

Review of Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Programs for Child Care Services

Key Findings

1. QRIS programs measure inputs, not actual outcomes for children
2. QRIS programs are expensive and complicated to administer
3. QRIS participation rates are low
4. QRIS ratings are limited in scope and often not shared with the public, so they cannot guide decision-making by parents and families

by Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education
Paul Guppy, Vice President for Research

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This Policy Note is a summary of an in-depth study on QRIS, available online at washingtonpolicy.org.

The Washington Department of Early Learning is considering adoption of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) which would offer financial incentives to private licensed child care providers who agree to strengthen the way they care for young children. The professional staff of a QRIS program first assesses child care facilities within a state and assigns them a quality rating, generally using a scale of one to five stars. More stars reflect a facility's higher child care quality. Once an assessment is complete, the typical QRIS program uses financial incentives, such as higher subsidy payments, staff training grants or educational scholarships, to encourage child care owners to raise the star rating of their facilities.

The first statewide QRIS program started in Oklahoma in 1998. Currently, the District of Columbia and 17 states have such programs. Eleven state QRIS programs provide higher subsidy payments to child care facilities that care for low-income children, which in turn automatically raise a facility's QRIS star ranking. Twenty-eight states, including Washington, have considered, but have not yet implemented, QRIS programs.

In order to evaluate how QRIS programs work in practice, Washington Policy Center analysts examined the QRIS programs of Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma, six states with the longest-running QRIS programs, as all of these states have had a QRIS program for eight years or longer.

These states are reporting that child care facilities have improved the quality of child care, as defined by their QRIS program. Washington's policymakers should, however, consider critical weaknesses exhibited by the QRIS programs in these states.

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 recent report from the Washington Department of Early Learning about QRIS systems acknowledges this fact:

“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.”

An extensive evaluation 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 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 are faced with assigning 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 a 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. Maintaining consistent funding levels can stretch the resources of state social services budgets, and put QRIS programs at risk as lawmakers juggle limited funding among competing public priorities.

FINDING #3: 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 #4: 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.

An Alternative Approach: A Washington Policy Center Proposed Parent Rating System for Child Care

If state QRIS programs are not proving effective at improving early childhood development, improving kindergarten readiness, managing costs or guiding parents, the question naturally arises: What kind of quality-rating system would be of most use to parents, caregivers and state program managers?

Policymakers should consider an alternative approach; a rating system focused on providing fact-based, timely information about child care facilities that is easily available to parents and caregivers, rather than one based on pre-determined rating scales managed by a centralized state agency.

Following is a list, developed by the Washington Policy Center, of fact-based information which could be included in an alternative child care quality system. The specific information about each facility would be based on responses from child care providers themselves, collected through the normal licensing and renewal process, so as not to create an additional administrative burden to child care facility owners.

Washington Policy Center Proposed Parent Rating System for Child Care:

Location and Physical Environments

- Location in the neighborhood, distance from parents' home
- Distance to public transit
- Hourly, daily and weekly rates charged
- Operating hours
- Preparations for emergency and natural disaster
- Compliance with state and local safety, public health and non-discrimination laws
- Handicap accessibility
- Square footage, play areas, building description and physical layout

Director and Staff

- Number of adult staff
- Experience, qualifications and training of staff members
- Experience and qualifications of the director
- Number and ages of children under care
- Number of years in business
- Number of years at same location

Child Care Facility's Policies Regarding

- Daily schedule and activities
- Child illnesses
- Snacks and nutrition
- Toys, games, play rules
- TV, video and other screen time
- Educational methods and philosophy
- Discipline, resolving disputes among children, maintaining order and a safe environment
- Insurance and liability coverage

Comments and Complaints from Parents

- Number of customer complaints filed and resolved
- Feedback and comments
- Enforcement actions, if any, by state officials

This information would be updated through surveys conducted on an annual basis by Department of Early Learning staff. Comments from parents about their experiences with a child care facility, both positive and negative, would be included.

Department of Early Learning staff would monitor parent comments only for evidence of violations of law or danger to children. Simple expressions of customer dissatisfaction would not be enough to prompt state action against a child care facility, but they would be posted online for parents to view, along with a response or explanation, if any, from the facility owner.

In addition to providing the information obtained through this comprehensive survey, this website would actively seek out and post parent comments and reviews for each program listed. Ultimately, a parent rating system would develop, with stars awarded to programs based on parents' experiences, not on conformity with an "environmental rating scale." Parents need information to make choices in concert with their own backgrounds and needs. Thus input from parent would drive improvements in the quality of care, as defined by parents, not government mandates.

The Department of Early Learning already operates an online Licensed Child Care Information System and produces a pamphlet to help parents select child care services. Its website is an important resource for parents and would serve as a basis for building a practical overall rating system. DEL can use this website to tell parents about best child care practices, about the centrality of the parent-child bond to the child's long-term success in life and work, and to inform parents and programs what "quality" interactions with very young children should look like.

In this manner, parents themselves would drive improvements in child care quality. Facility owners are much more likely to be responsive to their customers than to government rating teams and coaches offering monetary incentives. Parents would provide day-to-day oversight and monitoring of these "quality" characteristics in a way that cannot be achieved by annual visits from government inspectors. Through this website, the Department of Early Learning would provide information to parents about quality practices and early learning curricula, and harness the natural inclination of parents to enhance the learning opportunities and the quality of care for all children.

Conclusion

The rating elements currently used by state QRIS programs are not designed to measure outcomes. State QRIS managers report their programs have been successful at moving participating child care facilities up the quality star rating scale. Based on the data reviewed in this study, however, state QRIS programs are not successful at raising overall child care quality as measured by the two primary benefits such programs promise to provide: improving early childhood social, emotional and educational development, and enhancing readiness to learn in kindergarten.

Liv Finne is director of the Center for Education, and Paul Guppy is Vice President for Research at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Seattle and Olympia. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.