MOVING UP THE LADDER

BRIEF

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Aleksandra Holod

Ann-Marie Faria

Emily Weinberg

Eboni Howard

AIR®
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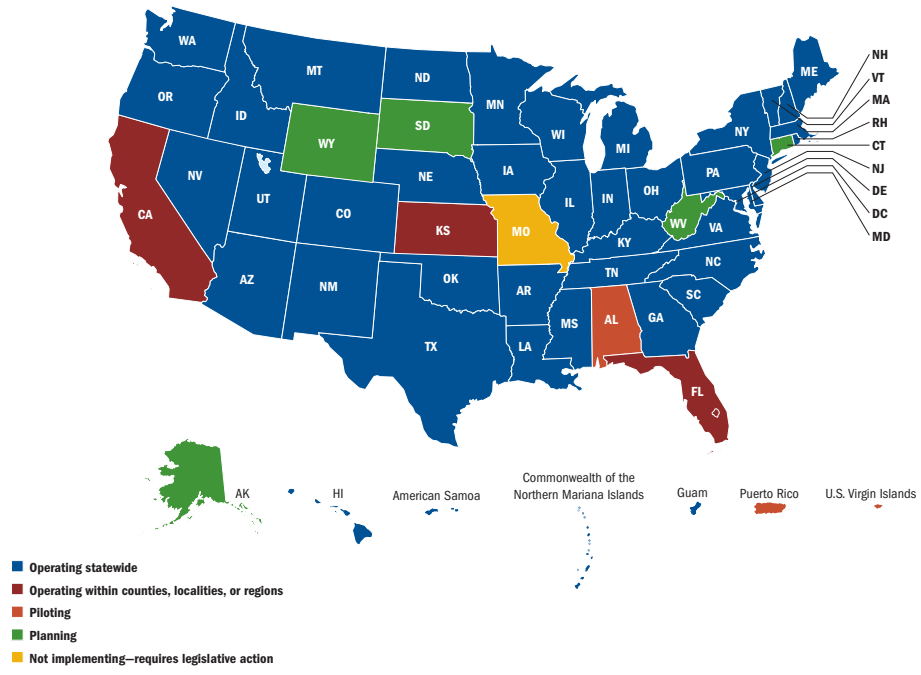
Moving Up the Ladder: How Do States Deliver Quality Improvement Supports Within Their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems?

As national attention has increasingly focused on the potential for high-quality early childhood education (ECE) to improve children's school readiness, states have developed quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) to document the quality of ECE programs, support systematic quality improvement, and provide clear information to families about their child care choices.[1] Nearly all states in the nation currently operate—or are planning to implement—some form of QRIS (QRIS National Learning Network, 2015). (See Exhibit 1.) This brief discusses quality improvement supports, including their prevalence in state and regional QRISs, and key considerations for their implementation.

Exhibit 1. Status of QRIS Implementation in States[2]



[1] See information on the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge initiative: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge

[2] Adapted from http://qrisnetwork.org/qris-state-contacts-map. Map shows the status of QRIS implementation in February 2015.

Initially, QRISs were used to rate the quality of care provided to infants and toddlers in public, subsidized settings. During the past decade, the goals of QRISs have broadened, and QRISs are now used to promote and reward high-quality care settings (Faria et al., 2015). An essential element of a QRIS is the initial *I* in QRIS—the quality *improvement* supports offered to help ECE providers and programs increase their QRIS ratings. Common supports include technical assistance, financial incentives, and workforce development supports. (See Exhibit 2 for definitions of these quality improvement supports.) Although improvement supports are common in existing QRISs, there are several questions about them in the early childhood field, including:

- How do QRISs incorporate improvement supports?
- How do QRISs support ECE workforce development and provide career pathways?
- Which improvement supports are associated with increases in QRIS ratings?

Exhibit 2. Types of Quality Improvement Supports

- **Technical assistance** is support or professional development for individual staff members or a group of staff at a single ECE program. Examples include basic support for QRIS enrollment and participation, coaching and mentoring to improve classroom practice, and consultation by specialists in topics such as infant and toddler care, special needs, or early childhood mental health (NAEYC & NACCRRA, 2011).
- **Financial incentives** are monetary awards that assist programs with the costs of increasing or maintaining quality or reward programs for achieving higher levels of quality. Examples include quality improvement grants, quality achievement awards, and tiered subsidy reimbursements for programs that serve children from low-income households.
- **Workforce development supports** are financial supports and incentives for staff participation in credit-bearing coursework, degrees, and credentials. These supports include scholarships for college coursework, wage enhancements that reward staff for completing additional credits, and retention bonuses that encourage more educated staff to stay in their jobs.

