



INFORMATIONAL BRIEF

Early Childhood Education: What is a Quality Rating and Improvement System?

What is a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)?

The concept of a QRIS has been applied in over 20 states as way to assess and rank the level of quality in child care programs and support improvements in quality. All QRISs include programs serving preschool children, and most also extend to programs serving infants, toddlers, and school-age children.

QRISs are designed to make child care quality transparent and easily understood through a simple rating system. And, QRISs are intended to improve child care quality by providing incentives and supports to help child care programs meet higher levels of quality.

So QRISs typically include 5 key elements:

1. Quality standards — based on research about what is most effective in preparing children to be successful in school
2. Accountability a means of assessment and monitoring
3. Outreach and support for providers - including technical assistance and training
4. Financial incentives for providers specifically linked to the quality standards
5. Parent education- educating parents about how the QRIS works

All statewide QRISs focus on child care settings, but some include a broad range of early care and education programs.

Why is it important to create this kind of system and then go through all the effort to make it work?

There are really four reasons why some kind of QRIS is important to implement:

First, we know from comprehensive research that the value of the educational experience that young children in out-of-home setting have is directly related to the kinds of standards that are typically included in a QRIS. The future achievement of children in K-12 education is built on this early learning foundation. Especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, quality early learning programs can make a dramatic difference in how successful they are as they enter K-12 schools.

Second, a QRIS provides families with more information on which to base their decisions about where to send their child for care and early learning. We know that more and more families depend on some form of early learning and care as necessary to enable them to work or to enhance their children's development. With more information, families can make more informed choices.

Third, a QRIS provides standards for child care providers to use when deciding how to improve their own programming, and resources to help them improve.

Finally, a QRIS provides benchmarks for communities and state government to measure the effectiveness of child care programs in enhancing child development and early learning.

Who does the QRIS apply to?

While details of Wisconsin's QRIS have yet to be worked out, the initial plan is that it will apply to licensed child care providers who serve children funded through the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program (over 60,000 per month). Child care providers must be licensed if 4 or more children unrelated to the provider are served. Licensed family child care programs are licensed for up to 8 children, and licensed child care centers care for 9 or more children. The Department of Children and Families is responsible for child care licensing and for Wisconsin Shares.

What does "levels" mean as it relates to a QRIS?

Depending on how it is developed, the concept in other states often includes 3-5 levels of quality that go from a basic level in which a basic level of health, safety, and development standards are met, up to higher levels of quality. All QRISs in other states include measures of (1) staff training and education, and (2) classroom or learning environment. States differ on whether they include measures on parent involvement, staff-child ratio, access by children with disabilities, national accreditation status, or other research-based standards that we know relate to quality improvements.

How does this affect existing providers?

The initial plan provides that current licensed providers would automatically be considered a Level I provider. Once the standards are adopted, programs can then apply to be evaluated to determine if they meet higher levels of quality.

Will increasing quality require an increase in costs of operations for providers?

Depending on how the standards are established, there may be some things that providers can do, with support and technical assistance support from the Division of Children and Families, which can help move them up the rating scale with limited additional cost. As the standards get higher, particularly in the area of teacher qualifications and training, the time and

cost involved in hiring and retaining more experienced and qualified teachers will definitely have an impact on provider costs.

The greatest challenge facing Wisconsin's child care program is the ability of providers to recruit, train, and sustain well-qualified teachers. Most parents in the private child care market cannot afford to pay fees supporting well-qualified staff, and the payment rates in the Wisconsin Shares subsidy program do not adjust depending on whether a program has high, average or low quality.

Given those assumptions about increasing costs, will there be increasing funding for higher quality programs through the Wisconsin Shares program?

The Governor's 2009-11 budget proposal contains funding to support development and implementation of a QRIS, including some technical assistance and training supports, as a necessary first step toward more complete implementation of a QRIS. It does not currently contain funds designated to provide increased reimbursements to higher quality providers and does not include a significant new commitment to helping providers improve the quality of their programs.

What do we know about the impact of QRIS in states that have implemented them?

While evaluation data is not extensive in this developing field, we do have some information from North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania. North Carolina has had a QRIS since 1999, combined with its Smart Start initiative (a public private initiative that provides funding designed to ensure children enter school healthy and are ready to succeed by investing in quality improvements for early learning programs). In 10 years, child care programs meeting high quality standards (4- or 5-star ratings) have increased from 20% to 56%.

Oklahoma's evaluation of its "Reaching for the Stars" program has found a significant increase in the quality of programs serving subsidized low-income children. Pennsylvania found that its Keystone STARS system has reversed a trend of declining quality in its state.