



Section 4: Standards and Criteria

Program standards are markers of quality that have been established by experts. Standard development is influenced by the goals and theory of change the state or region adopts for improving the quality of early learning for children and families (Schilder, Iruka, Dichter, & Mathias, 2015). Standards are established in areas critical to effective programming and might also encompass areas related to improved child outcomes and school readiness. They are used to measure and assign ratings to programs that participate in quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), providing families, policymakers, funders, and the public with information about the components and levels of quality.

There are several types of state, federal, and national program standards:

- ◆ Mandatory requirements, which must be met to operate legally (such as state licensing requirements);
- ◆ Funding standards, which must be met to be eligible for specific funding sources (such as child care subsidies, prekindergarten, and Head Start/Early Head Start); and
- ◆ Voluntary quality standards and best practices, which reflect a higher level of demonstrated quality (such as QRIS and accreditation).

Program standards should not be confused with learning and development guidelines that describe what children need to know and be able to do, and standards for practitioners that describe what early childhood teachers/providers must know and be able to do to work effectively with young children. However, to realize the greatest outcomes, program standards often address and link to learning and development guidelines and practitioner standards.

This section includes information about the following: categories of standards and criteria used to assign ratings; approaches states have used to organize the standards and assign ratings; ways states have incorporated other state, federal, and national standards into their QRIS; the inclusion of specific program types and groups of children into QRIS standards; and the use of observational assessments such as environment rating scales (ERS), CLASS, and other program assessment tools.

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Development of Standards and Criteria

Graduated Program Quality Standards

States typically use licensing requirements as the starting point or base of the QRIS, a foundation on which to build standards linked to higher quality settings. Licensing requirements are established in each state to support the provision of care that is safe, healthy, and nurtures children’s development. When licensing is the base for the QRIS, states take care not to duplicate those regulations in the QRIS.

Every QRIS contains two or more levels, or tiers, of standards beyond licensing, with incremental progression to the highest level of quality as defined within the state or jurisdiction. Systems vary in the number of levels and the number of standards identified in each level. The types of standards that are used to assign ratings are based on a number of factors, such as the following: research and evaluation; emerging knowledge about the characteristics of programs that produce positive child outcomes; state administrative protocols or data needs; measurability; the state’s vision about the role of aligned and integrated early learning sectors; and other factors. Many QRIS award easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to programs to indicate the levels of quality.

Early and school-age care and education programs that choose to improve their quality and meet the QRIS standards often receive supports (e.g., technical assistance, professional development) and financial incentives (e.g., tiered subsidy reimbursement, bonus payments, and awards) to help them meet and sustain the higher levels of quality. Additional information about those components of QRIS is found in the [Provider Incentives and Support](#) section.

Using Research to Develop the Standards and Criteria

States have used research, evaluation, and promising practices to help determine the indicators of quality that will be in their QRIS standards. Generally, research indicates that structural quality indicators (i.e., group size, child-staff ratio, teacher qualifications) and process quality indicators (i.e., teacher-child interactions) are interrelated, and that both affect child development and school readiness. The results of research on quality indicators may

apply to multiple categories of standards and combine with other factors to influence child outcomes and improve experiences for young children.

The following are some examples of publications and resources that summarize research findings states can use to develop and revise early and school-age care and education program standards:

- ◆ [Caring for Our Children, National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care, 3rd Edition](#) (2011), by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care, presents a set of standards, with a rationale based on research, to be used in planning and establishing a high-quality early and school-age care and education program.
- ◆ The [Child Care & Early Education Quality](#) topic on the Child Care & Early Education *Research Connections* website provides the latest research about the impact of child care on young children's development.
- ◆ [Defining and Measuring Quality in Home-Based Care Settings](#) (2010), by Barbara Dillon Goodson and Jean Layzer, presents considerations for designing and evaluating quality measures for home-based settings.
- ◆ [The Quality of School-Age Child Care in After-School Settings, A Research-to-Policy Connections, No. 7,](#) (2007), by Priscilla M. Little, identifies the features of high-quality afterschool settings that have emerged from the research and are reflected in program quality tools.
- ◆ [Stepping Stones to Caring for Our Children, 3rd Edition](#) (2013), by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care, presents 138 essential standards from *Caring for Our Children* intended to reduce the rate of morbidity and mortality in child care and early education settings.

Considerations for Developing and Revising Standards

The following are a set of questions intended to help states think through considerations as they develop and/or revise standards, criteria, timelines for meeting new standards, and sources of evidence for standards. Whether states are developing standards for the first time or revising standards, a survey of other states' standards using the BUILD Initiative's [Quality Compendium](#) "Create a Report" feature (2017) can provide useful information.¹ It is important to review the current standards and identify which work well for programs and which need strengthening. Data from the QRIS can show which standards are easily met by participating programs and which standards are more challenging. States may also consider how often to update the standards. Frequent changes can make it hard for the providers and families to understand the system. However, going many years without an update can lead to a stagnant system that is no longer based on state data, the most current research, or best practices. It is recommended that these questions be explored with each standard to assess if the standard should be included in the QRIS.