Using the QRIS Compendium to Answer Questions About Quality Improvement Supports

To answer these questions, American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an analysis of quality improvement supports for the 39 state and regional QRISs currently represented in the QRIS Compendium—an online catalog and comparison of QRISs (The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2014). (See Exhibit 3 for the list of QRISs included in the analysis.) The compendium includes profiles for participating QRISs, in addition to downloadable data files that contain quantitative and qualitative data on the features of the QRISs. The data include information about rating criteria and protocols, administrative funding sources, quality improvement supports, and approaches to publicizing ratings. The data stored in the compendium are intended to support the development, evaluation, and improvement of QRISs.

Specifically, AIR was interested in understanding how states use improvement supports within QRISs. To answer this question, the research team coded the compendium data in order to classify the diverse approaches QRISs take to structuring improvement supports. We report summary statistics about the percentage of QRISs that offer various improvement supports to document the current landscape of quality improvement strategies across the country.

How Do QRISs Incorporate Quality Improvement Supports?

Various improvement supports are offered in all QRISs to assist ECE programs and staff in their efforts to improve program quality. However, state and regional QRISs vary in the types of supports they offer to participating programs, the extent to which resources are available to programs, and the partners they use to deliver them.

Of the 39 QRISs, we found that all provide some form of technical assistance (100 percent), often in the form of coaching or consultation. Nearly all QRISs also provide at least one type of financial incentive (97 percent), such as tiered reimbursements and quality improvement awards. Just over half (51 percent) provide workforce development supports, most often in the form of scholarships for credit-bearing coursework.

How Do QRISs Structure Their Technical Assistance?

According to the data in the compendium, all 39 state and regional QRISs offer technical assistance, which ranges from initial assistance in applying to participate in the QRIS to relationship-based coaching and expert consultation.[3] Many QRISs offer more than one form of technical assistance. Quality, dosage, and the targeting of services to specific ECE programs are key considerations in the implementation of technical assistance.

QRISs work with a variety of partners to deliver technical assistance services, and the majority of QRISs offer guidance for technical assistance providers. The quality of technical assistance is related to the qualifications of the technical assistance staff and the guidance and supervision staff receive (Isner et al., 2011; Zaslow, Tout, & Halle, 2012). According to the compendium, child care resource and referral agencies are the most common partners that deliver technical assistance in QRISs (in 62 percent of QRISs). Public agencies (41 percent), community-based organizations (41 percent), and university faculty or staff (15 percent) also deliver technical

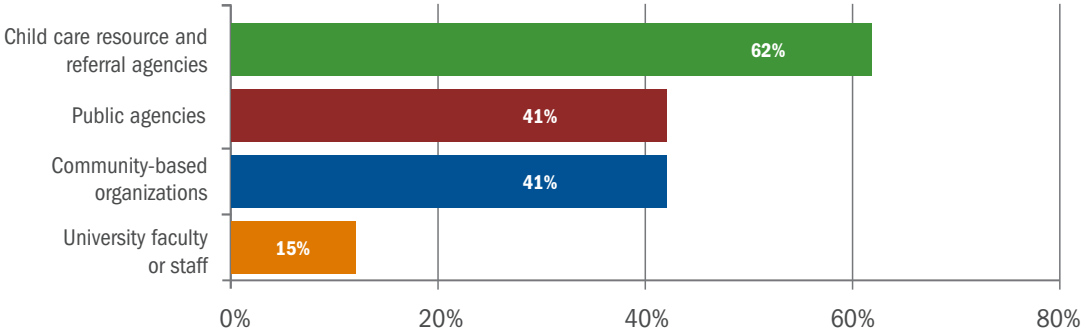
Exhibit 3.
State and Regional QRISs Included in This Policy Brief

