Program Quality Assessment & Montessori Programs

General PQA background

1. Although the PQA was developed and is published by HighScope, it is a general measure of best practices, <u>not</u> a specific measure of the HighScope Curriculum philosophy or practices. The PQA is also written to be consistent with the Michigan Early Childhood Standards of Quality, which are in turn based on best practices rather than reflecting a specific curriculum model.

2. The PQA was originally developed in 1995, when HighScope was contracted by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to evaluate the Michigan School Readiness Program (MSRP), now the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). PQA items were based on MDE performance criteria, which were in turn derived from the Head Start Performance Standards (HSPS) and developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). As DAP has been updated, based on current research about early childhood pedagogy and child development, the PQA has likewise been updated

3. To develop the PQA, HighScope turned MDE's notebook-length yes-no checklist of practices into a set of set of 5-point scales or continua. By providing behavioral indicators for the various levels within each scale, independent and trained observers can use the PQA reliably and validly. This format is used not only in HighScope's own observation tools but also in the ECERS, the most widely used program observation measure at the time the PQA was developed.

4. The PQA and comparable measures have been used in studies of diverse programs, including non-HighScope as well as HighScope settings. The findings show that the practices assessed in the PQA, regardless of the curriculum or program in which they are used, are positively and significantly associated with children's development. For example, access to diverse and open-ended materials promotes language development and complex play. Labeling promotes literacy. These are empirical findings, not just matters of belief or philosophy.

Specific PQA items: Comments & alignment with MI Early Childhood Standards of Quality

PQA item and comments	MI ECSQ
I. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT **I-C.** (Interest areas allow space for many children to play at once) If children are playing or working together, whether in the initial area, at a table, or on the rug, this should be observable by the validator and given credit. The word "play" encompasses work and/or other activities.	Page 48, Standard 2.2

PQA item and comments	MI ECSQ
I-E. (Labeling) Montessori <u>philosophy</u> may not advocate labeling, but as noted above, empirical <u>evidence</u> shows it promotes literacy. The PQA does not say the room should be "cluttered" with labels. The goal is to help children independently find and return classroom materials. Validators look for a variety of simple labels that children can easily recognize.	Page 49, Standard 2.7
I-F. (Varied and open-ended materials) There is a contradiction in the Montessori statement. If children are free to manipulate and discover with materials after an adult demonstrates them, then the materials (by definition) would have to be open-ended. If validators see children using the materials in various ways, they would rate them as open-ended. If they can only be used in the way demonstrated, they are not open-ended. Furthermore, as noted above, open-ended materials promote more complex and imaginative play. If these opportunities are limited (for example, to part of a full-day program only), then children will not get the benefit of this experience.	Page 49, Standard 4.3
I-G. (Plentiful and duplicate materials) The PQA also values helping children learn how to self-regulate, delay gratification, and share materials. This occurs whether there is a single item or duplicates. There are other reasons for having duplicate materials. Children playing alongside one another with the same material, especially if it is open-ended, use the material in different ways. They observe and learn from one another, share ideas, and engage in more extended and complex play. If, as the document says, Montessori provides multiple sets of many types of materials (e.g., drawing or pouring tools), then the validator would credit them accordingly.	
I-I. (Self-initiated work displayed) As long as the validator sees artwork displayed (regardless of how often it is changed), the program will be credited. The issue is not whether the display is in the classroom or hallway, but whether it is located in a place where children and families can readily see and talk about it. This is typically in the classroom. If the validator does not see it, then it is likely that children and parents are congregating in places where they don't see it either.	Page 49, Standard 2.8 Also Page 58, Early Learning Expectation, 3rd example

PQA item and comments	MI ECSQ
II. DAILY ROUTINE **II-B.** (Time to plan and recall); **II-D.** (Planning); **II-F.** (Recall) Research shows opportunities to plan and recall are the program elements that most positively and significantly contribute to early development (e.g., to executive function which includes emotional self-regulation and problem-solving). The importance of planning and reflection is also referred to in DAP. Having set times assures that these important activities take place. These activities do <u>not</u> interrupt play, but rather make play more purposeful. In addition to having set times to plan and reflect, the PQA also rates the number and variety of strategies used by teachers to promote them. These can occur throughout the day. If validators observe these planning and reflecting strategies in Montessori, the program will be credited for them.	
II-G. (SGT; same small group ≥2 months) In Montessori, a mixed-age group of children stays together for 3 years. This fits (exceeds) the PQA criteria, so there is no scoring problem. Question: Do Montessori programs do regular small group activities?	Page 31, Standard 1.3, 1.4; Page 45, Standard 8.5
II-H. (LGT) The PQA says nothing about how long LGT should last, only that it occur daily. In fact, for this age group, it should not last a long time. However, LGT provides important learning opportunities (physical development, music, creative movement, social interaction, leadership) and should therefore happen every day. If it does not happen every day, but Montessori programs use a variety of strategies and teacher participation, the validator will credit these aspects of LGT. Question: Do Montessori programs do regular large group activities?	Page 31, Standard 1.3, 1.4; Page 45, Standard 8.5
II-J. (Clean-up) Having a set clean-up time contributes to a sense of community and shared responsibility. Children help one another. However, the PQA recognizes that clean-up can occur throughout play or work time. If the strategies listed are used then, the validator will credit them.	
II-K. (Snack time) Snack time shared by all is important for social interaction. A set time, rather than ad hoc as individual children are hungry, contributes to a sense of community. When adults sit with children (not just children sitting with friends), they facilitate informal conversation and learn more about the children's lives. Children sit with peers they might not otherwise sit with. Having an open snack would only effect the first row as long as adults were available to converse with children while they did eat.	Page 39, Standard 2.3

