



QRIS Elements

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About QRIS

A quality rating and improvement system (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 and education providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. Even providers that have met the standards of the lowest QRIS levels have achieved levels of quality that are beyond the minimum requirements to operate.

QRIS are composed of five common elements: (1) standards; (2) accountability measures; (3) program and practitioner outreach and support; (4) financial incentives; and (5) parent/consumer education efforts.

QRIS Elements

The following includes summaries of the five common elements around which QRIS are built. Examples from State QRIS are included to illustrate each element. These examples do not include all States that have a QRIS, but are meant to represent a range of approaches States have taken to develop/implement these systems.

I. Standards

QRIS standards are used to assign ratings to programs that participate in QRIS, providing parents and the public with information about each program's quality. States typically use licensing standards as the starting point, or base of the system, on which higher levels of quality standards are built. Every QRIS contains 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. The types of standards that are used to assign ratings are based on research about the characteristics of programs that produce positive child outcomes.

Categories of standards in statewide QRIS include the following:

- Staff qualifications and professional development;
- Learning environment;
- Curriculum;
- Administration;
- Parent and family involvement;
- Licensing compliance; and
- Child-staff ratios and group size.

States have developed three methods for assigning ratings.

1. **Building block approach** – In this approach, all the standards within each level must be met in order for programs to move to the next level.
 - ◆ **Delaware** has a five-level system, with the fifth level being the highest rating. Licensing rules serve as the standards for Star Level 1. With each higher star level, a program is required to meet increasingly higher quality standards in the following categories: qualifications and professional development, learning environment and curriculum, family and community partnerships, and management and administration.
 - ◆ **Kentucky's** system is based on four levels, with five standards for each level: child-staff ratios, curriculum, training, regulatory compliance, and personnel. Once programs meet all five standards in level one, they can move to level two, and so forth through all levels.
 - ◆ **Maine's** system is based on four levels and includes sets of standards for child care centers, family child care (FCC) homes, school-age care programs, and Head Start programs.

2. **Point system** – In this approach, every standard is assigned a number of points, which are combined to determine the quality rating.
 - ◆ **Vermont's** system is based on five “arenas of actions” (i.e., standards): licensing compliance history, qualifications and training, family and community resources, program assessment, and program administration. Programs can earn from one to three points in each arena for additional services beyond licensing requirements. Programs achieve a range of points from one or more arenas, and the total determines the overall rating.
 - ◆ **Wisconsin** has a five star system based on earning points in four categories of standards—qualifications, learning environment and curriculum, professional practices, and health and wellness. Providers earn one star for being in compliance with licensing regulations. A range of points are required at each star level, up to a maximum range of 33-40 points to achieve five stars.

3. **Combination approach** – In this approach, a combination of the building block approach and the point system determines program ratings.
 - ◆ **Iowa's** system uses a building block approach for lower levels and a point system for higher levels.

II. Accountability Measures

Accountability and monitoring processes are used 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, QRIS is monitored by the licensing agency alone or in partnership with the subsidy agency or a private entity. Most often, monitoring is conducted by separate QRIS staff within the licensing agency. Most States monitor annually, but some monitor more frequently.

States use a variety of approaches for monitoring QRIS standards—onsite monitoring visits, program self-assessment, and document review and verification. States also rely on monitoring conducted through State

licensing to ensure minimum requirements are met, and program assessments conducted by accrediting bodies to determine whether programs have met accreditation standards.

- In **Ohio**, the licensing field agencies have staff dedicated to monitoring programs participating in the QRIS. It evaluates rated programs annually.
- **Oklahoma** Stars Outreach Specialists review and approve QRIS applications, licensing specialists monitor programs for licensing compliance and overall QRIS compliance three times a year, and university-based evaluators complete environment rating scale assessments every 3 years for programs that receive two or more stars.

Environment rating scale (ERS) assessments for programs participating in the QRIS are required in 20 States. Most of the States use only the ERS developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These scales are the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised, the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale–Revised, the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, and the Family Child Care Rating Scale.¹

The ways ERS assessments and scores are used within QRIS varies among the 20 States that require assessments.

