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Supporting Improvement In Early Childhood Programs: QNY's Approach

Quality New York (QNY) is a comprehensive initiative to support development and learning of all New York City's young children by assisting early care and education programs to improve teaching and administrative practices, provide high quality learning environments for young children, and engage in continuous self-monitoring and quality improvement. In addition to its work directly with early childhood programs, QNY is active in advocacy and public education promoting increased early education supply and quality through advocacy coalitions. Its newsletter, *QNY NEWS*, is widely distributed to early childhood programs, advocates, and public agency officials within the City, providing information on training, resources, and policy issues. Members of QNY staff serve on city and state task forces and work groups advising on and developing policy options. Through its diverse activities, QNY has contributed substantially to interest in improving quality of care through national accreditation in New York City and beyond.

In 2002, when QNY first began its work, there were approximately 1,800 child care centers and early education programs in New York City. Only 47 of these programs were accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and most of these served children in corporate-sponsored programs and high-income neighborhoods. Children from lower-income families, often families of color, were not able to access accredited programs because of their location and high fees. A critical impetus for QNY was not just the small numbers of accredited programs overall, but concerns about the quality of care available to children using public subsidies to pay for care.

QNY selected the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) program standards and accreditation process as the framework for its work because of its comprehensiveness, rigor, and acceptance in the field. QNY, a collaboration between Bank Street College of Education, Child Care, Inc. (CCI), and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA), is a registered Accreditation Facilitation Project with NAEYC and is considered a leading model for accreditation facilitation.

Since its beginning to the present, the QNY partnership has worked with 204 early childhood programs in the City, using the NAEYC standards and self-study tools as guides for child care, Early Head Start, Head Start, and private early education programs to improve the quality of their services. QNY has successfully guided 85 programs through the accreditation process. As of May 2008, QNY was working with an additional 70 programs pursuing accreditation.

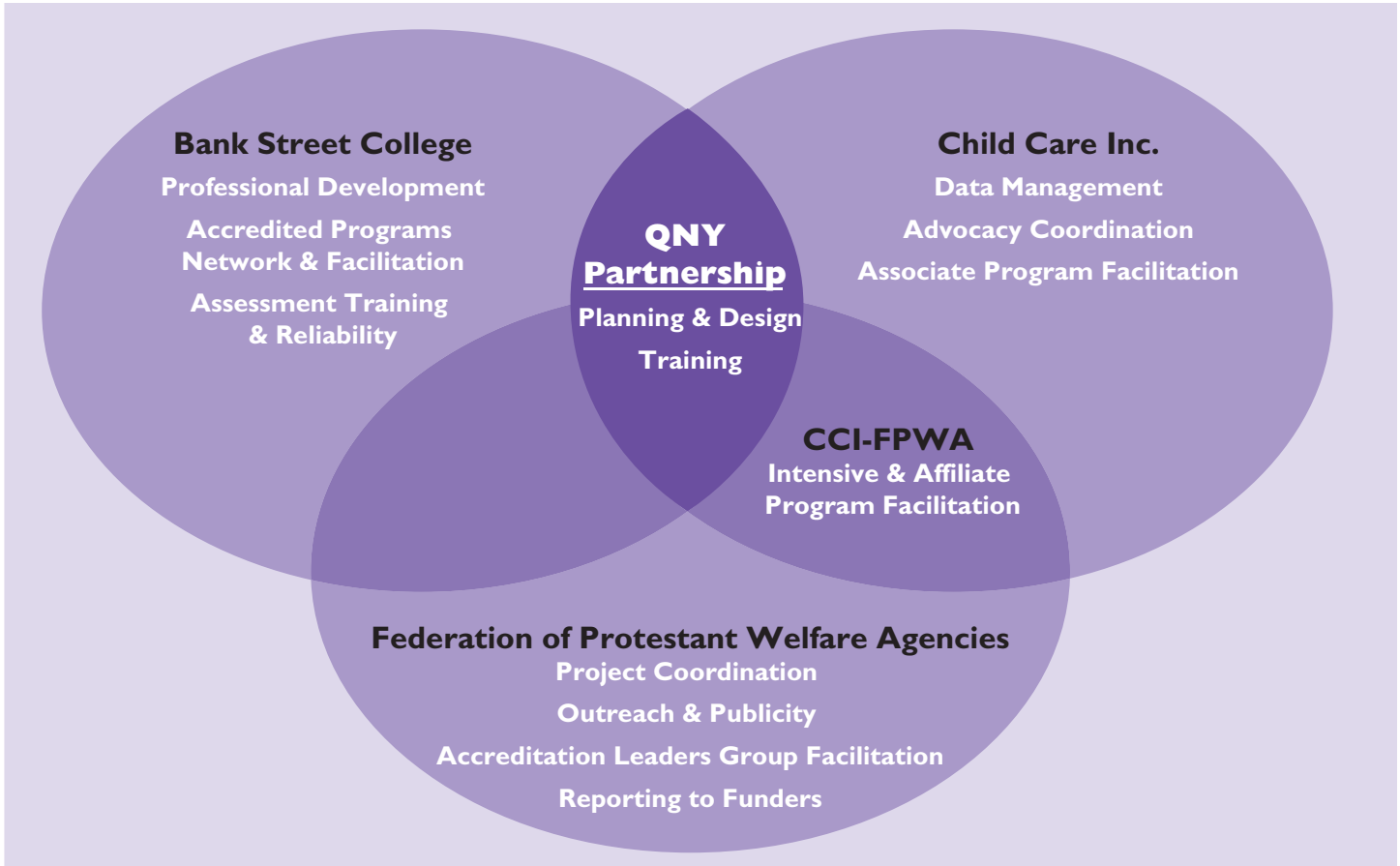
QNY uses a comprehensive program improvement model that is implemented by an experienced and dedicated staff. The core components of QNY's model from the beginning have been:

- Nationally recognized program standards and assessments as the framework for quality improvement
- A tiered approach to supporting programs
- Opportunities for facilitated peer learning and support for program administrators
- Professional development for program administrators and teaching staff
- Individualized technical assistance

Over the history of QNY, the specific approaches, tools, and resources in each component have evolved, reflecting experience, program needs, and changes in the field. One critical factor has been the NAEYC "reinvention" of its program standards and accreditation criteria and process, based on an extensive review of recent research. New standards and performance criteria were published in January 2006, and QNY modified its tools and strategies to begin work with a new cohort of programs under the new system.

This brief describes the critical components of the QNY program improvement model and provides some examples of how they have had an impact on early childhood program quality. It is hoped that others interested in using accreditation as a tool for program improvement will see ways they can adopt and adapt elements of the QNY model in their community.

QNY Partnership Responsibilities



THE QUALITY NEW YORK PARTNERSHIP

Quality New York (QNY) is a collaboration between Bank Street College of Education, Child Care, Inc. (CCI), and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies (FPWA), each of which brings critical capacities, experiences, and expertise to the work. The partnership provides QNY with an array of resources that no one organization could supply on its own — long-standing relationships with many diverse early care and education programs throughout the City; experience and expertise in organizing and providing rigorous professional development; staff with extensive experience and professional credentials in early childhood education and with skill in training and technical assistance; and organizational support for policy work.

PROGRAM QUALITY, ACCREDITATION, AND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

It is well-established that the quality of early care and education services in any setting — the child's own home, the home of a family member or friend, a family child care setting, or an early childhood center — is a significant factor in young children's language, cognitive, and social-emotional development. Further, quality goes beyond ensuring a safe and healthy environment where there is an appropriate number of adults to provide supervision and care, which is the primary focus of most state and local licensing and regulatory requirements.

NAEYC established a voluntary nation-wide system for assessing, improving, and accrediting center- and school-based early childhood education programs in 1985. Research has shown that NAEYC accreditation is associated with higher early childhood program quality and with more positive child outcomes.

The ten Program Standards in the NAEYC accreditation system cover all aspects of early childhood programs that affect the experiences and development of young children. The system requires that accredited programs demonstrate that each is met and provide annual evidence of continued compliance and progress toward improvement.

