



Trends in Quality Ratings Over Time

NATIONAL CENTER ON EARLY CHILDHOOD QUALITY ASSURANCE

SEPTEMBER 2023

This document was developed by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance under contract GS-00F-010CA/75ACF122F80020 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.

This factsheet is one in a series about the state of quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) in the United States. Data for the factsheets are from the Quality Compendium, a catalog of the quality initiatives and QRISs operating in early childhood education (ECE) programs in the United States. The Quality Compendium houses data from 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2021. While the Quality Compendium uses the term “QIS” to be more inclusive of the range of quality supports available across the country, this factsheet uses the term “QRIS” because it refers only to systems that have a rating component. In 2021, there were 42 fully operational QRISs in the United States.¹

Since the first system was introduced in 1999, program ratings continue to be a key feature of quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs). Ratings may be used to inform tiered reimbursement payments (e.g., programs with a higher rating receive higher child care subsidy reimbursement), designate quality levels for receipt of funding or eligibility for public programs such as state prekindergarten or Head Start, and help parents and guardians make informed choices about ECE. This factsheet reviews current rating structures and processes used in 42 QRISs in 2021² and discusses how they have shifted over time using data from 2015, 2017, and 2019.

1. States with a QRIS: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Florida (two localities), Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. While most QRISs operate at the state level, two represent separate counties in Florida (Duval and Palm Beach). The California QRIS, while represented in the Quality Compendium as one system, is implemented at the county level and does not include all counties in the state.

2. Data from New Hampshire was not updated in 2021. This factsheet includes its data from 2019.

Key Findings in Ratings

Key findings from 2021 and changes over time include the following:

- Forty-two QRISs have a rating system, while three QRISs³ do not.
- Thirty-six QRISs (86%) had either a hybrid or block rating structure. Few QRISs had point-based structures ($n = 6$, or 14%), a trend consistent with previous years. Of those with hybrid structures, the most common structure is blocks at lower levels and points at higher levels ($n = 10$, or 56%).
- Initial rating processes have largely remained the same since 2015. However, there was an increase in the number of QRISs requiring that providers complete a self-assessment as part of the initial rating process ($n = 25$, or 60%).
- Between 2017 and 2021, the number of QRISs using standard observational tools for any purpose (e.g., rating, self-assessment) decreased. Of those that still use standard observational tools, a number of QRISs shifted to using observational tools for program self-assessment or quality improvement rather than for rating purposes.
- More than half of QRISs ($n = 28$, or 67%) had separate standards for licensed family child care.

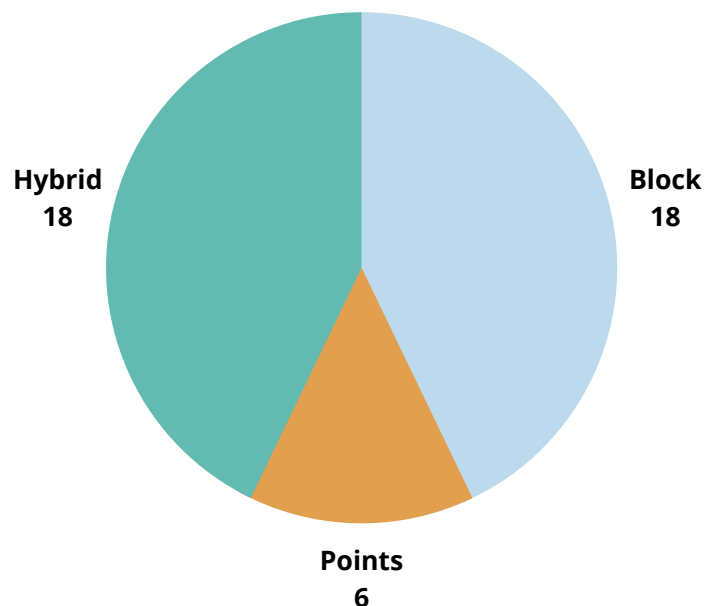
Rating Structures

Three rating structures are used in QRISs: (1) a **block structure**, in which programs must meet all of the quality indicators at one level before achieving the next quality level; (2) a **points structure**, in which points are allocated to programs depending on which quality indicators they meet, and the total number of points determines their level; and (3) a **hybrid structure**, which combines a block and points approach. In 2021, most QRISs used either a block rating structure ($n = 18$, or 43%) or a hybrid rating structure ($n = 18$, or 43%); fewer QRISs used a points-only rating structure ($n = 6$, or 14%; see figure 1).

