



STEP POLICY HANDBOOK

County of Los Angeles Office of Child Care

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STEPS TO EXCELLENCE PROJECT POLICY HANDBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

The Steps To Excellence Project (STEP) is a new quality rating and improvement system for licensed child care programs caring for children ages 0 – 5. Participation in STEP is currently voluntary. Eligible child care program must be licensed for at least one year and located in one of STEP’s pilot communities¹.

The *STEP Policy Handbook* was created to document the policies that govern participation in STEP. This document will be updated periodically as needed. The most current version is located on the County of Los Angeles Office of Child Care website at www.chlidcare.lacounty.gov.

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¹ STEP pilot communities are: Inglewood, Long Beach, Pacoima/Arleta, Palmdale, Pasadena/Altadena, Pomona, Santa Monica, San Pedro, Wilmington and an unincorporated region of Los Angeles County known as Florence/Firestone (zip code 90001).

**SECTION 1: COMPLIANCE WITH CHILD CARE
LICENSING STANDARDS**

ISSUE 1A: Child care program applies to participate in STEP but fails to meet STEP's regulatory compliance standards.

POLICY 1-01: The child care program's STEP application will be placed "on hold" until the program establishes a 3 year licensing history without any other compliance issues.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: 1-01.1) STEP operationally defines compliance with regulatory standards as the absence of any of the following three Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD) administrative actions from a child care program's licensing history in the past three years:

- Compliance plan
- Civil penalty
- Probationary license

1-01.2) The three year time period during which the child care program's STEP application is placed "on hold" is calculated using a start date equivalent to the date of the most recent CCLD administrative action.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: 1-01.A) The Office of Child Care will notify applicants of their "hold" status via a written letter and will keep the results confidential.

1-01.B) Once the 3 year time period has lapsed, the Office of Child Care will contact the applicant to determine interest in re-applying to participate in STEP.

ISSUE 1B: Child care program violates licensing standards for ratio and/or group size requirements during a STEP quality review site visit.

POLICY 1-02: The child care program will automatically receive a STEP rating equivalent to a "FAIL".

ADDITIONAL NOTES: N/A

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: 1-02.A) UCLA's Site Visit Coordinator will notify the Office of Child Care if a ratio or group size licensing violation was observed during the site visit via email, providing as much anecdotal information as possible.

1-02.B) The Office of Child Care STEP Project Manager will document the licensing violation in the program's *STEP Rating Results Report* and notify the program of their "FAIL" STEP rating via written letter.

1-02.C) The Office of Child Care STEP Training Coordinator will contact the child care program to review the *STEP Rating Results Report* via phone and will schedule a technical assistance meeting if necessary.

1-02.D) The child care program will subsequently be offered another (final) STEP site visit. Site visit must take place within 10 weeks of the original visit date.

1-02.E) If the program chooses to not participate in a second site visit, a "Fail" quality rating result will be displayed in the *STEP Child Care Rating Guide* posted online by the Office of Child Care.

ISSUE 1C: Child care program violates or is suspected of violating a regulatory compliance standard* during a STEP quality review site visit.

***Note:** Excludes ratio or group size violations (refer to STEP Policy 1-02)

POLICY 1-03: The child care program will be reported to CCLD for inspection by a licensing analyst.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: 1-03.1) A STEP quality rating equivalent to a "FAIL" will be issued only if CCLD's investigation results in any of the following administrative actions:

- Compliance Plan;
- Probationary License;
- Civil Penalty;
- Temporary Suspension of License; or
- Revocation of License

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: 1-03.A) UCLA Site Reviewer will immediately contact UCLA's Site Visit Coordinator to report the alleged licensing violation observed.

1-03.B) UCLA's Site Visit Coordinator will: report the licensing violation to CCLD; inform a representative from the child care program of this action; and notify the Office of Child Care STEP Project Manager of this action, providing as much anecdotal information as possible.

1-03.C) The Office of Child Care will contact CCLD to determine the result of their investigation. No action will be taken until the investigation is concluded.

1-03.D) If CCLD's investigation results in any of the actions listed above, the Office of Child Care will: notify the child care program of their "FAIL" STEP rating via written letter; send a detailed account of the licensing violation observed in the program's *STEP Rating Results Report*; and post a "Failed" quality rating result in the *STEP Child Care Rating Guide*.

1-03.E) The Office of Child Care Training Coordinator will contact a representative from the child care program to review the *STEP Rating Results Report* via phone and will offer technical assistance support services.

SECTION 2: STEP QUALITY RATINGS

ISSUE 2A: Child care program refuses or is consistently unavailable to attend a STEP Portfolio training to prepare for a STEP quality rating site visit.

POLICY 2-01: If the child care program has received and spent STEP quality improvement grant funds from the Office of Child Care:

A. The program will receive a copy of STEP Portfolio training materials via mail and will be offered technical assistance via phone by the Office of Child Care. The program's information will be forwarded to the UCLA Site Visit Coordinator within 4 weeks.

