

Supporting Quality Improvement in Education and Care

*Quality Support
Program Stage Three
- Key findings*



Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority



Background

This report presents key findings from the first three years of the Quality Support Program (QSP). The QSP is an initiative of, and funded by, the NSW Department of Education Early Childhood Education Quality Assurance and Regulatory Services Directorate (NSW DoE), involving the delivery by ACECQA of free tailored professional development and support to approved providers and service leaders of eligible services across NSW.

The evaluation of the QSP was overseen by the ACECQA Research and Evaluation team, independent from the QSP service delivery team, and reviewed by the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

The QSP has been implemented in four stages, with each stage comprising separate groups of services in 'rounds' of up to 18 weeks of tailored support. These rounds have overlapped each other and are tailored to different service types. This report covers Stages One to Three.

In Stage One (March 2018 to July 2019), Stage Two (February 2019 to August 2020), and Stage Three (July 2020 to June 2021), the QSP has delivered 457 occurrences of support¹ to 442 services, providing education and care for approximately 41000 children².

The eligibility criteria for services to participate in the QSP is:

- rated Working Towards the National Quality Standard (NQS)
- in Stage One to Three only: not meeting six or more Elements of the NQS (or otherwise indicated need for support)
- in Stage One and Two only: provides Long Day Care (LDC) or Family Day Care (FDC)

- in Stage One only: last quality rated between June 2015 and the end of December 2017³

- 457 occurrences of support
- 442 long day care, family day care, preschool, and outside school hours care services
- Attended by approx. 41000 children

Approved providers of eligible services were invited to voluntarily participate in the QSP.

The objectives of the QSP are to improve the quality of participating services so they receive a rating of Meeting NQS or higher, and to improve participants' knowledge of and confidence in the NQS. Additional information about the QSP can be found on the [QSP webpage](#).

Participants were provided with bespoke resources; a QSP facilitator to answer questions, discuss improvement priorities and prompt critical reflection; and one-on-one targeted tailored support with continuous quality improvement. The structure of each QSP round consisted of an introductory workshop, provision of eLearning modules and other resources, service visits, support phone calls, video calls, and emails. Workshops and service visits were conducted in-person in Stages One and Two and mostly online in Stage Three due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Different service types presented with different contexts and support needs. The QSP drew on the insights of participants to produce service-type specific resources.

¹ Occurrences of support refer to 16-week (Stage One) or 18-week active support periods where service leaders attended workshops, received resources, and interacted regularly with their QSP support facilitator.

² This estimation is based on the maximum approved places in each service assuming full capacity on any given day, estimated hours per week based on service type, and average attendance per child as reported in Report on Government Services 2021.

³ Also not meeting six or more Elements of the 2012 NQS.

1.1 Participating services

During Stages One to Three of the QSP, 457 occurrences of support were provided, to 332 LDC (15 services were supported twice), 29 FDC, 16 preschools, and 65 OSHC services. **Table 1** shows the breakdown of services across the three stages covered in this report. **Table 2** groups the participating services by number of NQS Elements assessed as 'not met' when quality rated prior to participating in the QSP. Just over half (54%) of the supported services were provided by small approved providers operating a single service, a quarter (25%) were provided by medium approved providers operating two to seven services, and less than a quarter (21%) were provided by large providers.

Table 1: Number of services in each QSP stage, by service type

Stage	LDC	FDC	Preschool	OSHC	All service types
One	126	16	-	-	142
Two	127	5	-	-	132
Three	94	8	16	65	183
Total occurrences of support	347	29	16	65	457

Table 2: Number of NQS Elements 'not met' on entry to the QSP

Number of Elements 'not met' ⁴	LDC	FDC	Preschool	OSHC	All service types
1 to 5	10 (3%)	7 (24%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	19 (4%)
6 to 10	164 (47%)	8 (28%)	11 (69%)	27 (42%)	210 (46%)
11 to 20	126 (36%)	8 (28%)	4 (25%)	22 (34%)	160 (35%)
21 to 30	37 (11%)	6 (21%)	1 (6%)	12 (18%)	56 (12%)
31 to 40	10 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	12 (3%)
Total	347	29	16	65	457

1.2 Methodology

The impact of the QSP on service quality was evaluated by examining changes between quality ratings conducted independently by the NSW regulatory authority before and after participation in the QSP. These results were compared to quality rating results for a selection of non-participating (comparison group) services with similar characteristics⁵.

