

## 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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## Section 2: QRIS Design Process

Planning or revising a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) includes many decision points. It is important for the process to be handled thoughtfully and with great deliberation. This section includes information on setting the vision and goals, beginning the design or redesign process, determining which programs will participate, and gathering information on the current workforce from the licensing program to inform decisions about the QRIS.

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# Establishing a Shared QRIS Vision and Goals

## Clearly Defined Vision and Goals

QRIS is a powerful system structure that can organize state efforts aimed at multiple goals. These goals can include strengthening system alignment and finance reform, improving quality in a range of care and education settings, expanding supply, and helping increase demand for high-quality programs. Clearly defining the vision and goals and determining the outcomes or expected results will guide all other design and implementation decisions. It is a critical step in the process of launching or redesigning a QRIS.

The majority of QRIS develop an explicit mission or goals statement that describes their multifaceted, systemic approach. Mission and goal statements may be included in QRIS statutes, policy manuals, and/or websites. Recognizing and improving quality is the most frequently stated goal. Informing parents, policymakers, and the public about quality is also a common goal. QRIS also include goals related to improving children's access to high-quality early care and education and supporting children's positive development and school readiness. Some QRIS note a goal of promoting the education and training of the early care and education workforce. [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Mission and Goal Statements](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017) includes several examples of mission and goal statements from QRIS.

It is important for states to articulate clearly the multiple goals and expected outcomes of a QRIS. A theory of change or logic model provides an essential roadmap for a QRIS (Zaslow & Tout, 2014). A theory of change or logic model can help QRIS administrators:

- ◆ communicate clearly with implementation partners and stakeholders to set realistic expectations about activities and outcomes;
- ◆ identify key indicators to track and monitor;
- ◆ develop an evaluation plan; and
- ◆ engage in continuous improvement of the QRIS.

[Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Stakeholder Theories of Change and Models of Practice](#) (Schilder, Iruka, Dichter, & Mathias, 2015), a resource developed by the BUILD Initiative, provides examples of theories of change and practice models that reflect the state QRIS context.

States may also develop a set of principles that articulate their visions and commitment to children and families through QRIS activities. New Mexico includes its principles within its [Essential Elements of Quality for Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs](#), the quality criteria assessed in FOCUS, the state's third generation QRIS.

Many states develop a QRIS vision and goals with an initial focus on early care and education programs. Later, some states begin developing QRIS standards for school-age programs. At that point, a review of the vision and goals with school-age stakeholders may help ensure that the expanded scope of the QRIS includes the perspective of the school-age field.

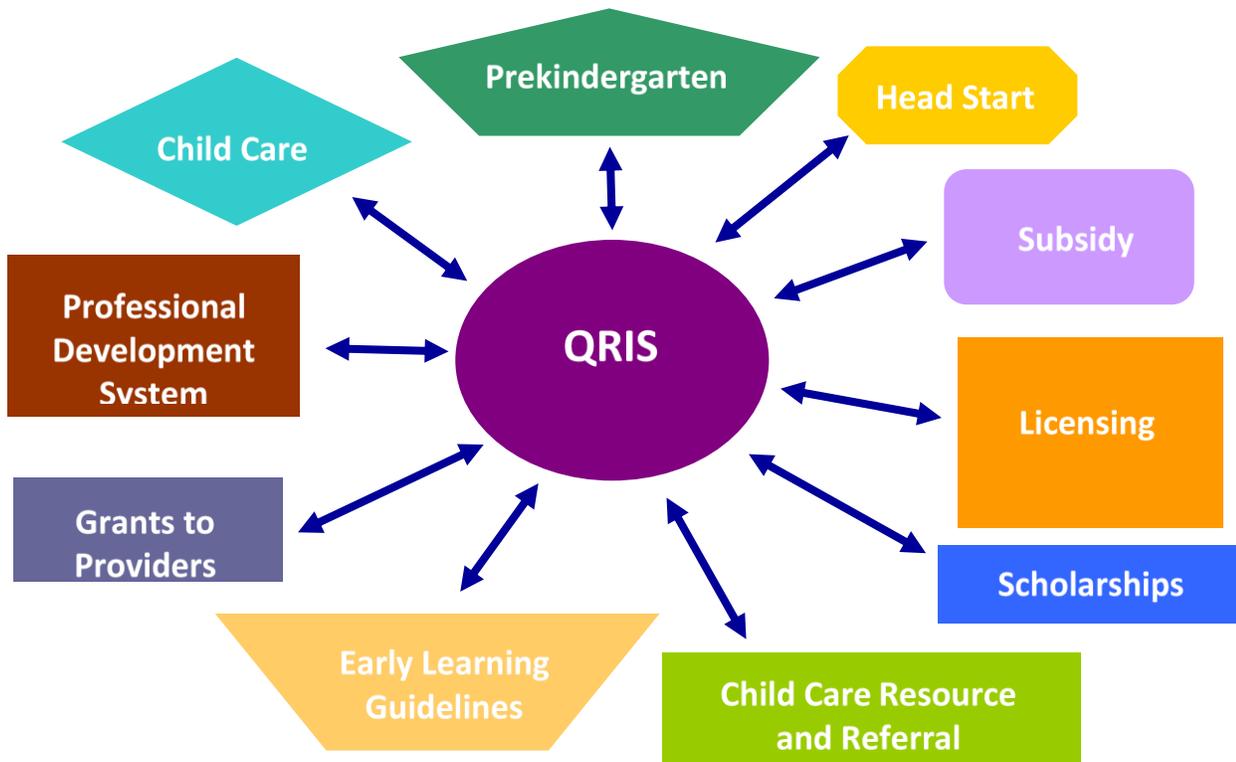
## QRIS as a Framework for Quality Improvement Efforts

With a new national emphasis on cross-sector and integrated early and school-age care and education systems, states are using QRIS to link supports for quality improvement into broad and inclusive infrastructures. Doing this provides assurance that investments and supports are tied to standards and a system of accountability. Linking participation in QRIS to access or eligibility for quality improvement supports provides both an incentive for QRIS participation and more targeted quality improvement efforts. A QRIS framework can help states guide system

reform by creating alignment of program standards and requirements and promoting collaboration among each system component. Such reform can make it easier for states to tap multiple and varied funding streams, reduce duplication of efforts, and monitor investment results based on progress toward program quality.

Following is an illustration of early and school-age care and education system linkages. Note that the arrows go in both directions. For example, the professional development system can grow and benefit from the QRIS standards for increased qualifications and training, but it also supports providers so that they can successfully participate in the QRIS.

**Figure 1. QRIS System Linkages**



The BUILD Initiative (2017) developed the [Tool for a Cross-Sector QRIS](#) to help QRIS planners design (or redesign) a cross-sector QRIS aimed at supporting children’s school readiness and equitable outcomes. The tool includes a self-assessment that planners can use to examine their progress in seven areas: mission, vision, goal, theory of change, and logic model; leadership and governance; financing; stakeholder engagement; standards; QRIS accountability and rating; and improvement supports.

## Educating and Building Support among Policymakers and State and Community Leaders

Support from policymakers is key to the success of a statewide QRIS. Although a few states have piloted QRIS with private sector leadership, experience suggests that public support is essential to go to scale and to sustain quality through mixed financing strategies. In many states, public support began with staff in the CCDF Lead Agency. In others, legislators played leadership roles. Regardless of how QRIS begins, public support contributes to long-term success.

Policymakers that can champion the initiative include the governor or lieutenant governor, legislators, state agency directors, and state child care administrators. They are influenced by other state agency staff, the media, the public, and service providers. Several states provided presentations to legislative committees to increase

support and created talking points for advocates to use. If possible, recruitment of legislators with more tenure and influence is advisable. Regardless of whether the QRIS is included in legislation, building legislative awareness and support is important for sustainability.

The following sources can help make a strong case for QRIS:

- ◆ State demographic data that demonstrate the need for early childhood education quality improvement, e.g., the number of licensing violations and complaints, average wages of providers, access to benefits, number of accredited programs.
- ◆ Data on the workforce, e.g., the number of providers by level of education linked with research on child outcomes influenced by provider qualifications.
- ◆ Research on the economic benefits of and return on investment in quality early childhood education.
- ◆ A comparison of how the state's licensing requirements compare to other states' requirements to demonstrate areas that need enhancement, e.g., staff-child ratios, parent involvement, curriculum, administrative policies.
  - Research briefs about trends in child care center, family child care home, and group child care home licensing regulations and policies for 2014. Information products about licensing requirements by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance are available on the [Protecting Children's Health and Safety](#) web page.
- ◆ A national perspective on how states are using QRIS as a vehicle to improve quality, e.g., research on the impact on quality, testimonials from other state leaders.
  - [Communications Strategies for Expanding QRIS: A Primer for Reaching Policy Audiences](#), from the BUILD Initiative and Child Trends (2017), provides step-by-step guidance on developing a communications strategy for policymakers.

Evaluation data are also important when expanding a QRIS or increasing available financial incentives and supports. If a state has not invested in an evaluation of the program or collected data on its impact, it may be necessary to explain why that information is unavailable, e.g., the cost of research and the lack of resources. Additional information is available in the [Data Collection and Evaluation](#) section.

## Educating and Building Support among Private Funders and Businesses

The private sector can offer vital leadership and support for QRIS. In addition to serving as key spokespersons, private sector partners can provide direct financial support, link an existing private sector initiative to QRIS participation, or encourage the public sector to increase funding for the effort. Businesses and employers are likely to deepen their support of QRIS if they understand the impact that quality, reliable child care has on their current and future workforce.

Identifying QRIS advocates and detractors in the state can show that you are intentional about involving them. Some influential advocates (e.g., media, business, philanthropic leaders) can help build support among policymakers and other key stakeholders, so thinking strategically about how and when to use them is advised. Since ill-informed individuals can spread misinformation and seriously undermine the process, states have found that it is better to have detractors at the table where their concerns can be understood and addressed; however, exactly how and when to involve these individuals will vary.

In addition to the BUILD Initiative/Child Trends resource, [Communication Strategies for Expanding QRIS: A Primer for Reaching Policy Audiences](#), the following resources provide strategies on building support with business leaders and others:

- ◆ [Strong Start for Children Toolkit for Early Learning Advocates](#) (2013), from the National Women's Law Center, provides resources for advocates and community leaders to promote early learning.
- ◆ United Way's [Business Champion Toolkit](#) helps state and local United Ways deploy business leaders already committed to early learning as public champions for early childhood education. Materials include speaker and trainer PowerPoint presentations, frequently asked questions, a tip sheet, and a 5-minute video that shows why early learning matters.
- ◆ [Alliance for Early Success](#) provides resources, reports, and tools on advocating for the young.

Launching an effective QRIS is fundamentally about raising public awareness of the importance of high-quality early and school-age care and education and changing behavior regarding how child care choices are made. To this end, it becomes important to engage many partners in spreading the word. The goal becomes encouraging all community leaders and stakeholders to consider QRIS when making decisions about choosing, funding, or monitoring early care and education programs.

## Beginning the Design Process

### Leading the QRIS Design

Leadership in creating or redesigning a QRIS can come from a variety of sectors, from the legislature or governor's office to state agencies or the private sector. In addition to identifying key stakeholders, part of the initial leadership role is to determine what agency or organization will coordinate and keep the design process moving forward. Administrative support may come from staff in state agencies, privately funded state or community groups, such as the United Way, or from business leaders. Some states have focused on implementation of a statewide system from the start; other QRIS have developed at the community level and provided the foundation for later expansion.

In most states, QRIS initiatives are administered by the agency that administers the CCDF and licensing program. These include state human services, health, education, employment, or early learning agencies. In most states, components of the QRIS, such as technical assistance and program assessment, are often contracted out to private entities. (See the [Quality Assurance and Monitoring](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide for additional information.)

The most comprehensive QRIS have been supported by entities that are committed to addressing the diversity of programs that serve infants and toddlers, school-age children, children with special or diverse needs, and children in different settings. When evaluating administrative locations, the QRIS designers should consider the following:

- ◆ What agency or organization has an established relationship with the providers that are to be included in the QRIS?
- ◆ Which agency has the staff resources needed to implement a QRIS, e.g., to determine and monitor the rating, to provide or monitor contracts for QRIS support services?
- ◆ What agency or organization has the capacity to effectively use existing and new funding for the QRIS, as well as receive and distribute private dollars, if available?
- ◆ What agency or organization has leadership that is committed to innovation, cross-sector collaboration, building public and political support, and a comprehensive early and school-age care and education system?

## Key Partners in the Planning and Design Process

QRIS design and planning committees may be known by different names, e.g., task force, steering committee, advisory committee, or strategic planning workgroup. An existing group, such as a state advisory council, may fill this role, or, if its membership does not include the appropriate stakeholders, a subcommittee or new task force may be named. Whether the design committee has decisionmaking authority or serves in an advisory capacity to an administrative entity should be made clear from the beginning.

Being inclusive from the start can increase support for the QRIS and reduce the potential for misunderstanding and opposition. Mitchell (2005) notes that, “By far, the most successful strategy for increasing support and hearing and addressing concerns is to commit to open planning, design, and implementation processes. State experience shows that closed planning leads to speculation and misconceptions that can spread rapidly, undermining the effort” (p. 15).

A growing trend is to design a QRIS that unites early childhood programs under a common vision of quality that applies to all settings and sectors. In this case, it is important to have those settings (e.g., child care centers, family child care) and sectors (e.g., Head Start, state-funded preschool programs, programs serving young children under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and out-of-school time programs) represented from the beginning. It is helpful to recruit people who can speak for their agencies or constituencies and who have the authority to make decisions and contribute resources, or have access to managers who carry such authority. More influential members can extend an invitation to others and help ensure that all needed stakeholders are involved.

It is critical for participants in the process to understand their role in the planning and design phase, as well as their potential role in implementation of the QRIS. At a minimum, it helps to begin the planning and design phase with a clear designation of which entities have lines of authority for funding and operating the QRIS, and, therefore, final decisionmaking responsibility. It has also become clear from evaluations of national systems-building initiatives that authentic involvement of parents, clients, and program staff assures both buy-in and successful implementation.

The initial QRIS design committee might include representatives from the following organizations:

- ◆ State agency implementing child care quality initiatives;
- ◆ State subsidy agency;
- ◆ State licensing agency;
- ◆ State education agency;
- ◆ State department of education’s Federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers program;
- ◆ State agency overseeing prekindergarten programs;
- ◆ State early intervention programs (Parts B and C);
- ◆ State Early Learning Advisory Council;
- ◆ Providers, possibly through their professional associations and inclusive of infant-toddler and school-age programs;
- ◆ Parents and organizations that represent parents;
- ◆ State Head Start Collaboration Project and Head Start Association;
- ◆ State professional development council;
- ◆ Child care resource and referral agencies;

- ◆ Organizations or initiatives that focus on specific populations or issues, e.g., infant mental health, family support, children with special needs;
- ◆ Statewide afterschool networks;
- ◆ State legislative leadership from both political parties;
- ◆ Governor's office;
- ◆ Foundations and business leaders with an interest in early childhood education;
- ◆ Vocational-technical schools;
- ◆ Higher education institutions;
- ◆ State leaders with an interest in the intersection of early care and education with health, mental health, early intervention, and parent support;
- ◆ Tribal child care;
- ◆ United Way, child advocacy organizations, and other groups working on early care and education in communities;
- ◆ Researchers and other child development experts; and
- ◆ Other partners that can contribute expertise or potential funding.

## Strategic Planning

Many state design committees guided the planning and development of a long-range strategic plan to help organize the process and track progress. Although some flexibility is necessary, timeframes in a strategic plan can keep the work moving forward when a window of opportunity exists.

QRIS are complex systems with many decision points that will significantly impact the future direction and funding priorities for a state system. Strategic planning should include identification of all programs and resources that can support the initiative, plus the identification of existing gaps in resources. Design committee members have their own priorities and strongly held beliefs. Some states have benefited from a chairperson who is skilled in directing and managing this type of process and who can guide an agreed upon decisionmaking procedure. It is often helpful to obtain the services of a trained facilitator to ensure that all members view the process as positive and respectful.

The development of a new statewide QRIS is enhanced by a detailed and thoughtful analysis of all aspects of the state's current early and school-age care and education system, as well as a review of national resources and other states' systems. The [Quality Compendium](#) provides profiles and detailed information of each QRIS in the United States.<sup>1</sup> QRIS features can be compared within a state or across multiple states. Links to QRIS websites are also available in the Compendium.

It may be helpful to assign various sections of the plan to subcommittees or staff who can report to the entire group. Subcommittees can include additional members with specific expertise in the areas being discussed. Focus groups of various constituencies, such as family child care home providers or parents, may ensure that the concerns of people most affected can be heard.

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

## Statutory and Administrative Authority

In some states, the QRIS is created through legislation; in others, a state agency or private entity initiates the program. The approach chosen by a state depends on several factors, including the state's needs, system goals, system type, and the state's political context. In a rated license system, each rated license is a property right that requires an appeal process to revoke, requiring statutory language. For states where the QRIS was created through state statute, e.g., **Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee**, there is a legal mandate to create and maintain the initiative as well as the possibility of state funding. Because the specific QRIS policies and standards will be revised over time, states have intentionally limited the amount of implementation language included in statutes. Each approach has advantages, but the choice depends more on the leadership and opportunities in a state than on any other considerations.