- Arkansas
- Arizona
- California
- Colorado
- Delaware
- Florida – Duval County
- Florida – Miami-Dade County
- Florida – Palm Beach County
- Georgia
- Iowa
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Kentucky
- Massachusetts
- Maryland
- Maine
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Montana
- North Carolina
- North Dakota
- New Hampshire
- New Mexico
- Nevada
- New York
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Utah
- Virginia
- Vermont
- Washington
- Wisconsin

[3] One limitation of the available data is that they do not distinguish between coaching and other technical assistance. Therefore, this brief discusses these two types of technical assistance jointly.

assistance, as shown in Exhibit 4. Also, three fourths (74 percent) of QRISs provide guidance and a standardized process for provision of technical assistance. For example, some QRISs publish guides that describe the steps in the technical assistance process. Just over two thirds (69 percent) of QRISs have requirements for the qualifications of technical assistance staff. For example, 36 percent of QRISs in the compendium require that technical assistance providers hold at least a bachelor's degree for one or more types of technical assistance offered.

Exhibit 4. QRISs Work With a Variety of Partners to Deliver Technical Assistance

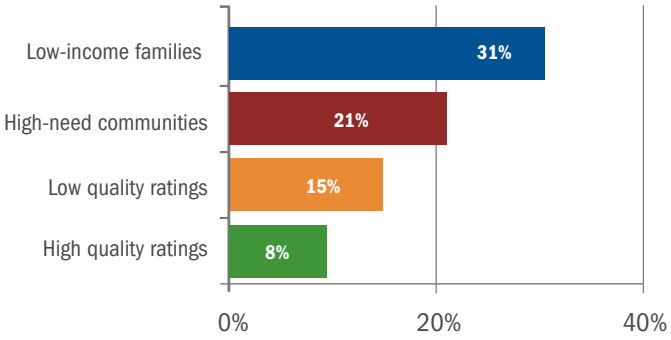


Capacity to deliver technical assistance varies widely across the 39 QRISs. The research team was also interested in the capacity that states have to provide technical assistance services to QRIS-participating programs. Recognizing that many QRISs offer more than one type of technical assistance, the research team compared the total number of technical assistance staff reported in the compendium to the number of ECE programs participating in each QRIS. Among the 39 state and regional QRISs, the number of staff available to provide *any type* of technical assistance, reported as the ratio of technical assistance providers to ECE programs in the QRIS, ranges from 1:4 to about 1:165. (See Exhibit 5.) This finding suggests that caseloads vary considerably and may be quite high for some technical assistance staff.

Exhibit 5. The Ratio of Technical Assistance Providers to ECE Programs Varies Considerably

Most QRISs provide technical assistance to all participating programs, although some technical assistance services are targeted. The distribution of technical assistance resources among ECE programs is another differentiating aspect of implementation. According to the compendium, most QRISs (72 percent) provide technical assistance to all participating ECE programs. However, many QRIS administrators report that some technical assistance resources are targeted to programs that serve children from low-income families (31 percent), high-need communities (21 percent), or programs that receive low (15 percent) or high (8 percent) quality ratings, as shown in Exhibit 6. Formal assessments also may be used to determine which early educators are most likely to be receptive to and benefit from technical assistance services, for example, the Stage of Change Scale for Early Education and Care (Children's Institute, Inc., 2009).

Exhibit 6. QRISs Use a Variety of Criteria to Target Technical Assistance Resources



How Do QRISs Use Financial Incentives to Improve and Sustain Program Quality?

Almost all QRISs provide some form of financial incentive. AIR also examined how states use financial incentives to encourage participation in QRISs and support increases in program quality. We found that 97 percent of QRISs in the compendium offer one or more types of financial incentives for participating ECE programs. In current practice, the dollar value of financial incentives varies considerably across states, from $250 to more than $60,000 (Mitchell, 2012). Available evidence suggests that more generous incentives may be more effective in motivating QRIS participation. Mitchell (2012) conducted an informal analysis of the relationship between incentives and participation rates in voluntary QRISs. Results suggest that states with more generous incentives had higher participation rates, in the 24–60 percent range, and states with less generous incentives had participation rates under 10 percent. However, more research is needed to rigorously evaluate the ideal size of financial incentives (AIR & RAND, 2013; Karoly, 2012).

