

QRIS Rating Systems Do Not Improve Learning or Social Development for Children

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A proposed bill, HB 2569, would impose a new rating system on child care providers in Washington state, known as the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), on top of the requirements of Washington's normal child care licensing laws.

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) offers money to private, licensed child care providers to change the way they care for young children. The professional staff of a QRIS program first assess child care facilities within a state and assign them a quality rating, generally using a scale of one to five stars. More stars reflect a facility's higher child care quality, as measured by the ability of a child care facility to provide an environment resembling that of a preschool, including college-educated staff holding a specialized degree in early childhood learning. Once an assessment is complete, the typical QRIS program uses money — such as higher subsidy payments, staff training grants or educational scholarships — to induce child care owners to change the star rating of their facilities.

In August 2011, the Department of Early Learning received a \$60 million grant from the federal government, and has chosen to use approximately 73% of this grant to implement a QRIS rating system for child care providers. HB 2569's fiscal note shows that by fiscal year 2017, the Department of Early Learning will spend \$27 million per year to rate, monitor, evaluate and provide QRIS awards and incentives. When federal funding dollars run out, the Department of Early Learning will turn to the state general fund to supply these funds.

In order to evaluate how QRIS programs work in practice, Washington Policy Center examined the QRIS programs of Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Pennsylvania and Oklahoma because these programs have been in effect for eight years or longer. The major findings from the study are summarized below. The full study is available online.¹

Finding #1: QRIS Programs Measure Inputs, Not Actual Outcomes for Children

QRIS programs rate the quality of a facility based on the presence of various inputs. None of the measures assess whether or to what extent a child care facility is improving learning outcomes for children, or whether children are better prepared to enter kindergarten. A report from the Washington Department of Early Learning about QRIS systems acknowledges this fact:

¹ "Review of Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Programs for Child Care Services," Policy Note, November 2009, at www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/Nov.%202009%20QRIS_PN.pdf.

However, currently, there is still no empirical research that specifically links effectiveness of QRIS programs throughout the nation to child outcomes and whether children are better prepared for school as a result of QRIS models.

A comprehensive, longitudinal study by the RAND Corporation of Colorado's QRIS program, one of the longest-running in the country, found no correlation between a child care facility's star rating and improvement in children's cognitive and social development.

Finding #2: QRIS Ratings Hurt Family Group Care Providers

Family group care providers report that the requirements of the QRIS rating system are costly and difficult for them to meet. Since QRIS was imposed in other states, the number of family group care providers has decreased, particularly those of small, family-owned businesses, eliminating jobs for people who don't hold a college degree, but who are otherwise experienced and well-qualified to care for children.

Finding #3: QRIS Programs Are Expensive and Complicated to Administer

Most states use a complex environmental rating scale to measure the learning environment of a child care facility — scales that were originally designed for a very different purpose. These rating scales require government staff to develop program standards and to train employees in visiting facilities and completing lengthy evaluation forms. Employees try to assign official star ratings fairly and consistently among hundreds of child care facilities operating under widely varying conditions. In particular, independent researchers question the effectiveness of the various environmental rating scales used by QRIS programs. Researchers have found that the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) is too lengthy and limited in scope. Physical environment is an important aspect of quality, but researchers suggest that shorter, more economical methods of rating overall quality should be developed instead.

The cost of assessing a child care facility can be as high as \$1,200 per classroom. The cost of a QRIS evaluation may not be a factor when rating a family group home with two staff caring for ten children, but costs escalate rapidly as state officials seek to rate child care centers that can have up to 200 children and two dozen staff. Pennsylvania's QRIS program cost \$62.7 million in fiscal 2008–09.

Finding #4: QRIS Participation Rates Are Low

The proportion of child care facilities rated by a state's QRIS program is consistently low, often less than half of the total number of facilities, except where state officials have made participation mandatory. This suggests that managers of child care facilities generally do not find QRIS programs useful in

raising the standard of care or in persuading parents to choose their facilities over those of competitors. It also suggests parents are using different standards of care to determine what quality means for them; standards that are missed by QRIS program elements.

Finding #5: QRIS Ratings Are Limited in Scope and Often Not Shared with the Public, So They Cannot Guide Decision Making by Parents and Families

Some factors that raise a child care facility's star rating are unrelated to improving quality, such as receiving a star for being licensed by the state, or receiving additional stars for taking in children from low-income families. These factors do not help QRIS program managers or parents know whether a child will receive better quality care at one child care facility compared to another. In addition, in some states full QRIS rating results are not shared with the public.

Conclusion

The research shows that QRIS programs are expensive and difficult to administer, that state funding to sustain QRIS in the future may not be available, that QRIS programs do not raise learning or social development outcomes for students, and that QRIS will tend to eliminate the jobs of people working in small, family group care providers.

Liv Finne is director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. For more information, visit washingtonpolicy.org.