

Increasing Provider Engagement in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

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As States develop and revise their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), many have focused particular attention and effort on raising provider participation rates. This brief highlights reflections from Indiana, Kentucky, and Washington about how they have increased provider participation in creative and practical ways.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, many States and localities have chosen to address the issue of varying levels of quality in early learning and development programs by developing, implementing, or revising a QRIS. This allows a coordinated State-level approach that

- clearly defines quality standards that are aligned across varied early care and education settings;
- assesses the quality of programs across various elements;
- offers programs a clear path and incentives to improving their levels of quality; and
- provides a means of disseminating this information to parents so they can make informed decisions about the setting they choose for their children.

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants support States in building statewide systems that raise the quality of early learning and development programs and in increasing access to high-quality programs for children with high needs so that all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. A high-functioning QRIS is seen as a key element in these efforts.

It is important that the State QRIS team make it a priority to inform the early learning and development providers of the benefits of their participation in the QRIS system. This can be a challenge, as some may worry that the QRIS could present them in a negative light or expose weaknesses in

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their programs. Others are concerned that participation may be time consuming or expensive. One study¹ found that some providers view ratings as akin to licensing—something to “pass.” States have developed strategies to help providers see QRIS as a positive experience. They want providers to see participation in a QRIS as a collaborative process that gives them opportunities to improve the quality of their programs. Promoting this idea is not always easy, and many States struggle to enlist providers in their QRIS.

This brief highlights the efforts to raise provider participation in three States: Indiana, Kentucky, and Washington. These States were selected because they represent varied but successful approaches to increasing QRIS participation. While these States serve as examples in this brief, other States have also employed innovative and successful strategies in increasing participation. Members of the QRIS team in each States participated in interviews that summarized their outreach efforts, identified particular actions or decisions that were effective in raising participation rates, and offered recommendations for other States.

INDIANA: EFFECTIVELY USING LIMITED RESOURCES



Indiana’s QRIS, Paths to Quality, was launched in 2008 and went statewide in 2009. The program has four levels of quality and has standards for licensed family child care homes, licensed child care centers, and unlicensed registered ministries. (In

Indiana, child care ministries may choose to be registered rather than licensed. These programs have fewer regulations to follow.) In early 2014, the State’s QRIS included 89 percent of licensed centers, 62 percent of licensed child care homes, and 11 percent of registered church ministry child care centers. One-third of these programs were at Level 3 or 4 (the highest quality ratings). Sixty-five percent of families using vouchers are in Paths to Quality programs.²

As the expansion of the QRIS began in 2008, some providers were resistant to participating. Many saw Paths to Quality as “another State program” that would come and go, and they did not see value in getting involved. Indiana’s QRIS team, which consisted of the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, the Indiana Association for Child Care Resource & Referral (IACCRRRA), and the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children (IAEYC), knew that it needed to alter perspectives and change minds. In light of its limited resources, Indiana developed a plan that would use the available resources as creatively as possible.

A FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Indiana provides an example of how a State can successfully develop provider participation even when resources are limited. After setting its budget at a sustainable level, Indiana’s team focused on leveraging existing relationships and developing new ones. The regional Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) offices and IAEYC chapters were connected at the local level to providers, families, and potential funders. Each CCR&R office had a specific person assigned to outreach and introduction, and recruitment was focused at the grassroots level for the first few years. Knowing that some providers were resistant to participating, outreach staff made efforts such as knocking on home providers’ doors to explain the Paths to Quality program and why they should participate. These targeted efforts were coordinated, monitored, and supported by the State’s central CCR&R office.

The QRIS team also focused on connecting with groups that are sometimes harder to reach, including Spanish-speaking providers and registered child care centers operated by a church or



religious ministry. The QRIS team identified key stakeholders in these groups, worked with them to understand their points of view, and highlighted reasons that they should participate. The QRIS team was able to identify advocates among the providers. These advocates were then eager to share with others how they have used the quality resources, and to mentor other providers. In its Hispanic outreach program, the team sponsored 11 providers who earned their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and took English language classes. These providers could then see the results of these quality efforts when they became licensed and part of Paths to Quality.

Indiana also saw that having official recognition for providers as they reached new quality levels gave them greater pride in their successes and strengthened the relationships among providers, families, CCR&R staff, and other stakeholders including IAEYC, higher education staff, and policymakers. The CCR&R offices included recognition information in their newsletters and local newspapers. This not only celebrated those providers, but it also fueled a healthy level of competition among their peers. Signs, banners, and flags were posted to recognize providers at their sites. This reminded them that they are valued and highlighted the successes of the providers for parents and the public. These recognition efforts, like the grassroots work and the outreach to different groups, served to build and sustain key relationships among the various parties in the Paths to Quality system.