- ◆ How does the standard relate to the purpose and goals of the QRIS?
- ◆ Is the standard appropriate for different settings, including:
 - Child care centers;
 - Family child care homes;
 - Group child care homes;
 - Before- and afterschool providers;

¹ The "Quality Compendium" was previously named the "QRIS Compendium". The *QRIS Resource Guide* refers to the compendium using both names.

- Head Start/Early Head Start;
 - Prekindergarten; and
 - School district-operated early childhood programs.
- ◆ Who will incur the cost associated with meeting the standard? How significant is the cost? Is the standard critical enough to justify that cost to programs? Will the cost be subsidized? What is the collective cost to meeting all the standards?
 - ◆ How much support, such as professional development and technical assistance, will programs need and receive to help them meet the standard?
 - ◆ How much time will it take to comply with the standard?
 - ◆ Is the standard measurable, and how will the rating assessors determine that the standard has been met? This might include observation, interviews, automated or manual submission of evidence, and pulled records.
 - ◆ Should the sources of evidence for meeting the standard be adjusted in any way?
 - ◆ How much time will it take for rating assessors to verify compliance with the standard? How much of this time is onsite and how much is off site?
 - ◆ What kind of expertise must rating assessors have to verify compliance with the standard?
 - ◆ Is the standard similar to other standards? In other words, does it overlap or is it redundant?
 - ◆ Could the standard be better addressed through professional development? Consider this especially if it is a difficult standard to assess or if assessing it might be intrusive to programs' privacy.
 - ◆ Would it make more sense to include the standard in licensing requirements?
 - ◆ Should a standard be moved to a lower or higher level in the continuum or awarded more or less points?
 - ◆ Is the standard tied to positive child or program outcomes?
 - ◆ Is there current research about your state's QRIS standards, or from other states, that might inform the standard's revisions? Is the standard based on research, promising practices, or emerging evidence?
 - ◆ How do proposed standards address issues of equity and improving conditions for children furthest from opportunity?
 - ◆ Do you anticipate pushback from providers on the standard? If so, is the standard critical enough to justify the repercussions of the pushback?

Application of Standards to Settings and Sectors

Standards for Child Care Centers and Family Child Care Homes

Most statewide QRIS have standards that apply to both centers and family child care homes, sometimes with separate sets of standards for each program type. The standards are either in separate documents or in one document, with a clear delineation of which standards apply to centers and which apply to family child care homes. While some standards such as family engagement might be appropriate for both centers and family child care homes, other standards may vary by setting. For example, assessment tools and accreditation standards must be appropriate for the setting. Higher staff qualifications may be more difficult for a family child care home provider to meet than a master teacher in a center. [QRIS Quality Standards Websites](#) (2018), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides links to all of the states' standards documents. Another

resource for exploring the most recent standards is the BUILD Initiative's [Quality Compendium](#) (2017), although the state websites provide more detailed information about the levels and context for the standards.

Standards for Head Start Programs, State-Funded Preschool Programs, and Out-of-School Time Programs for School-Age Children

There are some specific types of programs or funding sources that have their own program standards, such as Head Start and state prekindergarten programs. In developing standards for QRIS, states have taken different approaches to applying the standards from these settings and sectors. Examples of approaches include alternate pathways to achieving a level in the QRIS, adopting the standards from Head Start or prekindergarten directly into the QRIS, or a combination of both.

States must also consider if licensing is available to or required of Head Start or prekindergarten. If licensing is not required, states often look to crosswalks between the licensing standards, the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and the state prekindergarten standards to determine if licensing compliance needs to be included as a QRIS standard.

Head Start

According to the [Quality Compendium](#), Head Start/Early Head Start programs were participating in approximately 71 percent of statewide QRIS in 2016 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017). The Head Start Program Performance Standards released in September 2016 established expectations regarding Head Start participation in QRIS with several exceptions under [section 1302.53\(b\)\(2\)](#). Head Start regulations state that "State QRIS leadership should coordinate with state Head Start leadership, including the state Head Start Collaboration Director, to evaluate existing policies specific to Head Start participation, including allowable sources of monitoring data."

States have pursued a range of approaches to increase Head Start participation in QRIS:

- ◆ **Align** standards using the [National Programs Standards Crosswalk Tool](#). This tool can be used to crosswalk Head Start, licensing, and QRIS standards to determine whether the majority of licensing and QRIS standards are included in the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Greater alignment helps ensure that programs are not being asked to meet contradictory or duplicative standards. This activity also allows states to determine how specific Head Start Program Performance Standards match up to the QRIS standards. This can be used as a methodology for the alternative pathway mentioned below.
- ◆ Offer an **alternative pathway** for Head Start participants, which can include bringing them in at higher QRIS levels as a starting point based on a crosswalk between the Head Start Program Performance Standards and the QRIS standards.
- ◆ Offer **reciprocity** for some or all QRIS standards for Head Start programs that are in compliance. In other words, some or all Head Start standards are accepted to meet the QRIS standards to achieve quality levels. Though most states do not give full reciprocity, many offer an alternative pathway by either assigning an automatic QRIS rating for certain programs, including Head Start, or giving Head Start credit for particular QRIS standards.

