



POLICY BRIEF

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

by

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November 2009



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Key Findings

- Since 1998, eighteen states have implemented Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) in an effort to evaluate and raise the quality of private child care facilities.
- The elements which QRIS programs measure do not measure actual early development and educational outcomes for children.
- No empirical research exists which links QRIS systems to improved child outcomes or kindergarten readiness.
- QRIS programs are expensive and complicated to administer.
- QRIS ratings are limited in scope and often not shared with the public, so they cannot guide decision-making by parents and families.
- An alternative rating system could be designed to give parents objective facts and information about child care facilities, similar to the model offered by GreatSchools.net. Such a model would allow parents, not a centralized state agency, to decide which features and characteristics of a child care facility are most important to them.

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Introduction

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 goal would be to improve social, emotional and cognitive development for young children in child care and insure these children are ready to learn as they enter kindergarten.

Any of Washington's 7,400 licensed child care providers who accept the state's definition of "quality care" would be eligible for these incentives. Currently, the Department of Early Learning and its non-profit partner Thrive by Five Washington, are field testing its "Seeds to Success" QRIS pilot program in Clark, Kitsap, Spokane, Yakima and King Counties.¹ Once the model is tested and refined, the Department will consider extending it to all providers.

Adopting a statewide QRIS program is not a new idea. Over the years, a number of states have used QRIS programs in an effort to enhance child care services and improve children's readiness to learn. Before adopting a full QRIS program in Washington, it is important for policymakers and the public to learn from existing state programs, so Department of Early Learning managers can build on the successes, and not repeat the mistakes, of officials in other states.

This study reviews the availability and cost of child care services in Washington, presents current research on the effectiveness of QRIS programs, describes examples of QRIS programs operating in other states and, based on these findings, proposes an alternative model for informing parents and achieving high-quality child care services in Washington.

¹ More on the Seeds to Success program is available at www.del.wa.gov/partnerships/qris/Default.aspx. Field tests of the Quality Rating and Improvement System for Washington state were suspended temporarily due to reductions in the budget of the Department of Early Learning. Field tests resumed in July 2009 due to the provision of \$1 million in federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds.

Child Care in Washington State

Out of Washington's population of 6.4 million people, there are about 464,000 children under kindergarten age.² The vast majority of children in this age group, 355,000 or 77 percent, are cared for in a non-institutional setting; that is, by their parents at home, a friend, neighbor, relative or paid nanny care.³ Other than laws protecting public health and child safety, state policymakers do not impose regulations or license requirements on private, in-home childcare, in recognition of the rights of parents and of the importance of strong family and community ties in the lives of young children.

Included in the 355,000 children are those who are cared for in home settings are three and four-year-olds who attend preschool for less than four hours a day. These preschools are exempt from Washington's licensing requirements, so exact figures are not available. Census figures show that in Washington only about 23 percent of young children receive regular care in a licensed institutional setting.

Thus about 109,000 children under kindergarten age (age five-and-a-half) are in some form of institutionalized care.⁴ These include licensed family group homes and licensed child care centers. A family group home is limited to caring for 12 children, with no more than two infants per adult and with at least one adult for every six children. A child care center is a facility with a maximum of 200 children, with no more than four infants per adult, and up to 15 children per adult caregiver.⁵

Regulation and Declining Access to Child Care

There are approximately 7,400 family group homes and child care centers operating in Washington.⁶ They are licensed and regulated under more than 100 provisions of the Washington Administrative Code and numerous state laws covering child care facilities.⁷ Heavy state regulations have a negative impact on the availability of child care services for families. The Washington Learns Commission reports that the licensing rules for child care are too bureaucratic and do not provide timely information for parents.⁸

The higher regulatory burden and rising costs are contributing to a decline in the supply of affordable child care in Washington. Since its peak in 2002, the number of family group homes has fallen steadily, with a net loss of 1,558 facilities over a five-year period. There has been a smaller decline in the number of child care centers, down by 22 centers or 1 percent over five years, but because child care centers are typically much larger than family group homes, the number of lost

² "2007 Washington State Data Book," Table PT04, Office of Financial Management, State of Washington. This figure includes 422,913 children ages zero to four years, plus half the five-year-olds too young for kindergarten born after September 30th, for a total of 464,000 children under kindergarten age.

³ See "Washington State 2008 Child Care Survey," by Walter R. McDonald & Associates, November 21, 2008, for the Department of Early Learning, page 9, Table 8, "Child Care Center Population," and page 12, Table 11 "Family Home Population," at www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/LicensedChildCareInWashingtonState_2008.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Licensed Child Care in Washington State, A Guide for Families," Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network, at www.childcarenet.org/providers/licensing/.pdf/view.

⁶ "About Licensed Child Care," Washington State Department of Early Learning, at www.del.wa.gov/care/about/.

⁷ Washington Administrative Code, 170-295-001 through 170-295-7080.

