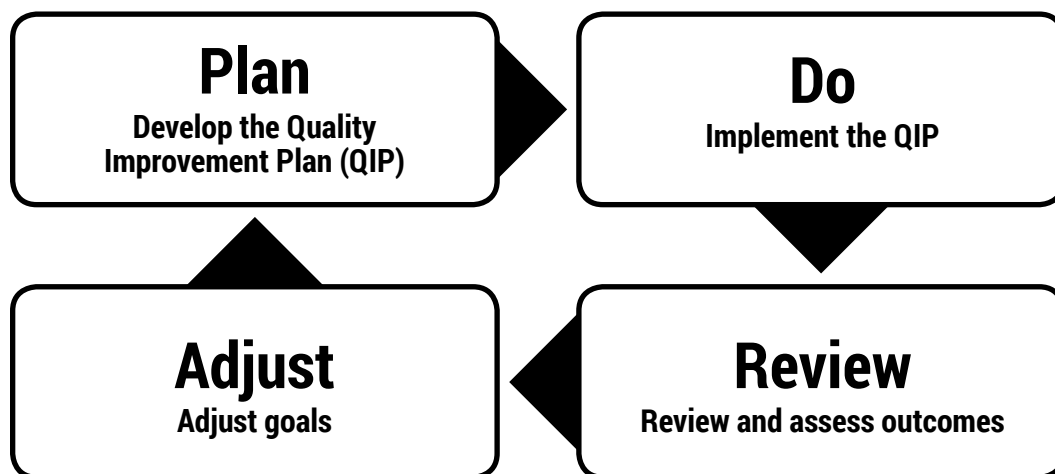
In a general sense, CQI is a strategy that encourages us to reflect daily on our practice, and to ask questions such as,

- What has been working well, and what could be improved?
- What can we do to improve upon our current practices?
- Is there another approach that might work better?
- What do we need to know and learn to improve our services for children and families?

Quality Matters uses CQI and encourages everyone who is involved with the centre—not just the educators—to reflect on what works and what might be improved. Many centres already utilize CQI and have processes and practices in place for licensees, management, and staff to reflect on their work. Quality Matters organizes those practices into a system of quality improvement.

Many centres have experience with observational assessment tools that measure quality. Such tools include the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)*, the *Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS)*, the *SpeciaLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale*, and others. Quality Matters, however, takes an approach to continuous quality improvement that may use these tools and go further. This approach to assessment is based on an internally motivated process that considers the unique circumstances of a centre, involves all staff, management, licensees and others, and creates a culture of reflection and ongoing learning.

In Quality Matters, CQI is an ongoing process, a cycle of reflection and planning:

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┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│      Plan       │      │       Do        │
│ Develop the Quality │  │ Implement the QIP │
│ Improvement Plan (QIP) │ │               │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘

┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│     Adjust      │      │     Review      │
│   Adjust goals  │      │ Review and assess outcomes │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
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In Quality Matters' CQI process, each centre will

- **Plan:**
  - In considering the three components of Quality Matters (Compliance, Accountability, and Program Quality), give particular attention to the four key elements that make up Program Quality:
    - **Leadership**: Professional, pedagogical, and administrative
    - **Staffing**: qualifications, professional development, human resources, and compensation
    - **Learning Environments**: high quality and inclusive
    - **Relationships**: interactions and partnerships with children, families, staff, other professionals, and the community
  - Conduct a Program Quality Self-Assessment to identify and describe the centre's strengths and challenges with respect to the four key elements of quality. Assess whatever opportunities may be available to the centre to help address whatever challenges may have been identified.
  - With the assistance of the Early Childhood Development Consultant (ECDC), develop a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) that will identify

    Goals: Compose clear statements about what the centre wishes to change or improve.

    Strategies: How will you go about this?

    Indicators: How will you know that your efforts are effective and contributing to success?

    Timelines: When are things going to happen?

    Roles and responsibilities: Who is going to do what?