The advantage to QRIS through agency administrative rules is that there is generally more flexibility because changes may be easier to make, depending on the state's administrative procedures process. The advantages to QRIS through legislation is that it provides greater longevity when political or agency champions leave their positions, and it increases the possibility that state funding will grow over time. The following are challenges to QRIS in legislation:

- ◆ If an attempt to get QRIS legislation passed is not successful, agencies are sometimes prohibited from proceeding with a similar policy effort.
- ◆ There is often legislative opposition to new regulations placed on businesses. There may also be opposition from child care providers or other sectors (e.g., public schools, nursing homes) that may fear that a rating process could be applied to them in the future.
- ◆ Legislation needs to be carefully written to allow for future changes in standards and policies without having to revise the law.

## Timeframe for Development

The QRIS design process often takes at least a year of intensive work to develop recommendations on all aspects of the system. In several states, it has taken far longer. QRIS planning may include operating pilots or field tests, developing cost projections (initial and revised), cultivating support, and securing funding. Over time, evaluation data, new research, changing funding levels, and lessons learned by other states can be used to inform periodic QRIS modifications.

## Determining Participation

### Identifying Eligible Early Childhood Programs

The goals of a QRIS will influence which programs are included. Although challenges to including all early and school-age care and education providers exist, a unifying, cross-system QRIS provides an excellent opportunity to link programs and resources into a more cohesive infrastructure. This also helps parents assess a wide range of program options. Almost all states include regulated child care centers and family child care homes, although sometimes states may implement just center-based care with a plan to expand to additional types of providers later.

### Alternative Pathways

Operating as a licensed program is often, but not always, a prerequisite for participation in a QRIS. Some states have created an alternative QRIS pathway for providers that are not required to be licensed but that seek to

participate. The providers that fall into this category vary by state and may include school-age programs, faith-based programs, part-day nursery schools, prekindergarten programs, school-sponsored early childhood programs, and others. Some of these alternative pathways include the following:

- ◆ **Arkansas'** Better Beginnings allows registered family child care homes (a voluntary status for home providers caring for 5 or fewer children) to participate at level one with no additional requirements. To achieve level two, they must meet the staff-child ratios in minimum licensing requirements, and at level three, family child care homes must be licensed.
- ◆ **Delaware's** professional development system supports QRIS in a cross-sector model, including the special education initiatives in the state. Inclusion is supported through technical assistance and quality improvement plans.
- ◆ **Indiana** allows license-exempt registered ministries to enroll in its QRIS by becoming licensed or choosing voluntary certification.
- ◆ **New York's** pilot QRIS included "any program regulated by the state of New York or the city of New York," which would include child care centers in New York City (NYC) that are required to be licensed, family child care homes and child care centers regulated by the Office of Children and Family Services, preschools outside NYC that are registered with the state Department of Education, and public school prekindergarten programs that are regulated by the state Department of Education.
- ◆ **Pennsylvania** has developed an accreditation crosswalk template for use by other nationally recognized programs such as Head Start and accredited programs such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The template helps determine the level of alignment between Keystone STARS (the QRIS) and the program or accreditation standards. Stakeholders can identify gaps and use a differentiated designation process so that only those items not demonstrated by the program or accreditation process are reviewed by Keystone STARS.
- ◆ **Pennsylvania** Pre-K Counts, the state-funded prekindergarten program in Pennsylvania, requires that all classrooms meet standards that are similar to and aligned with the Keystone STARS standards, such as achieving a particular score on an environment rating scale assessment. After a phase-in period across provider types, all Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts classrooms must now have teachers who hold early childhood education teacher certifications.

A strategy in designing a cross-sector QRIS is to align or incorporate other sets of program standards into the QRIS standards, such as the Head Start Performance Standards, accreditation, and prekindergarten standards. For example, in **Minnesota's** QRIS, Head Start programs are automatically eligible for four stars, while state prekindergarten programs and nationally accredited programs are offered an accelerated pathway to four-star status. **Maine** has a separate track and QRIS standards specifically for Head Start programs. **Oklahoma** does not require accredited programs to have an environment rating scale (ERS) assessment, and Head Start programs can use their Classroom Assessment Scoring System assessment in lieu of the ERS. Additional information is available in the [Standards and Criteria](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide.

## License-Exempt Programs

A number of states exempt certain types of programs from licensing requirements. Common types of license-exempt programs include programs operated by public schools, recreation and drop-in programs, and programs operating for limited hours per day or weeks per year. Some states choose to exempt programs from a subset of requirements only; for example, school-based programs may be exempt from facility requirements. In most states, license-exempt school-age programs are required to voluntarily become licensed to enter a QRIS, which may be a barrier that keeps some providers from participating. For a QRIS to be feasible as a way to improve quality in a range of settings, states may consider addressing this challenge through a number of strategies:

- ◆ Provide outreach and technical assistance to exempt programs to demonstrate the value of the QRIS and help them become licensed;

- ◆ Develop an alternative process to licensing, such as registration, so that license-exempt providers give basic information to the state and can participate in the QRIS; and
- ◆ Allow school-based, license-exempt programs that meet health and safety requirements through the state department of education to participate.

Most states do not include family, friend, and neighbor care in their QRIS because they are generally license-exempt and experience high turnover rates. However, states are not precluded from offering recognition and incentives specifically targeted toward this population. In **Illinois**, publicly funded, license-exempt, home-based providers receive up to three tiers of training award certificates. They also receive quality add-ons based on the amount of state-offered training they have received.

## Tribal Programs

In 1998, tribes were involved in the planning and implementation of **Oklahoma's** statewide QRIS Reaching for the Stars. Many tribal child care programs currently participate in Reaching for the Stars. Licensing is a requirement of the QRIS, and tribal programs can be licensed through the state or tribe. Through the Oklahoma Tribal-State Child Care Network, QRIS managers meet with tribal CCDF administrators on a quarterly basis to share updates and resolve any issues. During the initial launch of the state of **Washington's** QRIS Early Achievers, 7 out of 22 tribal centers chose to participate. Nationally, many tribes have chosen to participate in their states' QRIS while others are exploring the possibility of developing QRIS for their states' tribal CCDF grantees. [Tribal Child Care: Exploring QRIS](#) (National Center on Tribal Child Care Implementation and Innovation, 2013) provide tribes with an overview of QRIS.

Unfortunately, fiscal realities may also influence which providers are allowed or encouraged to participate in QRIS. After decisions are made on which types of providers should be included, cost projections for the numbers of providers and at what level they will enter the system may determine whether the QRIS needs to be phased in over time. Additional information is available in the [Cost Projections and Financing](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide.

## Voluntary Versus Mandatory Participation

Participation in most state QRIS is voluntary. When participation is optional, the QRIS often receives less opposition, and it may be more manageable to implement on a limited basis. On the other hand, mandatory participation by a significant number of the state's early and school-age care and education providers allows the QRIS to be more effective in empowering parents as consumers and improving the overall quality of services. Many states have strategically linked the QRIS to licensing in a way that engages all providers required to be licensed. For example, quite a few states craft QRIS standards so that all licensed programs are automatically placed at the first level. Thus, all licensed providers can easily participate in the system at least at level one; movement to a higher level is optional and requires that the provider demonstrate compliance with the standards at higher quality levels. This approach ensures that consumers can access ratings for most, if not all, programs. Full participation by all eligible providers at some level increases the credibility and legitimacy of the system.

In several states (**Colorado, District of Columbia, Maryland**), state-funded prekindergarten programs are encouraged to participate in QRIS. In **Vermont** they are required to be licensed and participate in the QRIS. In **North Carolina**, public school prekindergarten programs are required to become licensed and participate in QRIS at a four or five star level in order to receive state prekindergarten funding.

Some states make QRIS a requirement for public funding, including participation in the child care subsidy system. A Policy Interpretation Question ([CCDF-ACF-PIQ-2011-01](#)) issued by the Office of Child Care in 2011 explains that although parents receiving subsidies must be able to choose their child care provider, states can require providers who are paid with CCDF to meet quality requirements or standards, such as a QRIS rating level. However, parents receiving subsidies must continue to be allowed to choose from a range of child care providers

(center-based, group home, family child care, and inhome care) and types of care (nonprofit, for-profit, sectarian providers, and relatives who provide care).

- ◆ **Oklahoma** requires licensed child care centers to meet the one star plus level or higher in the QRIS to contract for the care of children receiving child care assistance. Family child care homes must be on a permit and one star plus or higher to obtain a contract. However, once family child care homes are licensed, they may be at the one star level to receive child care assistance payments. Participation in the QRIS beyond the one star level is voluntary.
- ◆ **New Mexico** requires all licensed child care programs receiving child care assistance to meet the two-star level requirements. Basic licensure includes one-star and two-star requirements of the FOCUS on Young Children's Learning QRIS. Star level two is voluntary for providers who do not accept child care assistance. Star levels three, four, and five are voluntary for all licensed child care providers. Registered home child care providers receiving child care assistance are not required to participate in the QRIS.
- ◆ Participation in **Maine's** QRIS (Quality for ME) is mandated for any licensed provider receiving child care assistance payments. Head Start programs are also required to join Quality for ME.
- ◆ In **Wisconsin**, participation in the QRIS is mandatory for child care programs that receive child care assistance through the Wisconsin Shares Program. Participation is voluntary for all other regulated child care programs. Providers receiving child care assistance payments must be at a two-star or higher rating. Programs receiving a two-star rating receive a 5 percent reduction in rates. Providers receive the base child care assistance rate at three stars. Programs that receive a four-star rating receive an increase of 10 percent, and programs that receive a five-star rating receive a 25 percent increase in tiered reimbursement rate.
- ◆ **North Carolina** requires all licensed child care programs receiving child care assistance to meet the three- to five-star license level. Basic licensure is at the one-star level, but programs can ask to be assessed for a higher level of license (two to five stars). State legislation passed in 2011 mandates limiting child care assistance payments to the higher quality programs. It also allows for exemptions where there are inadequate child care slots available at the higher star levels.

In states that link public funding to QRIS level, private-sector funders, such as the United Way, may follow suit and require the providers that they fund to participate as well. In that case, participation is technically voluntary, but it is required if the program wants to receive third-party funding.

## Mapping the Early and School-Age Care and Education Workforce

### Using Data to Inform Planning

QRIS planning is strengthened by data, especially when determining QRIS standards and criteria and projecting costs. It is helpful to collect as much information as possible on the number, type, and quality level of early and school-age care and education programs, the ages of children served in various settings, the educational qualifications of the practitioners, and available resources in the state. These data can be used to inform planners on the possible number of participants and assess the need for supports, such as scholarships, to help practitioners achieve higher levels of education to meet the QRIS standards. (The [Provider Cost of Quality Calculator](#) is described in the [Cost Projections and Financing](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide.) These data can be derived from a wide range of sources, including the state's social services department, education department, regional Head Start office, child care resource and referral (CCR&R) network, and others. Many states have also conducted early care and education economic impact studies that include helpful data. A searchable database of studies is available through Cornell University's [Restructuring Local Government](#) website. The number of nationally accredited programs in a state can be determined by going to the accrediting

organizations' websites. Additional information about accreditation as a QRIS standard is available in the [Standards and Criteria](#) section of this guide.

## Workforce Demographics

Studying the demographics of the workforce provides valuable information for the identification of QRIS standards that can move the profession forward but can also be attainable for most providers. These data also allow for more accurate cost projections.

Although several state licensing programs maintain workforce data, the most likely place to obtain state-specific data is from a professional development registry or a workforce study. More than 30 states have registries, and a map with links to the state registries is available on [The National Workforce Registry Alliance](#) website. Although most states do not mandate participation, registries may still provide helpful data if a representative sample of the workforce is included. The following are some other potential sources of data:

- ◆ CCR&R databases;
- ◆ Expanded market rate surveys that include questions on the workforce;
- ◆ Provider surveys of training supply and demand;
- ◆ Head Start's Program Information Report data;
- ◆ State department of education teacher data;
- ◆ Higher education data on students studying early childhood education or child development; and
- ◆ State employment and labor agencies.

If state-specific data are not available or are limited in applicability, national data can be helpful.

## Licensing Data

Licensing databases can be a valuable source of information for projecting participation at each QRIS level. These databases will vary significantly in both the data elements collected and the ability to access the data and generate reports. At a minimum, the number of licensed programs by category can be determined. Some databases may also include staff qualification and training information. More advanced systems can identify how many programs would be able to meet the standard on licensing compliance (i.e., operating in good standing on a full license, no serious noncompliance or substantiated complaints).

[A Guide to Support States and Territories' Use of Child Care Licensing Data](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017) can help CCDF and licensing administrators assess current licensing data systems and identify needed changes. It explores new uses for licensing data, examines some strategies for dealing with common challenges, and provides additional resources for review and reference.

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## Section 3: Approaches to Implementation

When considering a revision or redesign of a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), a pilot can be a prudent approach to test QRIS elements before moving to full implementation. This section includes issues to consider when planning for and conducting a pilot QRIS. It also describes how some states used a phased-in approach as an alternative to full implementation when launching a QRIS.

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## Conducting Pilot Programs

### Determining the Pilot Purpose

States may implement a pilot to examine the efficacy, sustainability, and applicability of new QRIS features, a QRIS redesign, or an entirely new system (in a state without a QRIS) before launching statewide. Some possible reasons to engage in a small-scale pilot or field test include the ability to do the following:

- ◆ Target available funding in order to build support. Stakeholders may feel it more appropriate to start slowly and produce some positive results on a smaller scale as a way to garner support for statewide implementation.
- ◆ Allow time for implementation approaches to be tested and refined before large numbers of programs are involved in the process. By investing the time and effort to conduct a pilot, a state can enjoy the benefits of customer and community feedback to better inform and revise the QRIS process.
- ◆ Evaluate aspects of the system, such as rating scales or professional development supports. For example, a state may be considering different rating scales and may like to compare them in a controlled way rather than launch something on a larger scale that needs later revision.

- ◆ Assess potential program participation and capacity for implementing a new QRIS statewide. A pilot can allow for better budget estimates and planning processes.

According to the [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: History of QRIS Growth Over Time](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, in addition to the 41 fully operational systems in 2016, 4 QRIS (10 percent) were in a pilot phase.

## Designing the Pilot

Many factors influence how and where to conduct a QRIS pilot, including the availability of funding and whether the features to be tested in the pilot are best examined in a specific area of the state or with one type of program. When piloting a new QRIS before going statewide, some states started with a limited number of program participants, a selected geographic area, or particular program types. When making decisions about how to target the pilot, it is important to consider the context and questions of interest. A state assessing the climate and overall response to a QRIS may pilot with a limited number of programs but recruit participants across program types and geographic regions. In contrast, a state interested in understanding the resources needed to implement the rating process (including observational assessments) may pilot with one program type in one or two geographic regions.

For example, if a new coaching model is being tested for a QRIS, a state may choose to pilot the model in a selected geographic area where coaches are already trained as a way to minimize start-up costs. The focus of the pilot would be on providers' responses to the coaching and making a determination of its effectiveness. If, however, the state is more interested in understanding the feasibility of implementing a coaching model (learning whether coaches can be trained to deliver the model with fidelity), they may instead conduct the pilot in multiple regions statewide and focus on the process of recruiting and training coaches.

## Length of the Pilot

The length of time a state will maintain its QRIS pilot phase is often determined by the amount financial resources; stakeholder, participant, and community support; and whether the goals for the pilot have been met. Pilots of QRIS features or a redesign can grow slowly by adding new communities or additional provider types. Pilots can last from a few months (**Pennsylvania**) to 1 or 2 years (**Delaware, Kentucky, Missouri, and Ohio**) to multiple years (**Indiana and Virginia**).

## Collecting and Using Data to Inform the QRIS

The goals the state and its partners set for the pilot will influence what data will be collected and by whom, how it will be recorded, and how it will be analyzed and used for adjustments and refinements. QRIS standards are generally informed by and aligned with existing standards such as licensing, national accreditation, Head Start, prekindergarten, or state early learning guidelines. The pilot is often used as a way to test a major change or a redesign. The following can be tested in the pilot: procedures for program application, rating processes, documentation methods, level assignments, the provision of quality improvement supports, and ways to communicate outcomes. Efforts to address equity in the QRIS among participating programs and the children and families they serve may also be addressed in a pilot.

The following are the types of data that can be collected in a pilot:

- ◆ Participation rates (overall rates, as well as rates by facility type, size, level, and geographic location);
- ◆ Characteristics of children served (race, income, subsidy status, home language, special needs) in the QRIS programs;
- ◆ Percentage of providers that are able to meet various quality criteria (such as degree requirements);

- ◆ Usage rates for incentives and support services, such as professional development or training opportunities, technical assistance supports, or financial incentives;
- ◆ Number and percentage of children receiving subsidies served by participating providers;
- ◆ Program participation rates at varying levels of quality;
- ◆ Baseline data from assessment tools;
- ◆ Parent/consumer awareness of QRIS; and
- ◆ Feedback from providers on clarity and ease of process and forms/documents.

Data can be collected in a variety of ways and from a variety of sources. The centers and homes involved in the pilot can provide critical feedback through self-assessments, self-reporting, and documentation. The staff involved in managing the pilot can collect feedback through interviews, observations, and document reviews. Staff can collect information about the following: the clarity of explanatory documents, standards, and the application process; sources of evidence or documents to include or accept; the amount and complexity of paperwork; time required to complete various requirements; and availability/accessibility of appropriate training opportunities.

