

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: what they are and why they matter

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The BUILD Initiative was established by the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative in 2002 with a vision of supporting US states in the development of high-quality early childhood systems. In 2009, BUILD led the development of the QRIS National Learning Network, recognising the importance of the new state strategy of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems in building high-quality early learning systems. This article explores the history and current challenges of QRIS.

Prior to the 1990s, childcare in the USA was seen as babysitting, a place for children to go while their parents worked. State regulation was generally minimal, focusing on health and safety issues and in many cases not even requiring workers to have a high school degree. In the early 1990s, legislation to expand support for low-income working families led to new funding for childcare – and an opportunity for childcare advocates to institute new strategies to improve quality and assist parents in choosing the best possible care for their children.

In the late 1990s, a few states began development of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) for these very reasons – to improve the quality of care for young children and help their families find high-quality care. The first QRISs were launched in Oklahoma, North Carolina and Colorado; now nearly every US state has one.

What is a QRIS?

A QRIS is an organised way to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early care and education programmes. A QRIS empowers parents to become informed consumers who can choose high quality for their children; gives policymakers effective tools to improve the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC); promotes accountability so that donors, legislators and taxpayers feel confident investing in quality; gives providers a road map to quality improvement; and promotes the health and development of children in early care and education.



△ Photo: BUILD Initiative

How does a QRIS work?

A QRIS affects the ECEC market in three main ways:

1 Quality assurance

All QRISs have progressive quality standards – usually three to five levels of quality, often denoted by ‘stars’ – based on research and best practice, and particularly emphasising teacher education, teacher/child ratios and classroom environment. The systems also include monitoring and assessment to determine how well providers are meeting quality standards.

2 Programme supports

Childcare programmes receive support under a QRIS, such as technical assistance on conducting self-assessments and developing quality improvement plans, and professional development to enhance the knowledge and skills of practitioners and increase their educational qualifications. Financial incentives are offered to providers to encourage improvement, and significant ongoing financial awards help to maintain higher quality.

3 Parent information

Using easy-to-understand symbols – usually star ratings, as with hotels and restaurants – helps guide parents in their search for quality care. Programmes’ ratings are publicly available and financial incentives are sometimes offered to reward consumers who choose higher quality.

While there are similarities across states, there are also many differences. Some focus on raising the floor of quality; some emphasise connecting families to other services that support healthy child development; some focus on school readiness. These in current US jargon are referred to as ‘child outcomes’.

Some states have built their QRIS into their childcare licensing system: the first star indicates that a programme meets the minimum requirements of licensing, and additional stars reflect higher standards such as improved teacher education or classroom environments, or a lower staff/child ratio. In other states, the QRIS is voluntary and completely separate from childcare licensing. The requirements for quality at each level may be very different.

Many states have instituted a tiered-reimbursement system as a way to incentivise and support the maintenance of quality: programmes serving children from low-income families who receive a childcare assistance from the state may receive a higher level of reimbursement if they are rated at a higher star level. North Carolina’s state legislature determined that state-funded childcare subsidies should only be used in programmes rated at three-star level or higher, and other states are following suit.

What are the pros and cons of a QRIS?

States have found that a QRIS is an important strategy not only in improving the quality of childcare but also in educating both policymakers and parents about the importance of quality early learning. Parents now understand that there are differences in the quality of childcare and that the star rating reflects this. Policymakers may not understand the nuances in the varying levels of quality, but they like the convenience of a rating system that assists with investing public dollars in higher quality.

However, numerous challenges still exist:

- Every state is taking a different approach to the ‘improvement’ component of a QRIS, and the systems are not yet funded at adequate levels to ensure results – additional funding is needed to support quality improvement, reduced staff/child ratios, and increased teacher education and training.
- When states do not require participation in the star rating system, or where there are few incentives, the number of programmes participating may be limited, which impacts both the quality of programmes and the information available to parents.
- Teachers who achieve the higher education levels required under the star ratings often leave childcare to move to schools, where pay levels are higher.

Going forward: what’s next?

We in the field of ECEC need to create greater commonality and shared definition than currently exist. We need to be clear about what a QRIS is, what are the desired goals of the system, what quality improvement activities are

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funded – and how much they will cost. Without acknowledging the real funding needed to improve quality, we risk diminishing the salience of the term QRIS by using it to mean different things. Moreover, undertaking QRIS activities while knowing that funding is inadequate to achieve the desired outcome may be counter-productive. Rigorous external evaluations of under-funded and immature systems will probably yield findings that these particular QRISs are not achieving desired aims. In turn, this could lead to an erroneous public perception that all QRISs are wasted investments.

We must put more effort into understanding and defining quality in ways that better reflect our multiracial, multilingual, multicultural child and family population, which also includes huge percentages of children living in poverty. Having clarified the cost of quality, we must seek with urgency the funding necessary to ensure that every young child has the opportunity to develop and learn. Early childhood systems have made many advances since the first QRIS, but we are still in the early years.

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