Figure 1. QRIS Rating Structures in 2021

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

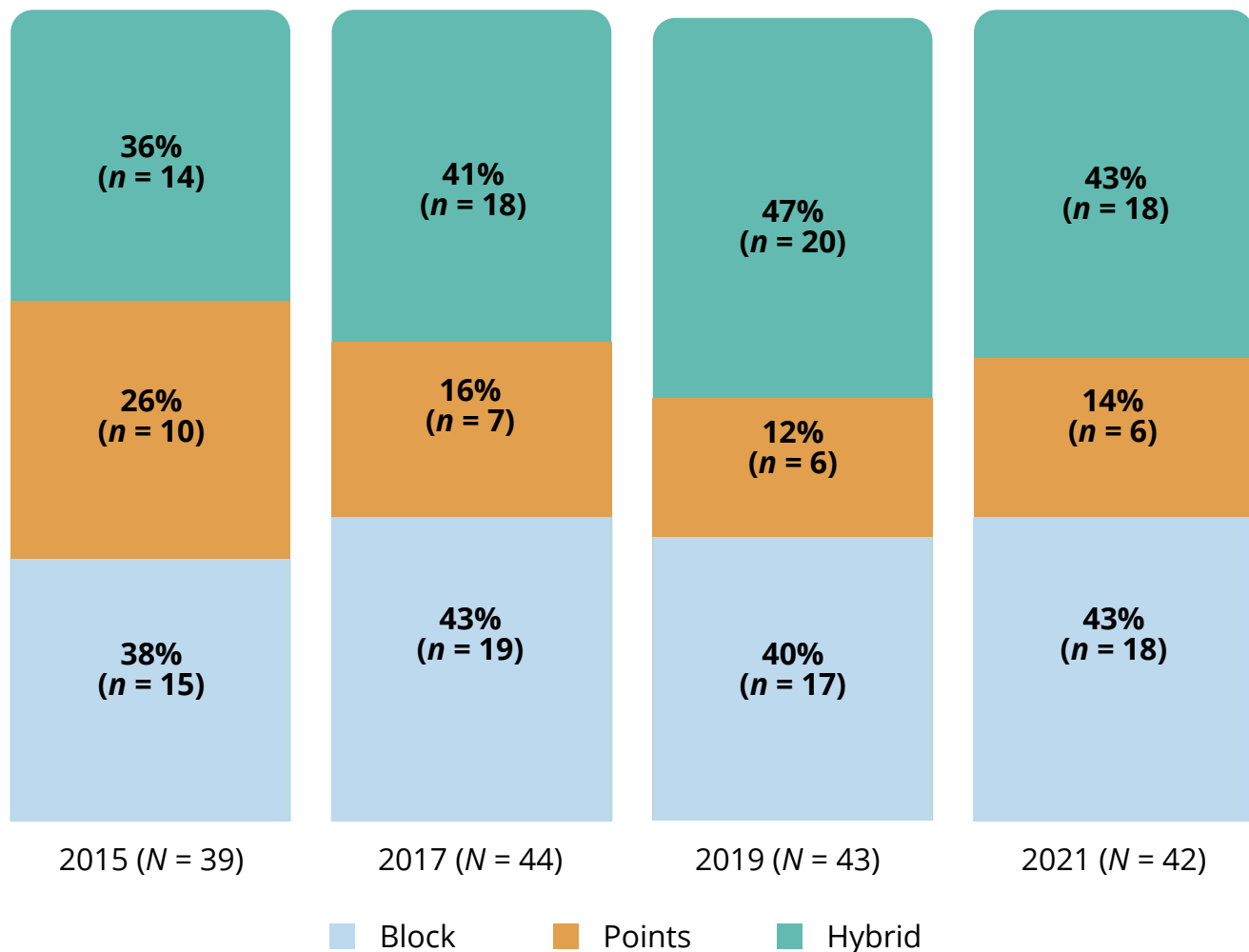
Note: $N = 42$ QRISs.