QNY staff are employees or consultants of the three partner organizations. These individuals bring a wealth of education, experience, expertise, and dedication to their work. All have worked in early childhood education administration for numerous years and are professionally active in providing training to others in the field. In capitalizing on these skills, QNY has developed a number of ways to ensure that the work is carried out efficiently across the three organizations and many individuals.

From the beginning, the QNY partners were aware of the need to ensure consistency and efficiency across three organizations and to sustain the skills and knowledge of the QNY staff, both in the field of early childhood education and on the accreditation system as it continues to be refined by NAEYC. Twice monthly meetings are held to review progress, problem solve, reach joint decisions, and plan. The Accreditation Facilitators hold meetings with the Quality Advisors every other month to share information and experiences. All QNY staff participate in several professional development sessions each year, covering both NAEYC accreditation and new child development information and early education approaches. Through this approach QNY models continuous quality improvement and professional development for participating programs.

THE QUALITY NEW YORK PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT MODEL

The QNY program improvement model includes the following components:

- Nationally recognized program standards and assessments as the framework for quality improvement
- A tiered approach to supporting programs
- Opportunities for facilitated peer learning and support for program administrators
- Professional development for program administrators and teaching staff
- Individualized technical assistance

QNY's services are provided to programs free of charge. QNY's supporters include the United Way of New York City, the Picower Foundation, the Heron Foundation, and Women United in Philanthropy (an affinity group organized by the United Way of New York City). Programs are expected to pay the necessary fees to NAEYC for enrollment and at each stage of the accreditation process, as an indication of their commitment to quality improvement.

QNY Component: Nationally recognized program standards and assessments as the framework for quality improvement

In assisting early childhood education programs to plan for and implement quality improvement strategies, QNY uses a nationally recognized set of standards, objective reliable data on current quality, and a structured process for making and sustaining program improvements. This framework supports programs in their development in the same way that good early childhood curricula and assessment support the development of young children — by offering opportunities for learning and demonstrating knowledge and skills across the full array of areas critical to success.

All programs that participate in QNY are required to use the NAEYC program standards in reviewing their programs and in setting goals for improvement. The standards provide programs with a concrete set of objective indicators of quality against which they can assess their program and toward which they can strive. QNY provides information, tools, resources, and training related to these program standards.

The NAEYC accreditation process is structured to take programs systematically through rigorous self-assessment, program improvement, documentation, and verification of all aspects of early childhood education quality. Achieving and maintaining accreditation ensures that early childhood programs operate efficiently and effectively in providing children with developmentally appropriate learning environments that meet their individual and family needs. The self-assessment and improvement process and annual confirmation of adherence to standards is the hallmark of accreditation and what makes it a successful approach to improving and maintaining quality program-wide. At the same time, the comprehensiveness of the requirements can be daunting. QNY has been successful in developing approaches and tools to help program administrators and their staff break down the process into manageable pieces, working toward concrete changes in policies and practices that improve the program immediately as well as move it toward accreditation.

Once a program has made the decision to pursue accreditation intensively, QNY staff conduct two types of assessments to provide more detailed data on the learning environment and on management policies and practices. Information on the program's learning environment for the children it serves is collected via one of two instruments developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina and used widely for research, assessment, and improvement efforts. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ECERS-R) is used in classrooms serving children ages 3 to 5 years and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ITERS-R) is used in classrooms serving younger children. QNY observes two classrooms from each program that is pursuing accreditation.

QNY staff also use a standardized tool to measure program management and leadership practices. The Program Administration Scale (PAS) was developed at the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership to provide information in ten areas — human resources development, personnel cost and allocation, center operations, child assessment, fiscal management, program planning and evaluation, family partnerships, marketing and public relations, technology, and staff qualifications.

Data from these assessments are shared with the program administrator by the assigned QNY Quality Advisor and together they set priorities for the Program Improvement Plan and identify resources and strategies to support improvement in specific areas.