The following are examples of states that demonstrate specific approaches to encouraging Head Start participation in their QRIS:

Arizona

- ◆ A Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) assessment will be conducted before an environment rating scale (ERS).

- ◆ If the CLASS assessment meets the three-, four-, or five-star level, with five-star being the highest level, the program can begin the process of preparing for the Quality First assessment within a 6-month timeframe.
- ◆ If the CLASS assessment does not meet the three-, four-, or five-star level, the program will receive an ERS assessment.
- ◆ The [Quality First website](#) and the [Quality First Participant Guide](#) (2018) by First Things First, provide more information.

Arkansas

- ◆ Programs' most recent monitoring reviews are used to determine where they will start in the three-level QRIS.
- ◆ Head Start facilities must submit an application and the most recent federal monitoring review results, including CLASS scores. Upon review of documentation, the level of certification will be determined. Facilities are required to submit annual verification that compliance with federal regulations is maintained.
- ◆ Head Start grantees may choose to participate in the reciprocity process or choose to participate by meeting QRIS criteria for the level requested.
- ◆ The [Better Beginnings website](#) and the [Better Beginnings Rule Book](#) (2010) by the Licensing and Accreditation Unit, Division of Child Care and Early Childhood Education, Arkansas Department of Human Services, provides more information.

Maine

- ◆ Maine has separate standards specifically for Head Start programs in the four-level QRIS.
- ◆ Staff must be registered in the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Registry.
- ◆ The [Quality for ME website](#) and the [Quality for ME Head Start Child Care Program Standards](#) (n.d.) by the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, provide more information.

Rhode Island

- ◆ QRIS participation is mandatory for programs approved to receive state subsidy.
- ◆ Compliance with Head Start Program Performance Standards can be used as a source of evidence for some QRIS standards.
- ◆ A Head Start program can rate at a level three through five by providing its program review in curriculum, child assessment, inclusive classroom practice, and family communication.
- ◆ Head Start is required to have an ERS onsite observation.
- ◆ The [BrightStars website](#) and [BrightStars Child Care Center and Preschool Quality Framework](#) (2013) by the Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children, provide more information.

Wisconsin

- ◆ Programs serving children in the Wisconsin Shares subsidy program are required to participate in the QRIS.
- ◆ Participating licensed center-based and family child care and group homes, as well as certified family child care programs, must accept children receiving subsidies.

- ◆ Head Start sites fall into three categories for rating purposes based on the hours of care provided in addition to programming.
 - Stand-alone Head Start programs without deficiencies receive a five-star rating (the highest level).
 - Sites with 3 or fewer hours of wrap-around care with no deficiencies are eligible to receive a five-star rating.
 - Sites with more than 3 hours of wrap-around care are eligible for any rating following the normal rating procedure.
- ◆ The [YoungStar Resources for Providers website](#) and [Policy on Head Start Participation in YoungStar](#) (2017) by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, provide more information.

State-Funded Preschool

According to the [Quality Compendium](#), early childhood programs operated by schools were participating in approximately 61 percent of statewide QRIS in 2016 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017). To encourage participation, states are starting to align the QRIS quality standards with standards for state-funded prekindergarten. For example, Rhode Island's QRIS standards include specific standards for state preschool programs approved by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (i.e., those operated by public schools and exempt from licensing).

In addition, there are some states where prekindergarten programs are required to achieve specific levels in the QRIS to receive state prekindergarten funding. The following are examples of those states:

- ◆ In **North Carolina**, all classrooms in the state prekindergarten program must achieve and maintain a four- or five-star level rated license and meet additional program requirements set by the Division of Child Development and Early Education. The rated license is North Carolina's model for a QRIS.
- ◆ Community-based child care programs that receive **Pennsylvania** Pre-K Counts funding must have a Keystone Stars QRIS rating of star three or higher. Pennsylvania phased out allowing star two programs to receive Pre-K Counts funding as the supply of programs at star levels three and four grew.
- ◆ In **Vermont**, programs must have four stars with two points in each of the standard arenas in Vermont's Step Ahead Recognition System to be prequalified to provide prekindergarten. A program with three stars or a program with four stars without two points in each standard arena may provide prekindergarten education if they have an approved plan to meet the required program quality standards.

Out-of-School Time Programs

According to the [Quality Compendium](#), school-age programs were participating in approximately 41 percent of statewide QRIS in 2016 (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017). Some states, including **Arkansas, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Mexico, North Carolina**, and **Wisconsin**, have separate sets of standards for out-of-school time programs. Additional states include specific adaptations in their standards for the care of school-age children in center-based programs. See the "Addressing the Care of Specific Groups of Children" section for additional details. [QRIS Quality Standards Websites](#) (2018), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides links to all of the states' standards documents.