3. Delaware, Florida, and Miami-Dade (Florida).

Of the 36 QRISs with reported data on their rating structure between 2015 and 2021, 11 QRISs (31%) altered their rating structure. Of those, six transitioned to a block structure (55%) and five transitioned to a hybrid structure (45%). Six new QRISs⁴ were implemented between 2015 and 2021 (including four hybrid structures and two points structures). Figure 2 depicts the percentage of QRISs with each rating structure by year.

Figure 2. QRIS Rating Structures Over Time, 2015–2021



Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Of the 18 QRISs that had a hybrid rating structure, more than half had blocks at early levels and points at later levels ($n = 10$, or 56%), an increase from 2015. The remaining QRISs were split between a mix of blocks and points at all levels ($n = 3$, or 17%), a largely point-based system with some specific requirements ($n = 3$, or 17%), or another hybrid structure ($n = 4$, or 22%; see table 1).

4. Alaska, District of Columbia, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Jersey, and Texas.

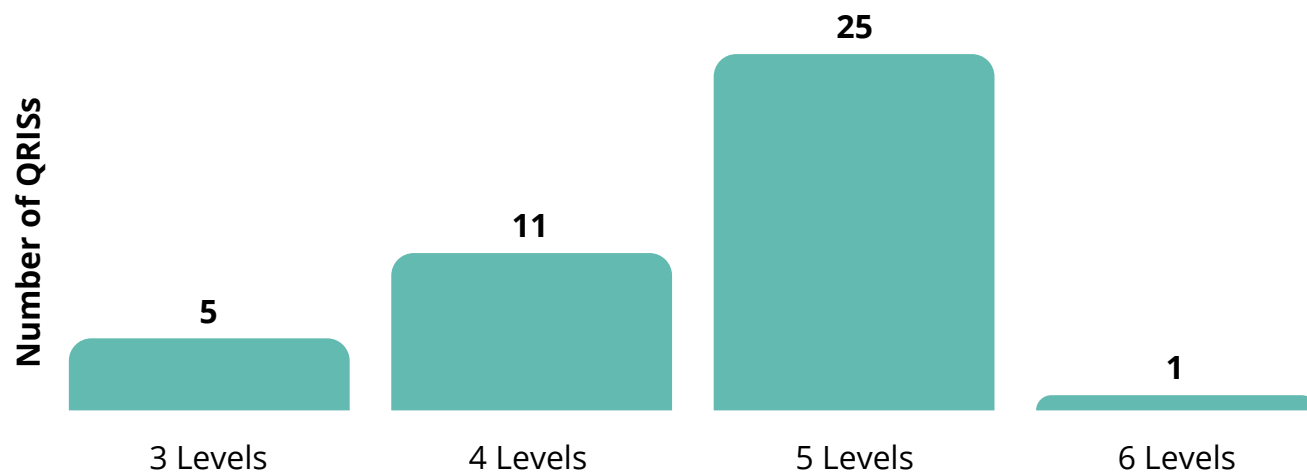
Table 1. Types of Hybrid Rating Structures, 2015-2021

	2015 (N = 14)	2017 (N = 18)	2019 (N = 20)	2021 (N = 18)
Blocks at lower levels and points at higher levels	5 (36%)	9 (50%)	9 (45%)	10 (56%)
Mix of blocks and points at all levels	2 (14%)	3 (17%)	5 (25%)	3 (17%)
Largely a point structure with some specific requirements	4 (29%)	4 (22%)	5 (25%)	3 (17%)
Other	3 (21%)	3 (17%)	2 (10%)	2 (11%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data about rating structure each year.

In 2021, most QRISs used either a five-level rating structure ($n = 25$, or 60%) or a four-level rating structure ($n = 11$, or 26%). No QRISs used a one- or two-level rating structure (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Number of Rating Levels in QRISs in 2021

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$ QRISs.

Rating Processes

The following sections describe typical rating processes across QRISs, including information about the initial rating process, how programs are evaluated and ratings assigned, and ongoing rating processes. Note that during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many of these processes were interrupted or adapted. Where applicable, we include information about how QRISs changed their processes.

Initial Rating Process

Most processes for initial rating have remained consistent since 2015. The most common initial rating processes for providers included submitting an application or rating documentation and receiving assistance in preparing documentation (see table 2). Notably, seven QRISs added requirements for providers to complete a self-assessment between 2015 and 2021. Eight QRISs reported a change to their initial rating process in the fall of 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with half of those pausing initial ratings and the other half allowing participation without an observation (Harris et al., 2021).