It is important to consider a state's capacity to gather appropriate and sufficient data to assign accurate ratings, redesign standards, implement procedures, or develop or change providers' supports. Gathering data that seems interesting is only a worthwhile exercise if it is used at some point to inform the system. Otherwise, the process can become costly and frustrating, and can be perceived as unresponsive. Many states have asked researchers to evaluate their QRIS pilots. Researchers can be helpful in selecting the most appropriate data elements for monitoring and implementation as well as for process and formative evaluations.

## Implementing the QRIS

Once a state and its partners determine they are ready to move from a pilot to statewide implementation, it is important to develop a detailed plan and timeline for implementation. An analysis of available funding, along with each partner agency's capacity to implement and manage the system, will also be critical factors in this process.

Most states subcontract the management of some QRIS components like technical assistance and coaching or onsite data collection. States may have an existing systems in place, like professional development systems, that can be leveraged to support the QRIS and the new features being added as a result of the pilot. States may add to the scope of work in existing contracts they have with child care resource and referral networks and postsecondary institutions to support QRIS activities. States may also issue a request for proposals process to select and engage organizations in implementation.

As a state makes changes to its QRIS based on a pilot, it is critical to consider the implications for consumer education and a QRIS website. It may be necessary to communicate changes to the system and the possibility that program ratings may change as a result of the redesign or new QRIS feature. Additional information on communicating with families is available in the [Consumer Education](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide.

## Implementation without a Pilot

A pilot or field test is not always feasible. If a state chooses to move forward with changes to the QRIS or implementation of a new system without piloting, it is critical to engage providers and other partners and stakeholders in a strategic implementation process. Although much information can be gleaned from research and lessons learned in other states, it is important to remember that each state is unique. A state must consider its landscape, history, infrastructure, and overall early and school-age care and education environment, and adapt the information to its particular set of circumstances. Data collection and monitoring during implementation are

vital activities. States can engage an evaluation partner or use internal resources to administer web surveys or to conduct focus groups with parents and programs to supplement QRIS administrative data.

[QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: History of QRIS Growth Over Time](#) (2017), by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, notes that, as of 2016, 12 QRIS (29 percent) were rolled out statewide without first going through a pilot phase.

## Phasing in Programs

### Phasing in the QRIS

A phased-in approach to a redesign or a new QRIS may be necessary due to limited funding and staff resources or a lack of broad support. However, policymakers should be aware that anticipated changes in program quality may not occur with incremental implementation as each element of a QRIS is dependent on the other. States will need to consider what resources and supports are needed to increase participant quality while also addressing gaps in existing capacity or infrastructure. A phased-in strategy requires careful consideration of which approaches to administration, monitoring, provider supports, and incentives are most likely to be cost-effective in terms of improving quality, ensuring accountability, and increasing participation.

It is also important to realize that a limited implementation strategy is only the first step toward a comprehensive, statewide QRIS. The value of expansion to a statewide QRIS is that it allows all parents and providers to benefit, provides a consistent standard of measurement, and improves opportunities for resource realignment. Planning for full, statewide implementation and the projection of total costs should be part of the process, even when a phased-in approach is necessary.

Making decisions about how and when to phase in implementation of a QRIS can be guided by the cost projection process. The Provider Cost of Quality Calculator (PCQC) described in the [Cost Projections and Financing](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide can help with projecting costs at scale. It can also help guide decisions regarding where and when to reduce costs, if necessary. It is possible to develop multiple cost projections for a statewide program using the PCQC. Projections can be made for strategies, such as the following:

- ◆ A comprehensive plan that anticipates full funding for the next 5 years for each component of a fully implemented QRIS;
- ◆ A midrange or scaled back plan to get started and build support for future expansion (e.g., limited participation, reduced provider incentives); and
- ◆ A basic program with fewer provider supports and incentives and fewer accountability measures.

In addition to projecting the cost of various implementation strategies, several other factors may influence decisionmaking about when to fully implement a QRIS. These include the following:

- ◆ **Rate at which changes are made to QRIS standards or criteria.** Changing them too quickly after implementation may be difficult for providers and could potentially erode their trust in the system and their feelings of success and confidence. Generally, states revise QRIS approximately every 3 to 5 years. Small changes can be made annually, especially changes that are responsive to participant feedback.
- ◆ **Financial incentives and supports.** Making a range of financial incentives and provider supports available early on is likely to increase provider participation. Limiting or targeting incentives and supports is likely to slow participation growth.
- ◆ **Level of participation.** Early and high levels of participation will affect how people view the success and value of the program and are likely to help build support for increased funding.

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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;

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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;

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<sup>2</sup>This 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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<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/qris-compendium-fact-sheet-staff-qualifications-professional-development-and-supports>

National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. (2015). *Research brief #1: Trends in child care center licensing regulations and policies for 2014.*

<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/research-brief-1-trends-child-care-center-licensing-regulations-and-policies-2014>

National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. (2015). *Research brief #2: Trends in family child care home licensing regulations and policies for 2014.*

<https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/research-brief-2-trends-family-child-care-home-licensing-regulations-and-policies-2014>

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## Section 5: Quality Assurance and Monitoring

When a state decides to pursue a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), it is important to engage providers, partners, and other stakeholders in a strategic process to determine appropriate policies and procedures for accountability and monitoring. This section addresses documenting compliance with standards and criteria, determining rating levels, deciding how frequently rating levels will be determined, choosing which assessment tools to use, monitoring ratings, and facing possible loss or reduction of rating levels.

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# Documenting Compliance

## Documenting Compliance Criteria

The compliance criteria for each standard define what a program must do to achieve a particular level, move to the next level, or earn points in a specific category. Documentation for meeting QRIS standards can be in the form of a checklist, self-report or self-assessment, presentation of materials, and an observation or assessment. It is very important that each criterion and forms of acceptable documentation are clearly defined. Interviews and conversations with providers and interested stakeholders during the design phase will help identify requirements and processes that are not clear or sufficiently defined.

**New Hampshire** and **New York** are among the states with checklists on their websites that list required sources of evidence.

- ◆ **New Hampshire's** Licensed Plus Quality Rating System [Option 1 Standards](#) includes a column that specifies the type of documentation that is required to verify compliance with the standard.
- ◆ **New York's** QRIS standards include a documentation checklist for each standard. New York has developed an online [Resource Guide](#) that provides details about documentation requirements and includes samples of acceptable documents. Upon clicking on the standard, additional information on that standard becomes available, including clarifications, key documents, and links to additional reading.

Many states have glossaries, or definition pages, to define and explain the criteria more thoroughly. They also have companion pieces, such as an application manual (**Maine**) or a program guide (**Delaware**) that help providers and other interested individuals better understand the QRIS. See the [Standards and Criteria](#) section of the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance's *QRIS Resource Guide* for additional information.

As QRIS evolves in a state, documentation requirements may change or need clarification. Any changes need to be communicated to all stakeholders. As participation in the QRIS increases, the capacity of the documentation and assessment system must increase accordingly. The goal remains to make accurate verification and timely rating decisions.

## Demonstrating Compliance

Some states permit multiple methods to demonstrate compliance with QRIS standards. One area where states frequently accept equivalencies is educational qualifications and attainment.

National accreditation is another standard that is often used as an equivalent measure in a QRIS. States that incorporate national accreditation systems into their QRIS generally do so as equivalent to, or requirement for, higher levels of quality. The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance provides an online [National Program Standards Crosswalk Tool](#) that includes the following standards: several sets of national accreditation standards; Head Start Program Performance Standards; Caring for Our Children Basics; Caring for Our Children, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition; Stepping Stones to Caring for Our Children; Department of Defense Instruction and Effective Rating and Improvement System; and Child Care and Development Fund Final Rule. The tool allows users to compare their state standards to national standards.

States may decide to include standards in addition to national accreditation if they feel that standards are not sufficiently incorporated in the accreditation system or monitored with enough frequency. An example of this is the requirement for program assessments, such as the environment rating scales (ERS).

When states are considering multiple ways to demonstrate compliance, they can consider the following questions:

- ◆ If there is another way to document compliance, is it equivalent to the competencies required in the QRIS?
- ◆ Do providers have access to programs and supports that will help them demonstrate compliance? If not, does the state have the capacity to make them available?
- ◆ If providers can seek validation from an outside group, association, or system to document compliance, does the outside entity have the capacity to meet the provider requests in a timely manner?
- ◆ Are there financial implications for the state or the provider involved with alternate pathways?

## Coordinated Monitoring

QRIS agencies may want to coordinate aspects of their monitoring systems with licensing, prekindergarten, Head Start, accreditation, or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part B or C. The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation’s (OPRE) [Coordinated Monitoring Systems for Early Care and Education](#) (Maxwell, Sosinsky, Tout, & Hegseth, 2016) outlines four goals of a coordinated monitoring system:

1. Improve consistency across programs or funding streams.
2. Reduce the burden on early care and education providers.
3. Increase efficiency.
4. Support continuous quality improvement.

States and territories may align standards, share data, or share or cross-train staff in order to support these goals. OPRE’s publication describes various approaches to coordinated monitoring, a framework for coordinated monitoring, and state examples. An interactive tool by the State Capacity Building Center and the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (2017), [Mapping the Early Care and Education Monitoring Landscape](#), is designed to help states and territories organize information and plan for coordinated monitoring.

Coordination with licensing is described in the “Licensing and QRIS” part of this document.

## Data Sharing

Documentation from various components of the system can be shared to verify compliance with QRIS standards. Sources include licensing data, a professional development registry, accreditation monitoring data, or prekindergarten program monitoring data. The Office of Head Start’s Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website has Head Start and Early Head Start [Monitoring Review Reports](#).

## Evaluation Readiness

Several states have found it helpful to have programs prepare for their QRIS evaluations by completing rating readiness tools. **Washington** has an [Interactive Rating Readiness Tool](#) (IRRT) to help facilities plan for their onsite evaluation visits. Additional information about the process can be found in the Early Achievers [Participant Operating Guidelines](#) (see page 30).

The IRRT is a checklist that includes the following:

- ◆ Classroom schedules and general facility information
- ◆ Documentation, including signed parent consent forms and the location of files for review
- ◆ Identification of which standard components the facility plans to demonstrate that they are meeting

## Frequency of Compliance Monitoring

Several factors determine how often programs will be monitored:

- ◆ Available financial resources
- ◆ Availability of staff with appropriate skills, knowledge, and time to perform functions
- ◆ Validity and integrity of data collection
- ◆ Connections to other systems and their monitoring and compliance processes

The method and frequency of monitoring may vary by standard. Some standards, such as current staff qualifications, may only need to be verified one time as long as the staff and their qualifications remain unchanged. Other standards, such as professional development requirements for ongoing training, need to be checked annually. Monitoring or verification may also be triggered under certain circumstances, such as staff changes, particularly if related to the director or serious licensing violations.

More information about how often programs are monitored can be found in the [Quality Compendium](#).

## Determining the Rating Level

### Authorities That Determine the Rating

Identifying the entity(ies) with capacity to effectively administer a QRIS over time is a central issue to consider in the design phase. Most statewide QRIS are administered by a state agency in partnership with private sector entities. The QRIS lead agency typically oversees several basic functions, including

- ◆ Initially assessing program quality and assigning QRIS levels;
- ◆ Monitoring compliance to ensure system integrity;
- ◆ Conducting classroom assessments (using an ERS, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or another instrument);
- ◆ Providing training and technical assistance; and
- ◆ Managing system planning, engagement, and outreach (data collection and analysis, Web design and upkeep, marketing development and public information dissemination, etc.).

In most cases, each of these functions is the responsibility of different staff members, many of whom may be with contracted agencies or privately funded partners. Several states use state agency employees for assigning initial ratings and monitoring compliance, and contract with outside entities for conducting classroom assessments and providing training and technical assistance. However, staffing patterns vary and are often influenced by available funding and current staffing needs and resources.

For validity of the system, it is important to separate the functions of conducting assessments and providing technical assistance. In other words, technical assistance providers should not also be responsible for assessing programs.

## Roles

This section will refer to *monitoring staff* and *technical assistance providers* when describing roles. Generally, monitoring staff include raters, assessors, data collectors, and onsite evaluators. Technical assistance providers include coaches and consultants.

Licensing staff in **North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee** monitor QRIS criteria, and a separate team of assessors conduct the environment rating scales. In **Oklahoma**, the ERS assessors are contracted through the University of Oklahoma's Center for Early Childhood Professional Development. **Arizona's** [Quality First](#) QRIS is administered by First Things First (a governmental agency funded with tobacco tax). Participation in Quality First begins with an initial assessment, during which a Quality First assessor visits the program to observe classrooms and interview teachers. All programs enrolled in Quality First receive a coach, who visits the program on a regular basis and supports programs with technical assistance. The coach reviews scores from program assessments and helps the program create a plan for improvement.

**Washington's** Department of Early Learning partners with the University of Washington (UW) to administer [Early Achievers](#) QRIS. The university is the lead agency for evaluation, assessment, and rating assignment. Data collectors from UW conduct facility onsite evaluation visits. The university is also responsible for the development of the Early Achievers Coach Framework. Washington designates several roles responsible for monitoring and supporting providers in the QRIS:

- ◆ Regional coordinator: Approves or denies programs' requests to be rated
- ◆ Community liaison: A member of the UW evaluation team who supports facilities and the data collectors so visits are successful
- ◆ Coach: A member of the UW evaluation team who participates in ongoing professional development and consultation with programs
- ◆ Technical assistance (TA) specialist: With the local lead agency, the TA specialist works with programs to develop work plans and timelines
- ◆ Data collector: A member of the UW evaluation team who collects data through observations, interviews, and reviews of records and documentation; this person also administers an ERS and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System

In many states, child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies play a key role in QRIS administration and often coordinate QRIS training and technical assistance. Institutions of higher education are also important partners and frequently assume responsibility for classroom assessment as well as help with data collection. Public-private partnerships, such as early and school-age care and education advisory committees, are often charged with planning, engagement, and outreach functions. In short, QRIS implementation is often a team effort.

State experience suggests that a strategic way to build on and expand current investments and maximize all available early and school-age care and education dollars is to use state licensing or other staff to assign ratings. Other outside entities, such as CCR&R agencies, institutions of higher education, and cooperative extension services, may assist with training and technical assistance.

## Monitor Competencies

Given that monitors should maintain a positive working relationship with all providers, and providers' characteristics and needs vary greatly, agencies should consider the desired knowledge, skills, and abilities of both monitors and coaches. Competencies can inform job descriptions, interview questions, selection of candidates, training, and evaluations.

Relationship-building and communication skills are at the center of training for monitors. Effective training takes into account the varying needs of centers and homes, urban and rural providers, different age groups, and cultural and language differences.

## Inter-Rater Reliability

The thoughtful process of hiring qualified monitors, training with fidelity, and implementing an ongoing inter-rater reliability protocol encourages provider and stakeholder confidence in the QRIS process.

To ensure the integrity of the monitoring process, states select reliable assessment instruments, provide ongoing training and supports to monitors, and maintain a monitor calibration process to ensure that the instrument is being consistently used at all times by all monitors in all settings.

**Texas** Rising Star has a section in the [Child Care Provider Certification Guidelines](#) dedicated to assessor protocol. The protocol includes best practices to ensure that the certification process is reliable and credible. The guide has an introduction to the process, details about what to do prior to an assessment, how to conduct an assessment, and documenting and reporting the results.

## Continuous Quality Improvement of the Monitoring System

To maintain and improve on the quality of the monitoring process, some states extend to programs the opportunity to provide feedback about the assessment experience. This feedback is usually shared immediately following the assessment visit and prior to the level designation or a request to appeal the rating.

Nevada Silver State Stars has a [QRIS Feedback Form](#) that allows programs to give feedback and share concerns regarding assessment experiences.

States may conduct annual stakeholder surveys to get feedback on providers' experiences.

## Licensing and QRIS

Licensing and QRIS are a part of the early care and education system and both are designed to support children's development. A large majority of states require licensure for QRIS enrollment, and many include licensing as the first QRIS level. However, states diverge from this starting point in their level of coordination. It is essential that QRIS administrators include licensing from the beginning and maintain strong and consistent communication with licensing staff. The next part will outline four areas in which licensing and QRIS can coordinate: enforcement, standards, technical assistance, and monitoring.

### Enforcement

Licensing and QRIS will need to communicate regarding how a program's licensing status affects its QRIS level and accompanying support. Most states require that programs participating in the QRIS be licensed and in good standing. States define "good standing" in different ways and may have additional expectations for programs specific to maintaining licensing status after receiving ratings. If a program fails to meet these expectations, then it could lose its rating designation and financial incentives and other supports.

Issues that states have considered when determining how licensing compliance affects a program's QRIS rating include the following:

- ◆ How far back does the review of licensing compliance go? Does a 3-year-old violation carry the same weight as a more recent incident?

- ◆ Should mitigating factors be taken into consideration when serious noncompliance occurs? In license revocation decisions, factors such as the program’s documented efforts to prevent the noncompliance from occurring and its subsequent response to the situation are often considered.
- ◆ Is there a different expectation for a program first applying to participate and a program that is already rated? In other words, a serious noncompliance might keep an applicant from attaining a higher level, but it might not cause a reduction in rating for an already rated program.
- ◆ Should a higher level of compliance be required for higher rating levels or is there one standard that’s the threshold for all rated programs?

Information about state QRIS participation policies and supports can be found in the [Quality Compendium](#) and in the [Provider Incentives and Support](#) section of the *QRIS Resource Guide*.