⁸ "Washington Learns, World-Class, Learner-Focused, Seamless Education," Governor Christine Gregoire, Final Report, November 2006, page 21, at www.washingtonlearns.wa.gov/report/FinalReport.pdf.

places for children has been proportionately higher. In all, Washington has seen a net loss of 4,225 child care places in licensed care facilities over five years.⁹

The Cost of Child Care

In 2006, the median annual cost at a child care center was \$9,308 for an infant, \$7,800 for a toddler, \$7,124 for a preschooler and \$4,065 for a school-age child. The average salary in 2006 for a director of a child care center was \$33,888 a year; for a teacher it was \$21,444 a year.¹⁰

Family group homes most closely approximate traditional home-based care. In 2006, the median annual cost of a family group home was \$7,020 a year for an infant, \$6,500 for a toddler, \$5,980 for a preschooler and \$3,120 for a school-age child.¹¹

About 41,750 children under kindergarten age receive a federal or state subsidy under Head Start, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) or similar programs to help their families pay for child care.¹² These are voucher programs. Low-income families select the family group or center-based care facility that best meets their needs and use the public subsidy to help pay the market cost of child care.

Head Start provides federal assistance to approximately 19,000 children (mostly four-year-olds and some three-year-olds) in Washington.¹³ The state ECEAP provides preschool to 8,200 children, at a cost of approximately \$6,500 per child per year.¹⁴

At least half of all Head Start teachers must have an entry-level of training recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children called a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. ECEAP requires staff to have a either a CDA or at least 12 quarter credits of formal early childhood education.¹⁵

The Development of QRIS

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a state-run program which seeks to provide better-quality child care services for children and families. The two primary goals of QRIS are to first, improve social, emotional and educational outcomes for children in their infant-to-preschool years (ages zero to five-and-a-half) and second, to increase the readiness to learn of young children as they begin their formal education in kindergarten. Another goal is to inform the

⁹ "Child Care in Washington State, Key Child Care Trends in 2006," Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network, September 2007, page 2, at www.childcare.org/community/state-data-report.pdf.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, page 3.

¹² Per author interview with Steve Rowswell, Information Technology Specialist 5, Department of Early Learning, Olympia, September 20, 2007.

¹³ "About Head Start and the Early Child Education and Assistance Program, Head Start Fact Sheet," Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP, at www.wsaheadstarteceap.com/about_hs_eceap.html. See also, "The State of Preschool 2007," by W. Steven Barnett, Jason Hustedt, Allison Friedman, Judy S. Boyd, Pat Ainsworth, National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007 at www.nieer.org/yearbook/.

¹⁴ "2007-09 Operating and Capital Budget Highlights," Conference Committee, Senate Ways and Means Committee, April 21, 2007, page 11, at www.1leg.wa.gov/Senate/Committees/WM/.

¹⁵ "About Head Start and the Early Child Education and Assistance Program, ECEAP Fact Sheet," Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP, at www.wsaheadstarteceap.com/about_hs_eceap.html.

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a state-run program which seeks to provide better-quality child care services for children and families.

public and families how individual child care facilities rank on the state's quality rating scale.

A typical state QRIS program comprises two primary functions: assessment and quality improvement. The professional staff of a QRIS program first assesses child care facilities within a state and assign them a quality rating, generally using a scale of one to five stars. Some states use scales of one to four stars, or one to six 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.¹⁶

The first statewide QRIS program started in Oklahoma in 1998. Currently the District of Columbia and 17 states have such programs.¹⁷ Eleven state QRIS programs provide higher subsidy payments to child care facilities that care for low-income children, which in turn automatically raise a facilities' QRIS star ranking. Twenty-eight states, including Washington, have considered, but have not yet implemented, QRIS programs.¹⁸

How QRIS Programs Measure Child Care Quality

QRIS programs used in the states measure five aspects of child care services in assessing quality. These aspects are:

1. The child care facility's learning environment;
2. The training, education and experience of the director and staff;
3. The facility's relationship with families in the surrounding community;
4. Whether the facility is accredited, and;
5. The number of children to each adult caregiver.¹⁹

In most states meeting the basic licensing requirement is enough to earn a child care facility one star. To receive the highest rating, usually five stars, a child care facility must generally excel in the five qualities listed above, and gain accreditation from the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or a similar nationally-recognized professional organization.

In assessing the first aspect of quality listed above, the learning environment, most state QRIS programs use one or more of four environmental rating scales (ERS):

1. The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS);
2. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS);
3. The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS);
4. The School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS).

¹⁶ "QRIS and the Impact on Quality in Early and School-Age Care Settings," National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, September 2007, at www.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/qrs-impactqualitycc.html.

¹⁷ These are Colorado, Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Vermont.

¹⁸ "The NAEYC Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) Toolkit," National Association for the Education of Young Children, June 2008, at www.del.wa.gov/publications/elac-qris/docs/NAEYC_QRStoolkit.pdf.

¹⁹ "Quality Rating and Improvement Systems," by Kim Cushing, Senate Committee on Early Learning and K-12 Education, and Paula Moore, Senate Ways and Means Committee, staff memo to committee members, Washington state legislature, December 21, 2007, at www1.leg.wa.gov/documents/senate/scs/edu/QRISMemo.pdf.

QRIS programs used in the states measure five aspects of child care services in assessing quality.

The environmental rating scales were not designed to operate as a part of a larger quality rating system administered by state officials.

These environmental rating scales were developed in 1983 by academic researchers Debby Cryer, Thelma Harms and Cathy Riley of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, to provide child care managers with a self-assessment tool to identify areas of needed improvement in their own facilities. They were not designed to operate as part of a larger quality rating system administered by state officials.

For example, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) comprises a check list of 43 indicators in seven categories. Examples of categories include Space and Furnishings (eight indicators), Personal Care Routines (six indicators), Activities (10 indicators), Program Structure (four indicators) and Interactions (five indicators).²⁰

Each indicator is scored on a seven point scale, for a possible total of 301 points. This rating system takes three to four hours to administer, which is workable for one manager conducting an annual self-assessment of one child care facility, but becomes unwieldy when applied by state officials to thousands of facilities statewide.