- In 13 States (**Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee**), ERS scores are used to determine rating levels.
- In five States (**Colorado, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, Wisconsin**), programs can earn points for ERS scores. The points contribute to the overall rating.
- Two States (**New Hampshire, Oklahoma**) require programs to be assessed with ERS, but do not tie particular scores to the ratings.
- In **Ohio**, self-assessments are required, but programs can use an ERS, **the Early Learning and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO)**, or other assessment tool, and scores are not tied to ratings.

Some States use other assessment tools:

- **Oklahoma** recognizes the **Child and Caregiver Interaction Scale, the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale, the Early Learning and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO), and the Program Administration Scale (PAS)**.
- **Ohio** recognizes the ELLCO tool for its self-assessment requirement.
- **Massachusetts** also requires assessments with the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) or Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale to measure teacher-child relationships, and the PAS for administration. Assessment with the Business Administration Scale (BAS) is required for FCC providers.
- **Mississippi** uses scores from ERS and the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale to determine rating levels.
- 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.

¹ The ERS 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.

III. Program and Practitioner Outreach and Support

Support for providers, such as training, mentoring, and technical assistance, are included in QRIS to promote participation and help programs achieve higher levels of quality.

All States currently have **professional development support systems** 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.

- **North Carolina** has worked to ensure that every community college offers early childhood coursework leading to the credentials specified in its QRIS, and has a statewide articulation agreement to support the transfer of credits and degrees from one higher education institution to another.
- **Oklahoma** established early childhood scholar coordinator positions in each community college to counsel and support child care staff pursuing coursework and degrees.
- **Pennsylvania** redesigned its professional development system to integrate program technical assistance, creating a program improvement system aligned with its QRIS.
- **Wisconsin** has YoungStar Regional Offices located across the State that have been charged with providing training, technical assistance, and support for providers who participate in YoungStar. The YoungStar Regional Offices are also charged with assigning ratings to providers in their area and administering micro-grants. Technical Consultants help programs create a plan for how to spend the micro-grant dollars.

States also promote participation in QRIS by providing **technical assistance**. A mentor or coach may be assigned to 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 regarding caring for infants and toddlers or integrating children with special needs.

- Qualistar in **Colorado** provides programs with an initial star rating and a Quality Performance Profile with a 1-year action plan for improvement. Coaches help programs implement these plans.
- **North Carolina** has aligned all of the available technical assistance and support through the Smart Start initiative in order to help programs attain higher star ratings.
- **Pennsylvania** provides onsite technical assistance to all programs participating in the QRIS. It has developed service delivery plans and established a database to track the provision of technical assistance.

In most States, QRIS is voluntary, so States conduct **outreach activities** to promote the QRIS goals and encourage programs to participate. States have done this in a variety of ways:

- Developing outreach materials that are distributed through licensing agencies, CCR&R agencies, trainers, college faculty, Child and Adult Care Food Program staff, United Way agencies, and others;
- Posting information and materials on Web sites;
- Conducting orientation sessions about the QRIS for child care programs;
- Conducting orientations for other organizations that have contact with child care programs in the community; and

- Designating specific outreach staff to encourage programs and provide assistance.

IV. Financial Incentives

QRIS use **financial incentives** to help child care programs 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 higher reimbursement rates linked to the CCDF child care subsidy system, bonuses, quality grants, or merit awards; loans linked to quality ratings; and priority given to applications for practitioner wage initiatives, scholarships, or other professional development supports.