"As a result of the accreditation and self-study [family] surveys that we conducted within our community, we found large gaps between the known and the unknown concerning school policy... All of our families now receive a user-friendly Parent Handbook at an orientation... [The family survey] is now used as a checklist for parents to give feedback to the director."

QNY Component: A tiered approach to supporting programs

One of the components of the QNY program improvement model is a tiered approach which allows QNY to work in different ways with programs depending on what level of involvement they have in the accreditation process:

- **Intensive programs** that are actively pursuing NAEYC accreditation — that is, have entered the one-year period of self-assessment immediately prior to candidacy
- **Affiliate programs** that are preparing for the self-assessment process or have had conditions change (such as a change in program administrator) so that actively pursuing accreditation at the moment is not feasible
- **Associate programs** that are using NAEYC standards to identify specific areas for work on program improvement but have not yet decided whether to pursue accreditation
- Previously or currently accredited **programs seeking re-accreditation** under the new NAEYC system.



Intensive programs are assigned a QNY consultant (Quality Advisor) who works with the program administrator using assessment data and the accreditation standards to develop, implement, and track a plan for improvement. *Intensive* and *Affiliate* program administrators attend monthly meetings headed by an Accreditation Facilitator who presents information, brings in materials, and encourages discussion and peer exchange on critical aspects of program quality. *Associate* programs and programs pursuing *re-accreditation* each have their own monthly program administrator meetings. All programs are invited to send staff to specialized professional development, depending on their level.

Within the group intensively pursuing accreditation are both programs that are stand-alone or part of a small agency and those that are affiliated with a large agency with a number of early childhood programs. A major QNY innovation has been the approach used with the larger agencies and their programs in the Accreditation Leaders Group (ALG) cohorts. This approach provides the same individualized technical assistance and facilitated program administrator support groups as other intensive level programs receive. In addition, early childhood executives at the agency level are brought together on a

monthly basis to develop strategies for making agency-wide changes necessary to institute quality improvement across all their programs. This approach was developed to encourage agency-level change and to build leadership within these larger agencies to facilitate program improvement and accreditation across all their early childhood programs.

QNY has also developed innovative strategies for supporting accredited programs. It facilitates a network to which all New York City NAEYC-accredited programs are invited to meetings at which QNY staff facilitate review and discussion of the annual reporting and re-accreditation requirements. These network meetings provide a valuable forum for program administrators to expand their professional relationships. QNY offers more individualized technical assistance on the re-accreditation process to programs that commit to attend a series of workshops.

Working at different levels has been successful in engaging a broad range of programs, many of which are not yet prepared to begin the formal accreditation process but all of which benefit greatly from participation in QNY's professional development activities.

QNY Component: Opportunities for facilitated peer learning and support among program administrators

The leadership of early childhood program administrators is key to program quality and to the success of improvement efforts. Program administrators must commit to quality improvement as a program-wide goal, must allocate time and resources toward that goal, and motivate and support program staff to make needed changes in practice. At the same time, program administrators often find themselves unprepared by their prior experience or training for the management challenges they face and isolated from others in the same situation.

Recognizing this, QNY has organized monthly program administrator support groups, facilitated by experienced staff. These groups provide opportunities for QNY Accreditation Facilitators to provide resources and tools on topics of interest to the group and to encourage peer-to-peer discussion and sharing. Administrators of programs working intensively on accreditation or re-accreditation are required to attend these sessions, while administrators of other QNY programs are encouraged to attend. As noted earlier, there are agency-level executive group sessions for the multi-program agencies involved in QNY — these form the Accreditation Leaders Group, as these staff are expected to take leadership roles promoting quality improvement and accreditation agency-wide.

The facilitated support groups offer program administrators access to more diverse experiences and builds their base of knowledge beyond their agencies' culture and own personal experience. In the groups, program administrators share examples and serve as models for each other. These relationships are often continued outside the group format in one-on-one exchanges. The group meetings serve as check-in points to report on progress and milestones and garner encouragement.

“It was helpful to have a forum where administrators could share their experiences, get feedback from directors who have gone through the accreditation process already, and get assistance from the QNY staff.”

