



# Quality Rating & Improvement Systems

## *as the Framework for Early Care and Education System Reform*

Anne Mitchell

## Build

Strong Foundations For Our Youngest Children

The BUILD Initiative helps states create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children’s health, mental health and nutrition, early care and education, family support, and early intervention. BUILD’s vision is at the center of an emerging and vibrant state-based policy movement in the early childhood development field. We work with those who set policies, provide services and advocate for our youngest children to make sure that they are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school. Visit [www.buildinitiative.org](http://www.buildinitiative.org).



*An effective early childhood system is multi-faceted, as are the needs of young children and their families. Such a system aims to promote healthy child development by advancing early learning, health, and family support, and embracing all children. Early learning happens in families and neighborhoods; in community libraries and museums; and in organized settings such as centers, family child care homes and schools. A catch-all term for all these organized settings whose purpose is early learning is ‘early care and education.’ Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) are rapidly spreading, state-designed policy innovations that systematically address the need for quality improvement and accountability in early care and education. This brief focuses on the potential for QRIS to be the unifying framework for creating the early care and education system.*

### **The Importance of the Early Years ●●●**

Evidence from human development and neuroscience research makes a very strong argument that the early years of a child’s life, from the prenatal period onward, when the brain is developing and growing faster than any other time, are critical and set the stage for all of later learning and adult functioning (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Our general understanding of how young children learn has also increased exponentially over the past decade. For example, we now know that a baby’s interactions with humans and the environment shape the brain’s architecture and that positive and nurturing early relationships develop healthy well-functioning brains that guide human beings as learners.

America’s long-term economic success depends on ensuring that children – the next generation of citizens – succeed in school and in life (Heckman & Masterov, 2004). Nurturing and stimulating early care and education programs help to enable children to become active learners and productive citizens.

This knowledge has helped to expand the early care and education industry. In fact, public investment in early care and education, especially investment in prekindergarten by states has grown. Still families, as

consumers on behalf of their children, continue to contribute the lion's share – nearly 60 percent– of the nation's investment in early care and education (Mitchell, Stoney & Dichter, 2001).

While we now have a greater appreciation of the importance of the early years, we currently do not have an early learning system that adequately supports the needs of our youngest citizens.

“Quality Rating and Improvement Systems offer an important policy lever to unify this system.”

## The Current Early Care and Education 'System' ●●●

Webster's dictionary defines the word system as “a group of independent but interrelated elements comprising a unified whole.”

At present, early care and education (ECE) in the United States operates through a set of independent sectors or subsystems: Head Start/Early Head Start, child care centers (nonprofit or proprietary), public prekindergarten, nursery schools (regulated or not), family child care homes (large and small), nannies, and care by family, friends and neighbors.

Each of these sectors has its own standards, procedures, funding rules, culture and history. Each of these sectors functions more or less well by itself; and each is, in fact, somewhat affected by the others; yet together they do not form a unified whole. What results from this fragmented system are inefficiencies and uneven early learning experiences for children.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems offer an important policy lever to unify this system.

### The ECE 'system' is a hodge-podge of programs, each with its own funding and regulatory 'silo'



## Quality Rating and Improvement Systems ●●●

Both public and private investors make reasonable demands for accountability and demonstrated value in early care and education programs. However, the early care and education market does not, by itself, offer families and early childhood funders much information on which to base their early care and education choices and funding decisions. This has led states to develop systems to rate and improve the quality of early care and education programs. The concept of quality rating systems for early care and education is similar to those for restaurants and hotels. This common-sense approach has appeal across the political spectrum and is spreading rapidly.

In fact, 19 states and the District of Columbia<sup>1</sup> now operate statewide QRIS. Originally most systems described themselves as a *Quality Rating System*, or QRS, but several states in the planning stages have begun to describe their systems as *QRIS* to recognize the two major purposes of these systems: not only rating, but equally important, improvement. Nearly all other states are planning QRIS or already are piloting them. And United Way of America promotes these systems as one of its national priorities.

Why? QRIS offer clear, organized ways to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early care and education programs by:

- Empowering parents to become savvy consumers who choose high quality for their children
- Offering policymakers effective tools to improve early care and education quality
- Providing accountability so that donors, legislators and taxpayers feel confident investing in quality
- Giving providers a roadmap to and supports for quality improvement
- Promoting the health and development of children in early care and education

“19 states and the District of Columbia now operate statewide QRIS.”