Scores on these environmental rating scales are used by the QRIS programs to assess facilities in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Colorado, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina and the District of Columbia.

In New Hampshire and Oklahoma, child care facilities must also participate in an environmental rating scale, but the results do not affect a facility's final QRIS star rating. In Ohio, regular self-assessments are required, but child care facility managers can at their option use an ERS or Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Tool (ELLCO), and scores do not affect a facility's star rating.²¹

It costs Qualistar in Colorado about \$1,200 per classroom to rate a single facility.

Examples of QRIS Programs in Other States

The preceding discussion gives a description of how state QRIS programs are typically designed and what they are intended to accomplish. Following are examples are drawn from states with the longest-running programs and provide the best data on how QRIS programs work in practice.

Colorado

One of the earliest QRIS programs in the nation was created in Colorado by the non-profit Qualistar Early Learning in 1999. Qualistar prepares a regular Early Learning Report which rates child care facilities in Colorado on a variety of quality scales. The reports are made available to parents as they seek child care for their children. Qualistar combines environmental rating scales (ERS) with other indicators to develop a single composite rating for each facility, which is then summarized in its public report.

Qualistar employs 13 rating specialists who apply the various environmental rating scales to Colorado child care facilities. Maintaining consistent reliability in the rating system is costly, time consuming and requires

²⁰ "Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education Settings: A Compendium of Measures," by Tamara Halle and Jessica Vick, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Trends*, November, 2007, see www.childcareresearch.org/location/13403.

²¹ "Quality Rating Systems: How States Are Improving the Quality of Early and School-Age Care Programs," by Abby Cohen, Region IX State TA Specialist, National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, March 2009.

frequent cross checks.²² It costs Qualistar about \$1,200 per classroom to rate a single facility.

Qualistar also manages a placement network called Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, through which the information it gathers about child care facilities is distributed to parents, policymakers and the public across the state.

Participation in Qualistar is voluntary. The state provides child care facility owners who participate with assistance to improve the quality of care. Three types of assistance are available: technical aid to develop business plans, additional materials and equipment to enhance the learning environment, and training for staff in the proper use of materials and equipment.

State-funded grants of up to \$2,500 per classroom are paid to some facilities for coaching, materials and professional development. Colorado policymakers also allow these grants to be used for staff training or educational scholarships. However, the Colorado program does not include higher subsidy payments to child care facilities that raise their Qualistar rating.

Funding for the Qualistar QRIS program comes from a mix of federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and state money for children living in the neighborhoods with low-performing elementary schools. Thus, most of the facilities rated by Qualistar serve children living in high-risk areas.²³ Child care centers not located near low-performing schools do not receive state funds, but can obtain funding from Qualistar through voluntary donations given by private foundations and businesses.

Since its inception Qualistar has rated approximately 10 percent of all family home care and child care centers in Colorado.²⁴ Nearly ten years into the program, 90 percent of child care programs in Colorado remain unrated by the state's QRIS program.

Evaluation of QRIS in Colorado

In 2000, Qualistar managers hired the RAND Corporation to evaluate the effectiveness of the program's rating components. Most of the funding for the evaluation came from private sources, rather than public funds. Donors hoped the assessment would demonstrate a link between child care facilities with high Qualistar ratings and children showing a demonstrated readiness to learn as they entered kindergarten.

RAND conducted its evaluation over a seven-year period, 2000 through 2007. RAND analysts assessed 65 child care facilities and 38 in-home programs providing care for a total of 1,300 children. They collected data three times, twelve months apart. In particular, they measured quality interactions between caregivers and children, and rated children's preparedness to enter kindergarten.

RAND found that the aspects of child care quality measured by the Qualistar program did not correlate with improved kindergarten readiness, better

²² "Examining the psychometric properties of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)," by Michal Perlman, Gail L. Zellman, Vi-Nhuan Le, 19, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 398-412, 2004, page 401.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Author interview with Geneva Hallett, Vice President of Qualistar Ratings, June 5, 2009.

RAND found that the aspects of child care quality measured by the Qualistar program did not correlate with improved kindergarten readiness, better cognitive skills or better non-cognitive skills.

cognitive skills or better non-cognitive skills, such as social development and individual creativity.²⁵

The RAND study found “the absence of a strong link between QRIS ratings and improved child outcomes...” The study authors questioned whether researchers and policymakers should focus more on outcomes for children rather than program inputs.²⁶ Currently state QRIS programs measure only program inputs, not educational benefits for children.

The RAND study found significant problems with two components of the Qualistar program: measuring child-staff ratios and parent involvement. Researchers found that, to qualify for financial grants, many child care managers moved teachers and children to different classrooms through the day to maximize the children’s time with a senior teacher with the most educational training. Qualistar has adjusted its definitions in an effort to correct these and similar manipulations of its rating system.²⁷

In a separate study, RAND researchers examined the use of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and determined that it fails to measure consistently child care quality across a range of factors. Use of the ECERS (ECERS) skewed results against facilities that scored poorly in one aspect of child care quality, such as the physical environment, but rated well in other important aspects of care, such as caregiver time with children. Colorado child care facilities that ranked low on one key measure tended to rank low overall, even if they excelled in other areas.²⁸

Nearly nine years into the program, only about one-fourth of child care facilities in Kentucky have been evaluated.