Arkansas’s and Vermont’s approaches to determining the effect of licensing status on QRIS ratings are described next.

**Arkansas**

- ◆ [Arkansas Better Beginnings Rule Book](#) (See page 10.)
- ◆ **Rating assignment method:** Building blocks
- ◆ **Licensing compliance:** All facilities must be in good standing with the Department of Human Services. A facility in good standing is not currently debarred, defunded, excluded, or under adverse licensing action.
- ◆ **Effect of licensing status on QRIS ratings:** Better Beginnings certification is valid for 36 months unless the facility becomes ineligible. Certified status can be denied, suspended, reduced, or removed if the facility is not in good standing (as defined in the previous bullet), substantiated complaints are received by the office, or the facility fails to correct deficiencies within a reasonable time period. Facilities that have their Better Beginnings certification removed are eligible to reapply in 12 months, unless otherwise notified.

**Vermont**

- ◆ [Vermont Step Ahead Recognition System Standards](#) (See page 3.)
- ◆ **Rating assignment method:** Points
- ◆ **Licensing compliance and effect of licensing status on QRIS ratings:** Points in the Regulatory Compliance arena shall be awarded in accordance with the following criteria: “In Compliance means that the program is in compliance with all DCF [Department for Children and Families]/CDD [Child Development Division] regulations, a DCF licensor has conducted an onsite inspection within the last two years and any substantiated violations have been corrected.”

Points	Standard
1	The program is in compliance as defined above and within the past year has not had any substantiated violations resulting in a parental notification, and has not had any substantiated violations of the same nature or exhibited a general pattern of regulatory noncompliance.
2	The program is in compliance as defined above and within the past three years has not had any substantiated violations resulting in a parental notification, and has not had any repeated, substantiated violations of the same nature or exhibited a general pattern of regulatory noncompliance.

Points	Standard
3	The program is in compliance as defined above and within the past five years has not had any substantiated violations resulting in a parental notification, and has not had any repeated, substantiated violations of the same nature or exhibited a general pattern of regulatory noncompliance.

## Monitoring

Frequently, the QRIS is monitored by the licensing agency alone or in partnership with other agency staff or a private entity. Using licensors who are already funded to make periodic visits to programs makes good fiscal sense. Strategically linking QRIS to licensing could provide an opportunity to increase the number of licensing staff, reduce caseloads, and broaden staff’s roles. For example, the **Oklahoma** Department of Human Services added 27 licensing staff members when it became responsible for monitoring QRIS compliance. However, an assessment must be made to determine if the licensing system can adequately support this new responsibility. If a licensing program is unable to adequately monitor child care or its sole focus is on enforcement, it will face greater challenges in monitoring a QRIS. If licensing managers are included early in the QRIS planning process, they may have valuable contributions to the discussion.

## Rating Frequency

States have policies and procedures for renewing rating levels, and several states also set a time limit on how long a provider can be at one rating level. During renewal, providers generally can earn higher or lower ratings, based on the standards they meet, or they can keep their current rating levels.

When discussing QRIS ratings, it is important to differentiate between two separate, but interrelated, functions: assigning a rating and conducting a classroom or home assessment. Most states use classroom or home assessments, such as an ERS, as one—but not the only—way to assess compliance with QRIS criteria in a learning environment. These two functions can occur on the same cycle, such as annually, or they can occur at different points in time. On average, states assign ratings and conduct classroom assessments annually. [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 states use and summarizes common features of the QRIS rating process.

## Use of Assessment Tools

As noted earlier, QRIS compliance is typically based on a number of factors, only some of which are determined by classroom assessments. Additional information is available in [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Use of Observational Tools in QRIS](#) (2017) by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance.

Most of the states that require a classroom assessment to evaluate program quality currently use [environment rating scales](#) developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These scales include the following:

- ◆ *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised* (ECERS-R)
- ◆ *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale–Revised* (ITERS-R)
- ◆ *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale* (SACERS)

◆ *Family Child Care Rating Scale (FCCRS)*<sup>1</sup>

[Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education Settings: A Compendium of Measures](#) (Halle, Vick Whittaker, & Anderson, 2010) provides detailed information about program assessment measures, including measure purpose, intended ages and settings, administration, and reliability and validity.

Some states are also using more focused assessment tools that measure interactions, classroom practices, and administrative practices in addition to or in lieu of measures of global quality.

- ◆ **Massachusetts** requires assessments with the *Program Administration Scale (PAS)* for child care centers and the *Business Administration Scale (BAS)* for family child care providers.
- ◆ **Oklahoma** recognizes the *Child Caregiver Interaction Scale*, the *Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale*, the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO)*, the PAS, and the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)*.
- ◆ In **Ohio**, self-assessments are required, but programs can use an ERS, the ELLCO, or other assessment tool, and scores are not tied to ratings.
- ◆ 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.

In some cases, classroom assessment tools are required and the scores are used to help determine ratings. Other states have made assessment tools optional—as one way to accumulate QRIS points—or require tools for programs seeking higher star levels only. Some states require programs to be assessed with environment rating scales but do not tie particular scores to the ratings. Information about the program assessment tools used by state QRIS is available in [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Use of Observational Tools in QRIS](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2017).

When determining what percentage of classrooms to assess using a classroom quality measurement tool, states have to balance financial resources with assessment validity. The authors of classroom measurement tools can advise on the minimum number of classrooms to assess so that the resulting average is an accurate measure of overall program quality. The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation publication [Best Practices for Conducting Program Observations as Part of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) recommends observing at least one classroom in each age range and observing 50 percent of the classrooms in each program (Hamre & Maxwell, 2011). The authors add that “weighing the costs, it is not recommended that QRIS observe every classroom in programs if the purpose is solely to determine the program’s rating. However, it is clear that observing every classroom may be useful for other purposes such as providing technical assistance.” (p. 9)

## Leveraging Existing Resources

A key step in QRIS design is to examine the current early and school-age care and education landscape and infrastructure to determine how to integrate various functions or subsystems. It is important to identify where there are services already in place that might be expanded or included in the QRIS structure. In most states, there are a host of resources that can be accessed.

- ◆ **North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee**, among others, use state licensing staff to gather and validate the information needed to assign ratings.
- ◆ **Ohio’s Step Up to Quality** program includes dedicated staff in each licensing field office whose sole responsibility is QRIS administration.

<sup>1</sup>The environment rating scale for family child care homes was revised in 2007. Some states still refer to the older version, i.e., the *Family Day Care Rating Scale (FCDRS)*.

- ◆ In **Colorado**, CCR&R staff, who are private sector employees who receive both public and private funding, conduct ratings.
- ◆ In **Illinois**, assessments are conducted by staff at the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. Scores are sent to the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), the QRIS application contractor, to be combined with other criteria for rating generation. It is also important to ensure that the assessor conducting the assessments has the appropriate background, credentials, and training related to the age group for each assessment scale. For example, the ITERS-R assessor should have knowledge of infants and toddlers. Likewise, the SACERS assessor should be knowledgeable about the care and education of school-age children.

## Monitoring the Rating

### Failure to Meet the QRIS Standards

The policies and procedures for monitoring ratings should be clearly articulated to all involved. As providers submit documentation and QRIS staff conduct interviews, observations, and assessments, it is important that all acceptable sources of evidence are consistently defined and interpreted. Whether a state implements a building block approach, a point approach, or a combination of the two, it must have a sound monitoring process in place.

Just as it is important for early and school-age care and education programs to be aware of any benefits for achieving a level, they also need to understand what they must do to maintain a designated level and the consequences for noncompliance. The policy should specify when a reduction of status becomes effective, what the process is to restore a level, and if there are any appeal rights. States have developed administrative policies for situations when a program no longer meets one or more of the standards in its current designation level. The process to be followed for noncompliance should be clearly written and communicated to programs.

Many states include a program improvement plan as part of the QRIS process. Typically based on a provider's self-assessment, observation, or rating, this plan identifies strengths and weaknesses and suggests ways to make improvements. Many QRIS use the results of an assessment tool, like an ERS, as a starting point for developing this plan.

**Maryland** requires a program improvement plan for programs that are seeking a Check Level 3 rating and have any ERS subscale scores below 4.0 on the program's self-assessment. For Check Level 4 and 5, a program improvement plan is required for a program that receives an outside ERS assessment with a subscale score of 4.5 or 5.0, respectively. Programs may use a variety of additional tools or assessments to create the improvement plan, such as accreditation self-study or validation results, school-readiness goals and objectives for their jurisdictions, and program-specific goals and objectives for continuous quality improvement.

**Washington** has extensive procedures on how licensing status affects QRIS participation, both at registration and during participation. For example, if a facility is operating under a probationary license, it has 6 months to regain full licensure. During this time, it may continue to work with a coach or technical assistance specialist, but it cannot be evaluated for a rating. If the full license is not reinstated within 6 months, its participation in Early Achievers will be terminated. In 2015, the [Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program \(ECEAP\)](#), Washington's state prekindergarten program, was required to participate in Early Achievers per House Bill 1723. Washington enhanced the data system and built the Early Achievers Participation Monitoring Report to track the progress of providers required to participate in Early Achievers (non-school-age providers receiving state subsidies and those serving ECEAP).

## Appeals Process for Programs

Providers may wish to challenge both an assessment score as well as the overall rating assigned to their programs. Some states have developed guidelines to follow if a program disagrees with its quality rating, although not all have a formal appeals process. Clear communication and training to help providers better understand the rating process may help to reduce the number of appeals.

In [\*Stair Steps to Quality: A Guide for States and Communities Developing Quality Rating Systems for Early Care and Education\*](#), Anne Mitchell (2005) makes the following statement about implications of accountability policies:

A key accountability issue in a quality rating system (QRS) [sic] is the accuracy of quality ratings. A well-designed and implemented accountability system, bolstered by clear communication about the structure and operation of the QRS, should minimize disagreements. A concern that has been raised about rating systems, especially those connected with licensing is whether rating the quality of programs will result in challenges to ratings and an increase in requests for hearings. Anticipating that some programs may not agree with the rating they receive, an appeals process should be designed in advance. Administrators of statewide QRS report that although quality ratings do change, there are relatively few challenges and little or no increase in hearing requests. (p. 36)

The guidelines developed by each state vary. In **Colorado**, a program may initiate a Technical Review of its Qualistar rating within 30 calendar days of receiving its Qualistar Rating Consultation. It may also initiate a Dispute Resolution Process within the same time period. In **North Carolina**, programs can appeal the evaluation of staff qualifications to the Education Unit, and can appeal the environment rating scale results first to the assessors at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and then to the Office of Administrative Hearings. In **Oklahoma**, if a program's star level is reduced, it can appeal or propose an alternative settlement but cannot reapply for 6 months if the reduction is due to noncompliance. **Wisconsin's** [\*YoungStar Policy Guide\*](#) stipulates that the "local YoungStar office discuss[es] the rating with the provider before it is published on the YoungStar Public Search website." In an effort to minimize the number of reconsiderations, YoungStar has established "clear documentation and justification of the rationale for a program's rating." Most of the guides, workbooks, and toolkits referenced in the [Provider Incentives and Support](#) section of the *QRIS Resource Guide* include information on the appeals process.

In **Arkansas**, upon receipt of the request for appeal, the Better Beginnings coordinator will conduct an internal review to ensure that the appropriate processes were followed and determine the validity of the original decision. According to the [\*Better Beginnings Rule Book\*](#), the Better Beginnings coordinator will review the findings with the division director and will transmit the findings of the internal review to the facility within 30 days of the receipt of the request to appeal. If the outcome of the internal review is unsatisfactory to the facility, it has 10 days to ask for further review by the Better Beginnings Appeal Review Committee.

## Reduction or Loss of Rating Levels

As states are integrating services across systems and aligning program standards in QRIS, the reduction or loss of rating levels can have a significant financial impact on programs. Examples include the following:

- ◆ Lack of or reduced access to free or low-cost training opportunities (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps [T.E.A.C.H.] Early Childhood® Project scholarships, training vouchers, Child Development Associate courses, credentialing programs, etc.).
- ◆ Reduction or loss of financial rewards or bonuses for attaining and maintaining higher levels within the QRIS. These awards can be directed to the program or to individual staff within the program.
- ◆ Reduced tiered reimbursement payments for subsidized child care.
- ◆ Limited access to supportive services, such as technical assistance, consultation, and ERS assessments.

- ◆ Inability to market a program at a higher level. This may reduce a program's ability to remain competitive with other programs and may affect parents' decisions regarding placement of their children in care.

## Communication of a Reduction or Loss of a Rating Level

Any partnering agency or service within the state system that advertises rating levels to the public needs to be notified of rating changes so that parents have access to the most current information. This includes both increases and decreases in levels. Local CCR&R agencies commonly maintain and distribute rating information to parents, and their listings must be accurate. If the licensing or subsidy agency is not the same agency that administers the QRIS, each of these agencies will need separate notification. When tiered reimbursement payments are involved, the subsidy agency must be notified. If prekindergarten programs are rated or if eligibility for funding depends on a specific quality rating, then the education department must be notified.

Early and school-age care and education providers should be advised not to market themselves incorrectly. Some states supply participating programs with materials, such as banners, window clings, and posters, to use to market their QRIS to parents. If these materials advertise a level that is no longer applicable, they should be changed accordingly.

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## Section 6: Provider Incentives and Support

An essential element of a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is the support offered to child care providers. Support helps them understand and meet the standards and quality criteria. States may already have support services in place that can be linked to the QRIS, they may need to invest in new services, or both. This section addresses various types of support services, such as professional development opportunities and targeted technical assistance (TA) approaches, as well as financial incentives for programs and individual staff.

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## Providing Program and Practitioner Outreach and Support

### Recruiting Programs

In many states, participation in a QRIS is voluntary so outreach activities are used to promote QRIS goals and benefits and encourage programs to participate. Recruitment of early and school-age care and education programs into the QRIS can be done through a targeted approach or a general marketing campaign. One example of a targeted approach is when the organization that will be administering the QRIS sends information directly to providers. This information may be customized for the target audience and delivered via e-mail, newsletters, mailings, and social media. A more direct approach is to invite providers to meetings or workshops during which the QRIS is explained and programs are able to ask questions, hear from exiting participants, and enroll.

States may promote participation by using a range of marketing efforts to publicize their QRIS and the benefits to providers:

- ◆ Developing promotional materials that are distributed by licensing and subsidy staff, child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies, trainers, college faculty, Child and Adult Care Food Program staff, United Way agencies, professional organizations, and others.
- ◆ Posting QRIS information, answers to frequently asked questions, and resource materials on a QRIS website, as well as on websites hosted by other organizations. More information about QRIS websites can be found in the [Consumer Education](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide.
- ◆ Sponsoring orientation sessions or webinars for potential QRIS participants and the early childhood community at large.
- ◆ Conducting orientation sessions for other organizations that have contact with early and school-age care and education programs in the community.
- ◆ Designating specific QRIS outreach staff to encourage participation and provide technical assistance.
- ◆ Conducting a provider or consumer survey, or both, to determine familiarity with the QRIS. The survey can provide baseline information and offer an opportunity to send targeted information to those who are not currently familiar with the QRIS.

In some states, the agency responsible for administering the QRIS assigns specific outreach and recruitment activities to staff. **Oklahoma** has outreach specialists and consultation and technical support specialists who encourage programs to participate and assist them with applications. **Pennsylvania** has STARS managers or specialists who take on this responsibility for their specific geographic regions.

## Orientation Sessions and Materials for Programs

Most QRIS offer an orientation to help providers understand what is expected and how to participate. **Kentucky** has STARS quality coordinators who provide STARS overviews and technical assistance for completing the process. **Ohio** offers a Step Up to Quality 101 training session during which providers learn about the requirements and benefits. **Pennsylvania** believes that initial orientation is critical to a provider's QRIS success, so it developed standardized materials and instituted a requirement that directors must complete the STARS Orientation to enroll in Keystone STARS. To ensure that providers have the information needed to participate, **Arkansas** held a series of Better Beginning Regional Clinics with a variety of subject matter specialists available onsite to provide consultation.

Several states have program or policy guides that provide detailed information about the QRIS. Some topics are universally included in these guides, while other topics only appear in a few states' guides. Examples of topics include the following:

- ◆ General information about what a QRIS is
- ◆ Detailed information about the initial and renewal application process
- ◆ Information about adverse or punitive actions that can/will result from failing to meet licensing or other requirements
- ◆ Information about what programs are eligible to participate in the QRIS
- ◆ A list of the QRIS standards
- ◆ A definitions list, glossary, and/or acronyms list

- ◆ Information about financial incentives and other program supports, including professional development and technical assistance
- ◆ Information about the roles, responsibilities, and/or authority of the entities involved (that is, the different agencies and partners)
- ◆ Information about the process for a provider to appeal a rating
- ◆ In-depth information about program assessment tools, such as environment rating scales or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System
- ◆ Detailed information about the evidence required to demonstrate each standard
- ◆ Information about the data system or Web interface used in the QRIS
- ◆ Information about how a program can leave the QRIS
- ◆ In-depth information about either the research specifically behind the state's QRIS or about how the state is evaluating the QRIS's efficacy

In addition to orientation and other customized training to inform and support QRIS applicants, many states also provide online manuals, resource guides, or toolkits. These resources help ensure that participants understand the requirements and expectations of the QRIS program, are aware of the supports and rewards that are available, and have access to tools that can help the programs attain, maintain, and improve their quality ratings.