- **Do:** Implement the selected strategies.
- **Review:** Monitor and assess the effectiveness of selected strategies.
- **Adjust:** Modify the QIP to identify new (or continuing) goals and strategies.

The four elements of program quality essential to the CQI process may be defined as follows

Leadership: professional, pedagogical, and administrative

- Leadership focuses on improved program quality by developing effective program management practices. Good leadership focuses on the inherent value of children and program personnel, and their work is recognized and acknowledged.

Staffing: qualifications, professional development, human resources, and compensation

- This element promotes continuous program improvement. The goal is to provide a clear wage structure, hire trained staff, have a clear organizational structure, and devote an appropriate allocation of funding to support staff development and programming. Funding allocation includes the provision of program planning time for staff.

Learning Environments: high quality and inclusive

- The intention is to provide high quality learning environments that embrace Nova Scotia's Early Learning and Curriculum Framework and promote children's growth, development, and well-being. Key elements of the learning environment include the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors; daily schedules and routines that provide predictability and flow for children and their families; and meaningful learning experiences for children.

Relationships: interactions and partnerships with children, families, staff, other professionals, and the community

- Young children thrive in early childhood settings when they have positive and secure relationships with educators who know how to stimulate and nurture their learning, development, and well-being. High quality programs strive to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships among educators and families. They recognize that families are important contributors to the programs, with unique knowledge, experiences, and strengths.

The development of a Quality Improvement Plan follows a series of steps taken with the above four elements in mind. The emphasis on CQI as an internally motivated process contributes to the success of this approach. As you will see, the development of a Quality Improvement Plan for the CQI process is one that involves everyone—early childhood educators, the centre director and staff, the board of directors, owners, families, community partners, and the children. Everyone is involved, not only in the self-assessment and reflection process to identify priorities and set goals, but also in forming of the QIP itself. CQI creates a culture of conviction in the idea that things can always be better.

Developing the Quality Improvement Plan

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.
– Lao Tzu

Developing a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) requires honest reflection, communication, and collaboration. While there are steps in the process, it is not always necessary to follow each step in sequence. For example, if you have already identified a problem with staff turnover, you may use the period of self-assessment to explore the issue by talking to former staff, interviewing current staff, discussing the issue with members of your board, looking over past files, or reviewing personnel policies. On the other hand, some centres may wish to begin the QIP process by gathering information concerning each of the four elements of program quality outlined in Quality Matters and their experience in implementing the Early Learning Curriculum Framework.

The planning process for developing your QIP involves

- self-assessment
- identifying your strengths—what works well, what you are proud of, and what you can build on
- identifying where you need to improve
- identifying your priorities—because you can't do everything all at once!

Based on the planning process, you will be expected to identify one or two goals to focus on for a defined period of time. The goals should be broad goals that include short- and long-term outcomes. Throughout the planning process, you can rely on the support of your ECDC. Both the centre and the consultant will sign off on the Quality Improvement Plan, and there will be an agreement between the centre and the ECDC to commit to on-site consultation as you work on the goals identified in the QIP.

TIP! *Before starting this process, you will need to confirm who is to take the lead at your centre, who else needs to be involved, and who will make final decisions. For some centres, final decisions may need to come from the board of directors; in others, a private owner; and in some cases, decision making may be delegated to the director. Regardless of who makes the final decisions, each centre will need to identify one person who will coordinate information gathering, schedule staff meetings, and correspond with the ECDC.*

Self-Assessment

STEP 1: GATHERING INFORMATION

The self-assessment depends not only on reflections of the director of a centre, but on input from all staff, board members, owner or operator, and parents. Understanding how your centre is perceived or experienced by others contributes to a full understanding of the centre's strengths and challenges. Often, others see strengths that are taken for granted by those involved in the everyday operation of the centre. Gathering feedback and opinions from others also helps to identify minor challenges before they become major.