QNY promotes peer learning by highlighting examples of program improvement strategies on the website and in the newsletter. QNY staff share information among themselves about innovative improvement strategies and program success stories that they then use in work with other programs.



QNY Component: Professional development for program administrators and teaching staff

Through the QNY partnership, program staff have the opportunity to receive intensive training tailored to help them make improvements in the learning environments they offer young children. QNY assists program administrators in developing strategic training plans for their staff and in ensuring that the knowledge acquired through training is put into practice in the classroom.

“The teachers are more cognizant of what is developmentally appropriate, and they use these practices more regularly.”

Bank Street College of Education, a nationally renowned graduate school of education, organizes QNY's professional development offerings. The multi-session workshop series are experiential, relevant and immediately applicable. They build on what teachers and program administrators already know to take knowledge and practice to the next level and engage learners in self-reflection and work with peers.

The workshop series offered by QNY are generally organized into four to six sessions over the course of a year and are designed to meet the specific needs of the cohort of programs currently engaged in the initiative. Each year a training needs assessment is conducted with input from both program administrators and QNY staff. Generally the specific content and approach for the workshops differ somewhat between those for programs that are pursuing accreditation and those that are still in the self-study or pre-candidacy stage. All workshops link their content to and use the language of accreditation standards and criteria. Workshops link specific practices with children's development and learning, moving what is being done in the classroom beyond discrete activities to organized strategies. Assignments for work between workshop sessions are given and shared with the program administrator when completed, so that the program administrator can be more supportive of practice changes and identify ways to encourage broader adoption of these practices throughout their program. Programs that have participated in QNY

professional development workshops may apply for on-site sessions so more staff can receive training in their own setting.

An innovative approach to professional development, used by QNY, is to involve program administrators in each workshop series for teachers. Directors attend an initial orientation session at the beginning of each series and attend a final session with the participating teacher(s) to review examples of classroom practices developed during the workshops. These sessions ensure that program administrators are prepared to support their teachers' adoption of new practices and to encourage sharing and use of the new practices program-wide. This contact with program administrators has also helped the training be more responsive to program needs. QNY advises program administrators in selecting teachers most ready to benefit from a particular topic.

In partnership with the NYC Early Childhood Professional Development Institute and the City University of New York (CUNY), QNY was instrumental in developing a strategy to make the coursework necessary for the New York State Children's Program Administrator Credential (CPAC) more accessible for current and future early childhood program directors. The courses are offered for one credit over a four-week period and can be taken in any order, maximizing their accessibility to those working in early childhood programs. QNY staff have been involved in designing and teaching many of the courses. QNY promotes the credential and the CUNY courses through its newsletter, website, and in contacts with program administrators.

“By far the most important result of the Accreditation process is the influence it has had on our staff development in the areas of child-directed and teacher-directed activities. Particularly in a school where most of our children have been referred for special education services, it is a challenge to maintain a balance between structured activities, where children learn to respond to adult requests, and child-initiated activities, where adults observe, engage and plan to meet children's interests, needs and strengths.”

“The teachers are more cognizant of what is developmentally appropriate, and they use these practices more regularly.”

“The teachers had always resisted “modern” educational practices...and reverted back to “traditional” teaching models that were heavy in rote learning and work-sheets.... Now, teaching practices are more child-centered and proactive. Today, the children can be heard speaking more, in both Chinese and English,... and learning by touching, hearing, tasting and seeing hands-on activities.”

“[Our teachers'] observation skills have improved their ability to observe children more carefully and use those observations in planning and implementing learning activities.”



QNY Component: Individualized technical assistance

QNY allots 35 hours per year for individualized technical assistance for up to two years to programs actively engaged in the NAEYC self-study process. These consultants — Quality Advisors — are experienced early childhood education professionals. In addition to the skills, expertise, and experience the Quality Advisors bring to QNY, they receive specialized training on the NAEYC accreditation standards, indicators, and processes. Quality Advisors act as mentors, coaches, sounding boards, and role models for program administrators. They provide a safe, non-judgmental relationship in which program administrators can identify areas of concern and receive non-directive support in coming up with effective approaches to make necessary improvements.

