

Quality Rating Improvement Systems: The Basics of Standards

Definition

A Quality Rating and Improvement System is a state level framework to assess, improve and communicate the quality of early learning and development programs.

Purpose

The ultimate purpose of a QRIS is to improve the learning and development outcomes of children by improving the quality of early learning and development programs. This is accomplished by providing

- pathways and resources for continuous improvement,
- accountability for funders, and
- information for consumers.

Scope

Ideally, QRIS design and participation will incorporate most group early care and education providers, regardless of funding stream or auspice, i.e., the QRIS will function cross-sector, including center- and home-based child care, Head Start and prekindergarten programs.

Essential standards

1. The Teaching and Learning Environment (including child assessment to guide teaching and inform consultation with families, reflective practice)
2. Teacher and Director Education
3. Staff/Child Ratios and Group Sizes (only if basic state standards on these are insufficient or non-existent)
4. Continuous Quality Improvement (this is a process rather than a content standard)

Structure

The categories of standards in a QRIS and the criteria specifying items within each standard are intended to define the progression of program quality as it improves.

STANDARD

Criteria (define aspects of the standard)

Indicators (further specify each criterion)

MONITORING/ACCOUNTABILITY

Measures attainment of each standard through assessment and documentation of the criteria and indicators defining it. Results are used to assign a rating. Monitoring methods include self-report, import of data from other systems (e.g., workforce

registry) as well as independent observation. Best practice is a combination of these. Automation is one way to make monitoring and accountability more cost-effective.

Basic Questions to Ask about Standards

1. What is the smallest number of standards and criteria that will yield reliable ratings that validly distinguish among levels of quality? The goal is simplicity with focus on a few powerful standards.

Relevance

2. Does each standard matter?
 - a. Is there strong enough evidence that each required standard is related to program quality and/or to child outcomes and to other significant goals of the QRIS?
 - b. Are the criteria within each standard supported by evidence?
3. Do the criteria within a standard offer a continuum of practice in support of quality improvement, i.e., do criteria distinguish among levels of quality or are they “yes/no” items?
4. Is each criterion measurable?
 - a. Does each criterion address an aspect of quality that can be directly observed, reported or otherwise documented?
 - b. Can it be measured accurately?
 - c. And at what cost to the state and the provider?

Context

5. Are race, culture, language, or ability diversity reflected in any standard?
 - a. Should a particular standard be revised, other criteria included, to ensure that race, culture, language or ability diversity are respected?
 - b. Should a standard be measured differently to address race, culture, language, or ability diversity?
 - c. Is the issue one of interpretation? Would recruiting a more diverse monitoring and TA staff, and investing in additional training, be a more effective action than creating/revising a standard?
 - d. Are some needs better addressed via professional development or other supports rather than in a standard?
6. How are specific populations addressed by a standard, such as infants and toddlers, school-age children, dual language learners?
 - a. What variations in practice should be articulated and put into the standards?

Trade-offs

7. Are the criteria in a required standard likely to significantly increase provider costs?
 - a. If so, is the state prepared to help subsidize those costs?

- b. If not, is the state willing to accept lower participation (i.e., only the subset of providers who could afford to comply)?
- 8. How will the QRIS standards span the distance between the current minimum and the highest state standards?
 - a. How high should the standards in the top level be?
 - b. How many levels are necessary to outline a credible pathway to the top?
 - c. What is the balance between high aspirations and achievability, given the “as is” reality?
- 9. Is there sufficient capacity across the state to offer support for implementation of the standards (if a provider needs/wants such support)?
 - a. If not, can introduction to the content of a standard be developed cost-effectively?
 - b. What can be provided online, in webinars or other electronic means?

Additions/deletions

- 10. What principles guide the addition of standards and criteria? What is a worthy addition?
 - a. The goal or outcome addressed is genuinely worthwhile and has substantial evidence of relationship to program quality and/or child outcomes.
 - b. The addition is potentially affordable for the early learning and development programs the state wants to engage.
 - c. The items/criteria can be specified clearly and measured efficiently.
 - d. The measure empowers providers to take responsibility for Continuous Quality Improvement and reflective practice.
 - e. The item is not better addressed via professional development or communication strategies or other aspects of the QRIS besides the standards.
 - f. Providers who are currently unable to meet this standard will know where to go to get help and can secure professional development and/or technical assistance if they need it.
 - g. The item has high value to a key constituency the state wants to engage or affect even though there is lack of evidence of the item’s relationship to program quality and/or child outcomes. E.g., families often value years of experience although there is no supporting evidence.
- 11. What principles guide the elimination of standards and criteria?
 - a. Use data from experience to guide changes in standards.
 - b. Nearly all programs meet the criteria so it no longer distinguishes levels of quality. (It might be moved into regulation, i.e., be required of all programs, or dropped entirely, e.g., NM. There is little resistance to moving an item into regulation when nearly all programs already meet it.)
 - c. Some items may be ‘predictors’ or ‘proxies’ for others. Consider only measuring the predictor items. Either retain as useful guidance, or eliminate, the items that it predicts.
 - d. The item is essentially a paperwork task or check-list that is time-consuming for providers to document and monitoring staff to verify, and lacks strong evidence.

Moving standards

12. If no or very few programs meet a standard and the standard is important, consider moving it up to a higher level. If not, drop it.
13. If most/all programs are meeting the standards at the lowest level, consider dropping that level entirely (e.g., NC)

Process of Changing Standards

14. How often do standards change?
 - a. Experience of long-term QRIS states is about every 3-5 years for significant changes.
 - b. States make minor tweaks as needed; no need to wait years to change simple things that will be received positively.
15. How are changes introduced?
 - a. Announce emerging standards; be clear about the timing of new standards taking effect (and retirement of old standards).
 - b. Link new standards to support, e.g., "in 201X the standard will change from...to... Here's where you can get help now if you need it."