Table 2. Initial Rating Process, 2015-2021

	2015 (N = 40)	2021 (N = 42)
Submit application	36 (90%)	38 (90%)
Submit rating documentation	34 (85%)	37 (88%)
Receive assistance in preparing documentation	32 (80%)	36 (86%)
Require self-assessment	18 (45%)	25 (60%)
Apply for a particular rating	20 (50%)	22 (52%)
Attend orientation	18 (45%)	18 (43%)
Other	20 (50%)	17 (40%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data on rating processes each year.

In 2021, more than half of QRISs ($n = 24$, or 57%) had automatic or accelerated rating pathways available to programs already meeting other ECE standards (see table 3). The most common automatic or accelerated rating processes were in place for center-based and family child care programs that were nationally accredited ($n = 23$, or 55%, and $n = 19$, or 45%, respectively), and programs meeting Head Start or Early Head Start standards ($n = 17$, or 40%).

Table 3. Standards for Automatic or Accelerated Ratings

Standards for Automatic or Accelerated Ratings	Number of QRISs
Have automatic or accelerated ratings available	24 (57%)
Accreditation for center-based programs	23 (55%)
Accreditation for family child care	19 (45%)
Head Start or Early Head Start standards	17 (40%)
Public or private school standards	7 (17%)
Other	10 (24%)
No automatic or alternative pathway to rating	18 (43%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data on accelerated pathways in 2021.

Process for Assessing Quality and Assigning Ratings to Programs

Assessment of program quality typically involves a few different ongoing processes: verification of program documentation, program observation, and monitoring. These processes are described in this section, as well as information about how QRISs assign ratings to programs.

Verification

In 2021, all QRISs had processes in place to verify quality ratings. Verification typically involves reviewing the accuracy of the information that programs and practitioners submit as part of the rating process. Most QRISs include information from other entities or organizations (e.g., transcripts from universities, records from professional development registries) to verify program applications ($n = 35$, or 83%). Most also reported completing an onsite observation to collect information for verification ($n = 34$, or 81%; see table 4). In a 2020 survey, 17 QRIS administrators reported interruptions to typical verification processes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris et al., 2021).

Table 4. Verification Processes in QRISs in 2021

	Number of QRISs
Rating includes verification by outside entities	35 (83%)
Rating includes onsite observation to collect information for the rating	34 (81%)
Verification is done off site by a rater using a manual or rating rubric	24 (57%)
Rating includes unverified self-reported information	19 (45%)
Rating includes an onsite visit to verify self-reported information	16 (38%)
Other	13 (31%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data on accelerated pathways in 2021.

Program Observation

Observational tools are used in various ways among QRISs, including for program and practitioner self-assessment and to assist with ratings, with some requiring specific scores at certain levels (see appendix table A1 for information about which tools are frequently used at each level). Figure 4 shows how many QRISs used each common observational tool comparing data from 2017 and 2021 (see appendix table A2 for the list of tools and their citations).

Figure 5 shows how many QRISs used each tool for rating purposes, and figure 6 shows how many QRISs used each tool for self-assessment purposes, comparing data from 2017 and 2021. Aside from the ECERS-3 and CLASS Toddler scales, the number of QRISs using each tool for any purpose decreased between 2017 and 2021. Generally, QRISs shifted to using the tools for self-assessment or quality improvement rather than for rating.

Glossary of Observational Tools
ECERS-R: Early Child Environment Rating Scale, Revised
ECERS-3: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition
ITERS-R: Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Revised
ITERS-3: Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition
SACERS-R: School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Revised
SACERS-U: School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition
FCCERS-R: Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Revised
FCCERS-3: Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition
CLASS Pre-K: Classroom Assessment Scoring System: Pre-K
CLASS Toddler: Classroom Assessment Scoring System: Toddler