More than half of the QRISs provide tiered subsidy reimbursements to support quality efforts. Tiered subsidy reimbursements, which are offered in 59 percent of QRISs, increase the per-child payment for ECE programs that serve children from low-income families. Tiered reimbursements may be offered as a flat, per-child dollar amount or a percentage increase in the reimbursement level (Tout et al., 2010). For example, states may add $100 to the per-child payment they give to ECE programs to cover the cost of serving children from low-income families, or they may increase the payment by 10 percent. States have implemented percentage-based tiered reimbursement by increasing reimbursements at higher rating levels and, in some cases, reducing the reimbursements at lower rating levels (The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2014). Across states, rates range from 5 percent below the standard reimbursement rate at the lowest rating level eligible to receive subsidies to 44 percent higher than the standard reimbursement rate at the highest rating level. There is limited evidence that tiered reimbursements, in general, are linked to improvements in program quality: A study by Gormley and Lucas (2000) found that applications for NAEYC accreditation increased in some states when policymakers offered higher levels of reimbursement to accredited programs. The study authors recommended a

59% of QRISs use tiered reimbursement

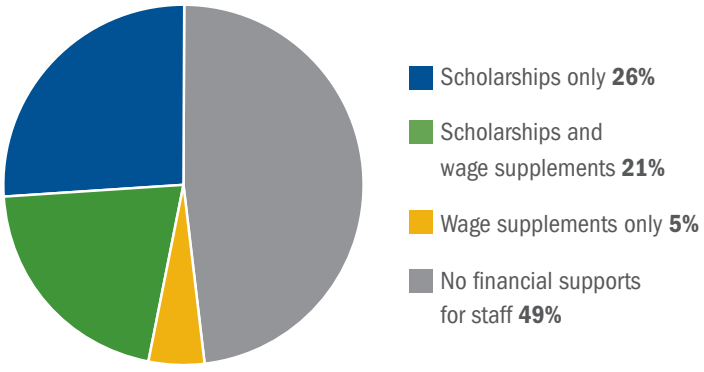
minimum of a 15 percent increase in reimbursement rates, because this is the threshold at which the association was evident. However, the value of tiered reimbursements varies depending on how close the subsidy rate ceiling is to real market rates (Mitchell, 2012). In addition, this approach to financial incentives reaches only ECE programs that serve children who receive child care subsidies.

Improvement grants and bonuses are also common financial incentives in nearly half of QRISs. Improvement grants, offered in 41 percent of QRISs, provide support to programs *before* they increase their quality ratings, to help them accomplish quality improvement goals. Quality achievement awards or bonuses, offered in 54 percent of QRISs, reward programs *after* they achieve quality benchmarks. Some achievement awards are a one-time award for reaching a given rating level, and other awards are provided annually to reward and support programs that maintain high ratings (Mitchell, 2012; Tout et al., 2010). Thirty-eight percent of QRISs also have linked QRIS participation to other sources of funding. For example, some states require ECE programs to participate in the QRIS or to hold a minimum QRIS rating in order to be eligible to receive child care subsidy payments, state prekindergarten funding, or funding for materials and supplies (Faria et al., 2015; The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2014). In addition, families who enroll their children in ECE programs that participate in QRISs may be eligible for targeted scholarships that help cover the cost of child care program fees or copays, if the family receives subsidies (Faria et al., 2015).

How Do QRISs Support ECE Workforce Development and Provide Career Pathways?

Just over half of QRISs offer financial supports for higher education of program staff. Many QRISs assess staff education levels and other professional development as part of the rating process. Staff education typically is measured by the degree, credential, or number of credit hours completed; and professional development is measured as the number of training hours completed. Just over half of QRISs in the compendium (51 percent) offer at least one type of financial support for higher education and other professional development. Specifically, 46 percent of QRISs offer scholarships for higher education coursework or other professional development, and 26 percent of QRISs offer wage supplements. As shown in Exhibit 7, some states offer both scholarships and wage supplements. These incentives may be linked to QRISs through the requirement that recipients work for ECE programs that participate in the QRIS (Mitchell, 2012).

Exhibit 7. Just Over Half of QRISs Provide Scholarships and/or Wage Supplements[4]



[4] Due to rounding error, percentages total to more than 100 percent and vary slightly from those shown in the text.