## Outreach and Support Services

In addition to recruitment and outreach to programs, QRIS staff typically help providers with the application process. Although general information about how to apply for QRIS can be covered in orientation sessions and guidance documents, programs often need individual support to answer their specific questions about expectations and involvement. Several states have developed user-friendly, online applications that can reduce the amount of TA needed.

Supports, such as training and technical assistance, are often made available to QRIS applicants as well as providers seeking to achieve and maintain higher levels of quality. Most states currently have professional development systems that organize training opportunities for early and school-age care and education providers. These systems often include specific certifications or credentials for infant and toddler care, school-age care, and care for children with special needs. These systems create quality parameters for available training and recognize practitioners' achievements. States can use these systems to help programs meet higher professional development standards and progress toward higher QRIS ratings. Examples of state outreach and support activities are as follows:

- ◆ **North Carolina** has worked to ensure that every community college in the state offers early childhood coursework that meets the credentials specified in its QRIS. It also has a statewide articulation agreement to support the transfer of credits and degrees from one higher education institution to another.
- ◆ To help providers meet the QRIS standards, **Delaware** redesigned its professional development system to include stronger quality assurance processes for the development and delivery of training events.

Relationship-based professional development (RBP) opportunities, such as technical assistance, consultation, mentoring, and coaching, are important program supports that can be strategically linked to QRIS participation. These supports can help programs meet specific standards in QRIS areas, such as learning environment or accreditation, ways to work with specific age groups, and ways to integrate children with special needs. RBP services can be delivered through community-based organizations, such as CCR&R agencies and professional development organizations, higher education institutions, or contracts with private consultants.

Technical assistance can help providers understand what quality is and how to achieve it. This type of support is most effective when targeted and specialized, which means it can be costly. It is important to clearly link this type of support to areas of identified need and program improvement plans. In addition, the qualifications and supports for technical assistance providers are also directly linked to successful results. States have begun to test out new, more cost-effective approaches to QRIS technical assistance that focus on strengthening the capacity of participating programs so they can sustain gains and remain focused on continuous quality improvement. States that have linked RBP opportunities to QRIS include the following:

- ◆ Providers who enroll in **Indiana's** Paths to QUALITY QRIS are eligible to participate in specialized coaching relationships through their local CCR&R agency and through the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children. Through a technical assistance process, the coach helps the provider work to achieve Levels 2 and 3. Once at a Level 4, a coach from the Indiana Accreditation Project helps the provider achieve accreditation and Level 4. Providers also have the option of choosing self-guided study.
- ◆ Programs participating in **Maine's** QRIS have access to targeted assistance from a variety of sources, including the Head Start Quality Initiative, Maine Roads to Quality, and the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies.
- ◆ **Georgia** created a TA cohort approach that assigned a single coach to a network of centers or homes. Cohorts were made up of participants from multi-site child care chains and franchises as well as networks with a similar philosophy, such as Montessori. The goal was to reach out to the mid-level managers in these organizations and strengthen their capacity to provide ongoing support after the time-limited state TA ended. Each cohort was assigned to a single licensing, prekindergarten, and subsidy coordinator to facilitate relationship development.

## Aligning Professional Development with Rating Standards

As QRIS and professional development systems evolve, it is important to ensure that there is service alignment. The **Pennsylvania** QRIS includes requirements for providers in the areas of staff qualifications and ongoing professional development. These requirements focus on attainment of certificates, credentials, and degrees. When the QRIS was launched, the state quickly aligned its delivery of professional development to support providers in accessing required coursework for QRIS, shifting from noncredit and workshop-type training to coursework that either was credit-bearing or could articulate to credit.

States can also focus financial assistance on professional development for QRIS participants through reduced or free coursework, scholarship assistance, and other incentives. Some states target the [T.E.A.C.H. \(Teacher Education And Compensation Helps\) Early Childhood Project](#) initiative toward staff who work in programs that participate in QRIS. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Project and similar scholarship programs help these staff pay the costs of tuition, books, and travel, and also provide a compensation incentive.

## Creating New Services to Help Programs Meet Standards

When developing a QRIS, it is important to conduct an assessment of existing support services. This inventory, examined against the standard requirements, can provide the state with critical information regarding existing capacity. There may be services that exist in some geographic areas and not others. Some areas of a state may have more resources readily available that can be integrated into the QRIS. Other areas will not have this capacity and may need help building it.

An example would be a QRIS that requires a program director to obtain a director's credential. In addition to ensuring that the required credentialing courses or training are available, consideration must be given to when the courses are offered and how they are accessed. It may be difficult for child care providers to attend evening training sessions when they are still caring for children until early evening. It is also challenging for providers in rural areas to access workshops or courses when they have to drive long distances to reach a course location. Distance education coursework and delivery on demand can ease some of these access issues. These are not the solution for all, of course, since some do not learn as well with these approaches or may not have the technology or skills for this type of access.

States are challenged to develop new and creative ways to deliver training and education. What worked in the past may not work in a new system with heightened requirements. As more is expected of programs participating in the QRIS, more can also be expected of the organizations supporting them. To address this concern, several states have developed trainer and training approval systems. Other states have created performance standards for training organizations based on their clients' QRIS participation and improvement.

As a state gains more experience with QRIS, it may find that it needs to realign or create new training, technical assistance, or outreach services. It is important to collect data on how the QRIS system is working. Data can indicate how long it takes a typical provider to move from one level to another and the most significant barriers to progress. It is possible that by adding a new orientation session, or by requiring training on the use of the environment rating scales, some of these barriers can be eliminated or reduced. A state may also find that strengthening provider support groups, creating networks of directors, adding accreditation support services, or encouraging shared service alliances are worthwhile investments.

## Existing Infrastructure to Provide Outreach and Support

It is an efficient strategy to examine the infrastructure that already exists for outreach and support and, where possible, work toward strengthening it. Integrating QRIS outreach and support services into existing structures in licensing, subsidy, CCR&R, and professional development systems can be helpful for providers and more sustainable in the long term.

Using existing infrastructure to send a comprehensive, consistent message regarding the benefits of QRIS and the details of implementation is important to increasing provider interest and participation. If a QRIS appears complicated and confusing, providers may become frustrated and discouraged and either drop out or not participate at all. States have found that clarity and simplicity are key principals for QRIS messaging. However, it is often necessary to change QRIS policies and procedures, either in response to process evaluation or to be aligned with other early learning initiatives. Thus, change is often inevitable. However, as changes are made to the QRIS, it is important to clearly communicate to the provider community the revisions, steps involved, and rationale. Creating and regularly updating a roadmap, manual, or toolkit for navigating the QRIS process is helpful, especially when there are changes to communicate.

## Continuous Quality Improvement Plans

Many states include a continuous quality improvement plan (CQI) as part of the QRIS process. The CQI helps ensure that there is an intentional and systematic process for programs to improve their quality. Most CQI or improvement plans use self-assessments, observations, or ratings to identify strengths and weaknesses and suggest ways to make improvements. Many QRIS use the results of an assessment tool as a starting point for developing this plan.

- ◆ In **Alaska**, CQI is part of the rating process. At every level the program is required to develop a CQI plan. Programs work with a coach to identify program goals and resources needed to accomplish the goals.
- ◆ In **Nebraska**, the CQI plan is used as an indicator for points toward a QRIS level. Information and outcomes from various assessments are used to create the CQI.

- ◆ In **Virginia**, the 3-year QRIS rating cycle includes access to a state-approved Virginia Quality specialist once a program is registered in the program. The specialist works with the participating program to help design and implement a quality improvement plan.

A program improvement plan, guided by QRIS requirements and results from assessment tools, can serve multiple purposes. In addition to providing a roadmap for a program seeking to attain a higher quality level, it can show what type of technical assistance would be most effective. It can also help the program gather data on provider needs and resources. As resources become more limited and states are increasingly asked to justify their programs and expenditures, program improvement plans can be a helpful accountability tool, both for the individual programs and the system as a whole. Data from assessments can be used to target appropriate services (such as professional development and technical assistance), gauge the effectiveness of a particular interventions, and help develop cost and budget projections for overall system improvement.

## Targeting Program Improvement and Financial Assistance

Revisiting the goals and intended outcomes for a QRIS is helpful when making difficult decisions about who can or cannot access program improvement and financial assistance. If, for example, a state is committed to increasing the quality of care in high need communities, it may focus assistance on providers offering subsidized child care services. In this case, participation in the subsidy program would be a requirement for access to services or grants within the QRIS. Or, the state could base the size of a quality grant on the percentage of low-income families served by the provider.

If a goal is to encourage programs that participate in the QRIS to serve children with special needs or those in the child welfare system or some other priority population, providers serving the specified populations may be given additional QRIS benefits. States that are concerned about raising the bar on quality may choose to target technical assistance to programs at the lowest quality levels. States concerned about provider turnover may want to offer help to providers who are most likely to remain in business and are focused on continuous quality improvement. States concerned about alignment with or transition to public school may limit their technical assistance services to providers in poor performing school districts who are most likely to attain high-quality standards.

Decisions regarding practitioner outreach and support are often based on financial resources. Some helpful steps toward identifying resource needs include projecting costs, examining the feasibility of redirecting current quality initiatives, and testing different financial scenarios to determine what is feasible.

The [Provider Cost of Quality Calculator](#), developed by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, is tool that can help determine if there is a gap between the cost of providing quality services and the revenue sources available to support an early care and education service provider. Knowing the size of the gap at different quality levels for various provider types can inform the design of financial support and incentive packages.

## Offering Financial Incentives

### Financial Support

Financial incentives are QRIS monetary awards that help support the costs of improving program quality and/or of maintaining program quality. Awards can encourage programs to participate in a QRIS, serve low-income families, or improve classroom or practitioner quality. Awards can help parents access higher quality programs, encourage educators to seek higher qualifications, and support educator compensation commensurate with qualifications.

In most early and school-age care and education programs, the primary revenue source is tuition and fees or subsidy in lieu of tuition. Because consumers are very price sensitive, and subsidy reimbursement rates are

limited, this revenue source frequently fails to cover the cost of delivering high-quality services. Raising the reimbursement rate via a tiered reimbursement strategy is often an insufficient approach unless it is coupled with a strategy that boosts enrollment (for example, using contracts or guaranteed slots for higher star-rated programs).

An economic recession, coupled with the challenges of tiered reimbursement and full tuition collection, means third-party funding is often essential, especially for programs that serve low- and moderate-income families. Strong programs typically access and layer multiple funding streams, including child care subsidies, Head Start and prekindergarten funding, foundation grants, parent fees, and other public and private resources. In theory, QRIS quality supports could be one of several sources of third-party funding that help fill the gap between the cost of implementing and maintaining a quality program and the fees that parents pay.

QRIS offer a unique framework for providing a wide range of financial incentives. Experience suggests that best results come from a combination, or menu, of strategies. Some of the financial incentives states use to encourage participation in QRIS are presented shortly. There are several common types of incentives: quality improvement grants, quality achievement awards, wage and retention awards, scholarships, grants and loans, refundable tax credits, and tiered subsidy bonuses. Financial incentives can be designed to support quality improvement and quality maintenance. In most cases, the QRIS financial support offered by states is structured as a **supply-side intervention** and awarded directly to a particular program or practitioner. Examples include grants for program improvement, technical assistance to programs, professional development scholarships, and wage supplements for personnel. However, QRIS support can also be a **demand-side intervention** aimed at changing consumer behavior. Examples of this approach include financial incentives for consumers to choose higher quality, such as refundable tax credits, and user-friendly websites that make it easy for parents to identify better quality programs. A strong financing strategy will likely include both supply- and demand-side interventions.

As noted earlier, it is important to think strategically about the relationship between financial awards/incentives and the cost of delivering services at each QRIS quality level. The [Provider Cost of Quality Calculator](#) can help establish or recalibrate the value of awards based on projected costs. Recent experience with the tool suggests that, in many cases, states are inadvertently rewarding providers for remaining at lower star levels because award levels are more than adequate for entry but fail to rise to the level needed to attain or maintain quality at the highest levels. Using the calculator, states can readjust rates to address this concern.

Austin, Whitebrook, Connors, and Darrah (2011) analyzed how a sample of QRIS provided incentives and supported wages and benefits for staff in their policy report [Staff Preparation, Reward, and Support: Are Quality Rating and Improvement Systems Addressing All of the Key Ingredients Necessary for Change?](#) The report includes an analysis of quality rating and improvement system supports for professional development. It also includes quality rating rubrics related to staff formal education, compensation and benefits, and adult work environments in center-based programs.

## Common Financial Incentives in QRIS

This section is focused on the various types of financial incentives that states may offer QRIS participants. Further discussion of incentives can be found in these resources:

- ◆ [Financial Incentives in QRIS](#) (ECQA Center, 2017a), which includes several state examples of incentives used for QRIS;
- ◆ [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Funding and Financial Incentives](#) (ECQA Center, 2017b)
- ◆ [Finance and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) (Mitchell, Hawley, & Workman, 2017); and
- ◆ [Financial Incentives in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Approaches and Effects](#) (Mitchell, 2012).

## Tiered Subsidy Reimbursement

Tiered subsidy reimbursement is a commonly used QRIS financial incentive. It works by providing programs that have higher quality ratings with higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates or bonuses. The rate differential typically ranges from 5 percent to 20 percent higher than the base rate but can be much higher in some states, especially for infant and toddler care. In some cases, states offer a set add-on amount to the base rate, as opposed to a percentage.

## Quality Grants, Bonuses, and Merit Awards

Quality grants, bonuses, and merit awards are incentives awarded directly to a child care center, center staff, family child care setting, or home based on participation in QRIS or attainment of a specific QRIS level. Quality grants, bonuses, or merit awards are typically not linked to the child care subsidy reimbursement system. However, in some cases states will require that the program be willing to accept children who receive subsidies or make larger awards available to programs based on the percentage of low-income families they serve. The strategy is often focused on programs serving all children, not just children from low-income families. States may consider offering grants to programs that specifically serve high-need children, including but not limited to children with special needs, those from rural communities, those who need care during nontraditional hours, English or dual language learners, and infants and toddlers.

The award amount varies among states. In most states, providers must apply, and recipients vary in terms of need. The time recipients have to use the funds may also be limited. In both **Pennsylvania** and **Ohio**, the grants vary by a combination of setting, enrollment size, and quality level, and their use must be related to a quality improvement plan.

## Wage Supplements

Wage or compensation supplements are typically connected to the professional development system. In some instances they are linked to QRIS. These awards are generally intended to reward providers for the credentials and qualifications they have achieved and help programs retain qualified staff. States that offer wage supplements include the following:

- ◆ **Maryland** offers Achievement Bonuses for teachers who maintain 1 year of continuous employment in a center that participates in the QRIS and complete continuing training and professional development activities. A one-time bonus at Credential Levels 2, 3, 4 and Administrator Level 1 and yearly bonuses for Credential Levels 4+, 5, 6 and Administrator Levels 2, 3, and 4 are paid directly to participating individuals. One half of the bonus is paid initially and the remainder is paid upon completion of all requirements the following year. Bonuses range from \$200 to \$1,000.
- ◆ In the **North Carolina** WAGE\$ program, salary supplements are tied to the educational level of the individual, the position the individual holds in her program, and the tier level chosen by each participating Smart Start Partnership, at the county level. Partnerships choose which of three tiers of financial supports they are able to provide. Teachers receive supplements in 6-month increments after maintaining 6 months of continuous employment in a licensed center or family child care home. Supplements range from \$200 to \$6,250 and are paid directly to the participating individual.

## Scholarships

Scholarships and financial support to help staff pay for college courses and related expenses are another type of financial incentive states use to encourage QRIS participation. Quite a few states have elected to implement the [T.E.A.C.H. \(Teacher Education And Compensation Helps\) Early Childhood Project](#) scholarship initiative, and some link this benefit to QRIS participation.

## Loans

Some states have crafted loan programs that help child care programs improve their quality as well as increase capacity. **North Carolina** worked with its statewide Community Development Financial Institution, Self-Help, to offer financing for a wide range of purposes, including minor renovations to existing buildings (whether leased or owned), working capital, bridge loans, equipment purchases, and start-up expenses. The loan fund has a special provision to activate a Disaster Relief Child Care Loan program if counties are declared Federal disaster areas by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Applications are accepted up to 1 year after the date of the disaster. If during the loan period the participating provider raises its QRIS quality level, its loan can get a partial conversion to a grant. Additional information about loan programs is available from the [Self-Help Credit Union](#).

## Tax Credits

All of the financial incentives described previously are supported by funds appropriated by the state. Most tap federal CCDF dollars, and a few allocate state general funds or draw in other resources. A handful of states have begun to tap state general fund dollars to support QRIS incentives by using the tax system. **Louisiana** has the most extensive tax-based incentive system for participation in QRIS, including refundable tax credits for families, providers, teachers, and investors.

Financing and administering QRIS incentives via the tax system is a new, and unique, approach that has both strengths and weaknesses. Tax-based financial incentives are often used to promote economic development and may help garner support for QRIS from a broader group of policymakers and business leaders. A tax-based approach can also be a more stable source of funding because, in most states, an annual appropriation is not required. However, to be effective, tax credits require a deeper level of engagement and understanding among child care providers and consumers. And, to benefit lower-income providers and consumers that most need help, the tax credits must be refundable.