Kentucky

Kentucky’s QRIS program, Stars for Kids Now, was created in 2000 as part of a broad voter-approved initiative designed to improve childhood development outcomes and school readiness for young children. The initiative funded the program through the state’s share of money received from the Master Tobacco Settlement Agreement lawsuit of 1998.²⁹

The Stars for Kids Now program rates 20 components of child care, in addition to using the environmental rating scale (ERS). The program provides state-subsidized technical assistance at no cost to child care facility owners. It also pays for child care staff to receive additional training and education in early learning.

Child care facilities that improve their ranking on the Stars for Kids Now scale become eligible for one-time payments, in addition to their regular state subsidy, ranging from \$100 to \$5,000, depending on the amount of improvement, the type of child care facility, and the number of children enrolled. Improved child

²⁵ “Assessing the Validity of the Qualistar Early Learning Quality Rating and Improvement System as a Tool for Improving Child-Care Quality,” by Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, Vi-Nhuan Le, Claude Messan Setodji, RAND Education, the RAND Corporation, 2008, at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG650/.

²⁶ “Assessing the Validity of the Qualistar Early Learning Quality Rating and Improvement System as a Tool for Improving Child-Care Quality,” by Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, Vi-Nhuan Le, Claude Messan Setodji, RAND Education, the RAND Corporation, 2008, at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG650/.

²⁷ “Lessons Learned From the Qualistar Rating and Improvement Study Rand Validation Study,” Diana Schaack, principal author, Qualistar Early Learning, October 2008, at www.qualistarearlylearning.net/pdf/Qualistar_RAND_Lessons_Learned_Final_electronic1.pdf.

²⁸ “Examining the psychometric properties of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R),” by Michal Perlman, Gail L. Zellman, Vi-Nhuan Le, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 2004.

²⁹ “Summary of the Attorneys General Master Tobacco Settlement Agreement,” Joy Johnson Wilson, Director, AFI Health Committee, National Conference of State Legislators, March 1999, at www.academic.udayton.edu/health/syllabi/tobacco/summary.htm.

care facilities also become eligible for an additional monthly subsidy payment of between \$8 and \$16 per child, depending on the amount of improvement.

The staff for Kentucky's QRIS program includes eight full-time evaluators, who develop rankings for child care facilities across the state, and 25 coordinators, who provide assistance to child care facility owners working to improve their Stars for Kids Now ranking.

Nearly nine years into the program, only about one-fourth of child care facilities in Kentucky have been evaluated.³⁰ As in Colorado, and despite significant financial incentives, the great majority of child care facilities in Kentucky are not participating in the state's QRIS program.

Evaluation of QRIS in Kentucky

Administrators of Kentucky's QRIS program say the Stars for Kids Now has raised the quality of child care for children, citing annual evaluations conducted since 2002 by researchers at the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville.³¹ In addition, the Stars for Kids Now program has influenced state policy by leading to a rise in licensing standards. Caregivers seeking a child care license in Kentucky must now meet requirements that approximate the standard for a QRIS rating of one star.³²

The annual evaluations, however, only show that participating child care owners are conforming to the state's environmental rating scales and similar requirements. Evaluations of the Stars for Kids Now program do not show that facilities with high star ratings enhance cognitive development for young children or improve readiness to learn in kindergarten. Researchers found no substantial improvement in learning outcomes for children cared for in facilities rated under Stars for Kids Now as compared to children enrolled in other child care facilities.

Due to the shortcomings found by the RAND study in Colorado, changes to Kentucky's QRIS program are being considered. The substantive components of the rating system are now being examined by a new Stars Policy and Research Team to incorporate developments in early childhood research and other trends.

Parents are not currently allowed to review the star ratings for child care facilities operating in their neighborhoods, because the ratings are used by officials to determine subsidy enhancements and program payment incentives. Kentucky officials say one of their goals is to allow parents access to Stars for Kids Now ratings at some point in the future.³³

North Carolina

In 1999, North Carolina officials adopted a QRIS program as part of the state's child care licensing system. Licensing staff working at the state Division of Child Development also became quality evaluators for child care facilities. North

³⁰ Author interview with Holly Acker, Stars Program Coordinator, Kentucky Division of Child Care, April 28, 2009.

³¹ "KIDS NOW Evaluation Project Executive Summary," by Jennifer Grisham-Brown, Rena Hallam, Anita Barbee, Joe Petrekso, Annajtie Faul, Becky Antle, Shannon Frey, and Megan Cox, 2006, at www.education.ky.gov/kde/instructional+resources/early+childhood+development/kids+now+executive+summary+and+enhancing+early+care+and+education+research+to+practice.htm.

³² Ibid.

³³ Author interview with Holly Acker, Stars Program Coordinator, Kentucky Division of Child Care, April 28, 2009.

Kentucky officials say one of their goals is to allow parents access to Stars for Kids Now ratings at some point in the future.

Carolina's program is mandatory; all the state's 8,820 regulated facilities must participate in the rating system.³⁴

Compliance with the program, however, is relatively easy. Meeting state licensing standards is enough to earn a child care facility at least one star. Child care providers can receive additional stars based on meeting additional state standards, hiring more staff, providing staff training and maintaining a consistent record of cooperating with state regulators.

