



QRIS and Inclusion

Do state QRIS standards support the learning needs of all children?

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BACKGROUND

As the country quickly builds its efforts to enhance quality in early education and care classrooms, states are implementing Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to recognize and improve the quality of programs. QRIS also provides technical support and increased financial benefits for participating programs to attain higher levels of quality.

Developed initially as a voluntary system for providers in many states, participation in a QRIS is increasingly becoming a requirement for family child care and centers to receive state or federal funds. QRIS policy has been embedded in federal initiatives such as Race to the Top--Early Learning Challenge and the Preschool Development and Expansion grants, mandating states to improve the quality of early education and care. Most important, QRIS is intended to provide consumers (parents) with a mechanism to differentiate quality of programs to determine which programs may provide better services for their children.

Methodology:

To learn more about the extent to which inclusion is addressed in state QRIS models, CELO conducted research through several methods. An online review of state QRIS websites identified states with QRIS and explored the extent to which criteria relating to inclusion were incorporated. Interviews with national experts were conducted simultaneously to identify innovative, promising models for incorporating inclusive practices substantively in QRIS standards. Finally, several state QRIS administrators were interviewed to determine development and implementation efforts resulting in promising practices to promote inclusion in state QRIS.

One aspect of determining program quality includes understanding provisions programs make to accommodate children with special needs and prepare its professionals for working with all types of learners. States vary on the degree to which such provisions are made, and it is not necessarily always apparent to parents which programs demonstrate higher levels of inclusive practices. The goal of this study was to determine which state QRIS standards include provisions for accommodating young children with special needs, and highlighting the states that are paving the way to integrate inclusive practices in an effort to improve quality of early care and education programs.

¹ The original text was published on November 19, 2014. This revised version includes updated information for Illinois.

What We Know

- QRIS began as a way to improve the quality of child care and has expanded to encompass programs offered by Head Start and state-funded pre-K as mixed-model service delivery becomes more prevalent.
- Each state establishes its own QRIS standards and approaches to rating quality of programs that participate. Definitions of quality, criteria, and designation levels vary nationally.
- States vary in their level of incorporating standards supporting inclusion as a specific component of their QRIS.
- Program capacity to serve all types of learners is a key indicator of program quality. QRIS is valuable to inclusion efforts in order to make sure young children with special needs are receiving high quality, specialized support.
- States include incentives for programs participating in QRIS to promote continuous improvement, including additional funding for professional development opportunities and for demonstrating strong inclusive practices. While no states are currently awarding incentives to promote inclusionary language in their standards, this is something that may be addressed in future legislation.
- QRIS continues to evolve for many states, which are currently evaluating and refining structures in response to emerging research and policy demands.

What We Learned

- Information about QRIS was available for 49 states and the District of Columbia. Four states were in the planning phase of QRIS and 3 were piloting their systems. Among the remaining 43 states (including DC), 42 reported having fully operational QRIS systems (Florida and California use regional systems) and one state did not have information about an existing QRIS. For additional information on each state's QRIS see Figure 1.
- Research into criteria used in state QRIS models showed a majority including special needs provisions in their quality-rating program, but the degree to which inclusion was addressed varied. Only 29 of 42 states with QRIS indicated any substantive reference to inclusive practices in their design.
- Most programs receive credit for providing rudimentary provisions for inclusion based on child-care licensing regulations. They do not necessarily go beyond the basic level of ensuring open enrollment or working with outside specialists to ensure accommodations to address all children's needs.
- Additional federal and state support would be beneficial for QRIS administrators, with equitable input from all state stakeholders to make inclusion a higher priority for early education and care quality in state QRIS models.
- Many states are currently refining QRIS systems, including efforts to strengthen criteria for determining the quality of inclusive practices. Information on the current status of these efforts was not readily available for review.
- No state has a unique designation through their QRIS in place for parents of children with special needs to clearly identify programs with exemplary inclusionary practices. Initial efforts are underway in several states.

Promising Developments

Currently no state has a mechanism for parents of children with special needs to clearly identify programs that might be considered to have exceptional inclusionary practices through their QRIS; however, several states are developing promising practices. Some states, such as Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, and North Carolina, have developed a more comprehensive plan of action to address inclusion, including providing additional resources and incentives to support implementation. Many more states are on the path to strengthening their inclusionary practices within QRIS and improving their methods of identifying high quality, inclusive programs.