In addition to Louisiana, several other states are experimenting with tax-based financial incentives for QRIS. **Maine** has an innovative child care investment tax credit. **Oregon** and **Colorado** have a child care contributions tax credit. Several states, including **Florida** and **Oklahoma**, have tax credits for proprietary child care providers who meet higher quality standards. Additional information about linking tax benefits to QRIS can be found in [Tax Credits for Early Care and Education: Funding Strategy in a New Economy](#) (Blank & Stoney, 2011).

## The Effect of Tiered Reimbursement on Prices Charged to Nonsubsidized Families

Although there are many benefits to establishing tiered child care reimbursement rates, this strategy can have the unintended consequence of driving up the price of care for nonsubsidized families or actually discouraging some child care programs from participating in the QRIS. As noted earlier, tiered reimbursement is typically structured as a percentage or dollar add-on to the public child care subsidy reimbursement rate. The percentage add-on typically ranges from 5 percent to 20 percent, with higher rates awarded to programs at higher levels in the QRIS or those serving special populations, such as infants and toddlers.

Child care subsidy reimbursement rates are based on fees charged to nonsubsidized families. Fees are often set in relation to the pressures of the local market, that is what other providers charge and what can families afford. When this market pressure is added to the cost of complying with higher QRIS standards, the result may be that programs decide that they cannot afford to pursue higher quality.

One way to avoid this problem is to structure the tiered reimbursement allocation as a bonus rather than a per-child rate increase. Quite a few states have taken this approach, including **Kentucky** and **Pennsylvania**. When the rate add-on is structured as a bonus, participating programs receive a lump sum allocation that is determined by their quality levels and the number of subsidized children they serve. This approach does not require a rate increase and, therefore, does not require a price increase to fees paid by parents. The Urban Institutes'

document, [\*Essential But Often Ignored: Child Care Providers in the Subsidy System\*](#) (Adams & Snyder, 2003), includes an analysis of the financial implications of tiered reimbursement structured as a rate increase or a bonus. Appendix 3 in this brief includes a graphic that illustrates payments providers would receive under three different rate policy approaches.

The value of a tiered bonus is related to the value of the basic subsidy rates. If the subsidy rate ceilings are high compared to average tuition fees in the market, those subsidy rates may be sufficient to cover the cost of programs at the lower levels of quality. In that case, the tiered bonus may only need to be offered at the higher levels of the QRIS. This also serves to support higher quality programs serving children from low-income families. Alternatively, if a state has low subsidy rate ceilings, then tiered bonuses have to be quite large to be effective and offered at all levels of the QRIS.

The unintended consequences of tiered reimbursement can also be mitigated by offering programs that participate in QRIS a range of financial incentives. This is important because for a program to offer higher quality to subsidized children, it must maintain higher quality for all children.

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## Section 7: Data Collection and Evaluation

Data collection and evaluation are central activities in a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). Pressure to complete a system redesign or launch a new QRIS can make a focus on data and evaluation challenging. However, it is important to elevate data collection and evaluation in system planning rather than waiting until a challenge or question arises that is best addressed through evaluation. Prospective planning ensures that data collection activities are maximized and take into account future evaluation questions. Yet, it is never too late to engage in data collection and evaluation activities that can inform system improvement. This section poses questions and offers tools that can be used early—and later—in QRIS implementation to collect data and answer critical evaluation questions. Discussions on the use of data in planning and implementation are included in the [Initial Design Process](#) and [Approaches to Implementation](#) sections of this guide.

[Quality Rating and Improvement System State Evaluations and Research](#) (2018) from Child Care & Early Education *Research Connections* provides a comprehensive list of state QRIS evaluations and research in the Research Connections collection.

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## Collecting Data

### Using Data Collection Systems to Help Plan, Design, Implement, and Evaluate the QRIS

All states have data systems that contain information on early and school-age care and education programs. In deciding what data to collect, states should first identify the questions it wants to answer and how the data will be used. Some data sources that may be helpful for QRIS include the following: licensing; registries of license-exempt providers; subsidy administration; practitioner and training/trainer registries; child care resource and referral (CCR&R) databases; technical assistance tracking systems; program profiles; classroom assessments; economic impact research studies; and Head Start, prekindergarten, and other education systems. An initial step in planning for a QRIS or designing an evaluation is to compile a list and description of existing state/territory data systems, including where they are located, how to access them, who has access to them, what information is collected in them, and how they interface with other data systems.

### Data Resources Analysis for Decisionmaking

Completing an inventory of the available data at the beginning of the planning and design stages is a helpful first step. The information gathered during this process can then be used to guide decisions during the implementation phase. For example, data from the licensing system or Head Start Program Information Reports may help the QRIS design team determine, at least initially, which types of programs (center, home, prekindergarten, Head Start) to include in the QRIS and which and how many programs may be able to achieve the standards. Data from workforce studies or professional development registries can provide a needs assessment of scholarships and educational offerings. This information will help estimate participation rates and predict the resources necessary to support projected participation. Looking at these data elements may reveal existing information that can help document compliance with proposed standards. Reviewing an inventory of existing data can also help determine whether it is best to begin with a pilot and, if so, which programs to include.

Child care subsidy data can also be helpful. Examining these data may lead to the conclusion that tiered subsidy reimbursement will not be sufficient as a support of higher program quality for a number of reasons. For example, if only 20 percent of the enrollment of a typical program are children who receive child care subsidies, that may not be sufficient to support the cost of higher quality for the program as a whole. The balance of the cost must be passed on as tuition fees to other families. Or the enrollment may fluctuate enough that programs cannot rely on tiered subsidy reimbursement to maintain quality. Therefore, subsidy data may be a good indicator of the potential impact of tiered subsidy reimbursement, pointing out the need to explore additional provider incentives.

### Data for QRIS Management

Using existing data systems can help make QRIS implementation more cost efficient and ensure consistency in data across systems. Adding reporting capacity or data elements or aligning data elements to an existing data system, such as licensing or a professional development registry, can be much less expensive than creating a new data collection and processing system specifically for QRIS. This may or may not be possible, depending on who administers the QRIS and what data systems can be tapped for the information. For example, if the existing data system is in a state agency and the QRIS will be operated outside of the state government structure, it may not be possible to use the state data system. Even when data exist in several separate systems, it may be cost-effective and ensure consistency if data can be transferred from one system to another, rather than entering all data anew for each child care program that wants to participate. For example, one QRIS requirement for participation might be a license in good standing or a license with no serious violations. It would be critical to have continuing, current information on the status of a license to produce reliable ratings. Similarly, if programs that participate in the QRIS are also rated or assessed by other entities, such as national accrediting organizations or the Head Start monitoring system, using data from those systems can make participation easier, more cost-

effective, and more reliable. Linking to data in professional development registries or credentialing and certification systems is another cost-effective way to verify staff qualifications, ensure consistency, and eliminate duplicative work in the rating process.

In summary, an accurate inventory of existing data systems, their accessibility, accuracy, and reliability is helpful in determining QRIS system design. A good introduction to data elements, collection, management, and governance is found in the slides and videos of the [Early Childhood Data: Building a Strong Foundation](#) webinar series presented by Quality Initiatives Research and Evaluation Consortium (INQUIRE) in spring 2013. An overview of the use of data to monitor and evaluate QRIS in five states may be helpful in thinking about the broad perspective of using data (Caronongan, Kirby, Malone, & Boller, 2011).

States are increasingly relying on comprehensive data systems that they either purchase or develop to help with the administration of their QRIS.<sup>1</sup> This section of the guide focuses on identifying the data needed and whether they can be collected from existing systems or if new data collection mechanisms need to be developed.

## Collecting and Using New and Existing Data to Assign Ratings

Looking closely at each QRIS standard and determining how compliance will be verified, what data for documentation will be needed, who will review the data, and where data will be stored are essential steps in QRIS planning. New data may be needed to assign a rating or to guide follow-up activities, such as development of an improvement plan. For example, QRIS standards may require that all teaching staff receive training in a state's early learning guidelines for a certain rating level. If completion of the training is collected in the professional development registry, it may be possible to import information from that system for the rating process. If the information is not currently collected, it may be necessary to develop a process for collecting that data, such as requiring program staff to document their trainings by submitting successful-completion certificates, requiring rating assessors to enter information into a new QRIS database, or asking early learning guideline trainers to input their class lists into the professional development registry. A thorough review of the rating assessment and monitoring process is needed to identify data to document compliance with QRIS standards. Once a QRIS is implemented, this data will also be invaluable in informing and guiding needed modifications.

## Collecting and Using New and Existing Data to Manage the Provider Support System

Data systems are a valuable resource for staff who manage the QRIS provider support system. Two types of data may be useful to them: (1) data on supports for *individuals* working in the early and school-age care and education programs, and (2) data on supports for the *programs* that seek QRIS ratings.

Data on supports for individuals working in the programs are helpful in projecting and managing the cost for scholarships for staff education and any type of retention incentives, such as wage supplements. These data can also help determine the effectiveness of various supports. Is the education level of the staff across the state going up? Are there any geographic areas not using scholarships? If not, why? Answering these questions requires data that are specific to QRIS participation. If, for example, a state currently has a scholarship program that is available to all early and school-age care and education providers, knowing which of these staff work in programs that participate in the QRIS is crucial. These data, coupled with broader data on staff qualifications, can help identify trends and inform decisions regarding the capacity of practitioners to meet QRIS standards and how to best support continuous improvement.

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<sup>1</sup>As a resource to State agencies, specific products, vendors and systems are referenced throughout this document. However, the Office of Child Care and the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance do not endorse any non-Federal organization, publication, or resource.

Collecting data on technical assistance and other supports for programs is usually a more complex process than collecting data on individuals working in the programs. Often programs that participate in a QRIS have access to technical assistance, including consultation and coaching supports. These supports might be available to a broad group of programs, including those that do not participate in the QRIS. Thus, it is important to create data systems that identify which supports and how much of each is received by each program participating in the QRIS. It is important to think carefully about what data about program supports needs to be collected, including data on new supports that may be created and accessible only to programs participating in the QRIS.

The QRIS planning team should think carefully about how program support information will be used. Will the data identify participating programs that access supports and how often? Will it be used to determine the correlation between supports accessed and improvements in program ratings? Will it be used to manage the cost of such supports or to monitor the effectiveness of support service providers? Being clear about the projected use of data will help to define what is collected and how.

Collecting data on financial supports for programs that participate in QRIS, such as grants, bonus payments, tiered reimbursement, loans, or tax benefits, can help project and manage budgets. Again, it may be very useful to correlate data with the maintenance or improvement of ratings. This will help identify which supports are most critical.

In many states, the QRIS becomes an organizing framework for a wide range of program and practitioner supports designed to promote quality improvement. States have moved from providing technical assistance and financial supports that are believed to improve child care quality to using the QRIS to track whether these supports are actually associated with quality improvements.

## Identifying Additional Data Needs

The exploration of what data might be needed is best done early in the process and with a broad view to future needs. In the planning and design phase, considering how to verify the standards has become increasingly important to states. Assessing the impact of key interventions to assist programs in improving quality is critical to project management. Within the rating process, it is becoming crucial to coordinate assessment of the QRIS ratings across sectors (i.e., child care, prekindergarten, Head Start) in a way that reduces the duplication of multiple assessment processes. In preparation for evaluation, consider the benchmarks that are being set and how to document their achievement, including coordination of standards using data from other assessment processes, such as accreditation, Head Start performance standards, and prekindergarten standards assessment.

## Implementing an Evaluation

### Using Evaluation Results

QRIS evaluation is essential for supporting continuous system improvement. Evaluation results can inform four activities that shape how the QRIS evolves:

1. **Identifying implementation successes and challenges.** At any stage of QRIS implementation, but particularly when the QRIS is newly launched or has undergone a major revision, evaluation can reveal which activities are working well and which activities need attention. Findings from focus groups or surveys with the implementation team or with providers participating in the QRIS add context and depth to administrative data. For example, administrative data can be used to track provider enrollment in the QRIS and to see how enrollment patterns differ across regions of the state. Additional data collection, such as surveys with eligible providers, can provide insights into the motivations and experiences of providers that underlie the patterns observed in the administrative data. Evaluation results can inform the development or revisions of marketing

materials, implementation partner communication protocols, roles and responsibilities of staff, the content of training sessions for staff, and the development of orientation materials for providers.

2. **Examining the effectiveness of new and existing activities in the QRIS.** Marketing, recruitment, distribution of financial assistance, provision of technical assistance, and assignment of program ratings are QRIS activities that require significant investments of staff and financial resources. Evaluation is a critical tool for learning about the effectiveness of QRIS activities and identifying whether and how different activities are contributing to intended outcomes.
3. **Documenting outcomes for stakeholders.** Stakeholders for QRIS expand beyond state agencies and implementation partners and include providers, legislators, parents, and business and community leaders. These stakeholders are eager for information about QRIS outcomes. It is important to set clear expectations for outcomes that align with the stage of QRIS implementation. For example, early in implementation, realistic outcomes include program enrollment and engagement in quality improvement activities. Realistic outcomes at later phases of implementation include increased awareness of the QRIS among the public, greater density of program participation, increases in program quality, and provision of quality at the highest levels of the QRIS.
4. **Engaging in short- and long-term planning.** Evaluation results can inform immediate adjustments to the QRIS and support development of plans for the future. For example, an implementation evaluation typically produces results that can be acted on right away to address challenges or to expand activities that are working well. Evaluation results also can be used to set long-term goals for outcomes, such as quality improvement. Results may support projection of the expected pace of improvement among programs, which can help with planning for technical assistance staffing and distribution of financial incentives to participating programs over 5 years or longer.

Using a QRIS logic model provides the guiding framework for evaluation efforts and development of an evaluation plan. The [Quality Rating and Improvement System \(QRIS\) Evaluation Toolkit](#) (Lugo-Gil, Sattar, Ross, Boller, Tout, & Kirby, 2011) includes a chapter that serves as a workbook for logic model development. The key steps to developing a logic model include the following: (1) describing the context and environment for the QRIS and articulating the QRIS goals; (2) identifying the inputs and the resources needed to support the work; (3) outlining the implementation activities; (4) indicating the outputs that can be tracked; (5) articulating short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes; and (6) linking expected outcomes with activities to identify any gaps or unrealistic expectations about the impact of the QRIS. The “Initial Design” section of this guide includes information about the Massachusetts QRIS logic model.

When embarking on logic model development, it is important to convene a group of stakeholders to inform the process. The logic model should reflect connections to other systems (e.g., licensing, professional development) and serve as a platform for identifying and leveraging implementation resources and cross-system evaluation opportunities.

Once the logic model is complete, it can be used to develop an evaluation plan. An evaluation plan contains the following: research questions (with a designation of their priority levels); the data elements needed to address the research questions; preferred timing for each research question; whether the data are currently available or need to be collected; an estimate of the cost for each type of research question; a note about whether the evaluation can be conducted internally or whether an external evaluator should be identified; and strategies for disseminating results.

It is important to designate a staff person within the QRIS implementation team to be the coordinator and facilitator of the work. Evaluation planning will be challenging to launch and manage if it is not assigned as an explicit work activity. If possible, it will also be important to engage an experienced evaluator to help guide the process of evaluation planning.

In the same way that logic model development will benefit from stakeholder participation, it is helpful to invite community stakeholders to be part of the evaluation plan development. Key stakeholders for evaluation planning include state agency partners, local or national funders, university partners, or other research partners who can bring new ideas, resources, and even evaluation capacity to the process.

The evaluation plan and the logic model can be viewed as living documents that should be revisited on a regular basis to ensure that they still reflect QRIS priorities and features of the system. Both documents can help guide planning if funding opportunities become available or if opportunities arise to evaluate other parts of the early learning system that offer a platform to add research questions related to the QRIS.

## Developing an Evaluation Plan

This section provides more specific recommendations for developing an evaluation plan. The following questions are addressed:

1. What research questions will be included in the evaluation plan, and what priority should be assigned to each?
2. When and how often will each research question be asked?
3. What existing data are available to support evaluation and what will need to be collected?
4. What evaluation strategies will be used?
5. What is the anticipated cost of the evaluation?
6. Who will design and conduct the evaluation?
7. How will evaluation results be reported and used?

## Developing Research Questions for QRIS Evaluation

Because a QRIS serves as a systemic structure with activities to support multiple goals related to program quality, children's development, and provision of information to parents and caregivers, there are many possible research questions to address through QRIS evaluation. A key planning task is to identify the research questions that will be most beneficial for informing system improvement. Research questions could be developed to understand implementation and outcomes for each of the primary QRIS activities, for example: program recruitment, technical assistance, program ratings, financial incentives (including tiered reimbursement), consumer education/dissemination of ratings, and system access and equity. Research questions may be prioritized to reflect the areas of the QRIS requiring the largest investment of resources, areas of particular concern in QRIS functioning, or areas required by a funder.

A critical aspect of planning and selecting research questions is making sure they align with the QRIS stage of implementation. Exhibit 1 provides general guidance about matching topics with the QRIS stage.

### Exhibit 1. Matching Evaluation Topics to the Stage of QRIS Implementation

<p><b>Launch of QRIS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach to eligible ECE programs</li> <li>• Recruitment, enrollment and ratings</li> <li>• Staffing of the QRIS (hiring, training, supervision)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Early QRIS implementation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder awareness of QRIS purpose</li> <li>• Participants' and stakeholders' perceptions of implementation and initial improvements</li> <li>• Reach of the QRIS</li> <li>• Initial effectiveness of rating tool and other activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Full QRIS implementation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in practice among ECE programs, staff and family child care providers</li> <li>• Changes in outcomes for children and families</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mature QRIS implementation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use evaluation findings to document impact of the QRIS, propose changes to QRIS design, or both</li> </ul>

### Sample QRIS Research Questions

The following is a set of sample research questions related to QRIS participation and ratings, program quality improvement, effectiveness of financial incentives, access to high-quality programs, validity of QRIS ratings, and use of QRIS ratings by parents and the public.

