

Building a High-Quality Early Education System: QRIS

In Massachusetts, 92% of all children under the age of 7 are cared for by someone other than a family member on a regular basis.¹ Research clearly shows that it is the *quality* of early education and care programs that matters most.² Yet parents, policymakers, and the general public lack clear, consistent, and reliable information on the quality of such programs in Massachusetts. In order to ensure that families across the state have access to high-quality early education programs, a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) can be used to implement uniform and unbiased measures of quality, transparent ratings of quality, and comprehensive support for improving quality. QRIS promotes high-quality in all settings for children from birth through school-age, while leading to increased accountability for public funds. The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) is currently piloting a QRIS and anticipates full implementation by January 2011.

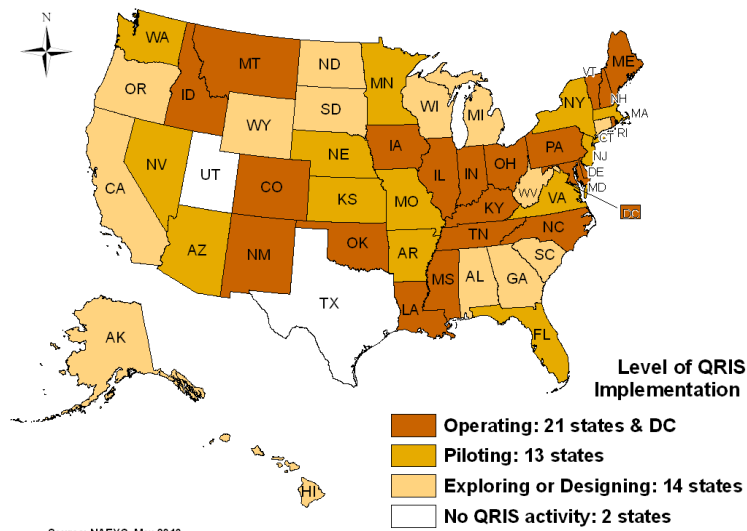
States have increasingly recognized the need for additional quality indicators to account for early education programs that fall between licensed programs that meet health and safety standards and accredited programs that achieve research-tested measures of quality. Since the typical early education program in Massachusetts is licensed but not accredited (only 35% of center-based programs are accredited), there is no objective basis to judge the quality of services provided by the majority of programs serving young children.³ Knowing the quality of all programs is necessary for decision-makers to understand what quality gaps currently exist, effectively target funding and supports to address those gaps, establish incentives for programs to improve, and empower parents to make informed choices about their child's early education and care.

QRIS Design

QRIS rating scales usually define three to five levels of program quality and may allow for financial incentives to align with quality levels, thus providing strong motivation for programs to participate and move up the scale. For example, programs serving subsidized children in Pennsylvania receive add-on daily rate bonuses per child if the program has a rating of two or more stars, with the highest bonus given to four-star programs. Tiered bonuses also apply to educator retention awards for highly qualified directors and staff. In North Carolina, loans to improve facilities are coordinated with the state's QRIS system and converted to grants if programs increase their rating. Financial incentives may also be used to encourage families to make informed choices about quality. Arkansas, Louisiana, Maine, and Vermont offer tax credits to families that enroll children in high-quality programs.

Acting on the urgent need to improve early education program quality, 21 states and Washington D.C. have established a QRIS, and 27 more states are in some phase of development (see map below).⁴

QRIS Development Across the States



Five Common QRIS Components

1. Standards
2. Monitoring and Accountability
3. Program and Practitioner Support
4. Fiscal Incentives
5. Family and Consumer Engagement

Source: Mitchell, A. 2008

QRIS quality standards typically address staff education and training, classroom learning environment, curriculum, leadership and management, and family engagement. QRIS administration involves assessment and program monitoring, and is typically handled by an unbiased entity with strong capacity such as a licensing or subsidizing agency, resource and referral agency, private entity, or some combination of these.