The National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment hosted [Creating a Successful Formula to Engage School-Age Programs in Quality Improvement](#) (2016), which is a webinar designed to explore strategies for building sustainable quality improvements, engaging school-age programs, creating standards, selecting assessment tools, and providing support. Participants can learn about national trends and promising practices from two states and shared strategies to build a system that works.

Licensing as the Foundation for QRIS

Licensing Requirements, Compliance Monitoring, and Enforcement

In most states, licensing is an integral part of the QRIS, serving as the foundation other standards build on. By law, licensing standards are minimum requirements that must be met in order to operate in a state. According to Licensing Curriculum developed by the National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA), licensing rules ensure a basic level of health and safety, not an optimal level of quality. State requirements vary tremendously in areas ranging from staff-child ratios and staff qualifications to facility requirements. On a positive note, several of the earlier QRIS states have been able to move QRIS criteria into minimum licensing requirements, raising the floor for all programs.

A comparison of licensing requirements is available in three research briefs by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (2015) about trends in child care center, family child care home, and group child care home licensing regulations and policies for 2014.

- ◆ [*Trends in Child Care Center Licensing Regulations and Policies for 2014*](#)
- ◆ [*Trends in Family Child Care Home Licensing Regulations and Policies for 2014*](#)
- ◆ [*Trends in Group Child Care Home Licensing Regulations and Policies for 2014*](#)

States also vary significantly in the level of licensing enforcement and compliance monitoring. A state may have strong licensing requirements but lack the resources or support to monitor compliance or use negative sanctions. [*Trends in Child Care Center Licensing Regulations and Policies for 2014*](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2015) notes that the most common frequency of routine licensing inspections is once a year. Eight states making routine licensing inspections three or more times a year, and 14 states monitoring once every 2 years. Seventy percent of states use an abbreviated compliance form when inspecting centers. Others determine the frequency or depth of monitoring based on the facility's prior level of compliance. If a license in good standing is included as a QRIS standard, it will be critical that the licensing enforcement is reliable and holds programs accountable.

Visit [Child Care Licensing Tools and Resources](#) for additional publications and online tools about child care licensing.

Including Licensing Standards in the QRIS

Licensing sets a baseline of requirements below which it is illegal for providers to operate, unless they are legally exempt from licensing. States establish both regulations that include the requirements providers must comply with, as well as policies to guide the enforcement of those regulations. The [National Database of Child Care Licensing Regulations](#) has the full text of state child care licensing regulations.

In most states, the first level of the QRIS simply requires programs to be in compliance with state licensing requirements. Some QRIS specify that the license be "in good standing," which often means that the program has no (or very few and not serious) violations on record. Alternatively, some QRIS require programs to meet licensing requirements and additional quality standards to achieve the first rating level. The following are examples of criteria in QRIS standards about licensing compliance:

- ◆ No serious licensing citations;
- ◆ No substantiated complaints;
- ◆ License in good standing; and

- ◆ Fewer than a specified number of repeated, serious or multiple non-compliances.

It is critical that licensing compliance be clearly defined and consistently measured due to the significant fiscal impact on programs when a higher QRIS level is denied or reduced. For example, “a pattern of non-compliance” seems to capture the desired intent of what programs should not have in their licensing history. However, a reduction in QRIS level based on that vague measure would be difficult to defend.

In addition, some states require providers to have been licensed for a specific amount of time, such as at least 6 months or 1 year, before applying for QRIS participation. This allows time for the provider to demonstrate compliance with licensing requirements. For example, in **Maine**, in order to participate in Quality for ME at a step one rating, programs must have been licensed, without any serious licensing violations, for at least 12 months. **Oklahoma** eliminated this requirement when it posed a barrier to continued quality of care when there was a change in ownership and licensure. Star ratings are removed when there is a change in ownership, but new owners do not have to wait to reapply and regain the rating the program had before ownership changed if the requirements are still met.

Additional information about how licensing requirements are incorporated into each of the statewide QRIS is available the [Quality Compendium](#).

In many states, child care providers that are exempt from licensing, such as relatives or family child care homes with small numbers of children, provide care for a large proportion of the state’s children. States typically base their QRIS on licensing requirements and seek participation from licensed providers; therefore, it becomes a challenge to include license-exempt providers in a QRIS. To help these providers improve their quality, states generally focus on offering training and technical assistance, connecting these providers to community resources, providing financial incentives for them to become licensed, or using similar strategies for promoting quality improvement.

Content of QRIS Standards

Categories of Standards and Criteria for Rating Levels

The following are common categories of standards in a statewide QRIS and examples of criteria used to assign levels under each category. The criteria for compliance within each standard reflect what programs must do to achieve a particular level, move from one level to the next, or earn points in a specific category of standards. The criteria vary widely from state to state.

These two resources provide an overview and links to state QRIS standards.

- ◆ [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Indicators of Quality for Ratings](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, describes the features of the most frequently used quality categories and indicators for QRIS.
- ◆ [QRIS Quality Standards Websites](#) (2018), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides links to each statewide QRIS’s standards.