CLEARLY DEFINED GOALS

Indiana also built its success by being very specific about participation and outreach goals. CCR&Rs, IAEYC, and licensing staff were given numerical targets for enrolling providers in each category, and all partners were aware of these enrollment goals. Similar to the effect of recognition for providers, publicizing these goals and results stimulated friendly competition among CCR&Rs. Locally, CCR&R staff met to discuss enrollment strategies for specific geographic areas and provider types.

In addition to setting clear goals, each CCR&R agency carefully tracked the enrollment progress via its data system. Each agency has a staff member assigned to data collection, entry, and dissemination. The teams continue to set updated goals each year and to talk about challenges. For example, a participation rate of nearly 90 percent for licensed centers is a great success, but the State knows that there is still room to increase participation for licensed homes.

The State also focused on innovative ways of keeping providers informed about the QRIS and helping them understand why it is relevant to them. Indiana requires licensing consultants to speak to providers about Paths to Quality. Though some consultants were initially resistant because they did not see how this task fit into their job description, they became convinced of its value when they saw the difference these quality discussions made in later licensing visits. Taking these opportunities to link the quality initiative to other efforts is a clear example of how strategic uses of resources (especially those other than funding) have allowed Indiana to successfully increase providers' participation in Paths to Quality.

CONSISTENT MESSAGING

Indiana has also directed efforts toward presenting consistent messages to providers, parents, and the public. The team developed a set of messages, frequently asked questions, and talking points. It made sure that the partners were all sharing the same messages in support of the QRIS initiative. To bring the information to the public, the team scheduled 12 press conferences across the State to launch Paths to Quality. Combined with online efforts that allowed parents to hear directly from providers, these communication endeavors were valuable in publicizing the program without the State incurring significant costs.

SUMMARY

Over the past several years, Indiana has been able to reach high levels of provider participation in its QRIS. The State team has had to think differently and work effectively with different agencies and partnerships. By working from the grassroots level, it has been able to develop strong relationships, maintain clear goals, and deliver consistent messages.

INDIANA'S KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Build upon existing systems and relationships.*
 - *Listen to stakeholders' needs and make relevant adjustments.*
 - *Set and be accountable to specific goals.*
 - *Develop clear messages and a plan for communicating with the programs.*
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KENTUCKY: INCREASING CLARITY AND COLLABORATION



Kentucky's STARS for KIDS NOW (STARS) QRIS program has been available to providers since 2000. It is a voluntary, four-star QRIS for Type I Centers, Type II Licensed Family Child Care Homes, and Certified Family Child Care Homes. All four STAR levels indicate that a provider has surpassed minimum licensing requirements.

Over the past several years, Kentucky has worked to increase provider participation in STARS. As a result, the number of enrolled providers has grown from approximately 20 to 40 percent of all eligible programs. This number reflects approximately 43 percent of licensed centers and 19 percent of certified family child care homes.³

INCREASED COLLABORATION AND CONSISTENCY

Kentucky's central strategy to expand its QRIS and bring in more providers has been to reduce the burden on providers by tightening the observation procedure and aligning the monitoring processes for licensing and STARS.

In the past, providers felt inundated by multiple visits from different evaluators, and they were not always clear about the purpose of a given visit. Licensing visits and STAR rating visits were not coordinated, and STARS raters often reviewed items that had been evaluated by licensing staff weeks or months earlier. This left providers with mixed feelings about participating in STARS and unsure about its benefit to them. In response to feedback from providers, leadership from licensing and STARS created a more provider-friendly system. Licensing visits and two STARS visits are now coordinated to occur within a specific window of time. The three person team—licensing staff, the environment rating scale (ERS) assessor, and the standards reviewer—all send their reports to one person who uses the information to generate the STARS rating for that program.

Kentucky has also been successful in creating a collaborative technical assistance process in its quality initiative. The State has worked to provide timely reporting to providers following STARS visits. Soon after pre-rating visits, providers are notified of their strengths and about strategies that will help



them move to the next level of quality. These plans are then addressed through coordinated technical assistance services provided by STARS Quality Coordinators with support from Child Care Aware® of Kentucky staff and Child Care Health Consultation staff as needed.