<sup>1</sup> The states and year each was launched are: Colorado (2000), Delaware (2009), Illinois (2007), Indiana (2008), Iowa (2006), Kentucky (2001), Louisiana (2007), Maine (2008), Maryland (2001), Montana (2002), New Hampshire (2006), New Mexico (2005), North Carolina (1999), Ohio (2004), Oklahoma (1998), Pennsylvania (2002), Rhode Island (2009), Tennessee (2001), and Vermont (2003) and the District of Columbia (2000).



## QRIS affect the early care and education market through three major avenues:

- 1 Quality assurance.** All QRIS have progressive quality standards — usually three to five levels of quality — based on research and best practice. The systems include monitoring and assessment to determine how well providers are meeting the standards of quality.
- 2 Supply-side interventions.** Programs receive supports. For example – technical assistance on conducting self-assessments and developing quality improvement plans, and professional development for enhancing practitioners’ knowledge, skills and educational qualifications. Financial incentives are offered to providers to encourage improvement, and significant ongoing financial awards help maintain higher quality.
- 3 Demand-side interventions.** All QRIS use easy-to-understand rating symbols – usually multiple stars. The star ratings are available publicly. Financial incentives are offered to reward consumers who choose higher quality.

## An Effective Early Care and Education System ● ● ●

The BUILD Initiative is part of the national Early Childhood Systems Working Group that has defined the five core elements of an effective early childhood development system.

In fact, the elements of a QRIS closely match the core elements of a high functioning early childhood system. All QRISs include:

- 1) Standards for programs and practitioners based on research and aligned with the state’s early learning guidelines
- 2) Accountability, through appropriate means of assessment and monitoring
- 3) Program and practitioner outreach and support including training, technical assistance, mentoring and other forms of professional development and program improvement
- 4) Financing that is intentionally linked to compliance with quality standards such as quality bonus payments, tiered reimbursement, targeted tax credits, and so forth;

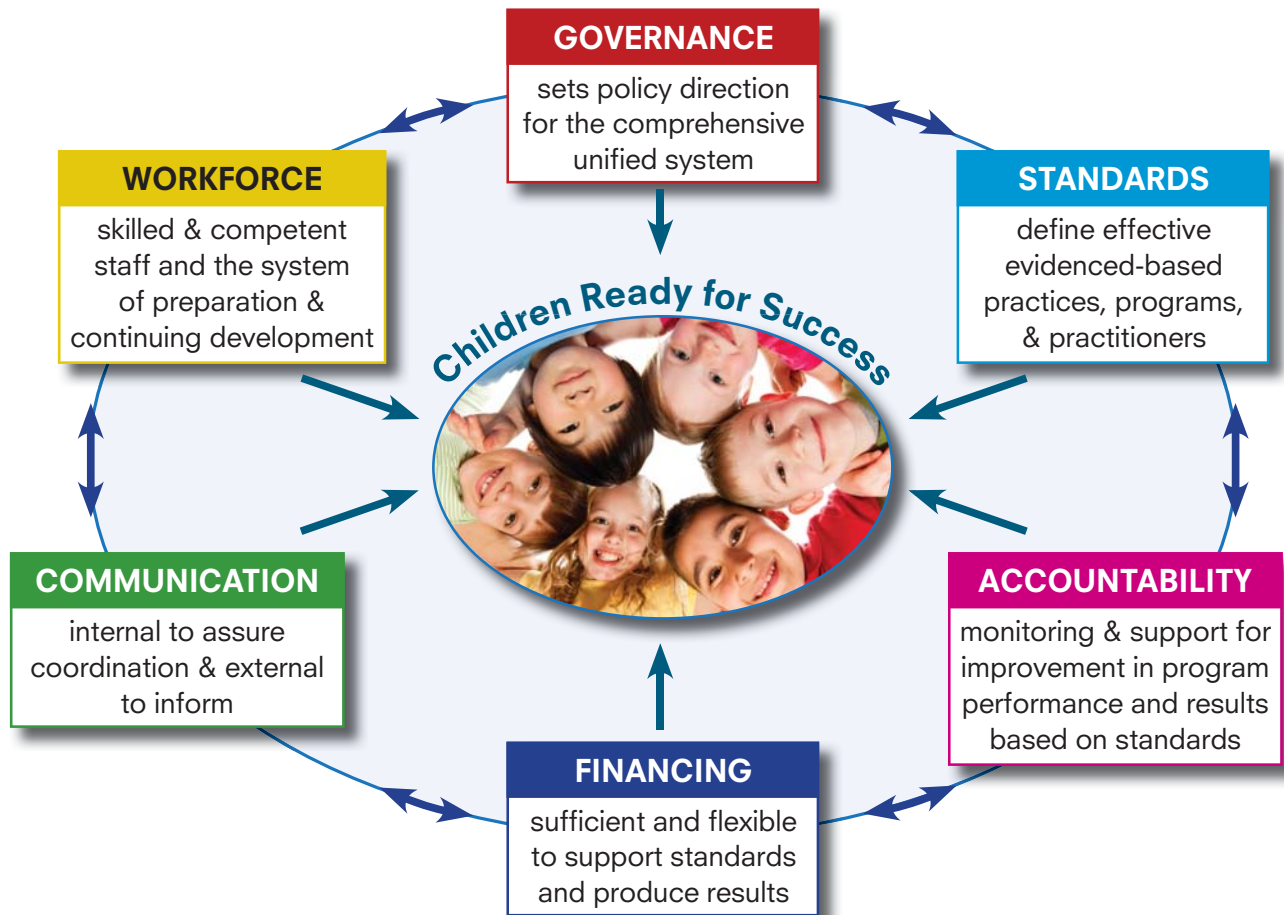
“ The BUILD Initiative is part of the national Early Childhood Systems Working Group that has defined the five core elements of an effective early childhood development system. ”



