

# Establishing an Ecosystem for High-Quality Early Learning

Summer 2016



Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are a relatively new early learning support strategy—one that is developing rapidly throughout the country. When QRIS were first developed, it was in the context of a prevailing concern about the quality and even safety of the formal settings for young children’s care. Then and now, the other overriding concern has been that disparities between opportunities and outcomes for young children by race, place, and income are substantial and persistent.

In 2008, leaders working to advance high-quality early learning from many national organizations and states helped to create the QRIS National Learning Network (NLN). It has become a vibrant community in which state systems builders, QRIS designers and planners, administrators, coaches, providers, researchers and other key stakeholders come together, virtually and in person, to learn from each other, share promising strategies, and test new ideas.

Over the past 18 months, BUILD has undertaken new efforts to examine the status of QRIS and what might be next best steps in the QRIS NLN’s support efforts. We published a paper—[Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Stakeholder Theories of Change and Models of Practice](#)—that describes and categorizes the multiple QRIS models that have resulted from the combination of QRIS being relatively new, severely underfunded, and state driven (or sometimes even locally driven).

All QRIS focus on quality. Some work almost exclusively with child care programs whereas others bridge child care, pre-K and Head Start. Some focus on school readiness outcomes for children while others are seeking to raise the floor of quality within child care. In short, diverse approaches, with different resource allocations, activities, and outcomes are being used across the country. Building on this re-examination of QRIS, which included generous engagement of many colleagues who shared their ideas, perspective and experience, BUILD has identified three priority areas for immediate focus: 1) QRIS model development, 2) financing, and 3) communications related to public policy and advocacy. At this meeting, and throughout the next year, look for sessions, new resources and discussion about QRIS model development, communications and messaging, and financing.

## New QRIS Resources Coming Soon

- Tool to support the development of a cross-sector QRIS focusing on school readiness, healthy child development, and equitable outcomes for young children;
- Paper addressing the three primary QRIS cost centers and exploring potential new sources of funding; and
- Guide to QRIS communications for public policy purposes.