Centres may also wish to include feedback from other professionals who are familiar with the centre's program, as well as from children who experience the program. Since the self-assessment is to focus on the four elements of quality identified in Quality Matters, you may wish to tailor questions to ensure they are relevant to the participant. For example, questions to parents not be familiar with the centre's human resource practices would be irrelevant; the same would go for questions to community partners not familiar with the centre's governance model; and so on.

TIP! *It's important to remember that this is a* self-assessment. *The information you gather from others gives you might guide your reflections, but it doesn't necessarily form the outcome of the* self-assessment. *For example, some parents might complain that the centre has terrible policies because they had to pay their regular fees for the week even though the centre was closed for a storm day. When reflecting on this, you may decide that the policy is reasonable, standard, and established in almost all centres, but that perhaps you need to do a better job to explain the rationale for this and other such policies to parents. This conclusion may lead to further reflection regarding the relationship between the centre and parents and regarding opportunities for parent engagement.*

There are many ways to gather input for the self-assessment process. Some examples include
- staff meetings
- board meetings
- parent surveys
- parent meetings
- interviews with selected parents, board members, staff, former staff, students, children
- document review, such as of staff performance appraisals, personnel policies, records demonstrating recruitment and retention patterns among staff and turnover of children and families, and annual report submissions to EECD for provincial funding
- review of complaints from parents

- review of letters of praise commending your program—from parents, community members, etc.
- review of your Compliance history
- review of documentation concerning your experience in implementing the Early Learning Curriculum Framework and what it means for children, staff, and families
- While standardized quality measurement tools for early childhood settings are not a formal part of Quality Matters, centres may wish to use these tools as part of the self-assessment process. Some centres may wish to complete an assessment tool on their own, and to use their observations to inform the self-assessment process. Others may wish to engage their ECDC or private consultant to complete an assessment, such as that of the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)*, *Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS)*, *SpeciaLink Early Childhood Inclusion Quality Scale*, etc. Using such tools is not required; however, in many situations the feedback from either a self- or an outside assessment may be helpful in understanding your strengths or challenges.

In documenting your planning for the QIP, you will be asked to explain how you gathered information, including and feedback, and how it was used in your self-assessment process.

TIP! *Although you may not need to develop goals for each of the four elements of quality defined in Quality Matters, you will need to document that your self-assessment process considered all elements.*

STEP 2: REFLECTION

The first part of the reflection process concerns the four elements of quality outlined in Quality Matters, with a broad reflection on the philosophy and values held by the centre. It is impossible for the staff at a child care centre to reflect on elements of quality without understanding how they view the child, values that underpin daily practice, and the philosophy and mission statement of the centre.

To initiate this process and discussion, staff may wish to consider questions such as

- What is my image of the child? Is this image consistent with what all staff believe? How do we convey this to parents?
- Is there a pedagogical approach that informs and guides our practice?
- What do we value about the work that we do?
- Do we have a shared philosophy about early learning and development?

A carefully articulated statement defining the centre's philosophy and mission will help to guide reflections on the four quality elements outlined in *CQI*. This statement will form the first part of the Quality Improvement Plan. When shared, all staff, parents, board members, owners or

operators, and community partners will be aware of the centre's approach, values, and beliefs. When the QIP is reviewed and adjusted, the mission and philosophy statement should also be reviewed and adjusted accordingly.

The second part of the reflection process focuses on the four elements of quality as outlined above. During reflection, you may find that there is some natural overlap among the four elements. For example, you might find overlapping when considering "leadership" and "staffing" or "learning environments and "relationships." This is normal. Just document your reflections, as they will be used again to identify strengths and challenges and to select priorities for quality improvement.

The centre's lead person for *CQI* may wish to use the suggested questions for reflection on each of the four elements outlined in the document, *Quality Matters Centre Templates for Self-Assessment*, *Quality Improvement Plans and On-Site Consultation* for the self-assessment process. Keep in mind that the questions are suggestions—each centre will need to develop its own process for reflection.