Service leaders⁶ experience of the QSP and perceived quality improvement was measured using service self-evaluation surveys before and after participation in the QSP, and an anonymous feedback survey completed after participation.

⁴ Element counts for quality ratings are converted from the 2012 NQS to the 2018 NQS where required. Adjusted 2018 NQS results are only an approximation.

⁵ Stratification and propensity score matching was used to select non-participating (comparison group) services with similar characteristics (NSW services initially rated Working Towards NQS, matched service type, within five Elements of the initial number of Elements not met, where possible, matched on initial NQS version, management type, remoteness, socio-economic index, centre-size, and provider size.

⁶ Service leader refers to a person who has been identified as holding a leadership role within an education and care service. For example, the role titles may be approved provider, approved provider representative, nominated supervisor, educational leader, director, coordinator, team leader, room leader etc.

1.3 Findings to date

97% of centre-based services supported by QSP improved in the number of NQS Elements 'met', by an average of 11 Elements.



1.3.1 Quality ratings for centre-based services (LDC, preschool, and OSHC)

- The QSP was largely successful in supporting participating centre-based services to achieve an overall rating of Meeting NQS⁷.
- 75% of centre-based services achieved a rating of Meeting NQS or above.
- Centre-based participating services were three times more likely to achieve a rating of Meeting NQS or above compared to matched non-participating (comparison group) services.
- 97% of centre-based services supported by QSP improved in the number of NQS Elements 'met', by an average of 11 NQS Elements. In comparison, 83% of centre-based services in the comparison group improved by an average of seven NQS Elements.
- Participating centre-based services showed a greater increase in the number of NQS Quality Areas, Standards, and Elements

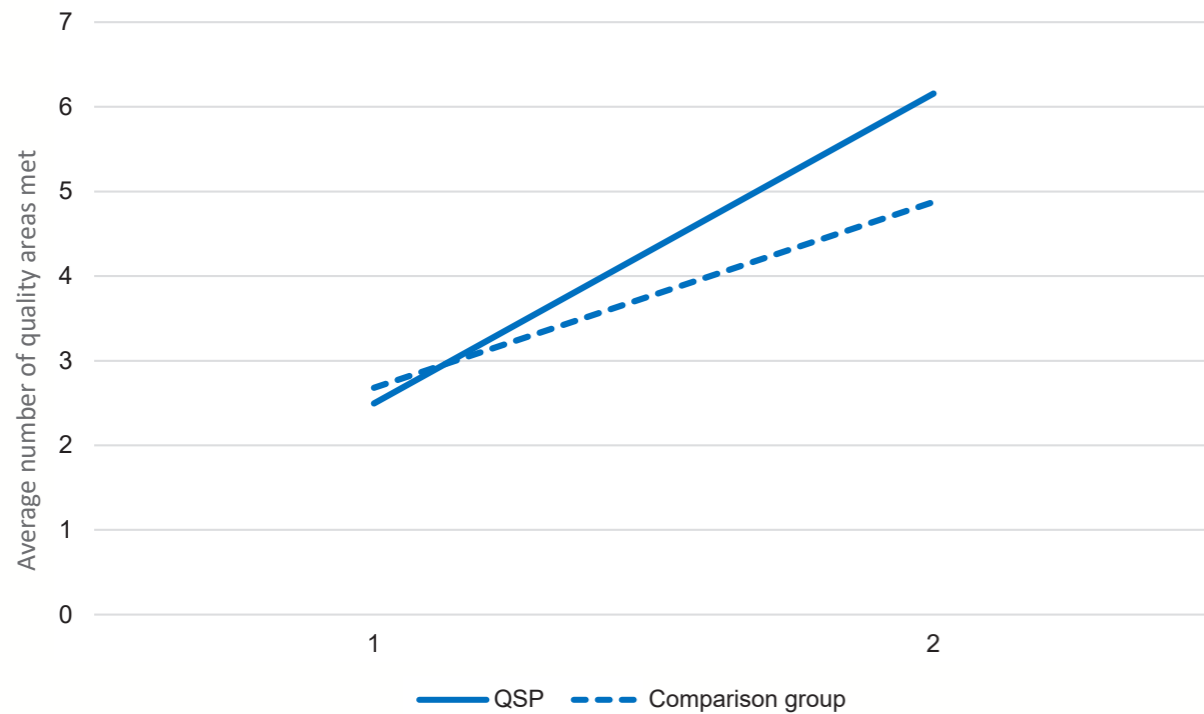
Centre-based services were three times more likely to achieve Meeting NQS or above if they participated in the QSP.

