

# Continuous Quality Improvement Video Series

## What is continuous quality improvement and why is it important for Texas Rising Star?

Whether you are new to Texas Rising Star or a long-time participant, understanding continuous quality improvement will help your program meet and even exceed the Texas Rising Star measures.

Continuous quality improvement, or CQI, is an approach to quality improvement that helps you have clear goals in mind, ways to learn or practice new things, and opportunities to reflect upon your progress. CQI was adopted by Texas Rising Star as a way to support early learning programs in building quality over time.

Before we tell you how it works, let's stop to ask, why is CQI so important? It comes down to understanding the power of incremental progress, or making *small changes over time*. We know from research that programs do really well when they are able to work on a few focused quality goals at a time. Embracing incremental progress means we don't expect perfection, we simply expect improvement.

*Incremental progress is at the core of CQI.* Let's think about it this way. This beaker represents the quality of my program [picks up beaker], and this water represents my goals for improvement. If I try to work on all my goals at once, I miss the mark. I'm not focused on how I'm pouring the water, water doesn't accumulate in the beaker, and I make a bit of a mess. In other words, I'm not really building quality because I'm overwhelmed.

But what if I set just a few goals at a time? And what if I stop along the way to look at how far I've come, and then I set some more goals? Over time, I'm going to fill up my quality beaker without losing sight of any goals and without overwhelming my program. This is what having a CQI mindset helps us achieve: a steady stream of small changes until we've built a high-quality program.

And remember, quality is something you have to continually practice in order to maintain it. CQI reminds us to continue to set goals and refine our practices so that we are always providing the highest quality services to children and families.

In the next videos, we'll walk you through how CQI works and how you can use the DRC to support CQI at your program. Stay with us.

## What are the steps of continuous quality improvement?

In the first video, we talked about how continuous quality improvement, or CQI, means building quality over time by focusing on a few goals first.

So, how do you get started with CQI? This is where the CQI cycle comes in.

The cycle includes three core steps: analyze data, plan, and practice, and then pausing to reflect between each step. It's not as complicated as it sounds. Let's start with the first step: analyze data.

Analyzing data is simply identifying where you need to improve quality. You can use your Texas Rising Star site assessment scores if you have them, or even a self-assessment. Look at where your scores are lower than they could be. If you have mostly high scores, dig deeper. There is always something to improve. You can do your own observations, brainstorm with a mentor, or talk to teachers about what they think their improvement needs are. All of this is useful data to consider.

Take a moment to record all your improvement needs. We've included a template on this page to help you.

Once you've identified areas that need improvement, you are ready to move into the planning phase of the cycle. We like to think of this as creating an action plan—thinking through what actions you need to take to improve quality.

Whether you are creating an action plan independently or with a mentor, you'll want to do these four things:

First, set a small number of realistic goals to work on. This might be the hardest thing about CQI—putting some goals aside in order to focus on others. But remember, incremental progress is how to build real quality. You will get to all the goals eventually. What are three or four goals that feel important and realistic to achieve over the next couple of weeks? If you are working with a mentor, ask their thoughts about how best to narrow down your goals.

Once you have your goals, you probably need to identify professional development that will help you and your staff learn more in that area. Record any trainings or courses you want your program to complete.

Then, plan for how you will put what you've learned into practice. Perhaps you need to create new training plans for your staff. What template will you use? How will you communicate the new plans to staff?

Or maybe it's a new teacher-child interaction your program needs to focus on. Some interactions will feel brand new to staff. How will they practice? Can they practice the interaction during daily routines or would it be easier to practice with a structured classroom activity?

The next phase of the cycle is practice. This one is easy. When you get to this point, you are just doing all of the things you said you'd do in your action plan, including learning about and practicing new skills. Time-wise, this is likely the longest part of the cycle, as you complete all of your action items.

Throughout the cycle, you want to stop and reflect on your progress toward your goals. Be honest with yourself—how did my program improve? What goals do we still need to work on? You can get feedback from a mentor, from staff, or even from families you serve. Reflecting on this feedback is really important. You can learn more about the process and benefits of reflection by following the link on this page.

The end of every CQI cycle is the beginning of the next one. You can decide to keep working on the goals you've set, or go back to your improvement list and set new goals. This cycle repeats again and again, and doesn't really ever end—there is always something to improve. As a program director or a school leader, adopting this mindset can help ensure you maintain the progress you've made as new families and staff come through your program.