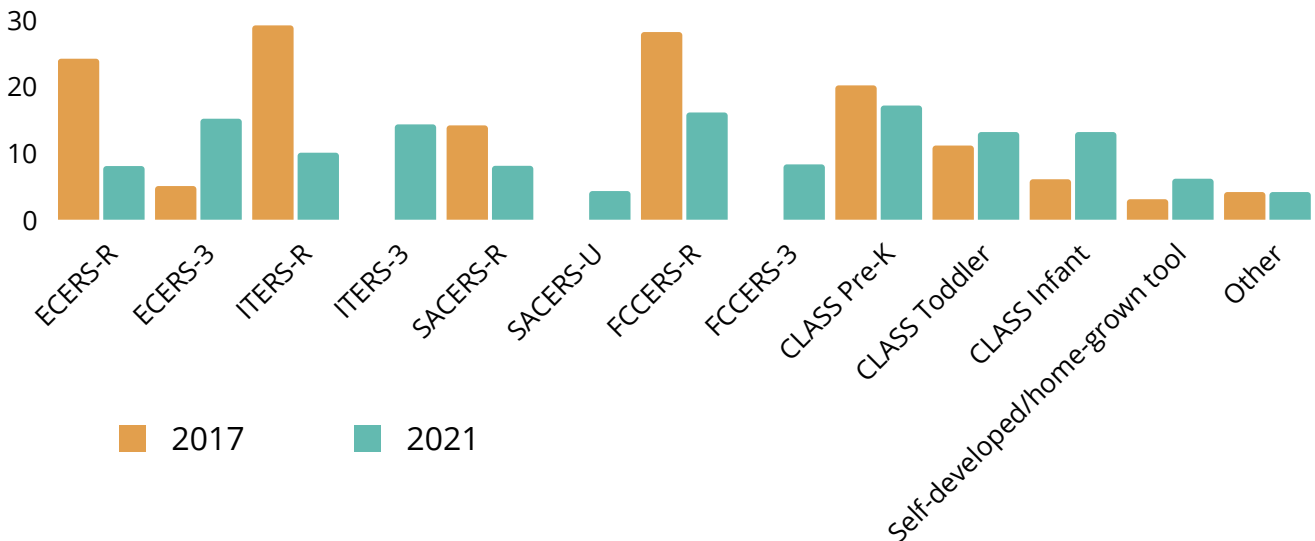
Figure 4. Number of QRISs That Use Each Tool, 2017 and 2021



Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: This question was not included in 2015, so 2017 data is used. ITERS-3 was not published until 2017 and FCCERS-3 was not published until 2019, so these were not included as options in the 2017 data collection cycle. SACERS-U was also not included as an option in 2017.

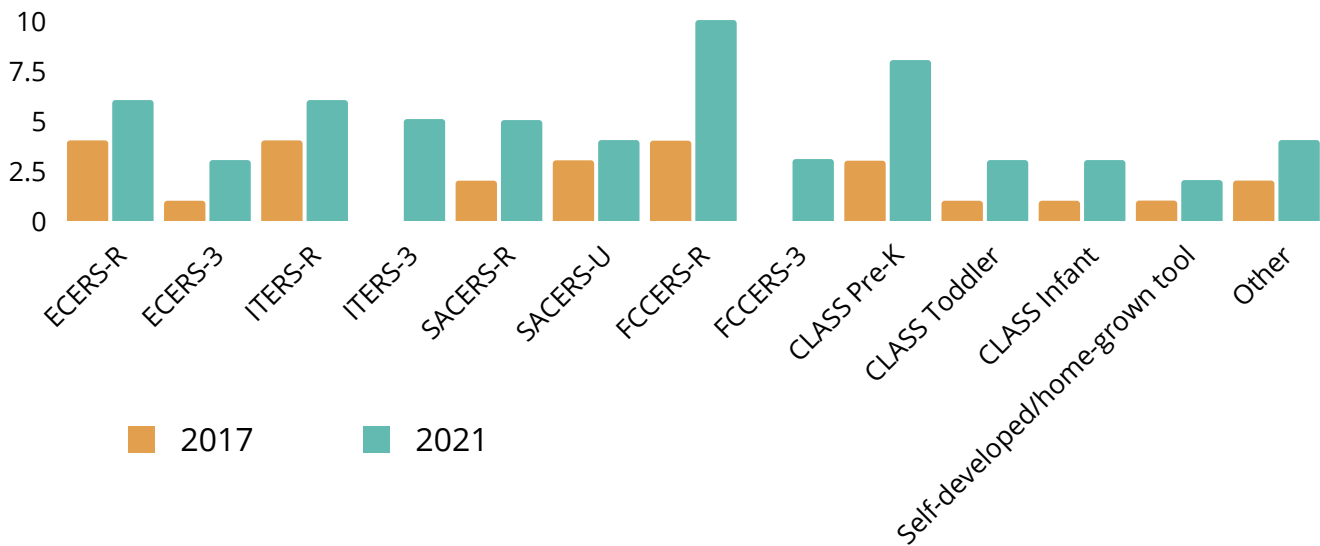
Figure 5. Number of QRISs That Use Each Tool for Rating, 2017 and 2021



Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: This question was not included in 2015, so 2017 data is used. ITERS-3 was not published until 2017 and FCCERS-3 was not published until 2019, so these were not included as options in the 2017 data collection cycle. SACERS-U was also not included as an option in 2017.

Figure 6. Number of QRISs That Use Each Tool for Self-Assessment or Quality Improvement, 2017 and 2021



Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS) [Data system]*. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: This question was not included in 2015, so 2017 data is used.

ITERS-3 was not published until 2017 and FCCERS-3 was not published until 2019, so these were not included as options in the 2017 data collection cycle. SACERS-U was also not included as an option in 2017.

There were several common approaches to addressing equity in program observations. For example, as of 2021, many QRISs allowed ECE providers and practitioners to receive observations in their preferred language ($n = 28$, or 67%). Some QRISs required observers to complete anti-bias training ($n = 5$, or 14%), and four QRISs required other general training, such as cultural awareness or diversity, equity, and inclusion (11%).

Separate Standards by Program Type

Programs participating in a QRIS meet quality standards (set by the QRIS and documented through metrics called quality indicators) to achieve a rating. QRIS standards were first developed for center-based programs, but over time, nearly all QRISs have opened participation to other program types and most have adjusted standards for those programs accordingly. Among the 30 QRISs that reported separate standards for various program types beyond licensed child care centers in 2021, 19 (63%) had different standards for two or more program types, such as family child care or school-age programs. The most common program type with separate standards from centers was licensed family child care ($n = 28$, or 67%; see table 5).

Table 5. Separate Standards for Different Types of Programs

Program Type	Number of QRISs
Licensed family child care	28 (67%)
School-age programs	8 (19%)
Head Start or Early Head Start	8 (19%)
School-operated early childhood program	5 (12%)
Legally license-exempt home-based program	2 (5%)
Legally license-exempt center-based program	2 (5%)
Tribal early childhood programs	1 (2%)
Other	7 (17%)
No separate standards or rating processes for different program types	12 (29%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data about standards in 2021.

Ongoing Monitoring

QRISs often have processes in place to monitor programs between official rating periods (which can vary from occurring annually to every 5 years). In 2021, QRISs commonly had a formal role for the licensing unit to monitor programs between ratings ($n = 18$, or 43%). About a third of QRISs required that programs submit annual continuous quality improvement plans ($n = 15$, or 36%) or annual reports ($n = 14$, or 33%). Thirty-eight percent of QRISs ($n = 16$) had other procedures in place, such as meetings with coaches or quality consultants and ongoing continuous quality improvement reporting and monitoring. Sixteen percent of QRISs ($n = 7$) did not have a process in place to monitor programs between ratings (see table 6).

Table 6. Monitoring

	Number of QRISs
Licensing has a role between ratings	18 (43%)
Annual continuous quality improvement plan	15 (36%)
Annual report	14 (33%)
Intermittent visits	11 (26%)
Other	16 (38%)
No process to monitor programs between ratings	7 (17%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data about monitoring in 2021.

Assigning Ratings

As of 2021, most QRISs had a QRIS staff member assign ratings to providers ($n = 31$, or 74%) after they completed a review and analysis of programs' written documentation (demonstrating how they meet each quality indicator) and their scores on observational tools (if relevant for the QRIS).

Most QRISs ($n = 36$, or 86%) had processes in place to ensure ratings are assigned consistently. Of these QRISs, more than half had ongoing reliability tests for observations ($n = 27$, or 64%) and about half had initial reliability tests ($n = 23$, or 55%). Twelve percent of QRISs had another process ($n = 5$) and 14% ($n = 6$) had no process to ensure rater reliability. Nearly all QRISs used data to inform rating determinations ($n = 40$, or 95%). A few QRISs reported that they used data to evaluate equity in their rating determinations ($n = 3$, or 7%).