- ◆ What are the characteristics of programs enrolled in the QRIS?
- ◆ How effective are QRIS recruiting efforts with different types of providers (for example, urban versus rural, centers versus family child care programs, and programs serving a high proportion of children who receive subsidies)?
- ◆ Do the characteristics of programs that are not enrolled in the QRIS differ from those that are enrolled? For example, are there differences in key characteristics, including geography, program type, funding, or director qualifications?
- ◆ What is the distribution of program sites across quality levels?
- ◆ What are the differences in program characteristics at each rating level?
- ◆ What are the characteristics of children who have access to high-quality programs?
- ◆ Which providers are improving and what resources are used for improvement?
- ◆ What is the quality of the program's learning environment as measured by an independent measure of quality?
- ◆ Are observed quality scores improving over time among programs in the QRIS? How is this related to quality improvement investments?
- ◆ What are the perceptions of non-enrolled early care and education (ECE) programs on QRIS?

- ◆ What is the reach of technical assistance in the state?
- ◆ What are the characteristics of teachers and family child care providers who receive onsite technical assistance?
- ◆ Does the stability of the early care and education workforce increase over time?
- ◆ How does the system's training and professional development impact child outcomes of interest? Provider outcomes of interest?
- ◆ Do parents know and use the QRIS to make ECE decisions?
- ◆ What are parent perceptions of program services and quality?
- ◆ How are website visitors using information to search for ECE programs (e.g., star ratings, distance, search terms)?

The Illinois Early Learning Council (Data, Research and Evaluation Committee) [Research Agenda \(2015\)](#) is an example of a research plan (not limited to QRIS). This group uses an overarching frame for its plan in which it asks, “What information would cause us to behave differently in policy and practice in ways that would likely lead to better outcomes for young children?”

## Timing and Frequency of QRIS Evaluation

Ideally, evaluation should be planned for as soon as a QRIS is designed so that evaluation can address each of the four purposes outlined in the “Evaluation Purpose” section. In addition, planning early can be efficient, especially when data collection and system activities are planned with the evaluation in mind. For example, a needs assessment conducted when planning the QRIS could also serve as baseline data that could be used to chart progress over time. In addition, QRIS data collection protocols for assigning ratings and technical assistance case management data will be better suited for evaluation if data elements needed to address high-priority evaluation questions are identified in advance. Planning for evaluation at the outset does not necessarily mean that an evaluation should be launched immediately but rather that the building blocks are in place for evaluation when the timing and resources are appropriate.

The timing and focus of evaluation should be matched to the stage of QRIS implementation (see [Approaches to Implementation](#) section). Some research questions may benefit from an annual study while others may only need to be addressed every 3 to 5 years. For example, a survey to understand provider experiences in the QRIS may be useful to launch annually, particularly early in QRIS implementation, so that adjustments can be made to the QRIS in response to the findings. In contrast, an examination of children’s development in programs at different levels of quality could be planned for a 5-year cycle to allow for system changes to be more established before investing in an expensive data collection effort. When establishing different timeframes and focal points for evaluation efforts, it is important to develop messages for stakeholders that convey the value of *ongoing* evaluation and how it will support system improvement.

Though planning for evaluation as part of QRIS design is ideal, it is never too late to engage in QRIS evaluation. An evaluation plan can be developed at any time during implementation. There may be some limitations in availability of data that can be used for evaluation, but these challenges can be addressed. It may be useful to work with an evaluation consultant to assess needs and capacity and to support evaluation planning once a QRIS is underway.

## Identifying Data for QRIS Evaluation

The data used in QRIS evaluation typically come from existing administrative data—that is, data collected for the purposes of administering the QRIS—and new data collected exclusively for the purpose of research and evaluation. The process of identifying data and developing data protocols for QRIS administration described in the

first part of this section can be very useful when planning for QRIS evaluation. A comprehensive data matrix that describes the available data in the early care and education system can provide evaluation planners with information about what exists already in the system and what new data would need to be collected to support evaluation.

Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the types of data elements that may be useful for QRIS evaluation.

### Exhibit 2. Possible Data Elements to Support QRIS Evaluation

Early Childhood Education Workforce	Programs	Families	Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Educational qualifications</li> <li>◆ Personal characteristics</li> <li>◆ Training experience</li> <li>◆ Current role</li> <li>◆ Skills</li> <li>◆ Knowledge</li> <li>◆ Readiness to change</li> <li>◆ Receipt of or provision of training and technical assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Quality and QRIS rating</li> <li>◆ Program type</li> <li>◆ Location</li> <li>◆ Characteristics of staff</li> <li>◆ Leadership skills</li> <li>◆ Cultural responsiveness</li> <li>◆ Language spoken</li> <li>◆ Commitment to continuous improvement</li> <li>◆ Licensing compliance</li> <li>◆ Receipt of technical assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Access to high-quality ECE</li> <li>◆ Preferences for ECE features</li> <li>◆ Use of consumer education</li> <li>◆ Access to family support resources</li> <li>◆ Engagement in child's learning</li> <li>◆ Language</li> <li>◆ Race/ethnicity</li> <li>◆ Income</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Hours and duration of participation in ECE program</li> <li>◆ Developmental gains</li> <li>◆ School Readiness</li> <li>◆ Injuries or illnesses</li> <li>◆ Special needs</li> <li>◆ Race/ethnicity</li> <li>◆ Language</li> <li>◆ Age</li> </ul>

When using administrative data for QRIS evaluation, it is important to be aware of potential limitations. The following questions can be asked to learn about the data:

1. What is the data coverage? Does it include all ECE programs, the entire ECE workforce, all geographic areas of the state, all children, all families? Data sets are typically limited in specific ways that are relevant to evaluation. For example, it is important to know if a provider registry is voluntary and the proportion of eligible providers that are included in the data.
2. Are there duplications in the data? It is useful to know if counts or frequencies calculated in the data are taking into account the fact that a program or provider, for example, may be included in the dataset more than once. Unique identification numbers are helpful for dealing with this challenge.
3. What is the quality of the data? Before analyzing data, know whether procedures are in place to ensure accuracy and reliability of the data. Staff entering data, for example, should receive training and be monitored over time to ensure they are following data quality protocols.
4. What is the availability of historical data? In some cases, only current data or data from a limited time period are available. The existence of archived data will determine whether it is possible to ask certain research questions that require the availability of data over time.

Child Care & Early Education Research Connections provides [Working with Administrative Data](#) (n.d.) a web page of resources organized by topic, including managing, analyzing, and linking administrative data and issues related to data confidentiality and security.

New data collection can fill gaps in data elements not covered by administrative data. When possible, consider using or modifying existing measures or surveys to facilitate comparisons and improve data quality. It is also important to consider the samples that will be tapped for data collection and the response rates of data collection efforts.

Two broad types of data can be collected: quantitative and qualitative. **Quantitative** data are expressed numerically and *define* a construct (e.g., a quality score). These data are collected through surveys, administrative data, structured observations, and direct assessments. Comparisons are made using statistical analysis. Quantitative data are useful for estimating trends, analyzing group differences, and understanding the factors that link to changes over time. **Qualitative** data *describe* a construct. Data include responses to open-ended questions that are used to describe perceptions, experiences, concerns, and recommendations for improvement. Qualitative data are usually collected through focus groups or interviews, and key themes are coded and reported. Qualitative data are useful for understanding complexity of experiences and underlying motivations.

## Determining Evaluation Strategies

Different evaluation strategies can be used to address different system needs. A **process or implementation evaluation** can be conducted to understand how implementation is proceeding and to identify strengths and areas of concern. A process evaluation may focus on a particular issue in depth (for example, outreach and recruitment of providers or provision of technical assistance) or it may cover a broad range of implementation activities to identify major issues or concerns. A series of research briefs on applying implementation science in early care and education is available to help with this work (Downer & Yazejian, 2013; Paulsell, Austin, and Lokteff, 2013; Wasik, Mattera, Lloyd, and Boller, 2013). In another resource, Paulsell, Tout, and Maxwell (2013) offer guidance on the application of implementation science specifically for QRIS. The authors provide a list of research questions to ask at each stage of implementation for each QRIS component. They also offer specific applications of the core implementation components to QRIS development and implementation. They provide a description of an ideal QRIS that is supported by the concepts of implementation science. "...QRIS is not a static system ... Rather, an ideal QRIS assumes that knowledge will continue to be gathered ...to make system changes that promote continuous improvement" (p. 288). They encourage the creation of a QRIS implementation team and offer a step-by-step guide to the work of such a team to improve QRIS.

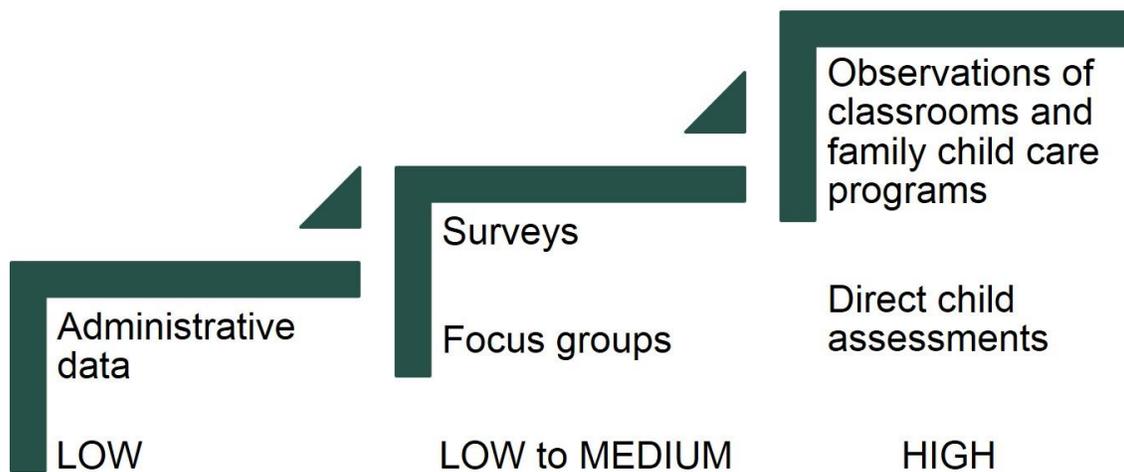
A QRIS **validation study** is a specific type of process evaluation that has been conducted in multiple states over the past decade. Validation studies are designed to examine in depth the tools used in rating quality and the extent to which the tools are related in expected ways to external quality measures and, in some cases, to measures of children's development. Findings from validation studies are used to make revisions to the quality rating tool. For example, certain quality indicators or measures may be added or taken out depending on the results. The Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant directed states to conduct validation studies. Results from these studies became available in 2016 and 2017. Resources to support planning for a validation study include the [QRIS Evaluation Toolkit](#) (Lugo-Gil et al., 2011), [Validation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems for Early Care and Education and School-Age Care](#) (Zellman & Fiene, 2012), and [Key Elements of a QRIS Validation Plan: Guidance and Planning Template](#) (Tout & Starr, 2013).

An **outcomes evaluation** can be conducted to examine the potential effectiveness of different QRIS activities in achieving intended goals. In most cases, the design of a QRIS outcomes evaluation will not permit causal statements to be made about activities. Despite this limitation, outcomes evaluations provide valuable insights about the predictors of intended outcomes, such as program quality improvement and expanded access to high-quality early care and education programs. For example, analyses can reveal the extent to which provider attitudes, provider demographic characteristics, coaching hours, and starting quality level are related to the likelihood that a program will receive an improved QRIS star rating.

## Examining the Cost of Evaluation

The costs of evaluation activities vary greatly depending on the type of activity, the scope of the research questions, and whether a third-party will be contracted to do the work. It is useful to examine the relative costs of different data collection activities commonly requested for QRIS evaluation (Exhibit 3). Observations of classrooms and family child care homes and collection of child development data are relatively more expensive data to collect than survey and focus group data or use of existing administrative data.

### Exhibit 3. Comparison of Relative Cost of Different Evaluation Activities



## Selecting an Evaluator

Choosing an evaluator is an issue that states address within the restrictions of their resources and the state bidding and contractual requirements. Other considerations that also influence the choice of evaluator should be incorporated in the request for proposal, including the following:

- ◆ **Qualifications and experience:** States look for evaluation teams with qualifications that match the task, i.e., early childhood and research qualifications and experience with QRIS research. They also look for evaluators who have experience completing the research within contract requirements.
- ◆ **Credibility:** Potential evaluators should be highly credible to the primary target audience. This is one of the reasons that many states use their own state universities, even though those universities may bring in national or out-of-state experts to partner on selected portions of the evaluation.
- ◆ **Stability:** If plans call for conducting a series of evaluations, an organization's longevity in the field and probability of continuing in the work will be important traits to consider.

## Using and Sharing the Results of the Evaluation

As noted, evaluation studies serve multiple purposes, including the provision of evidence-based insights into the design or implementation process, and informing funders and policymakers of the impact of the QRIS on child care programs and child outcomes. A strong communications strategy is needed to relay information..

It is important to plan a communications strategy at the beginning of each evaluation activity. Stakeholders should be involved in this planning effort. The plan should include details about which types of products will be developed and how they will be disseminated to different groups. Audiences and specific considerations for communications include the following:

- ◆ **Providers:** Consider multiple outreach strategies (such as videos and flyers) that use different communication techniques. Identify options for public forums, such as town hall meetings, that facilitate two-way dialogue and give providers the opportunity to ask questions about the findings. Talking points should be developed for technical assistance providers and licensors to help them communicate key messages, results, and implications for providers.
- ◆ **Policymakers:** Develop factsheets that provide vital information on the background of the program or initiative. Brief documents should define the problem, the intervention/approach, the results, and recommendations.
- ◆ **Funders:** In addition to the considerations for policymakers, include data to provide important context or rationale for the study or resulting recommendations, such as public opinion data or state or local population indicators.
- ◆ **Parents:** Communicate clear messages with brief details about the goals and objectives of the QRIS. Ensure that key terms such as “quality” are defined using simple, plain language.

Overall, research summaries shared publicly should use plain language, simple formatting, a question-and-answer structure (or other straightforward headings), and provide links to full technical reports and contact information.

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## Section 8: Cost Projections and Financing

Financial support for a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is critical during all periods of its development—from the start-up phase, to early implementation, to periodic review and revision. This section addresses several critical financing issues: (1) what needs to be financed, (2) ways to project costs, and (3) revenue sources (including identifying existing resources that can be realigned to support the QRIS and securing additional sources of funding).

QRIS designers and implementers should carefully identify the QRIS’s purpose and design and ensure that the financing available is sufficient to support them. A strategic approach to the financing and sustainability of the QRIS will ensure that resources are sufficient to meet goals, and that public and private funds are maximized and leveraged effectively to support improvements in quality over time. By thinking broadly and creatively about how to effectively use available funding, including maximizing and leveraging varied funding sources, states will go a long way toward ensuring the sustainability of their QRISs and the programs that participate.

The information in this section is organized into six steps for developing or revising a strategic financing plan.

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## Step 1: Deciding What Needs to Be Financed

### Funding QRIS Elements

Considering the phases of QRIS development and implementation is helpful in thinking through funding. Some phases are time limited while others are ongoing. The following QRIS elements should be considered for initial and sustained funding:

- ◆ **Planning and design:** Strategic planning and data collection to establish the initial system; identification of the QRIS's purpose and scope.
- ◆ **Standards:** Research and development of standards at the beginning and revision at later points in time.
- ◆ **Approaches to implementation:** Pilot or phased-in implementation approaches, and the overall management and administration of the QRIS.
- ◆ **Accountability and monitoring:** Program assessments, rating assignments, and ongoing monitoring.
- ◆ **Provider support and sustainability:** Short- and long-term program and practitioner supports, including one-time costs for attaining standards as well as ongoing support for sustaining quality levels. This may include professional development, salary enhancements, grants, and tiered reimbursement.
- ◆ **Data collection and evaluation:** Information technology system design, and data collection, analyses, and dissemination.
- ◆ **Public awareness:** Parent, provider, and stakeholder awareness, communication, and outreach.

The overall purpose and desired outcomes of the QRIS should be taken into account when modeling costs. For example, a QRIS that sets a school readiness goal for the children served is likely to have a different cost model and approach than a QRIS that sets a goal of raising the floor for quality to a step or two above basic licensing requirements. According to [Finance and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) (BUILD Initiative, 2017a), a well-financed QRIS dedicates its resources to accountability and ratings, quality improvement, and quality at the program level.

States are using varied approaches to help early care and education programs improve and then sustain higher levels of quality as defined by their QRIS standards. As reported in [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Funding and Financial Incentives](#) (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance [ECQA Center], 2017a), 12 of 41 QRIS (29 percent) provide programs with improvement grants through their system.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five QRIS (61 percent) provide quality bonuses to programs when they achieve a certain level of quality, and 28 QRIS (68 percent) provide financial incentives for programs through the use of tiered reimbursement.