Quality Advisors (QAs) work closely with each program administrator to set goals and implement strategies, such as in-service workshops, mentoring, reflective supervision, and technical advisement, so that programs can make and document improvement as they proceed toward NAEYC accreditation. The Quality Advisor reviews the results of the ECERS or ITERS and PAS assessment scores, along with their own observations, with the program administrator and elicits the program administrator's reflection on areas for improvement. Together, the program administrator and the Quality Advisor develop an individualized Program Improvement Plan. Quality Advisors help model and reinforce changes in practice that help program administrators begin the process of change. Quality Advisors share examples from other programs and help staff see the documentation required in the accreditation process - such as program and classroom portfolios — as a tool for documenting and sharing their practices.

One critical skill that many program administrators may not have developed in their earlier experience as early childhood classroom teachers is staff supervision. The Quality Advisor works with program administrators to help them develop approaches to engage, motivate, and if necessary, let go of staff who resist change. At the same time, Quality Advisors help program administrators find ways to be more supportive of their staff and respectful of the essential contributions they make to program quality.

In one program, two out of the three classrooms were making great progress, but in the third little improvement was evident. The director was frustrated in her efforts to work with the team in that classroom. She asked the Quality Advisor to observe and make recommendations for how to work with those staff.

In another case, the Quality Advisor recommended the book “Someone Moved My Cheese” to the director who gave it to a teacher resisting changing her classroom practice. The message was clear — “if you don’t participate in our program’s improvement, there won’t be a place for you here.” At the same time, the director asked the teacher to take a substantial role in the accreditation work as way to engage her in the change process.

One center had a large space with multiple uses and changing staff during the day. There was concern about how to use this space effectively for large group activities and how to supervise children when only a few were present. The Quality Advisor worked with the director and staff on furniture placement and arranging activities to accommodate both situations.

SUMMARY: What makes Quality New York effective in supporting ECE program quality improvement and accreditation?

QNY has been successful in assisting many early childhood education programs improve their quality and reach NAEYC accreditation. Its model includes the following components, each of which has contributed to QNY's success.

- QNY uses a **combination of tailored approaches** to meet the needs and strengthen the capacities of specific programs. These approaches reflect a **comprehensive assessment** and systematic identification of critical areas for improvement.
- QNY guides programs under a **comprehensive quality improvement framework** that addresses the full set of elements that contribute to providing children with quality learning experiences and support continuous quality improvement. The NAEYC standards and performance criteria are based on research evidence linking the standards with positive child development and learning.
- QNY takes advantage of the **wealth of practical experience and professional expertise of its diverse staff and consultants** who work with programs and provide training and technical assistance. It supports the continued professional growth of these staff and provides opportunities for them to share strategies and learn from each other.
- QNY recognizes the **critical role of program administrators** — and, in the case of larger agencies, agency-level executives — in supporting and sustaining program quality. It provides mentor/coaches in its Quality Advisors, who draw on their experience in program administration and use the NAEYC standards and tools to guide directors through systematic self-assessment and program improvement. It uses **facilitated support groups and professional development** opportunities to build leadership and organizational capacity to sustain quality.

This includes a partnership with the NYC Early Childhood Professional Development Institute and the CUNY School of Professional Studies, offering credit-bearing courses for the New York State Children's Program Administrator Credential. QNY is also working, through the United Way of New York City, with a group of women executives to provide training and coaching for program administrators on business and management issues.

- QNY supports the **professional development of the teaching staff** of early childhood programs as well, through workshop series offered by its partner; the Bank Street College of Education Center for Early Childhood Professionals. These workshops use principles of adult learning to build knowledge and skills in a format that encourages and reinforces immediate application in the classroom. QNY models the importance of continuous learning in providing training and support groups for its own staff and consultants.

