



Section 9: Consumer Education

Helping parents understand, choose, and evaluate early and school-age care and education programs is one of the primary reasons a state creates a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). For a system to be successful, however, messages should be designed for various audiences, promoting its value to a wide range of stakeholders. This section addresses a variety of strategies for reaching parents, consumers, and providers, as well as building support among policymakers, state and community leaders, and funders.

In *Stair Steps to Quality*, Mitchell (2005) notes:

“Not everyone will see the inherent benefits of QRS. Some may oppose QRS due to ideological concerns, which frequently include the belief that child care minimizes the role of parents. A strategy employed by supporters of QRS is listening to concerns, seeking common ground based on what is good for children, and responding with facts that explain why the QRS is being developed. Research on program quality is often part of the explanation, along with affirmation that parents are children’s first teachers and that many children are in out-of-home programs because their parents work.” (p. 18)

Several resources about this topic are available on the [Family Engagement and Consumer Education](#) and the [Consumer Education Resources](#) topic pages of the [Child Care Technical Assistance](#) website.

Contents

Reaching Parents and Consumers.....	1
Factors Influencing Parent Choice.....	2
Educating the Public and Parents About the Rating System.....	3
Providing Information About the Ratings to Parents and the Public on an Ongoing Basis	5
References	7
Selected Resources.....	7

Reaching Parents and Consumers

Some states working to increase the demand for quality programs, as well as their availability, offer parent and consumer education on QRIS. A QRIS provides parents with a way to differentiate among the child care providers in their communities. Information about the quality of child care that each provider offers, including how it has met QRIS standards (such as staff qualifications, learning environment, and curricula), promotes more informed child care choices. Some states have adopted the strategy of requiring parents receiving child care assistance to choose providers that meet higher standards of quality.

States are also updating their websites with accessible, easy-to-understand information about the types of child care available, availability of financial assistance, and resources on how to identify quality. States that employ these approaches improve transparency and greatly reduce the burden placed on families looking for information so vital to their child care decisions. These efforts are supported by the reauthorization of the Child Care and

Development Block Grant Act of 2014¹ and the final regulations, which require states to provide information to parents about a variety of topics, including the following:

- ◆ The diversity and availability of child care services provided through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and other child care services the family might be eligible for; and
- ◆ The quality of providers, which can be based on a state QRIS, if available, or other quality standards.²

Factors Influencing Parental Choice

Surveys have shown that nearly all parents (96 percent) believe that all child care providers offer learning opportunities for children, and 78 percent believe that all providers are trained in child development before working with children (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009). Parents are often unaware of or do not understand the factors that indicate quality, and they are not familiar with their state's licensing requirements. Others may be unwilling to acknowledge that their children are not receiving high-quality care. In addition, low literacy levels and limited English proficiency may also be barriers to accessing information. The [Center for Law and Social Policy](#) has several reports on meeting the needs of young children of immigrants and families with limited English proficiency.

In a November 2008 poll, parents identified safety, a learning environment with trained teachers, and cost as the three most important factors when choosing child care (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009). Earlier studies reflect that parents care about health and safety, how children get along with each other and with adults, opportunities for learning, the personality of the staff, and the program philosophy (Mitchell, 2005). Although it is important to educate parents on research-based quality criteria, using terms that reflect what parents in specific states understand and value will make the QRIS more meaningful to them.

A February 2011 brief entitled [Understanding Parents' Child Care Decision-Making: A Foundation for Child Care Policy Making](#) provides a graphic to illustrate a complex decisionmaking process shaped by parent and child characteristics; parent values, beliefs, and preferences; community and employment characteristics; as well as a set of opportunities, constraints, and barriers (Weber, 2011). The report also notes that "Parental employment and family and child well-being outcomes flow from the decision-making process, but child care decisions are seldom one-time occurrences. For example, parents change jobs, or employers change work schedules. Children outgrow arrangements, or parents decide that arrangements are not good for children. Changes in child care subsidy policies or relatively small changes in earnings can make a family ineligible or reduce the benefit amount" (p. 7). Child care decisions must often be made quickly, making ready access to information even more important.