Another form of quality improvement that directly supports personnel is staff scholarships for education—provided by eight QRIS (20 percent). Dollars associated with these quality improvement strategies vary, but on average, staff scholarships are approximately \$3,500, and improvement grants average \$2,873.

[QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Technical Assistance](#) (ECQA Center, 2017c) reports that 31 of the 41 QRIS (76 percent) offer some form of technical assistance (TA) to all participating programs.<sup>2</sup> These TA services are targeted to providers serving children from low-income families, programs at lower levels of quality, and programs located in communities of high need.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from this fact sheet are based on 41 QRIS that were fully operational in the United States in 2016. While most QRIS operate at the state level, there are states with multiple local systems.

<sup>2</sup> See note 1.

Visit the [Provider Incentives and Support](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide for additional information.

## Step 2: Projecting the Costs

### Elements to Include in a Cost Projection

Projecting the cost of a QRIS is critical for both initial planning and ongoing operation. Cost assumptions and models should be updated at least annually to ensure that there is enough funding for all the elements needed to achieve the purpose of the QRIS. A helpful resource for states to use in identifying finance strategies to ensure that the QRIS can meet its goals is the BUILD Initiative’s [Tool for a Cross-Sector QRIS](#) (BUILD Initiative, 2017b).

Data systems and information resources are critical factors in successful cost projection. These can be used to project key factors, such as participation rates by level, initially and over time. Systems that may provide useful data for projecting costs and participation levels include licensing databases that capture the level of compliance with regulations and professional development registries that collect staff qualifications and annual training attendance. Information about mapping the early care and education workforce is available in the [Initial Design Process](#) section of the QRIS Resource Guide. QRIS information systems can be linked to other data systems in early care and education to support ongoing projections and analysis. The [QRIS Data Systems Fact Sheet](#) describes the types of data included in QRIS data systems, how the data are being used, and data system linkages (ECQA Center, 2018).

It is also necessary to project participation as part of the overall cost modeling, revenue allocation, and budgeting for the QRIS. The overall participation of eligible programs varies by state, with some states mandating participation, some states conditioning receipt of public funds (such as child care assistance or prekindergarten) on QRIS participation, and some states opting for a voluntary approach. State participation rates can be found in the [Quality Compendium](#) within each state profile, under the Participation tab.

Participation rates will also vary based on the state’s inclusion of different categories of care. [QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Program Participation in QRIS](#) (ECQA Center, 2017b) includes information about which types of programs participated in the 41 QRIS that were fully operational in 2016.

- ◆ 100 percent of QRIS included licensed centers
- ◆ 93 percent included licensed family child care homes
- ◆ 71 percent included Head Start and Early Head Start
- ◆ 61 percent included school-operated early childhood programs
- ◆ 41 percent included school-age programs
- ◆ 19 percent included legally license-exempt centers
- ◆ 5 percent included legally license-exempt family child care homes

### Using the Provider Cost of Quality Calculator (PCQC)

The [Provider Cost of Quality Calculator](#) (PCQC) (ECQA Center, n.d.) is a web-based tool that calculates the cost of quality—based on site-level provider data and estimates—to help state policymakers understand the costs associated with delivering high-quality early care and education. This in turn helps them understand the budget needed for a QRIS. The tool can demonstrate whether there is a gap between the cost of providing quality services and the revenue sources available to support programs. Knowing the size of the gap at different quality levels for various provider types can inform the design of financial support and incentive packages. This analysis

provides additional information to calculate needed funding for incentives such as tiered reimbursement, bonuses, quality achievement awards, and quality improvement grants.

## State Experiences Using Cost Modeling for Existing QRISs

Several states have undertaken cost modeling studies for their QRISs and published the results.

- ◆ **Delaware**, [\*Modeling Quality Costs for Delaware Stars: Interim Report on Program Cost of Quality in Centers\*](#) (2013)
- ◆ **District of Columbia**, [\*Modeling the Cost of Child Care in the District of Columbia\*](#) (2016)
- ◆ **Ohio**, [\*The Dollars and Cents of Early Learning: Investing in Success—A Summary of Findings from groundWork’s Early Childhood Financing Project\*](#) (2016)
- ◆ **Rhode Island**, [\*The Cost of Quality Early Learning in Rhode Island: Interim Report\*](#) (2013)
- ◆ **Washington**, [\*Modeling the Cost of Quality in Early Achievers: Centers and Family Child Care\*](#) (2013)

The Alliance for Early Childhood Finance has a web page with [resources about cost modeling](#) projects states have done to estimate the cost of various early care and education finance initiatives.

Across these states, “a fairly common finding is that the base subsidy rate is sufficient to operate a program at the licensed level of quality, but that subsidy tiered rates are insufficient to support programs at the highest levels” (BUILD Initiative, 2017a, p. 9). Delving deeper, there is typically a significant revenue gap for programs that are at the top level of the QRIS. These studies typically show that size and ages of children matter, with smaller programs and those serving infants and toddlers experiencing greater revenue gaps. On the other hand, programs that are sponsored by schools or Head Start, and those using other available revenue streams, are more able to make ends meet.

Examining existing QRIS funding and determining whether it is sufficient to help early care and education programs improve their quality is important during start-up and on a regular basis.

## Creating a Master Budget

Once cost projections are made and decisions are reached on the elements for which funding is needed, an overall QRIS budget is needed. Certain aspects of the QRIS budget may be embedded in other budget expenditures, such as those for the child care assistance program and licensing program, professional development and technical assistance systems, child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies, and other services and supports. Other elements may be new expenses; for example, monitoring and rating, public and stakeholder awareness initiatives, QRIS information systems, and supports such as coaching, curriculum or assessment costs, and financial supplements. For QRIS serving programs such as prekindergarten and Head Start, it is particularly important to understand whether those programs are financially supporting participation in the QRIS, and how this is addressed in budgeting terms. In general, it can be helpful to review how other states organize their budgets, as well as how they pay specific costs.

Although a review of expenditure levels in other states’ QRIS provides a good starting point, each state’s QRIS has a different purpose, goals, criteria, and incentives. Comparisons may also lead to incorrect assumptions that each QRIS has similar availability of existing resources, such as licensing and access to training or technical assistance. Therefore, using the CEM to capture the state’s unique QRIS structure and existing resources, along with the PCQC to estimate provider costs, provides a more accurate approach to cost projections.

## Minimizing the Impact on the Cost of Care to Families

A primary goal of the QRIS is to improve the quality of child care and other early learning and school-age programs. Assuming that higher quality has higher cost, concern has been raised about how QRISs may affect families' costs. Because most child care revenues come from parent fees, child care markets are extremely price sensitive. A program's financial viability and sustainability is determined by three factors, sometimes called the iron triangle: revenue sufficient to cover expenses, enrollment as close to 100 percent as possible, and effective collection of all tuition and fees. If participation in a QRIS significantly increases costs for families who do not have tuition assistance through programs such as child care assistance, public prekindergarten, or Head Start, providers may be unable to cover their costs solely by raising prices.

States typically try to minimize the impact of a QRIS on the fees charged to consumers by subsidizing the increased cost of quality. First, they may support or offset costs of improvement tied to specific QRIS criteria. For example, states may offer scholarships to help staff obtain the education required for higher QRIS standards. A second approach is to cover the ongoing costs of maintaining quality through financial awards such as tiered reimbursement bonuses for providers that participate in a QRIS (that is, higher state reimbursement rates based on QRIS levels). Tiered reimbursement strategies are designed to help increase access to higher-quality child care for low-income families. However, unless tiered reimbursement is structured as a bonus and not linked to market price, it can have the unintended consequence of driving up the price charged to nonsubsidized families and limiting participation in the QRIS. This is especially true for providers that serve children of all income levels. This could potentially limit choices for low-income families if tiered reimbursement is the only financial incentive for a QRIS. Tiered reimbursement is likely to be more effective if it is one of several financial incentives available to providers.

Other financial incentives that states make available include annual program-level awards, which may be calibrated based on program size and the percentage of children served from low-income families. It is possible to structure financial incentives so they are available to providers that serve families at all income levels but also offer special incentives for providers that serve subsidized children. (See the [Provider Incentives and Support](#) section for additional information and examples of financial incentives that states have developed.)

To date, research data on the relationship between QRIS participation and the prices charged by participating providers are not available. Many factors make it difficult to correlate QRIS participation and price data, including external factors such as minimum wage increases, the supply of providers in a rate area, and local employment conditions. Nonetheless, it may be helpful for states to track price and rate changes over time, recognizing that the cost of care, market prices, and subsidy reimbursement rates are three related but distinct issues.

## Step 3: Identifying Funding and Resources That May Already Be Available or Aligned with the QRIS

### Accessing QRIS Funding or Resources

Many states that have implemented a QRIS have been able to align their existing quality improvement strategies with the QRIS and build on the professional development, technical assistance, quality improvement, and monitoring systems that were already in place. A QRIS can become an organizing framework for focusing multiple strategies toward an accountability structure that could include all early care and education services.

Using the QRIS as a tool for alignment and system reform requires careful planning. (See the [Initial Design Process](#) section for additional information.) Reaching the long-term goal of system reform is likely to occur over time as opportunities arise to restructure program administration and funding. Also, aligning resources and programs, such as licensing and CCR&R services, may require changes in regulations or contracts, which are actions that cannot be immediately implemented.

The first step is to identify all existing resources and activities that currently support functions or activities included in the QRIS, such as professional development, technical assistance, monitoring, data collection and tracking, and communication. This review should include resources for infant/toddler, school-age, and special-needs care that may indirectly support the overall system and may also help identify gaps in resources. If the QRIS includes programs beyond child care, such as Head Start or state prekindergarten, understanding how those programs' resources support the QRIS is essential. Resources may exist in several different state agencies. Many states have been intentional in making the changes needed to link these existing resources and activities to their QRIS. While this step can sometimes be implemented via memoranda of understanding or other agreements, in some cases this step may require revised job descriptions or administrative structures, legislation, new regulations, amendments to rate or contract policies, new or revised responsibilities with contractors, and other changes.

[QRIS Compendium Fact Sheet: Funding and Financial Incentives](#) (ECQA Center, 2017a) notes that funding of all elements of a QRIS is typically achieved through multiple sources, with the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) being the primary source. Although fewer states are using state funding, the amount of funding is similar to that from the CCDF. A QRIS may leverage local funding or private funding, but this is less typical. Currently, three states leverage local funding and five leverage private funding.

In addition, there are efficiencies that can be realized by linking with other resources. For example, creating online applications and importing data from a professional development registry and from a licensing database reduces the time it takes staff to collect information and assess providers' compliance with criteria. (See the [Quality Assurance and Monitoring](#) section for additional information.) Some states accept monitoring or other onsite assessments completed by other systems; for example, using Classroom Assessment Scoring System scores from Head Start classrooms. Under recent revisions to the [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#), greater efficiency is expected. [Section 1302.53\(b\)\(2\)](#), addressing community partnerships, provides for Head Start participation in a QRIS with the provision that Head Start monitoring data must be accepted to document quality indicators included in the state's QRIS.

States that go through a resource analysis may find that there are existing programs and activities that can be eliminated or that may become redundant once the QRIS is in place. Funding for eliminated items can be redirected to support the QRIS, although this action may require significant involvement of key stakeholders and administrators to garner needed support and commitment to use funding in new ways.

QRISs offer states the opportunity to ensure that funding currently allocated to early and school-age care and education quality improvement is spent wisely. If used as a systematic framework for financing and measuring quality, QRISs offer many opportunities to maximize existing resources and promote accountability for results.

## Step 4: Exploring Potential Sources of Funding to Fill the Gaps

### States' QRIS Funding Sources

Once funding needs are identified, states should seek new or unobligated funding sources that could be tapped to support the QRIS. The most common QRIS funding source is CCDF. Other possible sources of federal funds that can support a QRIS include the following:

- ◆ Community Mental Health Services Block Grant
- ◆ Every Student Succeeds Act
- ◆ Head Start
- ◆ Part B and Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
- ◆ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

- ◆ Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant
- ◆ Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

States may also be able to tap federal funds designed for special populations and initiatives (for example, Native Americans and rural providers) to fund specific outreach to underserved communities or to expand the scope of programs included.

Beyond federally generated revenue, there are other state and local funds that can support a QRIS, such as the following:

- ◆ State general funds
- ◆ Dedicated state funding generated by lotteries or “sin” taxes on tobacco products, soda, and sugary beverages
- ◆ Prekindergarten or education set-aside funding
- ◆ Tax credits
- ◆ Local sales and property taxes
- ◆ New revenue sources, such as marijuana revenue

Some states have experimented with the use of tax credits within the context of the QRIS. For example, Arkansas and Vermont reward families with a state dependent care credit for families who choose programs rated by a QRIS. Louisiana and Nebraska also have tax credit provisions that include benefits for families, teachers, and providers. Louisiana’s tax credit is noteworthy because it is refundable and benefits low-income working families as well as child care teachers who don’t owe taxes (BUILD Initiative, 2017a).

Finally, there are states that have leveraged private sources, including business and philanthropic contributions, particularly for start-up or one-time costs associated with the QRIS. Before exploring charitable and business support, the state may need to identify a partner that can solicit and receive private funding for this purpose. State governments often do not have mechanisms in place to receive private funding. Also, funders have their own applicant guidelines to, in part, allow them to address tax issues related to charitable giving.

## Step 5: Preparing a Strategy for Securing and Sustaining the Needed Funding

### Funding Strategy Planning

Key ingredients to a successful QRIS include a long-range goal, a plan for incremental steps toward reaching the goal, and a lot of flexibility. Obtaining initial and long-term funding is often about seizing opportunities and does not always follow a logical plan. It may be possible, for example, to make great strides in linking the QRIS to one particular funding stream, such as child care assistance. Or, it may be possible to secure financial incentives for a particular group of providers early on, and then work to extend these supports to all participants. (See the [Approaches to Implementation](#) section for information on the use of a phased-in approach when full funding is not available.) Regardless of the timeline, it is helpful to have a roadmap of potential resources and a strategy for securing them, so that it is easier to identify opportunities as they arise. (Also see the [Initial Design Process](#) section for information about building support among other stakeholders.)

## Step 6: Analyzing Costs and Expenditures Annually

### Tracking Expenditure Levels over Time

As participation in the QRIS grows and providers are able to move to higher levels, ongoing tracking and analysis of all expenditures is needed to ensure the best use of fiscal resources. Creating itemized budgets with expenditures by QRIS element and analyzing expenditures over time may yield significant information to support future budget planning.

A good place to begin fiscal analysis is with the underlying assumptions that were used to create the initial budget; for example, participation rates and use of incentives. Were those assumptions valid? Analyzing monthly expenditures over time can also offer insights, such as whether program costs increased following an expansion of outreach efforts. This analysis can assist in determining if the expense of that program element (in this example, consumer awareness), is justified. Are there other elements that yield more impact for less money? In an environment of limited resources, it is essential to steer investments to the most productive initiatives.

A thorough knowledge of the financial performance of the program will also be helpful when persuading policymakers to continue to support the initiative. At the same time, ongoing work is needed to match available financing to the needs of child care programs working to meet higher quality levels.

### Sustaining Funding Levels

Sustained funding is necessary to ensure continued success of the QRIS. The CEM can again be used to project administrative costs over several years and allow time to build support for increased resources.

Leaders may also want to engage early care and education service providers in sustainability planning, including an exploration of business models and strategies to attain greater economies of scale. Many early and school-age care programs operate on weak business platforms and are led by individuals with limited skills in fiscal management and, all too often, no time to focus on the business side of their work. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that many early care and education programs rely on multiple funding streams, some of a short-term nature, as well as parent fees. Effectively managing the iron triangle, especially maintaining full enrollment, is challenging but essential to sustainability. For more information, see [The Iron Triangle: A Simple Formula for Financial Policy in ECE Programs](#) (Stoney, 2010).

Given the mixed delivery systems of programs that may be involved in the QRIS—including publicly funded and private (for-profit and nonprofit) organizations—there can be great value in providing guidance and support for the business practices of program leaders and helping them learn about ways they can adopt shared services. Such support is one way to optimize a “return on the investment” in QRIS. Many states and programs are using shared services to improve quality, share learning, and reduce costs among providers through the sharing of resources and practical tools. More information about shared services is available on the [Opportunities Exchange](#) website.

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## 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.

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### 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 2014<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

## 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 42 U.S.C. §§ 9857–9858 (2015).

<sup>2</sup> 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	<a href="#">Alabama Quality STARS</a>
Arizona	<a href="#">Arizona Quality First</a>
Arkansas	<a href="#">Arkansas Better Beginnings</a>
Colorado	<a href="#">Colorado Shines</a>
Delaware	<a href="#">Great Starts Delaware</a>
Georgia	<a href="#">Georgia Quality Rated</a>
Idaho	<a href="#">IdahoSTARS Quality Rating &amp; Improvement System</a>
Illinois	<a href="#">ExceleRate Illinois QRIS</a>
Indiana	<a href="#">Indiana Paths to QUALITY</a>
Kentucky	<a href="#">Kentucky STARS for KIDS NOW Child Care Quality Rating System</a>
Maryland	<a href="#">Maryland EXCELS</a>
Michigan	<a href="#">Michigan Great Start to Quality</a>
Minnesota	<a href="#">Minnesota Parent Aware</a>
Nebraska	<a href="#">Nebraska Step Up to Quality</a>
Nevada	<a href="#">Nevada Silver State Stars QRIS</a>
New Mexico	<a href="#">New Mexico FOCUS</a>

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

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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