5) Consumer engagement and outreach designed to ensure that parents and others understand the QRIS and are able to effectively use it to guide decision-making.

Finally, all QRISs are guided by oversight bodies that review performance data, and revise policy for the system. Commonly, governance of the QRIS is accomplished through state Early Childhood Advisory Councils.

## Core Elements of the Early Childhood Development System



“ Commonly, governance of the QRIS is accomplished through state Early Childhood Advisory Councils. ”

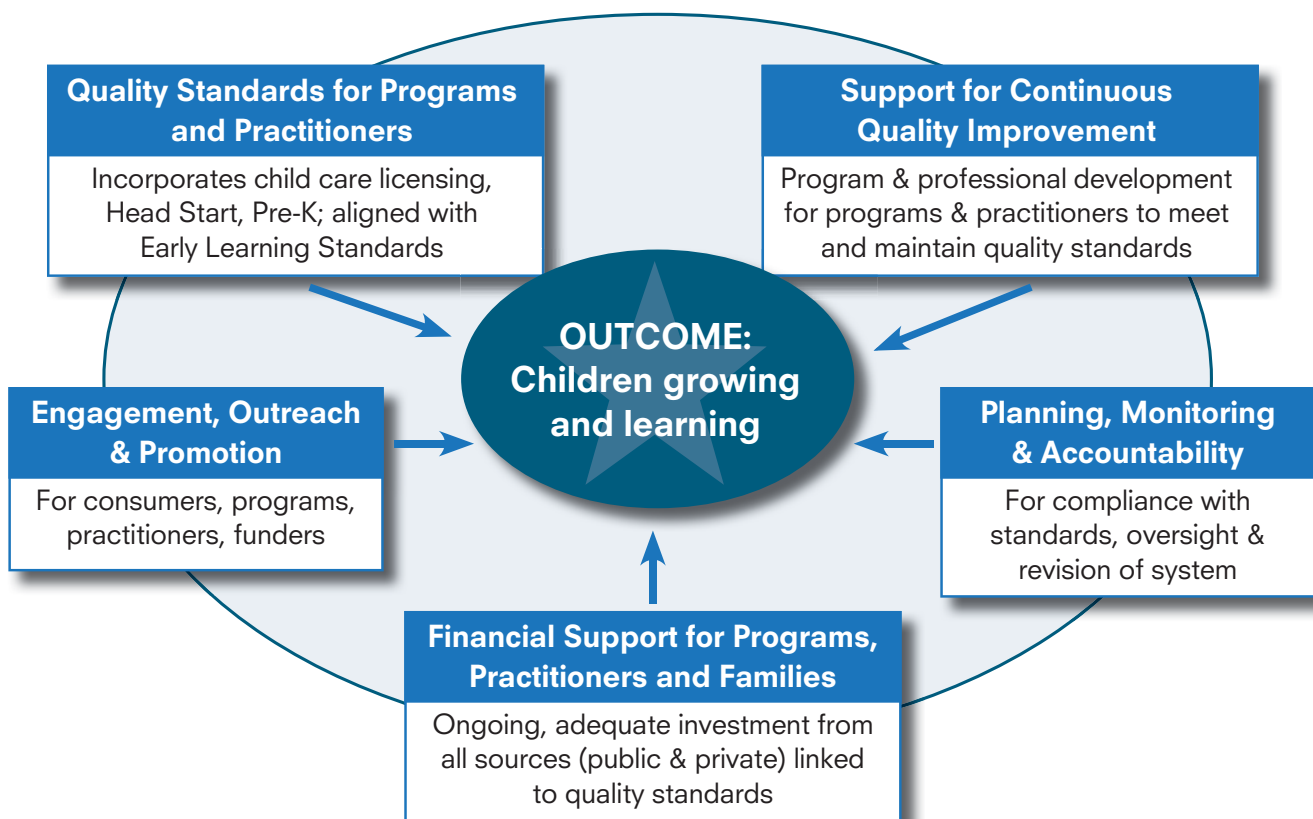
## The Reform Potential of QRIS ●●●

QRISs that are designed to include all settings have the potential to reform and unify the early care and education sectors into a coherent early care and education system. While such systems are a visionary ideal, some states are planning comprehensive QRIS and partial examples currently operate in a few states, e.g., Pennsylvania. A QRIS that only focuses on child care may unite efforts within the child care sector and positively affect child care quality, but will not improve other types of settings and will not provide sufficient consumer information to change consumer choice behavior.

A comprehensive QRIS unifies the sectors of early care and education through a common set of standards that define quality based on the core elements of best practice, which are well-established and do not vary by funding source or program auspice.

This common set of standards incorporates existing standards of child care regulation, Head Start Program Performance Standards, prekindergarten standards, nursery school registration and other program standards. These common QRIS standards also incorporate the full range of practitioner standards such as credentials, degrees and licenses and all are aligned with the state's early learning standards for children.

### QRIS: Framework for the Early Care & Education System



Such a system can unite the early care and education industry toward common good and greater efficiency. When multiple funders agree to use the common system for accountability, it is possible to reduce some of the costly and burdensome duplication in reporting, accounting, eligibility determination, etc. that occurs when a program with multiple funding sources has to meet the requirements for each source separately.

Further, comprehensive QRIS offer a concrete strategy for linking funding to results because every investment in direct services can be aligned with QRIS standards. When funding is aligned with a QRIS, money can flow to families and programs simultaneously, public investment is aligned toward public good, and private investors can have assurance that they are making good investments. For example:

- Prekindergarten programs can be rated – and only those meeting the higher standards can be funded
- Child care subsidy policies can promote access to quality programs for low-income children, who benefit most from quality
- Tax policy can promote families' use of higher quality programs, reward contributors to early care and education and direct funding to qualified practitioners
- Requirements such as children being screened for developmental delays, health or behavioral problems can encourage providers and the medical community to forge partnerships and make these services available