Nearly all QRISs included some online processes as part of their rating process, such as verification of program documentation ($n = 28$, or 67%), completion of the QRIS application ($n = 27$, or 64%), rating assignment ($n = 26$, or 62%), or rating documentation ($n = 24$, or 57%; see table 7).

Table 7. Online Components of the Rating Process

	Number of QRISs
Verification of documentation	28 (67%)
Application	27 (64%)
Rating assignment	26 (62%)
Rating documentation	24 (57%)
Other	16 (38%)
No online automation of the rating process	6 (14%)

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data about online portions of the rating process in 2021.

Ongoing Rating Process

QRISs use different approaches to the rating process. More than half of QRISs allowed programs to apply for and receive any rating level for which they qualify ($n = 22$, or 52%). In other QRISs, programs could receive the rating they qualify for without applying for a specific level ($n = 16$, or 38%) or had to progress sequentially through the QRIS levels ($n = 4$, or 10%).

Ratings remain valid for 1 to 5 years, depending on the QRIS rules. In less than half of QRISs, ratings were valid for 3 years ($n = 18$, or 43%), followed by 1 year ($n = 12$, or 29%) and 2 years ($n = 9$, or 21%; see table 8). Among the QRISs that selected “other,” the most common reason was that the length of time a rating is valid varies based on level.

Table 8. Length of Time a QRIS Rating Is Valid, 2021

	Number of QRISs
Five or more years	2 (5%)
Four years	0 (0%)
Three years	18 (43%)
Two years	9 (21%)
One year	12 (29%)
Less than one year	0 (0%)
Other	14 (33%)
No specific length of time the rating is valid	1 (2%)

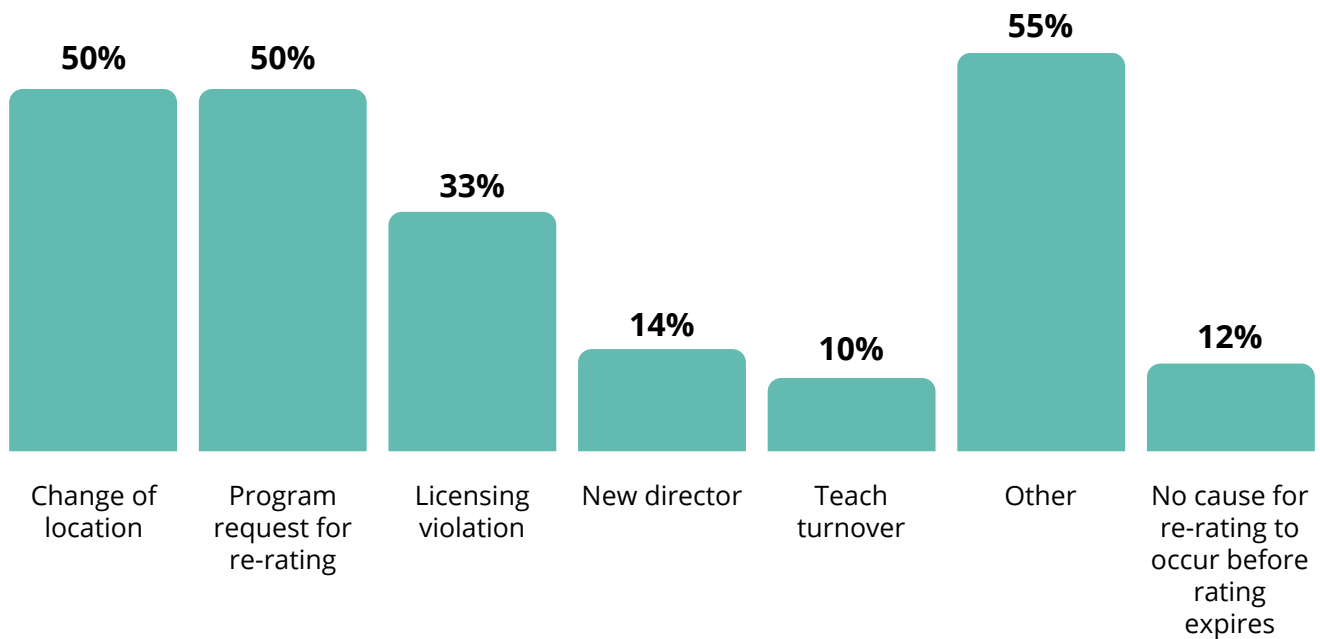
Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS) [Data system]*. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data about the length of rating in 2021.