Finally, if you are certified, you likely have a Texas Rising Star mentor to lean on during this process. Take advantage of their knowledge and experience to help guide you through the CQI cycle. However, the more you are involved in this process, the more successful you're likely to be. In between mentoring visits, you can use your new understanding of CQI to continue to work on goals and reflect on your progress.

## How can the DRC support continuous quality improvement?

The DRC was designed with continuous quality improvement in mind. If you watched the previous video, you'll remember that the CQI cycle includes a *planning* phase. In the planning phase, you are identifying how you will learn more about the goal, as well as how you will practice those goals.

Often when we think about learning, we think about professional development. The DRC includes different types of professional trainings, organized by broad topic areas, to help your program build strong foundational knowledge.

The *examples* in the DRC are also really great professional learning tools. They can help you picture what the goal looks like in real life, whether it's a teacher-child interaction, a document you need, or how to set up a learning environment. Reviewing and discussing these examples with your staff members can be a really powerful—and efficient—way to support their professional learning.

Then, when it comes time to plan how you will put goals into practice, you can also draw on the examples to guide *your creation* of new policies, documents, environments, and so on. In other words, you are putting into practice any pieces of the example that align with your program.

For Category 2 measures, we've included a special section for practice opportunities—these are ways your program can practice a specific teacher-child interaction, often in the context of a classroom activity. Using an activity to practice teacher-child interactions is an authentic way to bring out some of those interactions with children that may not otherwise happen.

For all of the resources in the DRC, we've included a brief description for how they can support learning and practicing in order to build quality in the Texas Rising Star measures. These descriptions may give you ideas for how to incorporate the resource in your action plan.

The DRC is always here for you to explore, but we also want you to know that DRC resources are also included as a link on your official Continuous Quality Improvement Plan, or CQIP, that you create with a mentor. Just scan the QR code on your CQIP report to find resources aligned to your current goals.

That's it from me on continuous quality improvement. Check out the other resources on this page to keep learning about CQI and Texas Rising Star. Happy goal-setting!

## What's next for quality?

If you are working at a Texas Rising Star-certified early learning program, you might ask...what's next for quality? Certification in Texas Rising Star is a starting point, and there are many ways to improve your program year-round. We'd like you to consider three potential areas of focus for your next quality improvement efforts.

Number 1. A good place to start is to make sure that ALL high-quality teacher-child interactions are occurring more often than not in ALL of your classrooms.

We say this for two reasons: You might know that Category 2: Teacher-Child Interactions is the most heavily weighted category in the final assessment score. This means that this scoring greatly impacts the Programs overall star rating. Maximizing Category 2 scores across classrooms is one of the best ways to maintain or increase your star rating.

The second reason is what we have learned from research. And that is teacher-child interactions are one of the biggest influences on children's positive learning and development. Strong teacher-child interactions mean more impactful learning experiences for children... and higher ratings for your program.

So even if your program scores high in Category 2, take an in-depth look into the individual measures and note those areas where classrooms may need additional support. You may find that a majority of teachers are struggling with a specific measure. You can then use the Digital Resource Collection or DRC (for short) to find examples and practice opportunities to hone those skills.

Number 2. Consider where you can boost the quality of implementation by expanding on those high-quality behaviors that you are already doing.

You can continually improve implementation for almost all of the measures on the Texas Rising Star assessment... For example, you might have a family education program that could be enriched with new content for families. Or, teachers can improve their use of a curriculum if they can learn how to create stronger lesson plans. Maybe your classrooms can be more systematic in how they use child assessment data to support children's learning. You get the idea... There are a number of areas in Texas Rising Star that you can continue to build quality around.

By now, you may have a few ideas of what could be turned into concrete goals. Or, perhaps you'd like to explore more professional learning resources to get a better sense of where you should apply your quality improvement efforts. The DRC has resources to help.

Number 3. Explore new initiatives that can help you build quality. For example, Texas Rising Star supports goals around management and leadership training for directors or preparing for a partnership with a public prekindergarten program. Take a look at the resources for these topics in the jump start section of the website.

You can also learn more about pre-k partnership opportunities by scanning this QR code. It will take you to the Texas Workforce Commission's Prekindergarten Partnership webpage.

For more information on how to set goals and improve over time, take a look at the Continuous Quality Improvement series, found here on the DRC.

Even high-quality programs benefit from making continuous quality improvement the focus of their program practices. There are always areas in which a program can improve. Once you establish a Continuous Quality Improvement routine, building and maintaining quality becomes a lot easier.

Finally, the DRC is here to help. With professional learning resources, implementation tools, examples, and practice opportunities, there are a lot of tools here to add to your toolbox and support you in your long-term quality improvement goals.