PQA item and comments	MI ECSQ
II-L. (Adults join outdoor play) When adults play outdoors with children, they observe and support skills they may not encounter during indoor play. The PQA expects that adults respect children's choices about how they play outdoors (i.e., they "join" in children's play; they do not "direct" the play) and is therefore consistent with Montessori.	
III. ADULT-CHILD INTERACTION **III-F.** (Partners in play) As noted under **II-L**, playing as a "partner" means respecting children's choices, including knowing when and how to join in their play. This is not intrusive, but rather how adults convey interest in children's ideas, learn how they think, and acquire information that lets them support each child's development. The strategies listed in the PQA make this clear, and if Montessori teachers do what they describe, they would be credited as such by the validator.	Page 42, Standard 1 is all about the importance of supporting play. Page 46, Standard 10.1 Also page 67, ELE: Intellectual Dev. 7th example
III-H. (Extend learning during group times) The PQA also expects that most of the day is spent in free-choice (individual) activities. However, a short daily SGT and LGT exposes children to experiences (with materials, peers, actions, ideas) they may not choose on their own. NAEYC best practices recommends children have a variety of such experiences every day; this is reflected in the PQA. To the extent that Montessori teachers use the strategies listed, they receive credit.	Page 39, Standard 1.12; Page 44 Standard 6.3 Also, page 92 ELE: Creative Dev.
III-I. (Encourage children to use materials in individual ways) See explanation for item **I-F**.	
III-K. (Encourage children to interact and help one another) Nothing in the PQA contradicts the Montessori philosophy or practices. Again, the PQA advocates primarily individually initiated activity, and supports children helping one another at their respective developmental levels.	Page 32, Standard 2.4; Page 38, Standard 1.7; Page 43, Standard 3.3

PQA item and comments	MI ECSQ
III-M. (Involve children in resolving conflicts) Adults facilitate children resolving conflicts with one another. The adult does not take over the process. In this respect, the PQA and Montessori are in agreement. However, children need to <u>learn</u> how to resolve social conflicts so to say that adults <u>never</u> intervene (e.g., to model or assist) is unrealistic (and potentially dangerous).	Page 39, Standard 1.11; Page 10, Standard 4.3
IV. CURRICULUM PLANNING **IV-E.** (Child observation measure) If assessment is done on an ongoing basis in Montessori, this meets the PQA requirement of "at least twice a year." The PQA further specifies that a validated observation tool be used to guard against subjective assessments. If Montessori can demonstrate that its observation process meets this standard, the validator can credit the program as such.	Page 51, Standard 1.2, Standard 1.4
V-VII. AGENCY-LEVEL ITEMS **V-G.** (Home visits and parent input) Relationships with families, including doing home visit, are an essential part of best practices (DAP as recommended by NAEYC). Home visits are required in the Michigan GSRP classrooms, MI Early Learning Standards of Quality, as well as most other state standards, Head Start, and so on.	Page 27, Standard 1.4
VI-A and **VI-B**. (Appropriate staff education and training) Montessori programs must meet state standards regarding teacher qualifications as reflected on the PQA. Decades of research show a significant correlation between practitioner education (general college degree as well as specific child development training) and program quality, as well as child outcomes. Montessori would have to <u>empirically</u> demonstrate its training meets state requirements to be credited on the PQA.	Page 27, Standard 7.1
VII-B. (Adult-child ratios) State licensing requirements reflect "minimal" levels of quality. The PQA strives for a higher level. Again, decades of research demonstrate that adult-child ratios and overall group size significantly and positively predict program quality and child outcomes. This empirical evidence is reflected in the PQA. The presence of adults does not promote clinging or "learned helplessness" if adults are properly trained to promote child initiative and independence.	