Evidence from other states

As implementation of QRIS has proliferated in the states, evaluations of state QRIS programs can help inform the work in Massachusetts to pilot and implement a system. Research shows that QRIS:

- **Provides reliable indications of quality:** In Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Indiana, Kentucky, and North Carolina, researchers have found that QRIS ratings correlate with independently assessed program quality scores on environmental rating scales (ERS). Programs with high QRIS ratings in Kentucky also tended to have high scores on the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation* (ELLCO); in North Carolina, programs with high ratings had lower rates of teacher turnover and higher staff salaries.⁵
- **Helps improve program quality over time:** Studies examining Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Tennessee have shown that average program ratings increase over time as more programs receive higher QRIS ratings and move out of low ratings.⁶
- **Increases low-income children's access to quality:** A 2005 Oklahoma study found that 76.5% of subsidized children were enrolled in programs at the top two quality ratings, up from 45.8% when the QRIS began two years earlier. This success is largely due to a state policy that prohibits subsidized children from enrolling in programs with the lowest quality rating.⁷

Progress in Massachusetts

To improve the coordination and accountability of early education programs and services in Massachusetts, the Early Education for All Campaign worked with the Massachusetts Legislature, starting with the FY07 state budget, to earmark \$500,000 for the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) to develop a QRIS for programs participating in the Universal Pre-Kindergarten program. As this process evolved, the QRIS plan was expanded to provide a framework for the governance, monitoring and assessment of the entire early education system. EEC convened a QRIS working group of diverse leaders from within the early education and care field and, with the help of national experts, drafted standards for a statewide QRIS. The framework adopted by EEC includes a five-level system tied to five distinct standard categories.⁸ In May 2010, approximately \$3.3 million in QRIS Program Quality Improvement grants was awarded to 640 early education programs for the purpose of advancing programs at least one level before receiving an official rating. This incentive will help ensure high participation rates and tangible quality improvements which will make for a more successful pilot. For more information, visit [EEC's QRIS webpage](#).

A look ahead

A QRIS is essential for identifying and monitoring program quality for children and families, as well as for communicating program and policy needs to lawmakers. With high-quality early education as a fundamental component of the birth-to-college learning continuum, it is critical that Massachusetts develops a comprehensive approach toward supporting both families and early education programs. Implementing a QRIS will help Massachusetts to fully develop a universally accessible system of high-quality early education and care, confident that new investments will help improve child outcomes.

¹ Opinion Dynamics Corporation. (2006). Statewide Parent Survey. Prepared for Strategies For Children.

² For example, low-income children who experience high-quality early education and care are 40% less likely to need special education or be held back a grade, 30% more likely to graduate from high school, and more than twice as likely to attend college. High-quality early education yield an estimated 16% return for every dollar invested. See Reynolds, A.J., Temple, J.A., Robertson, D.L., & Mann, E.A. Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program. Institute for Research on Poverty. Discussion Paper no. 1245-02, 2001.; Reynolds, A. J. et al. (2001). Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest. *JAMA*, 285(18), 2339-2346.; Barnett, W. S. & Masse, L. N. (2007). Comparative benefit-cost analysis of the Abecedarian program and its policy implications. *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 113-125.; Rolnick, A. and Grunewald, R. (2003). Early childhood development: Economic development with a high return. Retrieved from http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/studies/earlychild/abc-part2.pdf.

³ National Association for the Education of Young Children; Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care; February 2009 data.

⁴ National Association for the Education of Young Children, December 2009.

⁵ Barnard, W., Etheridge Smith, W., Fiene, R., & Swanson, K. (2006). Evaluation of Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS Quality Rating System in Child Care Settings; Norris, D., & Dunn, L. (2004). Reaching for the Stars: Family Child Care Home Validation Study Final Report; Elicker, J., Clawson Langill, C., Ruprecht, K., & Kwon, K. (2007). Paths to Quality: Child Care Quality Rating System for Indiana – What is the Scientific Basis? Child Development & Family Studies, Purdue University; Grisham-Brown, J., Grivil, M., Gao, X., & Missal, K. (2008). KIDS NOW Evaluation. University of Kentucky; Bryant, D., Bernier, K., Maxwell, K., & Peisner-Feinberg, E. (2000). Validating North Carolina's 5-Star Child Care Licensing System. Retrieved from <http://nccec.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/qrs-impactqualitycc.html> and http://www.fpg.unc.edu/smartstart/Reports/Validating_Licensing_System_Brochure.pdf.

⁶ Ibid; University of Tennessee College of Social Work, Office of Research and Public Service. (2004). Who Care's For Tennessee's Children?: A review of Tennessee's child care evaluation report card program.

⁷ Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral Association, Inc. (OKCCRRA). (2005). Oklahoma Child Care and Early Education Portfolio 2005.

⁸ As of this writing, EEC has defined the first four levels of its QRIS. Final definitions for level five are yet to be determined.

[Updated May 2010]