- Twenty States (**Colorado, Delaware, District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Vermont, and Wisconsin**) with a QRIS provide tiered subsidy reimbursements, in which higher quality programs are paid higher reimbursement rates for the children who receive child care assistance (if programs charge tuition at or above that higher reimbursement rate). The following are examples from three States.
 - ◆ Licensed child care centers and family/group child care home providers in **Illinois** serving children eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program receive a quality bonus of 5 percent, 10 percent, 15 percent, or 20 percent to the standard payment rate based on the Star Level completed in the Illinois Quality Counts Quality Rating System. License-exempt FCC providers also receive quality bonuses to their payment rates for completing training tiers.
 - ◆ **Montana** has a two-star QRS. Reimbursement rates for one-star facilities are increased at 10 percent more than the base rate. Two-star facility reimbursement rates are increased at 15 percent more than the base rate.
 - ◆ Providers participating in **Tennessee's** Star-Quality Child Care Program receive higher reimbursement rates. One-star programs receive 5 percent more than the base rate, two-star programs receive 15 percent more, and three-star programs receive 20 percent more.
- **Arkansas** has incentive grants that are renewable as long as providers maintain quality standards.
- **Colorado** awards both public and private funding for school readiness grants to child care centers in districts with low-performing public schools.
- **Delaware** has several awards available to programs: the participation award for completing quality improvement plans, professional development support grants, quality improvement grants for implementing quality improvement plans, and Merit Awards for achieving higher star levels.
- **Idaho** has QRIS Funding Grants that providers can use to meet the goals outlined in their QRIS Improvement Plans, prior to requesting a STAR Rating.
- One of the financial incentives offered in **Indiana** is financial support for the accreditation process for providers who have achieved the third level and desire to become accredited and reach the fourth level.
- In **Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, and Vermont**, programs can receive a one-time cash award when they reach each star level.
- In 2007, the **Louisiana** Legislature passed a package of tax credits known as the School Readiness Tax Credits that support the Quality Start QRS. The tax credits took effect on January 1, 2008, and include benefits for families with children enrolled in rated centers, child care providers who serve children receiving child care subsidies, child care teachers and directors who work in rated centers, and businesses that support quality child care.

- **Massachusetts** will award QRIS Program Improvement Grants of up to \$10,000 to 300 to 600 programs across the State through a Request for Proposal process.
- **Montana** offers both mini-grants (up to \$1,500) and larger grants (up to \$15,000) linked to QRIS and other quality improvement efforts.
- Funding priority is given for **New Mexico's** Child Care Facility Revolving Loan Fund to facilities that intend to use the funds to reach levels 3, 4, and 5 of the Look for the Stars QRIS.
- **Pennsylvania** offers four grant programs: a one-time Start With STARS award for beginning programs, STARS support grants for quality improvement efforts, STARS merit awards for helping programs maintain quality ratings, and annual education and retention awards for programs that employ teachers with early childhood degrees.
- **Rhode Island** gives providers a one-time quality improvement cash award of \$250 for participating in BrightStars. Additional quality improvement funds are available based on the program's licensed capacity.

V. Parent/Consumer Education Efforts

QRIS provide a framework for **educating parents** about the importance of quality in early care and education. Most QRIS award easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to programs 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, while others promote QRIS through media, posters, banners, certificates, decals, pins, and other items that are displayed by rated programs. In addition, CCR&R agencies play a vital role in parent education.

- **Colorado's** Qualistar program featured a front-page article on ratings in a Denver magazine. Because of this publicity, calls to Qualistar increased from 300 to 15,000 calls per month.
- A county newspaper in **Kentucky** published the ratings of child care providers and the number of children served by each provider.
- **Tennessee** succeeded in having TV stations in the four major media markets of the State run a feature announcing the results of the programs that were rated each week.
- The following are examples of States that have information on their QRIS Web sites specifically for parents:
 - ◆ **Colorado:** <http://www.qualistar.org/home.html>;
 - ◆ **Illinois:** <http://www.ilqualitycounts.com/quality-rating-system/parent-information>
 - ◆ **Indiana:** <http://www.childcareindiana.org/childcareindiana/ptq.cfm>
 - ◆ **New Mexico:** <http://newmexicokids.org/>;
 - ◆ **North Carolina:** http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/parents/pr_sn2_ov_sr.asp;
 - ◆ **Rhode Island:** <http://www.brightstars.org/parents/>;
 - ◆ **Vermont:** <http://dcf.vermont.gov/cdd/stars/>; and
 - ◆ **Wisconsin:** <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/parents.htm>.