

Section 1: About QRIS

The QRIS Resource Guide is intended as a tool for states and communities to explore key issues and decision points during the planning and implementation of a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). States are involved in various activities to improve the availability and quality of early and school-age care and education programs. Most often these activities are supported by quality set-aside funds from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). States increasingly use CCDF funds to create QRIS or elements of QRIS.

The development of QRIS began in the 1990s with states rewarding higher quality providers with higher subsidy reimbursement rates for those that were accredited. They found, however, that few providers were able to achieve accreditation. Due to the large difference between licensing and accreditation standards, states saw the need for steps in between to help providers bridge the gap. At this same time, states were creating comprehensive professional development systems and seeking to align their many different quality initiatives. The first statewide QRIS was implemented by Oklahoma in 1998. Since then, more than half of the states and the District of Columbia have implemented statewide QRIS, and most of the remaining states are developing or exploring QRIS as a mechanism for organizing quality initiatives into one coherent system. Additional information about the development of QRIS is available in Mitchell's (2005) [Stair Steps to Quality](#). In addition, [Quality Rating and Improvement System Fact Sheets](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017) provide information about the state of QRIS in the United States.

What is a QRIS?

A QRIS is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, QRIS award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their state's QRIS, early and school-age care providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. Even providers that have met the standards of the lowest QRIS levels have achieved a level of quality that is beyond the minimum requirements to operate.

Why Develop a QRIS?

QRIS are intended to improve the quality of early and school-age care and education programs through the alignment and coordination of systemwide initiatives. A QRIS may offer states several opportunities:

- ◆ Increase quality of early care and education services.
- ◆ Increase parents' understanding and demand for higher quality early care and education.
- ◆ Increase professional development opportunities, benchmarks, and rewards for a range of early care and education practitioners and providers.
- ◆ Create a cross-sector framework that can link standards, technical assistance, monitoring, finance, and consumer engagement for programs in a range of settings, including family child care homes, child care centers, school-based programs, Head Start programs, early intervention, and others.
- ◆ Develop a roadmap for aligning many pieces of the early care and education system, such as child care licensing, prekindergarten and Head Start program oversight, national program accreditation, early learning

guidelines, subsidy administration, technical assistance, training, quality initiatives, professional development systems, and others.

What are the Elements of a QRIS?

QRIS are composed of five common elements:

1. Program Standards

QRIS standards assign ratings to programs that participate in QRIS and provide parents and the public with information about each program's level of quality. States have chosen QRIS standards that are grounded in research about factors that contribute to positive child outcomes. States typically use child care licensing standards as the base of the system, and then build on those. All QRIS contain two or more levels of standards beyond licensing, with incremental progressions to the highest level of quality, as defined by the state. Systems vary in the number of levels and the number of standards identified in each level.

2. Supports for Programs and Practitioners

QRIS include provider supports, such as training, mentoring, and technical assistance, to promote participation and help programs achieve higher levels of quality.

Most states currently have professional development systems, or elements of a system, to assist practitioners. These systems organize training opportunities, recognize practitioners' achievements, and help ensure the quality of available training. States may use these systems to help programs meet higher professional development standards and progress toward higher QRIS ratings.

States also promote participation in QRIS for improved quality by providing technical assistance. A mentor or coach may be used with a program to facilitate the rating process. In addition, partnerships may be formed with existing technical assistance providers in the state, such as child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies, and programs participating in the QRIS may be given priority to receive this assistance. Some states invest in specialized technical assistance, such as support in caring for infants and toddlers or integrating children with special needs. Nongovernmental agencies typically provide classroom assessments, technical assistance, training, and other support, and often work under contract with the state.

3. Financial Incentives

QRIS use financial incentives to help early and school-age care and education providers improve learning environments, attain higher ratings, and sustain long-term quality. Financial support can be a powerful motivator for participation in QRIS. All statewide QRIS provide financial incentives of some kind, including increased CCDF subsidy reimbursement rates, bonuses, quality grants, or merit awards; refundable tax credits; loans linked to quality ratings; and priority on applications for practitioner wage initiatives, scholarships, or other professional development supports.

4. Quality Assurance and Monitoring

Accountability and monitoring processes provide ways to determine how well programs meet QRIS standards, assign ratings, and verify ongoing compliance. Monitoring also provides a basis of accountability for programs, parents, and funders by creating benchmarks for measuring quality improvement.

In most states, the licensing agency alone, or in partnership with the subsidy agency or a private entity, monitors the QRIS. States use a variety of approaches (alone or in combination) to monitor QRIS standards, such as onsite visits, program self-assessments, and document reviews and verifications. Many states also gather rating information from child care licensing agencies to ensure that minimum requirements are met, and from training registries and accrediting bodies, where appropriate.

5. Consumer Education

QRIS provide a framework for educating parents about the importance of quality in early and school-age care and education. Most QRIS use easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to indicate the levels of quality and inform and educate parents. Easy and widespread access to information about ratings is important. Many states post ratings on Web sites; others promote QRIS through media, posters, banners, certificates, decals, pins, and other items that rated programs can display. In addition, CCR&R agencies play a vital role in parent education.

The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (ECQA Center) supports state and community leaders and their partners in the planning and implementation of rigorous approaches to quality in all early care and education settings for children from birth to school age. The ECQA Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

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