Illinois²

[Excelerate Illinois](#), Illinois's quality rating system has begun to implement a voluntary Award of Excellence for Inclusion of Children with Special Needs for programs at the highest level of quality. Any program that has received "Gold Circle" quality (highest level of quality) may apply for the Award of Excellence. Evidence of high quality includes a Self-Study Portfolio, as Illinois recognizes that all programs fulfill standards differently. Annual reviews using different forms of evidence are also practiced to ensure the program is continuing to address inclusion needs and program monitoring. Illinois completed a pilot study of this scale and revised materials and protocol for full implementation in February 2015. Excelerate Illinois is also hiring a director for inclusion and three regional inclusion coaches to support continuous improvement for inclusion within QRIS which includes child care, public prekindergarten, and Head Start programs.

Georgia

Georgia [Quality Rated](#) not only encourages, but also expects all programs to include children with special needs. Georgia will be introducing a tiered system program in 2015 for 3-star (top designation) programs to receive an inclusion designation encompassing all disabilities. Georgia is not planning to provide additional student reimbursement for top-rated "I" programs at this time. While this QRIS program will focus only on top-rated 3-star programs, there will still be certain criteria based on the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP) all programs will have to demonstrate during an unannounced validation visit before the program can receive their 3 star "I" rating. The ICP is an evaluation that measures the quality of inclusion at the classroom level (see below on North Carolina's QRIS).

North Carolina

North Carolina's quality rating and improvement system called [Star Rated License System](#) consists of core requirements and points within a block system. Within the points system, programs can earn specialization points for meeting requirements associated with specific specialization areas, including special needs. Programs that receive enough credits could receive a "Program of Distinction" designation. Effective March 2014, programs are required to describe the ways children with special needs have opportunities for inclusion with children who are typically developing. [The Inclusive Classroom Profile](#), an assessment measuring the quality of inclusion in the classroom, was developed by the Frank Porter Graham Institute and piloted in 51 inclusive settings in North Carolina. The assessment

² The information on Illinois was updated on 11/25/14 from the originally published text to reflect recent developments.

provides a quantifiable assessment tool to gauge the quality of inclusionary practices in an early childhood classroom setting.

Maryland

Although a readily identifiable designation for inclusion is already part of Maryland's QRIS, [Maryland Excels](#), the state is taking measures to recognize and strengthen inclusionary early childhood quality by offering a professional development [webinar series](#) to meet program needs. The 5-part series will address several topics, such as first steps to inclusion in the classroom, tips for teachers, and methods for supporting children with different abilities.

Implications for Policy and Practice

State QRIS continue to evolve as they evaluate and refine standards and develop professional development in response to emerging research and policy demands. This presents an opportunity to strengthen QRIS to support inclusive practice and ensure that children of all learning abilities have access to high quality early care and education. We suggest the following:

1. Incorporate inclusion as a distinguishing component of quality more prominently in designing and implementing a state QRIS. Inclusion efforts should go beyond requirements found in basic child care licensing regulations. Federal and national leadership can strengthen quality inclusion practices in QRIS and alleviate disparities across states.
2. Design a QRIS as a user-friendly system for parents, to more clearly identify programs in their area that will best meet their needs. Programs could use a "Five Star-I" designation or special recognition to help quality inclusive programs stand out from less-specialized programs.
3. Use appropriate, validated instruments, such as ICP, for self-assessment and external review in QRIS.
4. Consider additional incentives for more inclusionary measures. For example, use increased reimbursement bonuses for programs effectively serving children with special needs.
5. Establish links with higher education for technical assistance and professional development. For example, establish a hotline number or provide coaches who specialize in inclusion.

Figure 1. Do State QRIS Address Inclusion?