In addition, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) released [Household Search for and Perceptions of Early Care and Education: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education \(NSECE\)](#) in October 2014. This brief provides insight into how parents perceive early childhood education arrangements and how and why they search for care. Among the findings are that many parents rely on family and friends for information about child care options as well as web-based searches. These findings, among others included in the brief, can inform effective outreach and communication strategies to increase the numbers of parents seeking quality care as indicated by QRIS.

¹ 42 U.S.C. §§ 9857–9858 (2015).

² Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33 (2016).

Educating the Public and Parents about the Rating System

In its July 2015 report, [Elevating Quality Rating and Improvement System Communications: How to Improve Outreach to and Engagement with Providers, Parents, Policymakers, and the Public](#), Child Trends offers the following:

The success of state QRIS requires effective outreach and engagement with a range of stakeholders. These include family child care and center-based early care and education providers (including child care, Early Head Start, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten programs) that enroll in the QRIS and must invest time and resources to meet new quality standards. As states are successful in getting providers enrolled and quality rated, they have an interest in sharing this information with parents and families of young children so they can search for high-quality early learning providers discernable by the QRIS rating. Even in QRIS settings such as Head Start and public school pre-k programs, where parents and families may not have choices about where to enroll their children, QRIS communications affords states the opportunity to distribute resources to parents about supporting children's development. (p. 3)

Most QRIS award easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to programs to indicate the levels of quality. Most people understand a rating system with stars because of its use with the hotel and restaurant industries, for example, a five-star hotel. An early and school-age care and education program's voluntary participation in the system should be viewed as a commitment to quality improvement. Parents need to understand that even ratings at the lower levels mean that the program has exceeded minimum requirements. Although the name given to a rating system cannot fully convey its purpose, the marketing campaign will be more relevant and compelling if the name is easily understood.

Twenty states with profiles in the [Quality Compendium](#) included the dollar amounts allocated to raising public awareness about their QRIS. Allocations ranged from \$10,000 (Idaho) to \$800,000 (Colorado). Outreach activities and strategies vary from state to state but might include establishing a marketing campaign, print investment, or television and radio broadcasting. Visit the [Quality Compendium](#) for additional information about state-specific activities.

Regardless of strategy, any outreach activity should consider and be responsive to the diversity of languages spoken by parents, providers, and the general public in the state. Consideration should be given to using multiple strategies for broader reach.

Easy and widespread access to information on ratings is essential. States typically send providers who participate in QRIS certificates that indicate the quality level they have attained; providers may choose whether to display these documents. Some states include the rating on the license even if the QRIS is not part of the license itself (rated license) as a way to increase its visibility. An [sample license](#) is available on **North Carolina's** website.

The following list summarizes some strategies that states have used to increase initial awareness among consumers:

- ◆ **Website listings**—Listings on websites can prominently display the providers' QRIS levels to help parents identify quality child care. Web bloggers, especially those connected to websites frequented by parents, can be key messengers for similar information.

The brief [Designing Family-Friendly Consumer Education on Child Care](#) (2017) by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance provides research-based information to support the design and implementation of consumer education websites.

- ◆ **Public service announcements or paid advertisements**—People with public relations expertise can help craft the best message and identify the best television and radio stations and times of day to reach the intended audience. The use of nonwritten materials, such as television and radio announcements, can be especially helpful for families with low literacy levels and limited English proficiency. **Tennessee** succeeded in getting TV stations in the state's four major media markets to run a weekly feature announcing the results of

programs that were rated. Media outlets in **Ohio**, including Time Warner, agreed to run a Step Up To Quality (the state's QRIS) public service announcement free of charge.