'met' between pre-QSP and post-QSP quality ratings than matched comparison group services did (**Figure 1**). This result is very unlikely to have occurred by chance.

- Most services (77%) that were quality rated Meeting or Exceeding NQS after QSP support had been Working Towards NQS for three or more years, and almost a quarter (23%) had been Working Towards NQS for seven or more years, receiving the rating two or more times during this period.
- The QSP was effective at increasing the number of NQS Elements 'met' for services from disadvantaged and advantaged socio-economic locations. Just over half (54%) of the services rated Meeting or Exceeding NQS after participating in the QSP were from relatively disadvantaged locations (SEIFA decile 1 to 5).

⁷ All quality rating results are based on the 281 centre-based services and 19 FDC participating services reassessed at the time of the evaluation. As there is a gap between a service completing the QSP and its reassessment by the NSW Regulatory Authority, the change in rating for all participating services is not available at the time of this report.

Figure 1: QSP centre-based services increased more in quality areas Meeting NQS



1.3.2 Quality ratings for family day care (FDC) services

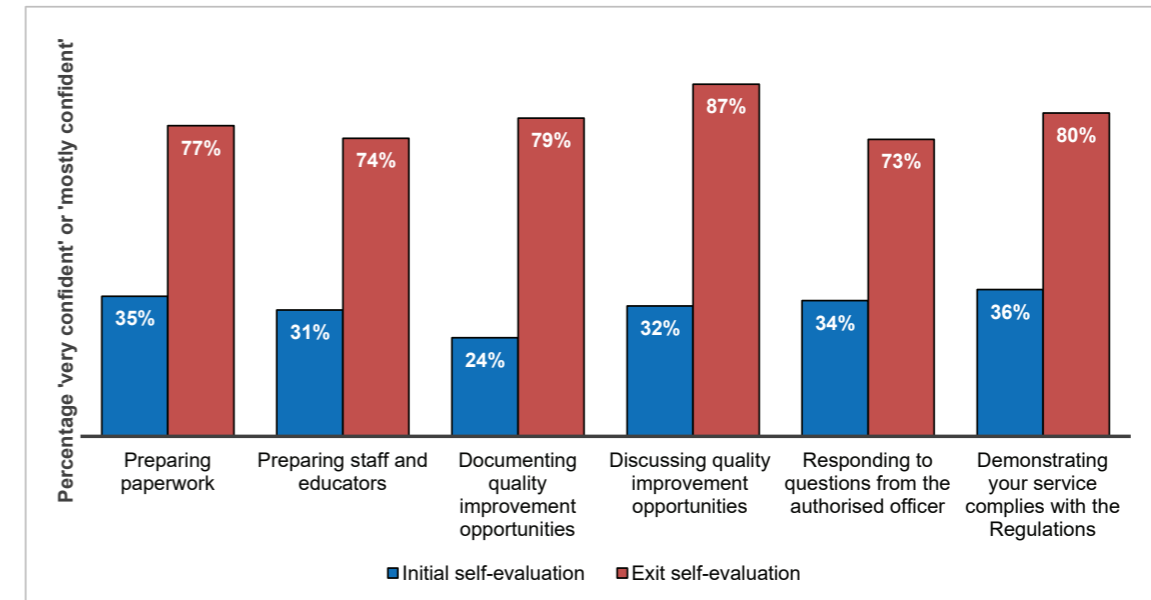
Family day care (FDC) services that were approved to participate in the QSP improved more than matched comparison group services in Quality Area 7, Governance and leadership, than other quality areas. One reason for this could be that FDC service leaders may have less frequent contact with their educators than centre-based service leaders who may work with their educators on a daily or at least weekly basis. Therefore, changes that service leaders implemented may have taken longer to impact on educator practice in FDC services. Improvements in Quality Area 7 may have been faster to implement because they are less reliant on changes in educator practice. A delivery model that supports FDC educators as well as service leaders may be more effective for this service type.