Similarly, states and the federal government (in the case of Head Start and early childhood special education) already invest in several supporting structures, such as professional development systems, technical assistance and program improvement initiatives. Funding for these structures can be aligned through QRIS framework to sustain progress toward higher quality. These existing structures can benefit from QRIS attributes that may be missing or are underemphasized — such as data-driven operations, parent empowerment as consumers and accessible approaches to accountability.

A comprehensive QRIS, that includes all types of care and education settings, also offers an easy way for parents to judge the relative quality of programs and differentiate among them to make informed choices. Once a sufficient portion of the early care and education market participates in a QRIS, consumer demand for quality programs increases as does the rationale for public investment in higher quality—that is, the benefit to society that is derived in addition to the benefit to individual consumers.



With some caveats, family, friend and neighbor (FFN) caregivers and nannies can be part of a comprehensive QRIS. Family, friends and neighbors are not offering their services in the EC&E market; rather they are helping out someone in their close social network. On the other hand, nannies are offering their services in the marketplace. Thus, it is sensible to rate nannies but not to rate FFN caregivers. Nannies can be included in the QRIS in several ways. For example, nannies who have achieved one of the three tiered levels of the national credential<sup>iii</sup> offered by the National Association for Nanny Care can be recognized in the QRIS and included in consumer information.

It makes sense to include anyone who is routinely caring for other people’s children, such as FFN caregivers and nannies access to training supports offered through a QRIS. In fact, nannies are required to participate in on-going professional development to maintain their credential. Aligning and coordinating training supports across early care and education providers ensures effective use of resources.

Performance benchmarks are the hallmark of a mature system. Once a QRIS has fostered the creation of an aligned EC&E system, benchmarks for its performance can be set and progress toward them tracked. QRIS system performance benchmarks might offer the degree to which low-income children have access to higher quality programs, the distribution of higher quality programs geographically (in all communities) and demographically (serving children from all linguistic and cultural backgrounds), among other factors.

With common standards and support to meet them through a common professional development system for practitioners and accessible technical assistance for programs, every place for children can become better and operate closer to best practice. This will create greater continuity for children, who are often in more than one program in a given day and certainly are in multiple programs over time. From the most basic level – the child – on up to policy and systems change, QRIS offers the promise of alignment, improvement, accountability and financial leverage that will enable every child to get a strong start in school and in life.