- ◆ **Brochures and posters**—Materials about the importance of choosing quality care for children and how the ratings can help with that choice can be shared at libraries, pediatrician's offices, employment offices, social service and health agencies, places of worship, and other locations where parents go. Many hospitals provide a packet of information to parents after the birth of their children, and they could include information on child care and QRIS. It is important that these materials provide a simple, compelling message.
- ◆ **Billboards**—Although expensive, billboards can be a very successful way to reach both families and the public at large to remind them of the state's commitment to early education. In metro areas, bus placards are also a highly visible approach.
- ◆ **Service providers**—Providers that could share information include child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies, the state child care licensing agency, the agency that authorizes child care subsidy or other benefit programs, home visitors, early intervention resource managers, and pediatricians. When possible, educate these messengers so they feel comfortable with the message and support it.
- ◆ **Electronically distributed news releases**—State agencies often have access to a network of state newspapers. News releases should include contact people with the local licensing or CCR&R agency who can provide community statistics or recommend people to interview. Providers can be given a template that they can submit to the local newspaper with announcements about their ratings. A county newspaper in **Kentucky** published the ratings of child care providers and the number of children served by each provider. States may also distribute newsletters, emails, or other forms of electronic communication to the public.
- ◆ **Magazines**—Periodicals read by parents can feature articles about choosing child care. A Denver magazine featured a front-page article on **Colorado's** former QRIS Qualistar Early Learning ratings, causing calls to Qualistar to increase from 300 to 15,000 calls that month.
- ◆ **Videos**—Many states have developed videos that describe their QRIS or what to look for in quality child care. These are typically posted on websites, are available on social media sites such as YouTube or Facebook, or are shared in a variety of settings, including provider trainings and other public events.
- ◆ **Social media**—Facebook, Twitter, texting, and smart phone apps are growing mechanisms for communicating to a wide audience, and they are increasingly the preferred method of communication among young parents. Many CCR&Rs and some state agencies have Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, and several states are developing smart phone apps for child care searches. Determining the best time to launch an awareness campaign aimed at families deserves thoughtful consideration. Early in the program, it is important to build an understanding of the QRIS and encourage parents to seek providers with higher ratings. As a note of caution, parents may become frustrated and concerned for their children's well-being if they cannot find providers with higher ratings. This disappointment may be lessened if a measure of accessibility is set (for example, a percentage of programs participating or participation levels by county) before launching a marketing campaign. **Rhode Island** decided to delay the launch of its parent outreach campaign until 20 percent of the licensed centers in the state participated in the initiative.

Providing Information about the Ratings to Parents and the Public on an Ongoing Basis

The challenge of every marketing campaign is that customers generally do not pay attention to information unless it is something that is meaningful to them at the time. Promotional and educational efforts, therefore, must be ongoing or repeated periodically. Parents with a child already in child care should be encouraged to ask about their program's QRIS level. The cultural and linguistic diversity of families requires that information be available in many languages and formats.

In addition to the strategies listed previously, most states post QRIS ratings on the Internet. QRIS websites can be a very effective way to disseminate information to consumers, funders, and providers. However, the sites need to be easily accessed, attractively designed, easy to navigate, and kept up to date with the most current information. States can provide information in multiple languages over the Internet, which is a growing source of information for all families. In some states, parents can choose to sort and view programs based on their QRIS levels.

The following are examples of states that have information on their QRIS websites specifically for parents:

State	QRIS Websites for Families
Alabama	Alabama Quality STARS
Arizona	Arizona Quality First
Arkansas	Arkansas Better Beginnings
Colorado	Colorado Shines
Delaware	Great Starts Delaware
Georgia	Georgia Quality Rated
Idaho	IdahoSTARS Quality Rating & Improvement System
Illinois	ExceleRate Illinois QRIS
Indiana	Indiana Paths to QUALITY
Kentucky	Kentucky STARS for KIDS NOW Child Care Quality Rating System
Maryland	Maryland EXCELS
Michigan	Michigan Great Start to Quality
Minnesota	Minnesota Parent Aware
Nebraska	Nebraska Step Up to Quality
Nevada	Nevada Silver State Stars QRIS
New Mexico	New Mexico FOCUS

State	QRIS Websites for Families
New York	New York QUALITYstarsNY
North Dakota	Bright and Early North Dakota
Oregon	Oregon Spark
Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania Keystone STARS
Rhode Island	Rhode Island BrightStars
South Carolina	South Carolina ABC Child Care Program
Texas	Texas Rising Star Provider Certification
Vermont	Vermont SStep Ahead Recognition System (STARS)
Washington	Washington Early Achievers
Wisconsin	Wisconsin YoungStar

Information about state QRIS consumer education efforts, including funding method and allocations, can be found in the [Quality Compendium](#) under the “Public Awareness” tab in the state profiles.

Several public and private agencies, such as the state licensing and child care subsidy agencies, CCR&R agencies, and community service providers, may have a role to play in ensuring that parents have up-to-date information on QRIS. It is helpful for states to have a mechanism that various partner agencies can use to communicate their approaches to information sharing.

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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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