TIP! *Centres may wish to track how often a particular concept or phrase is mentioned during meetings, interviews, or document review. For example, one may wish to track "child assessment" or "professional development" or "staff benefits" or "hours of service," or other topics that are relevant to the centre's self-assessment. This practice allows the centre to determine how frequently a topic is raised, and who raises it. As well, given the integrated nature of the quality elements, a particular topic may be relevant to more than one of the four elements of quality, and realizing this may lead to a multi-pronged approach for a specific goal.*

STEP 3: IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Once you have gathered information, perspectives, and feedback from multiple sources, it will be time to analyze what you have learned and see what it all means.

Although you may feel hesitant about inviting comments about the work your centre does, generally the process is rewarding because there is significant validation for the centre's program and the work that you do as educators. Similarly, it may sometimes be difficult for others to be completely honest in providing feedback, as people do not want to offend or be critical, even if they truly have a concern. In reviewing all the feedback you have received, you will need to be sensitive to this, and as you reflect on what you have heard, you may find that you need to follow up when you think someone may have more to say.

Your reflections on each of the four elements of quality (whose main headings are Leadership, Staffing, Learning Environments, and Relationships), should be analyzed within the context of what that element means with respect to quality early childhood education and care. Your analysis may be guided by the following sorts of questions:

- What do we understand about the importance of this CQI element?
- Based on our reflections on this element, are there things that we can be proud of? Why? Has this been a priority for us? What have we done that made this happen?
- As a result of our reflections, what needs to be better?
- Are there some things that we are proud of that still need to be better?
- Was there anything that we've identified that should cause us concern?

STEP 4: SETTING PRIORITIES

Once you have determined the areas that you need to improve, you will need to set a goal and develop a plan of action and focus for your QIP. In developing your priorities, you may wish to consider the following:

- *Is this a significant action for us to consider?*
  - You may have received comments that the parent information board is confusing and needs to be better organized. Is this a "quick fix" that you can accomplish in a day, or is the problem part of a broader issue concerning communications to parents?

- *Do we have reasonable access to the resources we need in order to accomplish this?*
  - Say you have identified that staff wages and benefits need to improve in order to reduce the rate of staff turnover and increase job satisfaction. Do you have access to the financial resources needed to accomplish this? Is the board of directors or the owner or operator committed to fund raising, or would they increase parent fees? Are there other approaches you can take to accomplish the same goals (e.g., improve job satisfaction and reduce turnover)? Does the lack of resources to accomplish this suggest setting a different goal, such as a review of the centre's finances, budget allocations, etc.?

- *Can we accomplish something like this in a one-year time frame?*
  - Your priority may be to improve how you use the outdoors as a learning environment for all age groups of children. Your board of directors has agreed to fundraise to purchase the lot next door, clean it up, install fencing, and transform it into a natural area playground for children. Once the lot is purchased, you and your staff will research options for natural areas for children and will propose a design for the board to consider. Given that these activities may take quite some time, you may even want to consider that this is something for next year's QIP, once you know that the lot is available to you.

- *Are there priorities that address more than one of the CQI four elements?*
  - You may find that your priorities with respect to relationships have a bearing on your priorities for the learning environment. You may wish to consider these priorities in one goal that addresses two elements.

Developing Goals

It does not take much strength to do things, but it requires a great deal of strength to decide what to do.
— Elbert Hubbard

Just as there are distinct steps to follow in the self-assessment stage of developing the Quality Improvement Plan, so too are there steps to follow in developing goals. However, you may find that the activities for developing your goals do not necessarily follow step-by-step in sequence as they appear in this guide. As you go through the steps of defining the goals, outlining strategies, identifying indicators, setting timelines, and assigning roles and responsibilities, you may find that you need to go back to a previous section to make adjustments. For example, once you start setting timelines, you may see that you have two strategies whose order needs to be reversed; or you may discover that once you start to assign roles and responsibilities, you need to adjust your timelines. Your ECDC will be available as a support to you throughout this process.