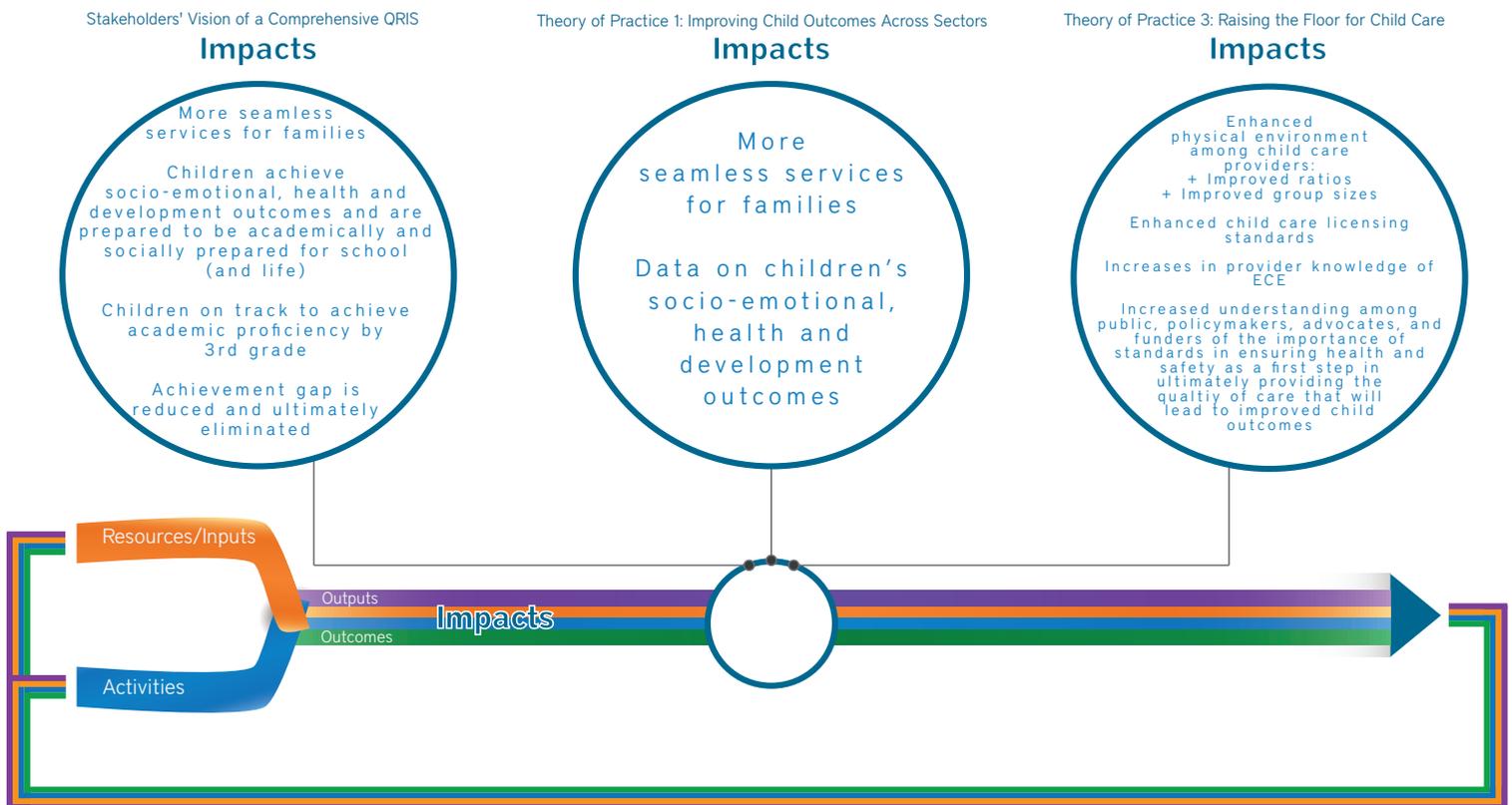


## QRIS Model Development

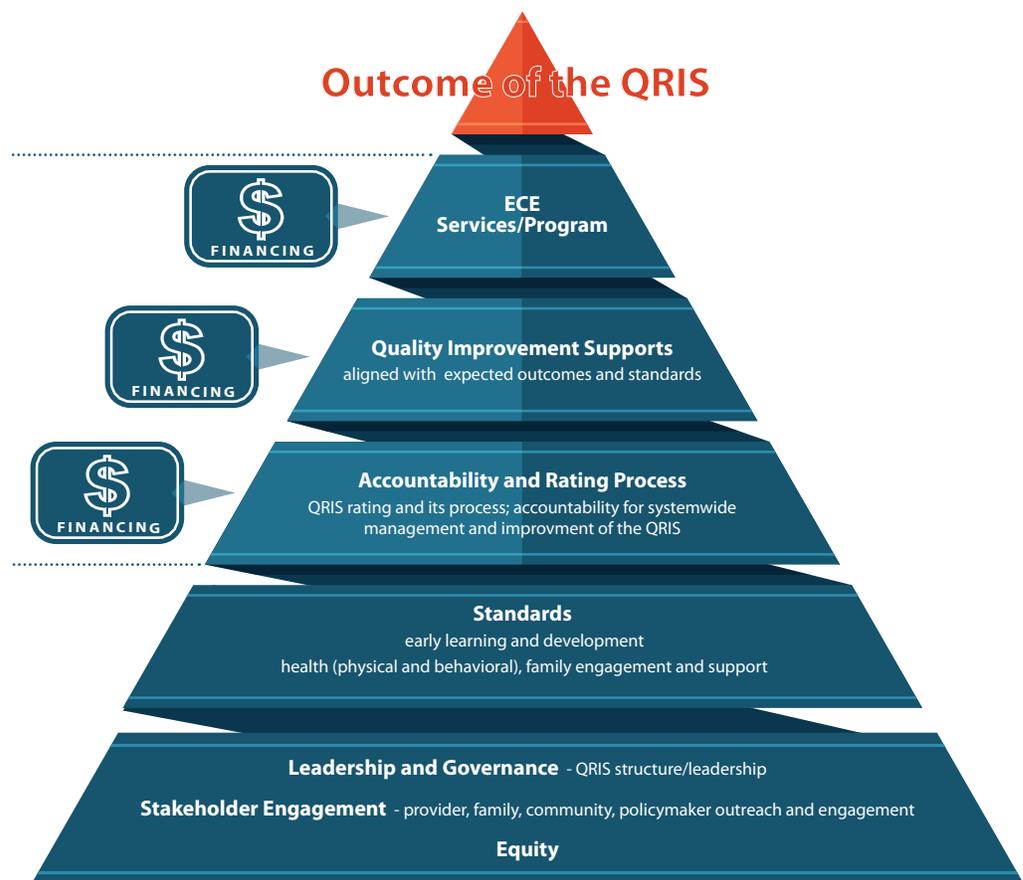
Clarity about the QRIS goals and outcomes is critical. It seems too obvious to say, but if designers and implementers of QRIS neglect to clearly articulate expected outcomes, it is hard to back map to the requisite activities, partnerships, and resources necessary to attain the outcomes. **Different expected outcomes have an impact on design, implementation, communication and financing.**