Wage supplements address the issue of ECE workforce compensation. One of the challenges in increasing the professionalization of the ECE workforce is that wages remain low relative to other professions, for similar levels of education, according to Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes (2014). They note that preschool teachers earn about $30,000 per year on average, which is half as much as comparably educated working women overall and one third as much as men. According to the authors, these low wages contribute to the 13 average annual staff departure rate in center-based settings. Wage supplements address these challenges by augmenting early childhood educators' salaries and rewarding them for remaining with their current employer (Howard, Holod, Sowers, Perrot, & Manship, 2015). These incentives are often tiered by education level so that more-educated staff receive higher payments. These incentives also may be provided as recognition that early childhood educators have completed academic credits or earned a credential. Wage supplements may be paid directly to staff or to ECE programs, who are then expected to pass that funding on in the form of higher wages and compensation (Mitchell, 2012).

Which Improvement Supports Are Associated With Increases in QRIS Ratings?

This is the unanswered question. Despite logic, theory, and some empirical evidence, definitive research about effects of quality improvement supports on teachers and programs, let alone QRIS ratings, is sparse. Little is known about which specific quality improvement supports are most closely related to improvements in classroom quality and child outcomes. Questions also remain about the ideal dosage or intensity of supports. Efforts to evaluate the effects of any one improvement support are complicated by the fact supports are often bundled together. For example, coaching may be offered in conjunction with credit-bearing coursework or professional development workshops (Isner et al., 2011). As a result, it is challenging to attribute any changes in early childhood program quality or child outcomes to coaching as the sole intervention (AIR, MDRC, MEF Associates, and Child Trends, 2014). Even coaching alone has a number of components that can vary (e.g., differing coaching activities, dosage, foci, and methods of delivery), again making it difficult to attribute change in quality or outcomes to a single aspect of the coaching process.

AIR has several projects that focus on this question and other aspects of QRISs. For example, AIR worked with the state of Iowa through the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest to document which types of quality improvement supports are most closely linked with improved QRIS scores. For this project, working with the Iowa Oversight Committee, the research team created a survey of improvement supports. The state administered the survey to a random sample of 600 providers across Iowa, and we are now analyzing the data with Iowa to identify which types of supports are most closely related to programs moving up the ladder of quality on Iowa's quality rating system. The results are due later in 2015 and will be publicly available. AIR's independent evaluation of California's Race to the Top, Early Learning Challenge QRIS, currently underway, is examining how quality improvement supports relate to improvements in program quality, staff professional qualifications, teacher–child interactions, and child outcomes. The study also explores the importance of dosage in quality improvement supports. The study draws on multiple sources of data, including a survey and focus groups conducted with early care and education providers. Results will be reported to the California Department of Education in late 2015.

As states continue to develop their QRISs, further research will be needed to determine which quality improvement supports are most closely related to increases in program quality and child outcomes and how these supports should be structured to maximize their effectiveness. Outstanding questions remain with regard to all three types of quality improvement supports: technical assistance, financial incentives, and workforce development supports. In Exhibit 8, we list some questions that could shape an ongoing research agenda for QRIS researchers and administrators.

Exhibit 8. Current Questions for a QRIS Research Agenda

Technical Assistance

- How do outcomes vary with technical assistance providers' level of education, experience, and training?
- How do outcomes vary with technical assistance dosage and intensity?
- How does technical assistance effect change across the various rating elements in a QRIS?
- To what extent are the effects of technical assistance sustained after technical assistance ends?

Financial Incentives

- What is the ideal dollar amount for financial incentives?
- Are financial incentives more effective in supporting program quality if they are offered in advance of quality improvements or after programs achieve quality goals?
- How do tiered reimbursements relate to program quality; does this vary depending on their relation to the real market rate?

Workforce Development Supports

- How can scholarship programs be designed to most effectively support completion of coursework, credentials, and degrees?
- How successful are wage supplements in reducing staff turnover?

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The Early Childhood and Child Development practice area is in the Education program at AIR. The work focuses on early care and education quality, quality improvement strategies, professional development and coaching, and school readiness topics. At the heart of our early childhood and child development work is a passion to improve the lives of young children, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds. For more information please contact Eboni Howard, Managing Researcher, at ehoward@air.org or visit our website http://www.air.org/topic/education/early-childhood-and-child-development

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