

Using CLASS® for Quality Improvement in the Designation Renewal System

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start. Dr. B here for another vlog. This one I'm going to cover the new DRS rule. I thought, you know, I'm sure you already know about the Final Rule by the time you're watching this. And I know that the Office of Head Start is going to provide a lot of support, webinars and – and PIs and all kinds of things that you're going to get related to this. But I thought it would be nice if I just kind of touched base with you. This is going to be pretty high level, not intensive training, but important to me.

So I just wanted to kind of touch base with you this way to talk about the new rule; pretty excited about it. It's taken a long time to get it to where it is, so I'm feeling excited that it's out there. I hope you are, too, but I also want to highlight sort of the sentiment behind it so that you can sort of get an idea, as you dig in, what it means for you.

Overall, I would say we really tried to take the framing as we talked about this, looked at comments, that we wanted to get closer to a growth model than a gotcha model at Head Start. And we've been working on this; I've talked about it in a lot of different ways. This is one of those. And so hopefully you're feeling that as you read it, and you kind of internalize what it means.

There were three major buckets of changes in that rule. I'm going to talk predominantly about one of them, but I want to just touch on the first two just so I don't ignore them. And the first one, pretty simple now, two deficiencies instead of one triggers competition. Pretty cut and dry. Really a response to, again, that sort of going from gotcha to growth. Looking for a pattern as opposed to just a one incident. So, that's easy.

The second one has to do with fiscal responsibility. And now you have two components to fiscal where before you only had one. The one you're already familiar with is the audit finding of going concern. That still exists. And second, there's a new component to the fiscal condition. If you have two or more audit findings of material weakness or questioned costs associated with Head Start funds, then that would also trigger a need to compete.

So those two are fairly cut and dry in terms of understanding. They're not very complex. If you have questions, of course please reach out. We want to make sure you understand them completely.

But the one I really want to talk about today is CLASS®. Near and dear to my heart is quality instruction. And in – in our case, that's the interactions that we have with children and really working toward improving overall the – the support that we give our teachers so that they can then deliver quality instruction in the classroom. And we use CLASS® to gauge that. And knowing that it's something that's so important, but wanting so much to get away from compliance and kind of gotcha and more toward growth, we really wanted to get comments back from – from the public about how they felt about the current state and what the suggestions were.

So we took a lot of comments and read all of them, took them all to heart, put them in this frame of growth, and considered, you know, what can we do to improve something that has already helped us increase quality. We know that, but we think we can do a better job of getting to even greater quality with more support for folks on the ground. So I'm super excited to talk about these with you today. And so, let's just break it down.

First, the very first thing we do is we establish what we call "quality thresholds." So the quality thresholds are – are different for each – each category. So there's a 6 for emotional support, a 6 for classroom organization, and a 3 for instructional support. So what we're saying is our goal is to see all of our programs, minimum, a 6, a 6, and a 3. Those are our quality thresholds. That's what we really want to strive for.

So as you're planning and you're doing professional development and you're doing walkthroughs and you're doing, some scoring, that's what you want to set as the bar for your organization. These quality thresholds represent our – our expectations overall. They are based on a lot of research that we did around data for previous scoring and looking at the field overall. And what we really hope is it shifts the – the frame of CLASS® from reactive to proactive.

So we kind of played with this a little even before the rule came out. If you remember, Amanda Bryans and I did a webinar on CLASS® last year to try to prepare for the new year. And the idea was, can we look at folks who were struggling or – or we know are going to be having a CLASS® review coming up and can we provide upfront response as opposed to just reacting if you have a low score? And so that was modeling that, which we want to see you doing at the local level, and using these quality thresholds as your benchmark.

This designation is not punitive in any way. But if you do fall below those quality thresholds, what we are going to do is give you the opportunity for growth and improvement, and that can come at your local grantee level, the regional level, but also OHS is going to take responsibility for this. And there will be professional development that will be available to you. I'm not going to get into those details today. That's probably too in the weeds, but what you need to know is that we're going to use those thresholds as a marker for kind of an opportunity for growth. We'll back it up with supports that will get you there. And then you'll have the support you need, teachers will have the support they need, and so the expectations of getting to these quality thresholds will be very realistic.