A tool is available to compare the content of national programs standards and align them with state program standards:

- ◆ The [National Program Standards Crosswalk Tool](#) is designed to help states that are developing and aligning program standards for licensing, quality rating and improvement systems, and/or prekindergarten programs to search and compare the content of several sets of national standards (e.g., Head Start, accreditation, Caring for Our Children).

Many states are focused on how the standards are working for diverse providers and families. A description of the current landscape and recommendations are included in [Quality for Whom? Supporting Diverse Children and Workers in Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) (2017) by Julie Sugarman and Maki Park, for the Migration Policy Institute. This report examines how diverse providers access QRIS and the processes built around them; what indicators can be used to better capture program elements that are valuable to immigrant and refugee families; and how the rollout of QRIS in different states has affected these communities. Drawing on interviews with practitioners and examples of best practice from across the country, it offers state decisionmakers a range of strategies that can be used to ensure QRIS are accessible, fair, and more accurately capture and value program elements needed to effectively serve culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.

Staff Qualifications and Professional Development

Most QRIS have standards for **qualifications** for classroom teachers and family child care (FCC) home providers.² Most QRIS include a **bachelor's degree** for center-based classroom teachers as the standard for achieving the highest QRIS level. However, only a few have a bachelor's degree as the highest level for FCC home providers. Many states have the Child Development Associate (CDA) or a state credential as the highest qualification for FCC. All QRIS for FCC include **training in early childhood/school-age content** at the first quality level. Most QRIS for child care centers have the **CDA or a state credential** at the first level. QRIS also frequently require participation in professional development activities, participation in a state professional registry system, or achievement of a level on a state career ladder/lattice.

Most QRIS have standards for **ongoing professional development**. Some QRIS also include criteria on the number of hours of ongoing training, often using the number of hours required by licensing as the lowest level and incrementally increasing the number of hours across QRIS levels. Most QRIS have standards for at least 15 hours of annual professional development at the highest quality level.

A number of states require staff to have an annual professional development plan based on practitioner competencies, classroom observations, and supervisory input.

[QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Staff Qualifications, Professional Development, and Supports](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides a summary of staff indicators in QRIS, including levels of education, initial training (hours and content), ongoing professional development, and staff supports.

In 2011, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment released [Staff Preparation, Reward, and Support: Are Quality Rating and Improvement Systems Addressing All of the Key Ingredients Necessary for Change?](#) by Lea J.E. Austin, Marcy Whitebook, Maia Connors, and Rory Darrah. This report is based on an investigation of QRIS supports for professional development, standards related to staff formal education, compensation and benefits, and adult work environments in center-based programs.

Curriculum and Learning Activities

Planned learning activities that are based on expectations for what children need to know and be able to do are associated with improved child outcomes. Nearly all states' QRIS standards support children's learning through the use of **curricula/learning activities** that are based on the state learning and development guidelines.

Some QRIS require specific curricula, require curricula that align with the state's learning and development guidelines, or require that programs demonstrate that staff use the guidelines to shape program activities. Frequently, the content of these standards include requiring programs to:

- ◆ have a written plan of daily learning activities;

²This analysis was conducted by reviewing program standards documents available on state websites.

- ◆ use a planned or approved developmentally appropriate curricula;
- ◆ align curricula with learning and development guidelines;
- ◆ address multiple developmental domains; and
- ◆ use environment rating scales to document developmentally appropriate use of curricula/learning activities.

[*QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Curriculum and Child Assessment Indicators*](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, describes in detail the way in which curriculum and child assessment indicators are incorporated into QRIS.

Administration and Business Practices

Many QRIS include content about **administration and business practices** in their standards. A review of states' standards reveals that the content covers a variety of administrative issues, including:

- ◆ Score on the Program Administration Scale (PAS) or Business Administration Scale (BAS);
- ◆ Financial record keeping systems;
- ◆ End-of-the-year financial statements for families;
- ◆ Annual budgets;
- ◆ Business plans for expenses, program improvements, and maintenance;
- ◆ Business liability insurance;
- ◆ Written program policies (e.g., employee and parent handbooks);
- ◆ Outside reviews or audits of business practices, and consultation with tax preparers;
- ◆ Compensation for employees (e.g., salary scales);
- ◆ Benefits for employees (often programs must offer a certain number of benefits from a list);
- ◆ Job descriptions;
- ◆ Policies and procedures for hiring and terminating staff; and
- ◆ Quality self-assessment and program improvement plans.

[*State Policies that Support Business Practices of Child Care Providers*](#) (2016), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides an overview of strategies that states and territories can employ to promote and strengthen business practices and leadership in early childhood settings

Family Engagement

Program quality standards can promote **family engagement**, support families' involvement with their children's learning, and strengthen partnerships with families. Standards often include criteria about regular communication with parents that supports children's learning and development. Standards also often cover opportunities for parents to participate in children's activities, parenting education activities, and activities that support social networking or connections. Another important element considered in more robust family engagement are standards related to providing culturally appropriate services for families and children.

The content of early QRIS standards or at lower levels of the QRIS about family engagement began with activities that were measurable and easy for programs to accomplish such as

- ◆ provide a bulletin board or newsletter;
- ◆ develop a parent resource center; and
- ◆ develop and distribute a parent handbook/written program policies.