1.3.3 Service leaders' experience of the QSP

“What a wonderful privilege it was to have been given the chance to participate in this program! It was a professional mentoring/coaching relationship. I appreciate that we could be honest about where we were at and where we needed support (without being judged). At times when we felt overwhelmed, hearing the questions ‘How are you going’ and ‘How can we support you?’ was uplifting. Leaders need support too, in order to lead well. The positive feedback [we] received from the educators...is a testament to the improvements they witnessed in our leadership. Overall, the Quality Support Program challenged the way we do things. Indeed, we benefitted from this program’s shared goal for us to be more confident to make improvements to meet (and even exceed) the NQS that ultimately leads to improved outcomes for the children under our care and their families.” - Feedback received from an OSHC service leader

Service leaders became more confident following their participation in the QSP and felt they were better prepared for the Assessment and Rating process, as shown in Figure 2.

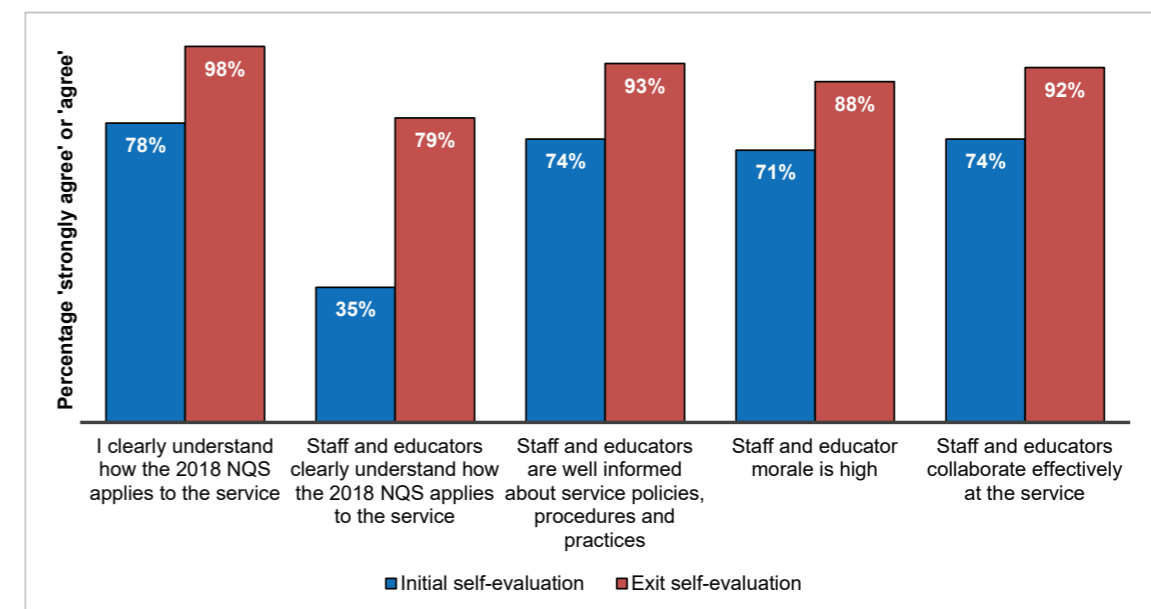
Figure 2: Service leaders were more confident after participating in the QSP



Service leaders increased in confidence after participating in the QSP (Figure 2). More FDC service leaders were confident when entering the QSP (average 53%) than other service leaders (average 30%) and therefore showed smaller increases despite reaching a similar level of confidence after completing the QSP.