The next piece I want to talk about is the revised CLASS® condition, and this is pretty significant. We dropped the bottom 10% criterion. And again, we listened very much to the public on this. This was something we certainly got public comment, but I got comments all the time as I traveled and this was something that people shared with me. The uncertainty of the 10%, the not knowing what – what's the goal. I have to wait until everybody's scores come in to know where I fell. That unpredictability, to me, probably created anxiety and – and wasn't really in that growth mindset.

So we agreed with these comments. And you know, despite its drawbacks, that 10% requirement did cause folks to pay attention to CLASS® more readily to – to improve. We've seen scores go up, we've seen instructional quality go up across the board. So we know that the

– the benchmark works, that the – the sort of goal works. What I wanted to see and what the field wanted to see was something that was a little more static instead of something that moved all the time.

So, the thresholds that are going to trigger competition now are a 5 for emotional support, a 5 for classroom organization, and for instructional support, it's a little bit different—still using that growth mindset, still using the opportunity for improvement and a proactive mindset. This is how this is going to work. Up until July 31, 2025, that threshold will be 2.3. So below a 2.3 would be cause to compete. But after Aug. 1, 2025, 2.5 will be implemented.

So we're looking at, again, growth. Opportunity for growth. So we're working toward raising even that benchmark for competition. Hopefully that makes sense. If any of that's fuzzy, lots of folks around to clear that up for you.

Now, it's important to note that the CLASS® competitive thresholds represent our minimum goal. What I really would love to see is for everybody to just focus on the 6, 6, 3. And let this be the floor, the thing that we all can get to because we understand that – that minimum sort of expectation, but we're not reaching for the minimum. We're reaching for the ideal, which we believe is the 6, 6, 3 CLASS® scores. So see what you can do. You know what your history is and what's realistic. You do have to be realistic; you know who your staff are and – and the supports, so – so keep those in mind. But with those goals out there, you can work toward that.

A couple of other things that I want to mention, because I couldn't do this webinar and not bring the topic of COVID-19 into the conversation, because it is impacting our ability, of course, to do monitoring. And to, you know, get CLASS® scores if you're not having in-person learning, that would be very difficult to do. We are in an unprecedented time. We have to be very responsive to what's going on, and that's what we've been trying to do ongoing since March.

We think it is really important that, despite the pandemic, that we are all still striving to provide quality instruction to our children. We are confident that you're figuring out how to do that based on your community need. We think these are really important changes that are being made here with this DRS Final Rule, but it is probably going to take time before they can be implemented fully because of the situation.

So I would say continue to work with your teachers, continue to strengthen instruction, but be aware of the fact that there are going to be responses that we're going to have to make as an office based on our availability to do the – the work that we need to do to come to conclusions on these DRS pieces. So be aware of that. I'm not going to speak to it specifically here because by the time you see this, there will probably be guidance out on that. And, it could even change.

So the bottom line is the rule is exciting. The changes in the rule are permanent. In the context of COVID, they might look different and – and just know that and be comfortable with that. I can't overemphasize though, with all of this, the importance of site leadership.

So as we talk about something like improving instruction, I truly believe the lever lies with the person who is leading in the local space where the instruction is happening. So whether or not you're providing in-person instruction right now, in-person services at a center because of COVID, you may or may not be doing that. Your mindset should be on developing leadership.

That when that day comes — if it's now, wonderful, if it's not, when it comes — that you've got site level leadership in place equipped to constantly support quality instruction, quality classroom organization to support the emotional support that teachers need to be giving children and interactions they have with their children.

That's only going to come from constant observation and feedback, the feedback loop that teachers need. They use that to grow and to drive the way they operate. And that's going to come from leadership in the building, the person who sets the tone for how we treat children, for how we talk to children, for how we set up our classrooms, for what we expect them to be able to do regardless of where they live or their circumstances; and that is going to be empowered by that site leader.

So I hope you are embracing this concept and looking for ways to grow site leadership in your program if you don't already have it — and if you do, how do you enrich it? — and use that as an opportunity in conjunction with this DRS change to really make improvements in your program. I appreciate all you are doing, all you have done and continue to do all the time, but particularly at this very difficult time. And I hope you find that these changes to the DRS are really something that support your program and support your staff.

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