Upon rating expiration, most QRISs ($n = 36$, or 86%) had similar processes for re-rating and initial rating. Most QRISs ($n = 36$, or 86%) had an appeals process for programs to appeal their rating if they disagreed. In the 2020 survey, 23 QRIS administrators reported that their re-rating deadlines were extended or that re-rating processes were paused during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris et al., 2021).

The most common reasons QRISs required re-rating before expiration include a change of program location ($n = 21$, or 50%), program request for re-rating ($n = 21$, or 50%), and a licensing violation ($n = 14$, or 33%; see figure 7). Fifty-five percent of QRISs selected “other” reasons for re-rating, including temporary changes to license status (e.g., a conditional or probationary license), a new owner, and noncompliance with QRIS policies or practices.

Figure 7. Causes for QRIS Re-Rating to Occur Before a Rating Expires, 2021

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: $N = 42$.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided data about re-rating in 2021.

References

Harris, P., Blasberg, A., Mathias, D., & Wright, M. S. (2021). *The impact of COVID-19 on early care and education quality initiatives*. Child Trends; BUILD Initiative. https://qualitycompendium.org/assets/documents/Impact_of_COVID-19_on_ECE_Quality_Initiatives.pdf

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Appendix

Table A1. Number of QRISs That Require Specific Scores at Each Level, by Observational Tool

Observational Tool	Specific Score Required at Level 1	Specific Score Required at Level 2	Specific Score Required at Level 3	Specific Score Required at Level 4	Specific Score Required at Level 5
ECERS-R	0	1	4	5	4
ECERS-3	1	5	11	10	8
ITERS-R	0	2	6	7	4
ITERS-3	1	3	7	7	8
SACERS-R	0	3	6	5	4
FCCERS-R	0	3	8	8	6
FCCERS-3	1	2	5	6	6
CLASS Pre-K	1	2	5	6	4
CLASS Toddler	1	2	3	4	3
CLASS Infant	1	2	3	4	3

Source: BUILD Initiative & Child Trends. (n.d.). *A catalog and comparison of quality improvement systems (QIS)* [Data system]. <http://qualitycompendium.org/>

Note: Frequencies tend to be higher at levels 3 and 4 than at level 5 because QRISs vary in the number of levels included in their systems.

The total number of QRISs is based on the number of QRISs that provided this data in 2021.

Table A2. Observational Tools Commonly Used by QRISs

Observational Tool	Citation
ECERS-R	Harms, T., Clifford, R. M., & Cryer, D. (1998). <i>Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, revised edition</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
ECERS-3	Harms, T., Clifford, R. M., & Cryer, D. (2014). <i>Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, third edition (ECERS-3)</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
ITERS-R	Harms, T., Cryer, D., & Clifford, R. M. (1990). <i>Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
ITERS-3	Harms, T., Cryer, D., Clifford, R. M., & Yazejian, N. (2017). <i>Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, third edition</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
SACERS-R	Harms, T., Jacobs, E. V., & White, D. R. (1995). <i>School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS)</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
SACERS-U	Harms, T., Jacobs, E. V., & White, D. R. (2013). <i>School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, updated edition (SACERS)</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
FCCERS-R	Harms, T., Cryer, D., & Clifford, R. M. (2007). <i>Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, revised edition (FCCERS-R)</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
FCCERS-3	Harms, T., Cryer, D., Clifford, R. M., & Yazejian, N. (2019). <i>Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, third edition (FCCERS-3)</i> . Columbia University, Teachers College, Teachers College Press.
CLASS Pre-K	Pianta, R. C., La Paro, K. M., & Hamre, B. K. (2007). <i>Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) manual, pre-k</i> . Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.
CLASS Toddler	La Paro, K. M., Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2012). <i>Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) manual, toddler</i> . Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.
CLASS Infant	Hamre, B. K., La Paro, K. M., Pianta, R. C., & LoCasale-Crouch, J. (2014). <i>Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) manual, infant</i> . Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.