State	QRIS	Special Needs Language Included	Resources & Notes Addressing Inclusion
Alabama	Pilot		
Alaska	Planning	N/A	
Arizona	Yes	No	
Arkansas	Yes	No	
California	Regionally	Yes	California Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) RTT-ELC Implementation Approximately 77 percent of California’s RTT-ELC grant funding will be spent at the local level to support a voluntary network of 17 Regional Leadership Consortia, each led by an established organization that is already operating or developing a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS)
Colorado	Yes	Yes	Colorado Shines Quality Rating and Improvement System Point Structure Guide for Quality Levels 3-5
Connecticut	Planning	N/A	
District of Columbia	Yes	No	
Delaware	Yes	Yes	Early Care & Education Center Standards
Florida	Regionally	N/A	Different QRIS programs for regions covered
Georgia	Yes	Yes	Quality Rated Program Manual
Hawaii	Pilot	Yes	Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Pilot Main Page Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Pilot: Policies & Procedures Manual
Idaho	Yes	Yes	Idaho Steps to Quality: Quality Rating & Improvement System (QRIS)
Illinois	Yes	Yes	ExceleRate Illinois Award of Excellence for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs
Indiana	Yes	Yes	Standards for Participation in Indiana: Licensed Child Care Center
Iowa	Yes	No	
Kansas	Yes	No	
Kentucky	Yes	No	
Louisiana	Yes	No	
Maine	Yes	No	
Maryland	Yes	Yes	Child Care Center Standards Inclusive Early Childhood Education Webinar Series
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	Key Indicators of Quality MA QRIS Standards Revisions: Center-Based/School Based Programs

State	QRIS	Special Needs Language Included	Resources & Notes Addressing Inclusion
Michigan	Yes	Yes	Great Start to Quality Standards and Points
Minnesota	Yes	Yes	Parent Aware Indicators and Scoring Full Rating for Center-based Programs
Mississippi	Yes	No	
Missouri	No	No	
Montana	Yes	Yes	Best Beginnings STARS to Quality
Nebraska	Yes	Yes	A Program Guide to Nebraska’s Step Up to Quality Standards, Rating and Improvement System
Nevada	Yes	Yes	Silver State Stars Quality Rating & Improvement System (QRIS)
New Hampshire	Yes	Yes	New Hampshire Quality Rating System
New Jersey	Piloting	Yes	Grow NJ Kids: Center and School-Based Standards
New Mexico	Yes	Yes	New Mexico Focus: Essential Elements of Quality for Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs
New York	Yes	Yes	Standards for Center/School-based Early Learning and Development Programs
North Carolina	Yes	Yes	The North Carolina Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) Advisory Committee Executive Summary Chapter 9- Child Care Rules
North Dakota	Yes	No	
Ohio	Yes	Yes	Standards for Programs Step Up to Quality Guidance Document Part I- Introduction While special needs are not explicitly included in the Standards for Programs, Preschool Special Education programs have begun participating and all programs will be rated by July 2018.
Oklahoma	Yes	No	
Oregon	Yes	Yes	Oregon’s Quality Rating and Improvement System
Pennsylvania	Yes	Yes	Keystone STARS: Continuous Quality Improvement for Learning Programs
Rhode Island	Yes	Yes	Child Care Center and Preschool Quality Framework
South Carolina	Yes	Yes	ABC Quality Special Needs/ Different Abilities and Needs
South Dakota	Planning	N/A	
Tennessee	Yes	Yes	The Tennessee Star-Quality Child Care Program
Texas	Yes	Yes	Texas Workforce Commission Texas Rising Star Provider Certification Guidelines
Utah	Yes	Yes	Opening a Quality Child Care Center
Vermont	Yes	Yes	Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS) Standards
Virginia	Yes	Yes	Standards for Classroom-Based Programs
Washington	Yes	Yes	Early Achievers, Washington’s Quality Rating and Improvement System Standards
Wisconsin	Yes	Yes	Quality Indicator Point Detail: Quality Rating and Improvement System Overall Model
Wyoming	Planning	N/A	

Resources and Links

BUILD Initiative Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)
<http://www.buildinitiative.org/TheIssues/EarlyLearning/QualityQRIS.aspx>

Division for Early Childhood. (2014). *DEC recommended practices in early intervention/early childhood special education 2014*. Arlington, VA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>

Frank Porter Graham Institute. (2014). *Measuring the quality of inclusion: The Inclusive Classroom Profile*. Chapel Hill, NC: Author. Retrieved from <http://npdci.fpg.unc.edu/measuring-quality-inclusion-inclusive-classroom-profile>.

Head Start Center for Inclusion
<http://depts.washington.edu/hscenter/>

National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute
<http://inclusioninstitute.fpg.unc.edu/>

QRIS Compendium (2014)
<http://qriscompendium.org/>

QRIS National Learning Network
<http://qrisnetwork.org/>

ABOUT CEELO:

One of 22 Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) will strengthen the capacity of State Education Agencies (SEAs) to lead sustained improvements in early learning opportunities and outcomes. CEELO will work in partnership with SEAs, state and local early childhood leaders, and other federal and national technical assistance (TA) providers to promote innovation and accountability.

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