Higher levels of quality added criteria such as

- ◆ develop and implement a written system for sharing daily events;
- ◆ provide parents with consultation prior to children's enrollment;
- ◆ hold conferences and parent meetings; and
- ◆ maintain a list of community resources and referrals as needed.

In rewriting or updating standards or at the higher levels of the quality continuum, additional criteria are often included that require programs to

- ◆ organize a family advisory board;
- ◆ use input from family surveys to inform continuous quality improvement, culturally appropriate services, and program policy development;
- ◆ use a national or state tool to assess and improve family engagement strategies such as the [Strengthening Families Program Self-Assessments](#) and the [Measure of Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality \(FPTRQ\)](#) materials;
- ◆ provide evidence of transition plans or policies for changes in settings and providers; and
- ◆ provide services, written materials, and support in the home language of the families and children.

Staff-Child Ratios and Group Size

Only a few QRIS have standards that require child care providers to have **staff-child ratios and group sizes** that are lower than those required by licensing. For example, **Kentucky** requires a staff-child ratio of 5:1 and a group size of 10 for infants for the first QRIS level, which is the same as the licensing requirements. At the third QRIS level, the required ratio for infants is 4:1 with a group size of 8.

Variations in the standards that states include often reflect the level of minimum licensing requirements. If licensing standards provide the starting point for the QRIS and already require strong administrative policies or health and safety measures, for example, these categories of standards may not be needed in a QRIS.

Child Assessment

Child assessments include a range of activities, such as observations, portfolio development, and performance appraisal, using multiple indicators that measure children's learning and development. Less than half of the QRIS standards include requirements about conducting child observations and assessments. Often these standards require programs to share assessment results with families or use assessment results to individualize curriculum or improve teaching and learning practices.

The following publications provide additional information for including child assessment in QRIS standards:

- ◆ [*Moving to Outcomes: Approaches to Incorporating Child Assessments into State Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement Systems*](#) (2012), by Gail L. Zellman and Lynn A. Karoly, at RAND Corporation, compares strategies for incorporating child assessments into state QRIS and other early childhood quality improvement efforts.
- ◆ [*QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Curriculum and Child Assessment Indicators*](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, describes in detail the way in which curriculum and child assessment indicators are incorporated into QRIS.
- ◆ [*Understanding and Choosing Assessments and Developmental Screeners for Young Children Ages 3-5: Profiles of Selected Measures, Final Report*](#) [OPRE Report # 2011-23] (2011), by Tamara Halle, Martha Zaslow, Julia Wessel, Shannon Moodie, and Kristen Darling-Churchill, at Child Trends on behalf of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It provides information about child assessment tools commonly used with young children.

Health and Safety

Very few QRIS have standards about **health and safety**. QRIS standards are built on a foundation of licensing, and all states have extensive health and safety standards in their licensing regulations for both child care centers and family child care homes. Therefore, many states choose to rely on licensing to ensure that programs provide healthy and safe environments for children. In the states that do have these standards, the following are some examples of the categories of criteria that programs must meet:

- ◆ Nutrition and physical activity;
- ◆ Policies for limiting screen time;
- ◆ Medical plans for children;
- ◆ Daily health checks;
- ◆ Health and developmental screenings;
- ◆ Health and safety training requirements;
- ◆ Use of nurses or health consultants; and
- ◆ Health and safety self-assessments and checklists.

[*Caring for Our Children Basics*](#) (2015), by the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, represents the minimum health and safety standards experts believe should be in place where children are cared for outside of their homes. *Caring for Our Children Basics* is a helpful resource for states and other entities as they work to improve health and safety standards in licensing and quality rating improvement systems.

Continuous Quality Improvement and QRIS Standards

Recently, there has been a focus on states using a **continuous quality improvement (CQI)** approach in their QRIS standards. CQI is a continuous cycle of quality improvement focused on improving outcomes for children and families. The child welfare field provides this definition:

Continuous quality improvement is the complete process of identifying, describing, and analyzing strengths and problems and then testing, implementing, learning from, and revising solutions. It relies on an organizational and/or system culture that is proactive and supports continuous learning. Continuous

quality improvement is firmly grounded in the overall mission, vision, and values of the agency/system. Perhaps most importantly, it is dependent upon the active inclusion and participation of staff at all levels of the agency/system, children, youth, families, and stakeholders throughout the process (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement and Casey Family Programs, 2005, p. 1).

In QRIS standards, states have adopted a CQI approach by including indicators that take programs through a process of self-assessment and using data gathered from that assessment to develop quality improvement plans. The quality improvement plans are used at all levels of the QRIS to track progress. **New Mexico** has the following description of CQI in its [FOCUS QRIS standards](#):

DEFINITION – Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is a proven strategy to increase and sustain efforts to improve a program’s quality. CQI is considered to be an appropriate approach for a Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) because it provides a clear framework for programs that are moving from one level of quality to the next. CQI uses data to inform and guide a program’s efforts to improve their quality, thereby influencing positive outcomes for children. CQI is a four-step cycle:

- PLAN – establishing a plan of action by identifying, describing, and analyzing strengths and needs;
- DO – implementing the plan of action and making programmatic changes;
- STUDY – reflecting on the actions taken and learning from what has been done; and
- ACT – implementing successful changes into daily practice and determining what needs to be done next. (New Mexico Children, Youth, and Family Department, 2014, p. 20).