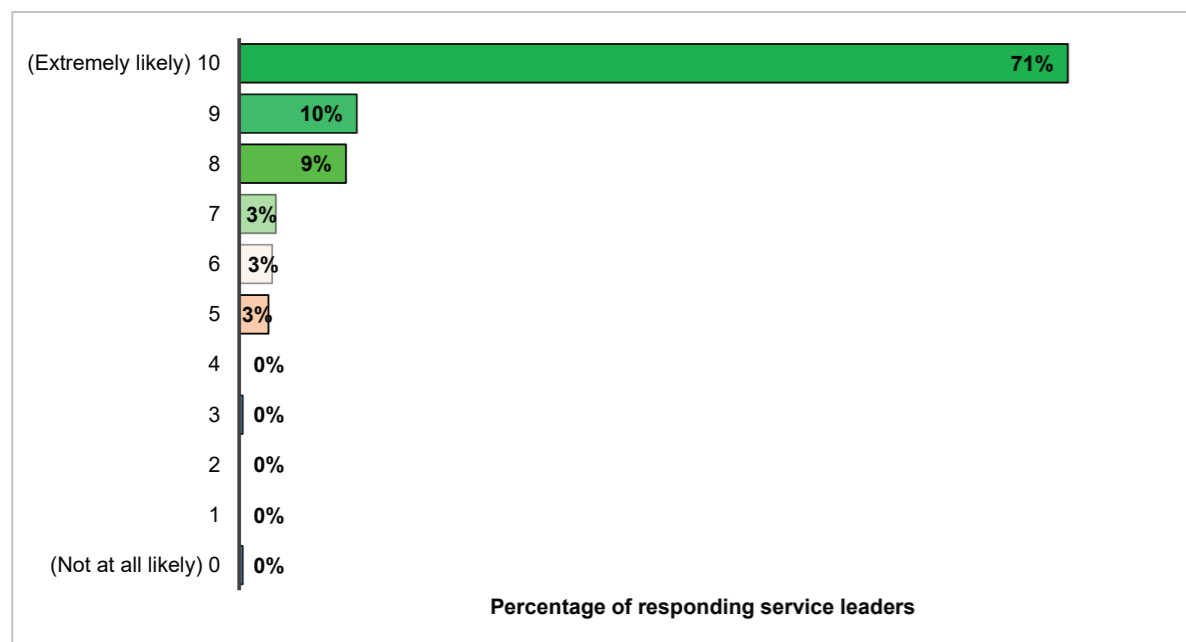
Service leaders felt more knowledgeable about the NQS at completion of the QSP, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Service leaders felt more informed after participating in the QSP



Service leaders were overall very satisfied with the QSP, would recommend it to others (Figure 4), and found that the support and resources provided were helpful

Figure 4: Participants report that they are very likely to recommend the QSP to other services



1.4 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on QSP delivery and results

QSP support was able to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic with in-person support replaced by online interaction. QSP support delivered remotely was very effective at improving quality ratings and service leader confidence, and service leaders were very satisfied with the QSP. There were advantages to in-person support that were hard to substitute, including the speed of rapport-building and engagement, and increased ability to observe practice. Service leaders also experienced challenges to QSP engagement during COVID-19, such as low enrolment numbers, service closures, and staffing issues. As a result, while confidence increased significantly, it showed a slightly smaller increase, and engagement and satisfaction were still high, but slightly lower for COVID-affected rounds of QSP support.

1.5 Solution-focused coaching approach

QSP support transitioned towards a solution-focused coaching approach, first introduced at the end of Stage Two. Most QSP facilitators felt that this increased the quality of support significantly (64%) or somewhat (21%). Solution-focused coaching is expected to produce more lasting effects because the QSP facilitator:

- Facilitates critical reflection
- Encourages and supports the service leader to find answers to their questions rather than just being a source of advice
- Enables service-leaders to spearhead change and improvement ideas, drawing on their expert knowledge of their own contexts

Qualitative responses suggest that solution focused coaching was a beneficial approach for building service leader capacity and creating lasting change:

“The program was great, I learned a lot about different ways to improve my service but was never given direct answers/directions on what to do, instead I was given tips. I loved that the most as it challenged me to think more for myself which will help me to always improve the service in the future. Thank you for everything!” – LDC service leader