The North Carolina QRIS program incorporates the environmental rating scale (ERS) in evaluating facilities; however a facility may earn up to three stars without meeting any of the requirements of the environmental rating scale.

North Carolina supplements its QRIS program with TEACH (Teachers of Excellence for All CHildren), which provides state scholarships to pay for training and health care benefits for child care workers.³⁵

Also, the state's WAGE\$ program provides salary supplements and incentives for child care staff who complete early childhood education coursework and continue to work in child care. Child care facility owners can seek scholarships through the Smart Start initiative, a collection of 100 local public-private partnerships. Smart Start is funded with a combination of state funds (about \$200 million annually) and private giving (\$257 million in donations since 1995).³⁶

North Carolina's QRIS program provides increased reimbursement payments and other incentives to child care facilities that improve their star rankings.

Funding for North Carolina's QRIS program comes from a mix of federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) dollars, federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Family Funds (TANFF), and state dollars. It is not possible, however, to assess the cost of North Carolina's QRIS program because it is an integral part of the state's larger licensing process.³⁷

Evaluation of QRIS in North Carolina

North Carolina's scholarship programs produce mixed results for child care facilities. Better trained staff bring new skills and enthusiasm to child care work, but some staff leave the child care field to work in federally-funded Head Start facilities, which usually offer higher pay and better benefits. Others return to college to earn an education degree, and then take a teaching position at a public K-12 elementary school, rather than returning to work in child care. This trend creates staff turnover problems for North Carolina child care facilities, as they are often unable to retain staff members who have received additional state-subsidized training.

North Carolina reduces the time and cost of rating child care centers by inspecting only one-third of the classrooms in each facility, with at least one assessment completed for each age group. While lowering costs, this policy means child care facilities do not receive a full quality evaluation.

³⁴ "Child Care Snapshot," Division of Child Development, North Carolina, at www.ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/general/mb_snapshot.asp.

³⁵ "What is NC TEACH?" North Carolina Teachers of Excellence for All CHildren, at www.ncteach.ga.unc.edu/what.php.

³⁶ "About Smart Start, History," The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc, at www.smartstart-nc.org/about/whatisSMARTSTART.htm.

³⁷ Interview by author's assistant, Abby Burlingame, of Peggy Ball, Smart Start National Consultants, National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC), Technical Assistance Specialist, June 30, 2009.

This trend creates staff turnover problems for North Carolina child care facilities, as they are often unable to retain staff members who have received additional state-subsidized training.

Also, many child care facilities do not participate in the state's environmental rating scale, thus limiting how many stars a facility may receive. Following the partial QRIS assessment, child care owners receive a detailed report to assist them in improving the facility's star rating, if they choose to do so.

As of May 2009, only 55 percent of North Carolina child care facilities have received a four or five star rating, out of a possible five. After ten years in place, North Carolina's QRIS program has only raised a little more than half of child care services to the higher levels of quality, even though participation in QRIS is mandatory for all licensed facilities.³⁸

Tennessee

In 2001, Tennessee officials initiated the Star-Quality Child Care Program to improve early childhood development and give parents more information about the quality of care their children receive.³⁹

Tennessee's program is mandatory. During the annual license renewal process, state officials evaluate child care facilities in several areas of quality, including a physical assessment using the environmental rating scales. Areas of quality include the record of cooperation with state regulators, the level of education, training and experience of staff, the ratio of staff to children, on-site observation, the business management style of the director and the level of parental involvement.⁴⁰

After the evaluation, approved child care facilities receive a new license and a report card with their star rating. The report card and a copy of the state license must be posted on the internet for parents and the public to view. The state provides an appeals process that allows child care facility owners to contest QRIS results with which they disagree.

Facilities that achieve a star rating receive a higher state reimbursement payment for the low-income children in their care. Facilities earning one star receive a reimbursement 5 percent above the base rate; two stars earn 15 percent above the base rate; and three stars earn 20 percent above the base rate.⁴¹

Facilities that do not earn a star rating can ask Tennessee's Department of Human Services for funding to make improvements in their child care programs, and then seek a better Star-Quality ranking when renewing their license the following year.

Evaluation of QRIS in Tennessee

In 2006, the University of Tennessee conducted a survey of participants to evaluate how the state's Star-Quality program is working. Three groups were surveyed: the state agencies and other administrators involved in the program, field staff, and the directors and teachers of 52 child care facilities. This study concluded that Star-Quality has produced an improvement in the quality of child care by raising

³⁸ "Regulated Child Care Facilities by License Type, All Enrollment Total" Monthly Statistical Summary, North Carolina Division of Child Development, May 2009, at www.ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/pdf_forms/may_2009_statistical_report.pdf.

³⁹ The Tennessee Star-Quality Program, Background Information, Child Care Services, Tennessee Department of Human Services, at www.tnstarquality.org/html/star-quality.htm.

⁴⁰ "Smart, Safe and Happy Kids," Tennessee Child Care Evaluation and Report Card Programs, at www.tnstarquality.org/html/report_cards.htm.

⁴¹ "Financial Rewards of the Star-Quality Program," Tennessee Star-Quality Child Care Program, Child Care Services, Tennessee Department of Human Services, at www.tnstarquality.org/html/star-quality.htm#rates.

the bar with research-based standards, increasing knowledge about the skills of professionals in the field, and informing parents about different aspects of quality.