Incorporating Learning and Development Guidelines into QRIS Standards

Incorporating Learning and Development Guidelines

Many states have incorporated their learning and development guidelines (also known as “early learning guidelines” [ELGs]) into their QRIS standards. Learning and development guidelines identify outcomes in language, literacy, mathematics, and other academic and developmental domains for young children. There are several ways that states have incorporated learning and development guidelines into the multiple levels of their QRIS standards, for example, by requiring providers to do the following:

- ◆ Complete professional development on implementing the guidelines;
- ◆ Use a curriculum that is aligned with the guidelines;
- ◆ Use the guidelines for planning activities for children or developing a curriculum;
- ◆ Have a copy of the guidelines available for use;
- ◆ Align the ELGs with child assessment practices; and
- ◆ Implement the guidelines in the classroom.

A recent analysis by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) found that approximately half of statewide QRIS refer to the state’s ELGs, most often in standards that require staff training in how to implement ELGs or the use of a curriculum or learning activities aligned with ELGs. [Practices for Promoting Young Children’s Learning in QRIS Standards](#) (2012), by Sheila Smith, Taylor Robbins, Shannon Stagman, and J. Lee Kreader at NCCP, provides a further examination of the strength of supports for children’s early learning in QRIS standards.

States with cross-sector QRIS, which include Head Start or prekindergarten programs, are increasing rigor and a focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes at the upper levels of their standards.

- ◆ **Massachusetts** has standards that work to improve the context for teaching, such as ongoing mentoring that includes demonstration of best practices. Programs can demonstrate systematic opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective teaching practices through the use of peer groups and coaches or mentors. Programs have an incentive to reward each educator who takes the next step up the career ladder. For more information, see the [Massachusetts QRIS standards](#).

Addressing the Care of Specific Groups of Children

QRIS Standards for Infants/Toddlers, School-Age Children, and Children with Special Needs

Many states also address the care of specific groups of children in their QRIS standards, such as school-age children, infants and toddlers, and children with special needs. Many categories of QRIS standards impact each of these specific groups, and as awareness of the unique needs of children continues to grow, QRIS standards provide the opportunity to better address those needs. The following publications are intended to help states address the care of infants and toddlers, school-age children, and children with special needs in their QRIS:

- ◆ [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Infants and Toddlers Addressed in QRIS](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, describes how state QRIS are addressing the unique needs of infants and toddlers with the use of observational tools; inclusion of quality indicators related to curriculum, assessment, and developmental screening; and specialized technical assistance.
- ◆ [Using Quality Rating Systems to Promote Quality in Afterschool Programs](#) (2007), by the Afterschool Investments Project, examines using state QRIS as a strategy to assess afterschool programs and the needs of school-age children.
- ◆ [Why Program Quality Matters for Early Childhood Inclusion: Recommendations for Professional Development](#) (2009), by the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, describes dimensions of program quality that define high-quality inclusion and how quality can be improved through initiatives such as QRIS.

Structure of QRIS Ratings

Rating Levels

Determining the number of rating levels in a QRIS often depends on the differences between the criteria in licensing requirements and those in the most rigorous set of standards currently in place (e.g., national accreditation or prekindergarten standards). If the difference is great, then more steps may be needed to allow programs to experience success by making incremental progress toward higher quality. In the development of a QRIS, states must discuss the progression from one level to the next higher level (e.g., the difficulty of attaining the next level, how long it will take a program to progress from one level to the next, and the cost of meeting the standards at each level).

Most statewide QRIS have a range of two to five levels of standards above licensing requirements. The most common number of levels, including the foundational licensing level, is five. Information about the number of levels in each of the statewide QRIS is available in the [Quality Compendium](#).

[QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Rating Structures and Processes](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides a summary of the types of QRIS rating structures being used and summarizes the common features of the rating process for QRIS.

Assigning Ratings

States have developed three methods for assigning ratings:

1. **Building block approach.** In this approach, all the standards in each level must be met for programs to move to the next level.
2. **Point system.** In this approach, every standard is assigned a number of points, with a combined score used to determine the quality rating.
3. **Combination or hybrid approach.** In this approach, a combination of the building block approach and the point system determines program ratings. The first levels are building blocks; higher levels are earned through a point system.

Additional information about how the ratings are assigned in each of the statewide QRIS is available in the [Quality Compendium](#).

[QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Rating Structures and Processes](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides a summary of the types of QRIS rating structures being used and summarizes the common features of the rating process for QRIS.