Our research and work with states reveals that some QRIS, especially those associated with the Early Learning Challenge, target “child outcomes” or school readiness, as their outcome. These QRIS tend to support alignment and connection between child care, pre-K and Head Start programs. Although ambitious in its timelines and desire for a unified system, this QRIS model is somewhat narrower than the vision that many leaders articulate when thinking about a comprehensive QRIS, which more specifically acknowledges racial and income disparities and focuses on the child within the context of family and neighborhood. Other QRIS, which tend to serve child care exclusively, are trying to raise the floor of quality. **States whose QRIS model is “raising the floor” are better served by using program rather than child outcomes.**

The graphic below shows the desired impacts of three different models for QRIS, comparing a comprehensive QRIS approach with a multi-sector, child outcome approach and with a raising the floor for child care approach. This provides an example of different impacts based on the overall QRIS design and purpose.



**Thinking about the ecosystem of QRIS highlights the interdependence of elements.** Regardless of which model QRIS a state is implementing, attention must be paid to each of the key ingredients: equity; stakeholder engagement—from parents to teachers to policy makers; governance of the QRIS; the standards; accountability and rating process; the supports needed to achieve and maintain quality; and the functioning of the program itself including the teachers. *Figure 1* below depicts these ecosystem elements. Each one must be planned for and supported with sufficient financing to support attainment of the intended outcomes. And, if any one element is not adequately supported, it will impact the other elements and the potential for achieving the intended QRIS outcome. *Figure 1* shows essential cost-drivers for QRIS but we note that all elements do require financing, whether equity, governance, engagement and outreach, or standards.



*Figure 1*

Partnerships are a crucial aspect of fitting parts together, and are frequently essential for leveraging the necessary buy-in, financing, and human resources needed to create, maintain, and sustain the QRIS.

### Early Learning System Model

**To assist QRIS designers and implementers,** BUILD is developing a new tool focusing on a comprehensive cross-sector QRIS with school readiness, healthy child development, and equitable outcomes for young children. State leaders will be able to use this tool to reflect on what elements are in place or missing from their QRIS, what impact the missing elements or the inadequate financing will likely have on potential outcomes, and what might be the best next steps to address gaps.



## Financing

**Financing is needed for three large parts of the QRIS—all noted in *Figure 1* above—1) rating process and system accountability, 2) quality improvement supports, and 3) ECE services.** Too little attention is paid to financing the ECE services themselves, which is a shared responsibility of QRIS and the underlying programs (e.g., depending on the reach of the QRIS, child care, pre-K and Head Start), making it more challenging for QRIS development. For QRIS designers and implementers, identifying the costs for all parts of the QRIS is urged—rating process and system accountability, quality improvement supports, and ECE services. Sufficient investment is needed to match the model/outcomes that have been selected for the QRIS. Look for a new publication later in 2016 addressing these issues and suggesting potential new ways to finance QRIS.

## Communications for Public Policy

**Sharpening QRIS communications for public policy is essential to stabilizing and growing QRIS.** Public policy messaging has not always been clear; it often over promises, and rarely leads to public understanding of early learning or the need for and the means to quality. Together BUILD and ChildTrends have interviewed legislators, governors' staff, and QRIS administrators and advocates around the country to gain their insights on how administrators and advocates are framing their QRIS public policy communications, and on how governors' staff and legislators view QRIS. We're working in collaboration with Child Trends on a QRIS public policy communications guide with suggested messaging that will be available later in 2016.

## Summary

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are evolving rapidly. QRIS leaders are trying new strategies and creating new models. To contribute to the evolution of QRIS, BUILD is creating resources to address the continuing challenges of financing, and the need to gain adequate public investment to support QRIS sufficiently to meet its full potential.