Though child care facility owners were generally supportive of the Star-Quality program, they reported that star ratings often do not accurately measure the true quality of care. They also felt they needed more technical assistance from the state about the assessment process and better training in how to implement the state's rating scales.⁴²

This study did not evaluate the impact of the rating system on educational outcomes for children, or readiness for kindergarten.

Pennsylvania

In 2002, Pennsylvania officials created the Keystone STARS QRIS program. STARS stands for Standards, Training/professional development, Assistance, Resources and Support. This is a voluntary program intended to provide targeted financial assistance, professional development and other support to improve the quality of child care available across the state. Participating child care facilities receive from one to four stars, with increasing state reimbursements for low-income children at facilities receiving two or more stars.

The Keystone STARS program does not require use of an environmental rating scale (ERS) for most child care facilities. It does require increasing levels of staff training hours and professional development, and increasing levels of learning materials for the children, in order for a facility to gain a higher star ranking.

The program seeks to save money by allowing owners of child care facilities to receive up to three stars by annually conducting a self-assessment of their facility's learning environment and report the result to the state. Facilities seeking the highest rating, four stars, are assessed by state evaluators who apply one of the standard environmental rating scales (ERS). The result is a considerable savings in the amount of time needed for state officials to conduct QRIS evaluations, but this approach involves some sacrifice of consistency and rigor in how program standards are applied across a wide variety of facilities.

Department of Public Welfare officials report that as of June 30, 2007, five years into the program, only 42 percent of Pennsylvania child care facilities are participating in the Keystone STARS program.⁴³

Evaluation of QRIS in Pennsylvania

Several studies report that child care quality, as measured by Pennsylvania's QRIS system, is improving. No information, however, is provided on the impact of QRIS on child educational outcomes, or on kindergarten readiness.⁴⁴ More than

⁴² "What is Working? What is Not Working? Report on the Qualitative Study of the Tennessee Report Card and Star-Quality Program and Support System," the University of Tennessee College of Social Work and Office of Research and Public Service, November 2006, at www.tennessee.gov/humanserv/adfam/rept_insidess.pdf.

⁴³ "Star Designations, Regional and County Totals, June 2007," Keystone Stars, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, June 2007, page 2, accessible at: www.dpw.state.pa.us/Resources/Documents/Presentations/Child/STARSReportJune07.pdf.

⁴⁴ "QRIS and the Impact on Quality in Early and School-Age Care Settings," by National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, September 2007, at www.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/qrs-impactqualitycc.html. See also, "Evaluation of Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS Quality Rating System in Child Care Settings," by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center, December 2006, at: www.pakeys.org/docs/Keystone%20STARS%20Evaluation.pdf.

Several studies report that child care quality, as measured by Pennsylvania's QRIS system is improving; however, no information is provided on the impact of QRIS on child educational outcomes, or on kindergarten readiness.

half, 57 percent, of Pennsylvania’s participating facilities achieved only the lowest ratings, one or two stars.⁴⁵ In fiscal 2008-09, Pennsylvania’s cost of administering the QRIS system was \$62.7 million, with the state providing approximately 40 percent of the funding and the federal government providing the rest.⁴⁶

Oklahoma

In 1998, Oklahoma officials created a QRIS program as a voluntary component of the state’s regular child care licensing process. The program is funded primarily through federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) dollars. Licensing staff at the state child care division rates facilities on a one-to-three star scale.

Oklahoma offers scholarships to staff of child care facilities to earn degrees in early childhood education at twenty different state community colleges. The majority of enrollees in the community college program are also eligible for federal Pell Grants. The state uses the CCDF dollars to pay for any additional cost for tuition and books. Oklahoma provides funding to community colleges to pay for a child care education mentor at each campus to assist students. The average time for a child care staff member to earn a degree through the program is three to six years.⁴⁷ Even with additional training, staff turnover remains high, at a rate of 36.7 percent per year for child care centers.⁴⁸

Oklahoma offers increased child care reimbursement rates for facilities that receive a high star rating. State officials publish star ratings and data collected on facilities across the state on a Child Care Resource and Referral website.

Of 1,790 child care centers in Oklahoma, the great majority, 1,216, participates in QRIS, but of 2,845 home care centers, less than half, 1,227, participate in QRIS.⁴⁹ Thus, after 11 years in place, only 53 percent of Oklahoma’s child care facilities participate in Oklahoma’s QRIS program.

Evaluation of QRIS in Oklahoma

Numerous studies have evaluated the Oklahoma program. Results show that since 1999 child care facilities receiving state subsidies show the most improvement in their star ranking.⁵⁰ The first Child Care Portfolio in 2003 reported that 76.5 percent of children whose care was paid for through state subsidy received child care in a two- or three-star rated facility.⁵¹ Today, 91.8 percent of

⁴⁵ “Star Designations, Regional and County Totals, June 2007,” Keystone Stars, Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, June 2007, page 2, at www.dpw.state.pa.us/Resources/Documents/Presentations/Child/STARSReportJune07.pdf.

⁴⁶ “Investing in a Brighter Future through Early Education,” Executive Budget 2009-2010, Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning, page 42, April 6, 2009 at www.pde.state.pa.us/early_childhood/lib/early_childhood/OCDEL_budget_09-10final4-6-09.pdf.

⁴⁷ “Quality Rating and Information System: Staff Memo, Quality Rating System in Other States: Memo Attachment,” by Washington state Senate Committee Services, Kim Cushing and Paula Moore, December 21, 2007, at www.leg.wa.gov/documents/senate/scs/edu/QRISMemo.pdf.