## Transformation from Silos to System: Steps to Creating a Comprehensive QRIS ●●●

**Embrace change.** One of the most important elements in the process is the capacity for the leaders and major players to embrace and welcome change. Attitude matters when it comes to prevailing over the “advocates for no change” who certainly will surface.

Current players will need support to step out and make changes in activities that have been done the same way for a long time – often regardless of results or outcomes.

Transformational leaders:

- Are persistent
- Stick with the long-term goal of alignment,
- Adjust as necessary to changing conditions
- Take advantage of opportunities
- Keep all eyes on the prize of the coherent, high-quality early care and education system

“One of the most important elements in the process is the capacity...to embrace and welcome change.”

**Include all educational settings.** State QRIS can be designed intentionally to include all educational settings from homes to centers to schools.

This happens more or less naturally in those states such as Vermont, where the regulatory system covers all formal settings including public schools. In other states, intentional effort is required to design a comprehensive system. The full comprehensive system might be launched at once, or the various sectors might be phased into operation over several years.

Most QRIS are reviewed and revised about every 3-5 years, which is an opportunity to re-design and expand to include other sectors. The re-design process should include representatives of the appropriate constituencies that will be affected by the re-design and take account of data on the effectiveness of the existing system – what works and what doesn't.

**Design a culturally relevant QRIS.** QRIS developers must pay particular attention to designing QRIS to foster culturally competent ECE settings and practitioners who can meet the needs of a diverse population. This is essential so that the aligned system promoted by QRIS has the capacity to begin correcting the inequities that exist in the current system. See the recent Build publication, *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems for a Multi-Ethnic Society*, for a clear and detailed discussion of these issues.



**Align system components.** Moving the various sectors (the ‘silos’ of distinct funding sources and programs) into alignment with each other and the QRIS is a complex and often lengthy process that is best done intentionally and carefully by:

- First, analyzing the requirements, procedures and quality initiatives in each existing funding stream and major program; both public and private. The necessary data include: rules and regulations that pertain to funding and any quality measures, current use and effectiveness of each quality initiative, as well as the source and amount of its funding, the current status of its operations (e.g., federally directed, state-run, contracted out) and the timetable for decision-making
- Next, directly aligning various program standards (e.g. prekindergarten, Head Start) and professional development standards within the QRIS. Incorporate common standards into everything and ask how each initiative and program can be transformed to:
  - Support continuous quality improvement in all early learning settings
  - Require funders such as the child care subsidy system and state prekindergarten funds to incentivize continuous quality improvement for programs
  - Provide strong incentives for consumers to choose higher quality

This may require policy changes, addition of performance benchmarks in contracts, new incentive structures like tax credits, and other modifications to current practices. The length of time for full transformation depends on the decision-making timetable of each element. For example, a contract that is set to run for two more years probably cannot be altered until it is re-bid.

Activities that clearly are ineffective should be discarded. Keep the best – discard the rest.

“ Keep the best - discard the rest. ”



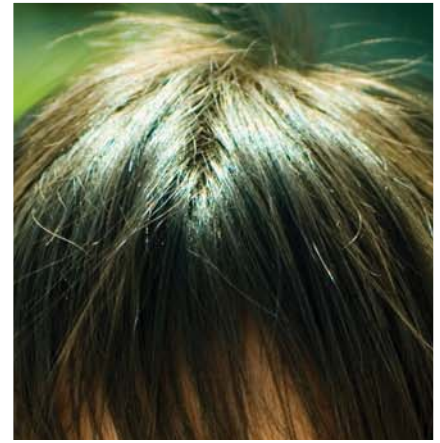
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i An early childhood development system has several interrelated parts working together toward a common goal: to ensure the healthy growth and optimal development of all young children in the context of their families. The major parts of such a system are early learning, health, and family support. Early learning means early care and education opportunities in nurturing environments where children can learn what they need to succeed in school and life. Children with special health care needs, disabilities, or developmental delays need to be identified as early as possible, assessed, and receive appropriate services. Early intervention includes direct services to children, in inclusive settings, and supports to their families. Family support means the economic and parenting supports to ensure that all children have nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults. Other services, supports and infrastructure not spelled out in this agenda may be needed, especially in situations where children have special needs, are at risk of abuse or live in families with high levels of stress or economic insecurity. For more on early childhood systems, see <http://www.buildinitiative.org/content/systems-building>

ii Webster's Online Dictionary. Retrieved on April 14, 2009 from <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/definition/system>

iii Information about the three-tier national nanny credential from the National Association for Nanny Care is at <http://www.nannycredential.org/page/page/4227227.htm>



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