While successful in helping many early childhood programs achieve NAEYC accreditation, QNY is not simply a project helping these programs improve their services. Its broad mission to support program quality for all New York City's young children is reflected in its wide range of activities with diverse programs and in its work on public education and advocacy. QNY's semi-annual newsletter is distributed widely; its members are heavily involved in early childhood education professional associations at all levels. It partners with other city and state organizations on advocacy to promote public investments to support quality and its staff serve on city and state task forces shaping public policy and offer leadership with other accreditation facilitation projects around the country. QNY contributes to the understanding of and commitment to early childhood program improvement in New York City, New York State, and at the national level.



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NOTES

- 1 Accreditation Facilitation Projects were developed as a response to the need of early childhood programs for more intensive and sustained support in the accreditation process than was possible for NAEYC staff to provide. See Flis (2002) and Goldfarb and Flis (1996) for descriptions of the role of Accreditation Facilitation Projects.
- 2 This evidence is summarized in a QNY-commissioned paper (Stephens, May 2006) and in McDonald, 2007. The association between accreditation and program quality is recognized by many states in their early childhood quality rating and improvement systems and in the requirements for programs participating in their prekindergarten initiatives, in which NAEYC accreditation is generally accepted as evidence of the highest level of quality (see NAEYC, May 2008). QNY conducted its own study of the quality of accredited programs, re-administering the ECERS-R at a sample of 10 NAEYC-accredited QNY programs between July and September 2006 to determine the level of quality that these programs have maintained over time. Programs were selected based on length of accreditation; the range in length of time since a site received its accredited status was between 6 months and 3 years. Findings were very promising, as the average ECERS-R score across all 10 QNY sites (5.24) indicates that all are of high quality.
- 3 Summarized in Appendix A in McDonald, 2007.
- 4 Bank Street College, a recognized leader in early childhood education, is an independent, fully accredited graduate institution. Child Care, Inc., a child care resource and referral agency, works to expand the supply of quality child care and school-aged education in NYC through public policy, training, and technical assistance to home- and center-based programs. The Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies is a leading social service support organization in NYC and an advocate for the poor and underserved. As one of its many programs, FPWA provides technical assistance and training to child care centers.
- 5 Programs likely to be eligible are encouraged to apply for NAEYC scholarships to cover these fees.
- 6 For detailed information on the NAEYC standards, see www.naeyc.org/academy/standards.
- 7 As noted by the QNY Project Coordinator in a recent article, the accreditation self-study process using these standards is an opportunity for early childhood programs to recreate themselves in line with best practices in the field (Pepper, 2005).
- 8 Once accredited for a five-year period, programs must annually report on any changes in program staff, operations, or facilities and continued compliance with quality standards. In addition, the annual report asks for information about progress toward improved quality. This is a very important component of accreditation, as it assures that programs continue to monitor their quality against the national standards and demonstrate commitment to continued program improvement.
- 9 More information on the ECERS and ITERS is available on the website of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (www.fpg.unc.edu) where they were developed. Also see Harms, Clifford, and Cryer (1998, updated in 2005). A concise summary is available in Halle and Vick (2007).
- 10 The ECERS consists of 43 indicators that can be aggregated into 7 subscales — space and furnishings; personal care routines; language-reasoning; activities; interactions; program structure; and parents and staff. The ITERS consists of 39 indicators in 7 subscales — space and furnishings; personal care routines; listening and talking; activities; interactions; program structure; and parents and staff. The scoring for each indicator on both scales is from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest).
- 11 More information on the PAS is available on the website of the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership Development (ceci.ni.edu), where it was developed. See also Talan and Bloom (2004). A concise summary is available in Halle and Vick (2007).
- 12 QNY support for programs at the associate level and programs seeking re-accreditation will begin in the fall of 2008.
- 13 Among the first two ALG cohorts were nine agencies with a total of 61 early childhood programs. QNY worked intensively with the executives and with the directors of 20 programs. Subsequently, 16 additional programs in those agencies have become accredited or are pursuing accreditation under the leadership of their agency's executive.
- 14 A survey of the early childhood education workforce in New York City found that over 90 percent of current program administrators reported no prior experience or formal training in program management (New York City Professional Development Institute, Spring 2008, and Ochshorn and Garcia, 2007).

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