



Early Learning Coalition of the Nature Coast

Serving Citrus-Dixie-Gilchrist-Levy-Sumter Counties

Provider Alert #4
October 29, 2007

Last fiscal year the Board approved a revised program observation system. The revisions established a Quality Rating System and changed the program observation process from an observation of quality to an observation of program compliance.

On April 4, 2007, the Board voted to postpone the implementation of the Quality Rating System as a result of the Legislature's potential interest in adopting a statewide Quality Rating System.

On September 5, 2007, as a result of a potential budget reduction, the Board voted to transfer several provider services that were implemented by Childhood Development Services to the Coalition. The services included the following:

- Technical Assistance
- Training
- Program Observations

The services were reduced to allow current Coalition staff members (specifically the education specialists) to incorporate the additional services into their existing job duties. Specific service reductions included the following:

- Technical assistance was reduced to provide assistance related to weak areas noted during program observations from any assistance requested by an early learning provider.
- Training was reduced to 120 hours from 150 hours a year.
- Provider observations were not reduced; however, in an effort for the education specialists to complete the child assessments in the timeframe established in the Coalition's policy and procedures, the initial program observations were reduced to mini observations which included the observation of critical areas such as lesson planning, teacher/child ratios, etc.

Although the reduced services were transitioned from CDS to the Coalition smoothly, questions and concerns related to the program observations surfaced. Specifically, the education specialists found it difficult to conduct both the child assessments and the mini audits. The greatest barrier was the effects the mini audits had on the education specialists' relationships and interactions with the children. During the child assessments, the children perceived the assessments as "play-time" with the education specialists and expected the same type of interaction during program observations. The education specialists are expected to be "invisible" during the program observations in an effort to observe an accurate picture of the activities in the classroom. This "invisible" behavior often confused and frustrated the children.

In addition, the education specialists noted that although the objective of the program observation system had been revised from a quality observation to a program compliance observation many of the program requirements were in fact related to quality indicators. The education specialists had

to interpret the expectation of each indicator; however, the interpretations varied based on the education and experience of each education specialist and the individual preferences and interpretation of quality at the provider level. It is important to note that although many of the education specialists have early learning program experience, the staff was originally hired to conduct child assessments.

Based on the concerns noted during the mini audits, Coalition staff expects additional concerns to surface during the implementation of the full program observations. In an effort to meet the objective of the program observation system and to consider the individual preferences and interpretations of quality at the provider level, staff recommends the following revisions to the program observation system:

- Repeal the current Program Observations policy and procedures.
- Clearly define the state, federal, and Coalition school readiness standards. The definitions must include objectives as opposed to processes.
- Develop an Early Learning Plan template, based on the defined state, federal, and Coalition school readiness standards. The template must be designed to allow the early learning providers to describe their plan to provide school readiness services. (It is important to note that the template should be designed, if possible, to mirror common accreditation plans in an effort to reduce duplication of work.)
- Develop a procedure for Coalition staff to approve/disapprove the plan, based on the defined school readiness standards, and to validate the activities of the plan on at least an annual basis. The validation process must include a site visit observation and an appropriate measurement of child progress based on the results of the child assessments.
- Develop a simple process for providers to update their Early Learning Plans on an annual basis.

It is the position of Coalition staff that the above revision will allow the Coalition to fulfill its obligation to document compliance with the School Readiness Program and provide early learning programs with flexibility in implementing school readiness programs in accordance with school readiness requirements.

It is the intent of Coalition staff to share the above information with the Coalition Board during their annual "retreat" on November 7, 2007. It is important that Coalition staff share your feedback with regard to this ALERT with the Board. Please provide your comments to sbosanko@elc-naturecoast.org, or mail your comments to 1564 North Meadowcrest Blvd. Crystal River, FL. 34429, or fax your comments to (352) 563-5933 by NOVEMBER 5, 2007.

PLEASE NOTE: the Board Retreat scheduled for November 7, 2007 will be held at the Dixie County School District, County Road 349, Old Town, Florida beginning at 9:00AM and will likely last four (4) to five (5) hours. The Board will focus on many critical issues during this retreat; therefore, it is extremely important that early learning providers attend this meeting.