STEP 1: DEFINING THE GOAL

Now that you have completed the self-assessment process by gathering information and identifying your strengths and areas to improve, and you have selected your priority areas for action, you are ready to start defining the goals of your QIP.

CQI recommends that you develop one or two goals for your QIP. You may find that your analysis of the available resources (financial, human) limits what you can reasonably expect to accomplish in a selected period of time. You may have identified a priority area for improvement during your self-assessment, but you have decided to wait to identify this as a goal until you do your next QIP (for example, waiting to see if the board does purchase the lot next door before you start to develop plans for a natural outdoor play environment). Such thinking indicates reasonable and realistic planning.

Much of the literature about setting goals refers to the importance of setting goals that are SMART (Doran, 1981). While many organizations have substituted other words for each of the letters (e.g., "A" could stand for action oriented, etc.), the SMART acronym usually means

- *Specific* — target a specific area for improvement
- *Measurable* — identify an indicator of progress
- *Assignable* — specify who will do it
- *Realistic* — state what results can realistically be achieved, given available resources
- *Time-related* — specify when the results can be achieved

Effective goals are positive and realistic. Your goals should state what you will be working toward, rather than practices you will end (e.g., we are going to stop cancelling staff meetings). While it may be wonderful to think that you will double wages in the next year, that is likely not going to happen. One of the most important things to consider in defining your goal is the clarity and specificity of the language you use. It can be very disheartening when three months into the process you discover that there are multiple interpretations as to what the goal means.

Some examples of clear goals:

EXAMPLES
Goal: Enhance our relationship with the local family resource centre by sharing two professional development activities in the next year, agreeing on a mutual referral approach, and collaborating on a community "play fair" for all children and parents to be held next summer.
Goal: Redesign the outdoor play environment to create a natural play area for infants and toddlers.
Goal: Revise our centre's approach to PD sessions by developing individualized professional development plans for all educators that articulate (1) personal goals for development, (2) new practices to be learned, and (3) centre-wide needs for skill development.

Once you have defined your goals, the steps of outlining strategies, identifying indicators, setting timelines, and assigning roles and responsibilities may not be done step-by-step. You may prefer to go back to adjust a strategy once you start to consider timelines or roles and responsibilities. For the sake of clarity in this document, however, these next steps will be outlined sequentially.

STEP 2: OUTLINING STRATEGIES

Now that you have defined your goal, how will you achieve it? If your goal is the destination, your strategies are the road map that you will use to reach that destination. You will likely have more than one strategy for reaching your goal, and it is quite possible that, as time goes on, you will revise your strategies based on your reflections and assessment as to what is working and what is not. Your strategies will form part of your QIP.

While your strategies will map out how you will reach your goal, a strategy does not have to include all of the details about who, when, and where. For example, if the goal is to redesign the outdoor environment to provide for a natural play space for infants and toddlers, then your strategies might include "Prepare a site plan for the new infant-and-toddler area." This strategy would need to describe specific actions, such as

- Meet with the infant/toddler room staff to discuss ideas
- Research natural play spaces
- Ask parents to submit ideas
- Visit other centres to see how they have designed their natural outdoor play spaces for infants and toddlers

A second strategy might be "Meet with board/owner/operator for approval of plan and budget" — knowing that this strategy requires information about costs, scheduling a board meeting, preparing options, etc. You may also want to "Coordinate a 'Volunteer Day' to begin construction of the new play space" — again, with your tasks and responsibilities outlining any additional resources needed and who will do what to run this event. Each of the above specific actions will be addressed when you identify indicators, set timelines, and assign roles and responsibilities.

STEP 3: IDENTIFYING INDICATORS AND EVIDENCE

Once your goals, strategies and action requirements have been developed, you should have indicators that describe what success will look like. You may have numerous indicators to let you know that your strategies are working, which will result in the form of evidence.