1.6 Additional learnings

- LDC, FDC, preschool, and OSHC services operate in very different contexts, with different stakeholder expectations. To be relevant to service leaders, resources need to be tailored to address application of the NQF as it applies to their service type, or at least provide application examples in their service type.
- Participant feedback suggests that resources⁸ are not always used to their full potential until service leaders are guided on how to use them effectively to answer their questions and needs.
- The QSP continues to highlight that many of the general sector resources available to support services’ understanding of the NQS

High quality early childhood education and care has positive effects on children’s immediate and future health and wellbeing. The QSP helps to improve service quality ratings regardless of service location.

A selection of QSP resources are available on the [Meeting the NQS webpage](#), with more than 60000 page views since publication in July 2019

can be better tailored to the needs of services. In response, ACECQA’s QSP team developed a suite of resources that use plain English, practical tips, graphical representation, and service-type specific resources⁹. A selection of QSP resources is nationally available on the [Meeting the NQS webpage](#), with more than 60000 page views since publication in July 2019. The resources have been accessed by people across Australia.

- The benefits of tailoring support to suit the needs and capabilities of the service leaders are highlighted in this report’s findings. Support includes the encouraging, non-judgmental relationship that is developed between service leaders and their QSP facilitator, and a coaching approach. Support is tailored by targeting chosen focus quality NQS Standards for improvement and adapting resources to meet service leaders’ needs. This has proven effective in developing confidence and understanding of service leaders in areas of the NQS that they previously identified as challenging.
- Tailored support, like that provided by the QSP, is much needed. Every service operates in a unique context. Through one-on-one support, facilitators are able to recognise the strengths and identify the needs of the individual service, and adapt the Program to changing circumstances, as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The QSP support was effective for services in NSW regardless of their location or history of quality improvement. Services from relatively disadvantaged locations, and services with a long history of consecutive Working Towards NQS quality ratings, improved to Meeting NQS or above at the same rate as other services with QSP support.

⁸ Resources include the QSP Service Resource Toolkit, Guide to the NQF, eLearning modules, Quest for Quality Game, Educational Leader Resource Folder, and ACECQA website.

⁹ In agreement with NSW DoE, ACECQA retains the copyright to these resources.

1.7 Conclusion

QSP was beneficial for a wide range of services, including those with a long history of being awarded a Working Towards NQS ratings, and locational disadvantage. The provision of tailored, service-specific support has demonstrated benefits for education and care services, service leaders, and educators including:

- Improved service quality ratings
- Increased confidence preparing for assessment and rating, discussing and documenting quality improvement, and demonstrating compliance with regulations
- Perceived improvements in service leader and educator understanding of how the National Quality Standard applies to their service, and team morale and collaboration
- Reported improvements in knowledge and skills including reflective practice, and ability to use resources to their potential

The QSP has provided access to tailored support for NSW education and care services most in need. The NSW Regulatory Authority funded ACECOA to deliver the QSP, which helped to ensure that support was provided independently from quality rating assessments.



1.8 Future direction

Feedback from QSP participants and reflection on the QSP design has led to improvements including: OSHC and FDC specific eLearning modules and resources, live online workshops that encourage participant engagement and interaction, and online video support rather than phone calls where possible.

During Stage Four, QSP facilitators will continue to find new and innovative ways to engage services and observe practice remotely and return to in-person visits when it is safe to do so.

The stages of support provided by the QSP overlap to ensure a seamless transition between rounds. Therefore, Stage Four of the QSP commenced in March 2021. As requested by NSW DoE, all services rated Working Towards NQS, including services with fewer than six NQS Elements 'not met', are eligible to apply for QSP support in Stage Four.

Follow up evaluations are planned to track and report on progress and adjustments to program delivery. These will be presented in the Stage Four Evaluation Report due for release in October 2022.

“The Quality Support Program provided our service with the opportunity to unpack our service’s practices, and further identify areas that needed to be articulated and imbedded in our service practices and daily routines. Through collaboration and consultation, the Quality Support Program supported the service in the decision making and benefited in delivering a better quality service for children and their families.” – LDC service leader