⁴⁸ “Oklahoma Child Care and Early Education Data, 2008,” Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral Association, Inc., at www.okchildcareportfolio.org/datasheet.asp?County=State.

⁴⁹ E-mail interview by research assistant Abby Burlingame of Joni Riley, Oklahoma Department of Health Services, June 25, 2009.

⁵⁰ “QRIS and the Impact on Quality in Early and School-Age Care Settings,” by National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, September 2007, at www.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/qrs-impactqualitycc.html.

⁵¹ “2003 Oklahoma Child Care and Early Education Portfolio,” Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral Association, Inc.

Oklahoma data shows that 47 percent of all child care facilities received the lowest ranking, one star, and are not participating in QRIS evaluations to improve their ranking.

children receiving child care subsidies are receiving care in a two- or three-star rated facility.⁵²

However, statewide data, which also includes non-subsidized facilities, shows that 47 percent of all child care facilities received the lowest ranking, one star, and are not participating in QRIS evaluations to improve their ranking.⁵³ In addition, the evaluations show Oklahoma officials have failed to demonstrate a link between the state's QRIS program and improved educational, social or emotional outcomes for children.

Weaknesses of State QRIS Programs

In general, state QRIS program managers report their programs are successful at raising the quality of child care services in their respective states. The very existence of a rating scale has the beneficial effect of communicating to parents, child care facilities and the public that raising the quality of early child care is an important goal.

However, the primary weakness of QRIS programs is that their specific rating elements do not measure actual progress, or lack of it, toward the two main policy goals of QRIS: improving social, emotional and educational outcomes for children ages zero to five-and-a-half, and increasing the readiness to learn of these children when they enter kindergarten.

Recent research has found that the structure and performance of QRIS programs have fallen short of the outcomes promised when these programs were created. The main findings of this research are summarized below.

FINDING: The elements QRIS programs measure do not correlate with actual early development and educational outcomes for children

State QRIS star rating programs are presented to policymakers and the public as a way to produce better learning outcomes for children. Yet the elements of state QRIS programs are not designed to assess whether children's early social, emotional and educational development has actually improved, or whether they are better prepared for kindergarten.

For example, an extensive evaluation of Colorado's QRIS program, one of the longest-running in the country, reveals weaknesses in the programs' ability to improve kindergarten readiness for children. The study found no correlation between a child care facility's star rating and improvement in children's cognitive and social development.⁵⁴

While the elements measured by QRIS, mainly physical environment and staff training, are important to providing quality care for children, state QRIS programs fail to assess other elements of quality, like day-to-day caregiver interactions with children or rate of staff turnover. Research in early childhood development indicates that close, trusting bonds between caregivers and children are critical in the development of a young child's brain. Similarly, the current

⁵² 2008 Oklahoma Child Care and Early Education Portfolio, by the Oklahoma Child Care Resource and Referral Association, Inc., at www.okchildcareportfolio.org/datasheet.asp?County=State.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Assessing the Validity of the Qualistar Early Learning Quality Rating and Improvement System as a Tool for Improving Child-Care Quality," by Gail L. Zellman, Michal Perlman, Vi-Nhuan Le, Claude Messan Setodji, RAND Education, the RAND Corporation, 2008, at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG650/.

environmental rating scales (ERS) do not attempt to assess facilities for their ability to improve kindergarten readiness rates of children.

This point is echoed in the RAND evaluation of Colorado's program. Study authors note that skills such as "...children's capacity to regulate emotions, develop trusting relationships with adults, and approach learning in an efficacious way..." are of greater interest to early childhood educators, researchers and kindergarten teachers than the elements measured by QRIS programs.⁵⁵

All five aspects used by QRIS programs measure inputs. None of them 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.⁵⁶ A recent report from the Washington Department of Early Learning about QRIS systems acknowledges this fact by observing as follows:

"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."⁵⁷

Other analysts voice doubts about the metrics employed to establish quality in this field. Robert C. Pianta, Dean of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, and his colleagues have determined there is little correlation between early childhood environmental rating scales and quality standards established by NIERR and NAEYC⁵⁸ and demonstrated gains in the "academic, language and social development" of four-year olds. Their study found instead that it is the quality of the emotional and instructional interactions between teachers and children that correlate to gains in student learning.⁵⁹

Pianta and his colleagues have developed their own assessment of teacher-child emotional and instructional interactions.⁶⁰ In addition, Pianta's research team observed that:

"...only about 15 percent of 700 classrooms across eleven states provided 4-year-olds with the high levels of emotional and instructional support needed.... Unfortunately, exposure to gap-closing classroom quality, although highly desirable from nearly every perspective imaginable, is not a regular feature of early schooling and even less likely for children in poverty."⁶¹

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut," by Chester E. Finn, Jr., Education Next books, Hoover Institution, 2009, p. 32, see www.hooverpress.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=1346.

⁵⁷ "Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System: Considerations for Development in Washington State," Department of Early Learning, December 2007, page 8, see www.childcareresearch.org/location/14055.

⁵⁸ National Institute for Early Education Research (NIERR) and National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

⁵⁹ "Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut," by Chester E. Finn, Jr., Education Next books, Hoover Institution, 2009, p. 38, citing "Measures of Classroom Quality in Prekindergarten and Children's Development of Academic, Language, and Social Skills," *Child Development*, 79, May-June 2008, pages 732-49.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Effective Teacher-Student Interactions, Measuring and Improving Classroom Practice," by Robert Pianta, Dean, Curry College of Education, University of Virginia, at www.classobservation.com/docs/research_papers/CLASS_PolicyBrief_single.pdf.