A study (Tout, Chien, Rothenberg, and Li, 2014) compared [three hypothetical QRIS](#) that use different rating structures: block, points, and hybrid. For each structure, the researchers examined the distribution of programs across ratings levels, linkages of ratings with measures of observed quality, and scores on individual quality categories. Findings indicate that QRIS structure has significant implications for QRIS outcomes.

The **building block approach** is the easiest structure for providers and families to understand and for QRIS managers to administer. It also clearly identifies those criteria that the QRIS designers believe to be essential for all programs to meet.

Point systems require clear and explicit marketing so that parents can better recognize the varied strengths that are represented among programs that may all have the same rating. A point system works well as a program improvement strategy. Programs can easily see what is needed to improve in each category and have more options for moving to a higher level.

The number of states using a **combination of blocks and points**, or hybrid model, is growing. In these systems, typically the first two levels are achieved if the provider meets all of the standards for those levels. For the higher levels, providers earn points in the various categories of standards. However, it may be more difficult to evaluate the quality of programs at each level as a point system allows more variability in how programs achieve levels. This combination of approaches ensures that essential criteria are met while allowing programs to focus on their own priorities as part of continuous quality improvement.

Use of Program Quality Assessment Tools

Observational tools are used in QRIS for the assignment of ratings and as a method for supporting programs' continuous quality improvement (CQI). Commonly used observational tools are supported by a research base with established protocols for tool administration. Observational tools are most frequently used either in the rating process with specific scores required or for self-assessment or quality improvement purposes.

The [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Use of Observational Tools in QRIS](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, provides a descriptive analysis of how observational tools are being incorporated into QRIS. It addresses classroom assessment policies and observer training and reliability.

Most of the states with a QRIS that require a classroom assessment to evaluate program quality currently use the [Environment Rating Scales](#) (ERS) developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and implemented by the Environment Rating Scale Institute. These are the scales currently available:

- ◆ *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale®*, Third Edition (ECERS-3);
- ◆ *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale®*, Revised (ECERS-R);
- ◆ *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale®*, Third Edition (ITERS-3);
- ◆ *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale®*, Revised (ITERS-R);
- ◆ *Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale®*, Revised (FCCERS-R);
- ◆ *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale®* (SACERS); and
- ◆ *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale®*, Updated Edition (SACERS-Updated).

It is important to distinguish these scales, which are used to assess the overall classroom and teaching environment, from other assessment tools that are designed to assess the specific progress of children in the classroom.

The [Classroom Assessment Scoring System \(CLASS®\)](#) is another observation instrument used in states that assesses the quality of teacher-child interactions. For prekindergarten classrooms, CLASS® includes three domains or categories of teacher-child interactions that support children's learning and development: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. There are different domains for infant and toddler classrooms.

The way assessments and ERS or CLASS scores are used within QRIS varies among the states that require assessments:

- ◆ Scores are used to determine rating levels;
- ◆ Programs can earn points for scores, which contribute to the overall rating; or
- ◆ Programs are assessed with an observational tool, but specific scores are not tied to the ratings.

The following are examples of states that use other program assessment tools for measuring quality:

- ◆ **Oklahoma** recognizes the Child and Caregiver Interaction Scale, the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale, the Early Learning and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), the Program Administration Scale (PAS), and CLASS. [Reaching for the Stars for Child Care Programs Quality Rating Improvement System](#) (2016), by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, provides more information.
- ◆ **Massachusetts** requires assessments with CLASS or *Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale* to measure teacher-child relationships and requires PAS for administration. *Assessment with the Business Administration Scale* (BAS) is required for family child care providers. Massachusetts also uses the Environment Rating Scales and the *Strengthening Families Protective Factors Self-Assessment*. The [Massachusetts QRIS Standards](#) website provides more information.

- ◆ **Michigan's** Great Start to Quality uses the *Program Quality Assessment*®, developed by the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, for an onsite observation to confirm quality levels for programs at the higher levels. The [Great Start to Quality Getting Started](#) website provides more information.
- ◆ In **Rhode Island**, CLASS scores are collected from a random sample of 33 percent of preschool classrooms. Scores were not used in the rating process during the first year of implementation. The [BrightStars Application Materials](#) website provides more information.
- ◆ In **Washington**, each assessed facility/family home child care must score at least a two on instructional support in the CLASS, a 3.5 on emotional support and classroom organization/emotional and behavioral support in the CLASS, and a 3.5 on the ERS to achieve a level three to five rating. Facilities that do not meet these minimum thresholds will receive a level two rating. [Early Achievers, Washington's Quality Rating and Improvement System Standards: A Framework to Support Positive Child Outcomes](#) (2017), by the Washington State Department of Early Learning, provides more information.

The following publications provide information about the use of program quality assessment tools:

- ◆ [Best Practices for Conducting Program Observations as Part of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) (2011), by Bridget Hamre and Kelly Maxwell, highlights issues and recommendations for conducting program observations as part of a QRIS.
- ◆ [Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools, 2nd Edition](#) (2009), by Nicole Yohalem and Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, Forum for Youth Investment, provides an overview of tools developed to measure quality in youth programs.

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