If the child care program has not received or solicited STEP quality improvement grant funds from the Office of Child Care:

B. The program will receive a written notice and/or call requesting participation in a STEP Portfolio training. Nonresponsive programs will be withdrawn from the STEP project.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: N/A

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: N/A

ISSUE 2B: Child care program refuses or is consistently unavailable to schedule a STEP quality rating site visit.

POLICY 2-02: If the child care program **has received and spent STEP quality improvement grant funds** from the Office of Child Care, the program will have the option to either:

A. Reimburse the County of Los Angeles for the full grant amount awarded and withdraw from the STEP project;

-OR-

B. Receive an automatic STEP rating equivalent to a "1" across all quality domains. Rating will be posted in the *STEP Child Care Quality Rating Guide*.

If the child care program **has received but not spent STEP quality improvement grant funds**, the program will have the option to either:

C. Return the grant award to the Office of Child Care and withdraw from the STEP project;

-OR-

Select option B (see above).

If the child care program **has not received STEP quality improvement grant funds**, the program will have the option to:

D. Withdraw from the STEP project.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: N/A

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: 2-02.A) UCLA Site Visit Coordinator will report scheduling difficulties to STEP Project Manager.

2-02.B) The Office of Child Care will notify child care programs of possible options via a mailed letter. Response from child care program will be required within 10 working days of mailing date.

ISSUE 2C: Child care program disagrees with STEP quality rating results.

POLICY 2-03: The child care program may appeal their STEP rating by sending a written request to the Office of Child Care.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: 2-03.1) Request must specify which element and/or domain is being contested and include documentation of compliance with STEP quality criteria.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: 2-03.A) The Office of Child Care will notify child care programs of appeal procedures via a written letter that accompanies the *STEP Rating Results Report*.

2-03.B) The STEP Project Manager or Training Coordinator will review appeal evidence with a representative from the child care program prior to verify validity of request.

2-03.C) STEP Project Manager will forward valid appeal requests to UCLA Site Visit Coordinator for analysis.

2-03.D) Appeal results will be communicated to the child care program via a mailed letter. Changes to STEP rating will be made accordingly.

SECTION 3: LAUP FUNDED PROGRAMS

ISSUE 3A:

A family child care home volunteers to participate in STEP but already has a quality star rating from Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP).

POLICY 3-01:

The family child care home will be required to fully participate in a STEP quality review site visit, but may opt to assign its LAUP star rating as its STEP rating for the learning environment and staff qualifications.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

3-01.1) STEP rates a child care program's quality across six domains:

1. Regulatory Compliance
2. Teacher/Child Relationships
3. Learning Environment
4. Identification and Inclusion of Children with Special Needs
5. Staff Qualifications and Working Conditions
6. Family and Community Connections

3-02.2) STEP and LAUP both use the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS) to measure and rate the quality of a family child care home's learning environment. If authorized by the family child care provider, STEP may therefore assign a rating equivalent to the LAUP star rating for the learning environment.

3-02.3) STEP and LAUP both use the same criteria to rate the quality of the licensed family child care provider's (and assistants') qualifications. If authorized by the family child care provider, STEP may therefore assign a rating equivalent to the LAUP star rating for staff qualifications.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES:

3-01.A) STEP Clerk will obtain a signed Release Form from family child care providers interested using their LAUP star ratings in upon enrollment in STEP.

3-01.B) STEP Clerk will email a copy of signed Release Form to LAUP Representative and obtain LAUP star ratings the month after the STEP quality review site visit is conducted to ascertain the rating is the most current.

3-01.C) STEP Clerk will email LAUP star rating to UCLA Site Visit Coordinator once data is received.

ISSUE 3B: A child care center volunteers to participate in STEP but already has a quality star rating from Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP).

POLICY 3-02: STEP will prioritize non-LAUP funded classrooms for observation. All other site visit policies will remain unchanged. The center will be subject to a full STEP quality review.

ADDITIONAL NOTES 3-02.1) STEP rates a child care program’s performance across six areas:

1. Regulatory Compliance
2. Teacher/Child Relationships
3. Learning Environment
4. Identification and Inclusion of Children with Special Needs
5. Staff Qualifications and Working Conditions
6. Family and Community Connections

3-02.2) STEP and LAUP both use the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) to rate the quality of the learning environment and use the same criteria to assign a quality level. However, whereas LAUP uses the ERS to rate the quality of all classrooms serving 4-year-old children, STEP conducts ERS ratings of a randomly selected sample of half of the center’s classrooms serving children ages 0-5.

3.02-3) Therefore, if the center serves **younger groups of children** (e.g. infants or toddlers) or **non-LAUP funded classrooms**, these groups will have priority and will be observed by the STEP quality reviewer.

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES: N/A