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.

FINDING: QRIS programs are expensive and complicated to administer

In setting up a QRIS program, state officials develop program standards and then train government employees in visiting facilities and completing lengthy evaluation forms. In administering the program, government staff tries to insure that official star ratings are assigned fairly and consistently among hundreds of child care facilities operating under widely-varying conditions.

For example, the same QRIS program elements are applied to child care facilities both large and small, in rural and urban settings, and to those located in wealthy and low-income neighborhoods, without accounting for the differing circumstances of participating families, child care operators or the surrounding community.

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.⁶² As noted, 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.

In addition to the cost of conducting evaluations, most state QRIS programs include yearly spending on grants and scholarships that are disbursed in an effort to move individual child care facilities up the rating scale. As noted, 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: 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.

Another limitation is that participation rates are low. A review of state programs finds that the share of child care facilities rated by QRIS programs is consistently low, often less than half, except where state officials have made participation mandatory. This suggests 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.

⁶² "Examining the psychometric properties of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)," by Michal Perlman, Gail L. Zellman, Vi-Nhuan Le, 19, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 398-412, 2004.

Data suggests parents are using different standards of care to determine what quality means for them, standards that are missed by QRIS program elements.

Recommended Alternative Approach: Providing Child Care Quality Information to Parents

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.

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

A model for this kind of rating system is GreatSchools.net, a website that provides clear, objective nationwide information about elementary and high schools within five miles of a given zip code.⁶³ The site includes a five-star rating system providing information in the categories of principal leadership, teacher quality, extracurricular activities, parent involvement, and safety and discipline. Both public and private schools are rated and the site includes a school's location, student diversity, class sizes, per-student spending, test scores and other factors.

The purpose of GreatSchools.net is to provide parents with neutral but important facts to help them make a decision, leaving the ultimate determination of educational quality to them. Some families may feel location and student diversity are most important, while others may wish to choose a school based on class size or per-student spending. The information provided is objective, but the weight given to each factor is left to the parents.

Following is a list, developed by 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's 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

⁶³ "Find a School, Compare Schools," GreatSchools, Involved Parents, Successful Kids, at www.greatschools.net/.

- 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, both positive and negative, with a child care facility 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.

Building on Department of Early Learning Resources for Parents

The Washington Department of Early Learning operates the Licensed Child Care Information System (LCCIS) to provide parents with basic information about child care programs. Access to LCCIS is available online and gives the public information about a child care facility’s license validity, capacity, age range of children served, and length of service and referral recommendations.⁶⁴ It also includes proven complaints against a facility, but not comments from families who have used a particular child care services in the past. The state website notes that if a child care facility cannot be located through the site, it may be an unlicensed business.

The Department of Early Learning also produces a 12-page pamphlet, “You have a choice! A Guide to Finding Quality Child Care,” to help parents in selecting child care services.

⁶⁴ “Licensed Child Care Information System,” Child Care and Preschool Options, Washington Department of Early Learning, at www.apps.del.wa.gov/lccis/lccisSearch.aspx.

The Child Care Information System, the quality care guide and the Department's website are important resources that are already in place to help parents, and would serve as a basis for building a practical overall rating system.

The DEL can use its position on this website to use survey information 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

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.

The rating elements currently used by state QRIS programs are not designed to measure outcomes. At best, QRIS rating systems show no learning improvement for children who are cared for in highly-rated facilities, compared to those in low- or non-rated facilities, or who are cared for at home. An important consideration for state policymakers is whether QRIS programs should be altered so that scale elements measure outcomes, that is, lasting benefits to children, in addition to existing inputs.

Low-income parents in particular need information about the qualities of child care programs, including whether or not a program uses pre-literacy curricula to prepare children for kindergarten. This second purpose of QRIS, achieving kindergarten readiness, is far more important to these children than many of the structural inputs now measured by a typical QRIS program. In addition, some of these structural components, such as requiring staff to have college degrees in early childhood development, erroneously assume that only highly-educated personnel are capable of effectively administering a pre-literacy curriculum to very young children.

A more useful rating system would be one that is voluntary, transparent, objective, available to the public and readily understandable to the average parent. Such a rating system, like GreatSchools.net, could be operated at low cost to taxpayers, with minimum added burden on child care operators, while providing timely and valuable information for parents.

The benefits of this approach would be two-fold. First, it would move key decision-making information from state managers to those who know the children needing care the best, their parents and day-to-day caregivers. Second, providing objective, fact-based information would avoid the problem of state managers pre-determining what "quality" means. Child care quality means different things to different families, depending on the unique circumstances and needs of children.

Efforts in the states to create an official definition of “quality” and then use a QRIS system to administer this definition to thousands child care facilities have not been successful at improving learning outcomes for children. Policymakers and state officials in Washington should focus child care quality resources on what the state does best: gathering data and presenting it to the public in a reliable, understandable way. This approach provides a vital public service without trying to achieve a state-defined, uniform standard across all child care facilities, while ensuring that key decision-making about raising children remains with families.

Providing clear and consistent information to parents, through the state’s website and the Department of Early Learning licensing process, is the best way to help parents and other caregivers find safe, effective and affordable care for children.

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