Below we have provided examples of indicators and evidence of success.

INDICATOR	EVIDENCE
Consultation with staff and parents has taken place.	Summary report lists nature of consultations (e.g., parent meeting, parent survey, staff meeting, phone interview) and dates for each, with names of people consulted and summary of the feedback received.
We conducted research on infant-and-toddler outdoor play spaces.	Summary report to document findings of research.
We visited other centres to see their outdoor play areas.	List of names of centres, dates of the visit, and summary of observations.
The director and board conducted a site visit to identify how the new space could be used to promote learning goals for this age group.	Site plan report completed.

STEP 4: SETTING TIMELINES

Now that you know your goal, have identified strategies to reach that goal, and have considered the detailed actions within each strategy, you will need to set timelines for getting the work done. This is the point where you may need to consider who will be carrying out each activity, and you may need to adjust timelines to aim for a reasonable flow to the activities. For example, you may discover that before the staff in the infant-and-toddler program provide input, they would prefer to see the summary of research on natural play spaces, or to visit other centres to see their outdoor environments.

For the QIP, timelines for each goal should be in the six-months to one-year range. If you believe that it will take several years to reach your goal, then you should think of the goal in phases. For example, if a redesign of the outdoor play environment to create the separate space for infants and toddlers requires purchase of additional land, you might decide that your Phase 1 goal involves fundraising and acquisition of the land, while Phase 2 involves the actual construction of the new play space.

As you move forward with strategies to reach your goal, you may find that you need to revise your timelines. This is normal, as things may happen beyond the control of your centre. A storm knocks down trees in your yard. You run into fundraising problems or lose staff. On the other hand, you may enroll a new family and find that the parents own a landscaping company and are willing to donate time and equipment. In this case, you decide to change your timelines because you can accomplish more than you thought in a shorter period.

STEP 5: ASSIGNING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Well-designed goals, strategies, indicators, and timelines are meaningless unless you know who is going to carry out the work. Depending on the goals and strategies you have selected, groups of people could be responsible for different parts of the work (e.g., board of directors, owners or operators, parents' advisory committee, etc.), or individuals (centre director, supervisor for school-age program, etc.) could be responsible for specific activities. The lead of your QIP should indicate who is responsible for each activity and who carries overall responsibility to ensure that the QIP is being implemented. This lead person will likely be the primary contact for the ECDC.

Since the director usually has overall supervisory and management responsibility for the centre, it is normal that he or she be designated to take responsibility for implementing the QIP, unless for some reason it makes sense that another person do so. The director or designate makes sure that each person identified to carry out a task is working on it, and that timelines are being met. If someone is not meeting set timelines, it will be up to the director or designate to determine why that is happening and take steps to resolve the issue. The director or designate is typically the person who reports to either a board of directors or the owner of the centre. If there are delays in meeting timelines, the ECDC should be notified as soon as possible so that the reasons for the delays can be discussed and timelines adjusted as appropriate.

On-Site Consultation — Early Childhood Development Consultants

On-site consultation and support from Early Childhood Development Consultants (ECDCs) are key features of the Continuous Quality Improvement process of Quality Matters. Your ECDC will be involved both in the development of your Quality Improvement Plan and in supporting you to implement your strategies for achieving your identified goals. You and your ECDC will agree on a schedule for on-site visits and the format for communication. Together, you may decide on face-to-face meetings or a combination of face-to-face, email updates, and telephone calls.

For purposes of Quality Matters, your ECDC will

- consult with you regarding your participation in Quality Matters to explain the program, expectations, and reporting requirements
- engage with you to begin the Continuous Quality Improvement process, with both your self-assessment process and the development of a Quality Improvement Plan
- provide on-site consultation in working with you on your QIP
- approve your QIP
- monitor and assess progress in meeting goals and timelines outlined in your QIP
- support you in revisions and updates to your QIP and in implementation of the Early Learning Curriculum Framework

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