Adding to this collaborative process is consistency of training. Uniform training modules have been developed and are being piloted to ensure that technical assistance staff serving child care providers (including those from Child Care Aware® of Kentucky, STARS, and Child Care Health Consultation) receive the same foundational training. This ensures more consistency in technical assistance services. Beyond this, the State has created a coordinated tracking and data system to support communities of practice among technical assistance providers at the regional level and to encourage collaborative technical assistance that supports quality improvement.

This alignment between licensing and STARS has also made a positive change for parents. They now have one website that is easy to access and that gives them the information they need. The Child Care Aware® of Kentucky online data portal was redesigned to pull directly from the State data system and to support parents in understanding STARS. As parents search for information about child care, they are immediately linked to information about the importance of quality programs and how to find them. The STARS rating level is presented with each provider option. This data portal requires no log-in and is free of charge.

CREATIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS

Kentucky's representatives have worked to sustain effective public relations campaigns to spread the word about its QRIS. In addition to banners, billboards, and other traditional marketing strategies, the team has taken advantage of new funding to market STARS and support the providers participating in the QRIS. For example, it used American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funds to provide thousands of cribs to participating providers, to support them in meeting new federal requirements. This not only benefitted providers and children, but also gave providers a tangible reward for their participation in STARS.

SUMMARY

Kentucky took stock and noted that the different licensing and QRIS standards and procedures caused confusion for providers and made them less likely to participate in STARS. Streamlining administrative processes and building collaborative relationships between Licensing and Quality Monitoring staff has made the process more comprehensible to providers and has helped them better understand the benefits of participating in a quality improvement initiative.

KENTUCKY'S KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Align rating and licensing processes to streamline services for providers.*
 - *Establish collaborative relationships among all technical assistance providers to ensure similar messages and non-duplicative services.*
 - *Promote awareness through the provision of tangible awards that demonstrate the usefulness of quality standards and the benefits of participation in the QRIS.*
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WASHINGTON: FOCUSING ON PERCEPTION



Washington State's QRIS, Early Achievers, is based on a voluntary, two-year field test called Seeds to Success that was first piloted in 2010. The RTT-ELC grant allowed the State to reach statewide implementation of the QRIS

on July 1, 2013. Early Achievers is a voluntary program that has five levels and is open to licensed child care centers and family child care homes, Head Start programs, and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program preschools. The QRIS does not serve unlicensed providers. Washington operates Early Achievers using an integrated system of partners. The Department of Early Learning administers the program; the University of Washington provides ratings and evaluation; and Child Care Aware® of Washington (the State's CCR&R agency) delivers coaching, outreach, and implementation.

Washington has been strategic in making a high level of support available to providers, which has resulted in increased participation. However, the Department of Early Learning has also taken several specific steps that have created a strong foundation for success.

By moving the system into the State gradually, the QRIS team was able to learn from and build upon each previous phase, handle concerns as they came along, and make necessary adjustments.

Partnering with Child Care Aware® of Washington, the Department of Early Learning held community meetings and introduced related online trainings in the months preceding the rollout. This phased rollout allowed Washington to avoid some of the pitfalls that have befallen other States: a study of "early adopters" of State QRISs found that a lack of pilot testing led to a need for significant reassessment and revision.⁴

In addition to allowing time to identify potential concerns, this gradual process gave Child Care Aware® of Washington the time it needed to adjust its processes as it moved from a focus on licensing compliance to a focus on quality. In the words of one of Washington's representatives, "Child Care Aware® of Washington had to fundamentally change how they were doing business."

PHASED ROLLOUT

Washington began the gradual phasing in of the QRIS in 2008 by conducting a two-year field test in five communities. Throughout 2011, the team worked on developing the system infrastructure while continuing to work with the field test communities. In July 2012, it began a phased regional rollout to the State's seven regions. It reached a full statewide rollout in July 2013. At that point, Early Achievers was available to every eligible program in the State. As of March 2014, Washington had 1,991 licensed providers—36.5 percent of the total number in the State—participating in Early Achievers. This included 817 child care centers and 1174 family child care homes. The majority of those rated reached Level 3 or 4.⁵ By 2015, Washington's goal is to have 54 percent of the providers in the State participating in Early Achievers.

IMPORTANCE OF PERCEPTION

The phased rollout was critical in allowing Washington to realize the importance of how the QRIS was being perceived by providers and other stakeholders. Based on findings from the field test and other feedback throughout the rollout, the Department of Early Learning recognized that it was viewed by many as mainly a regulatory body and associated with licensing (which may not have always been a positive previous experience for providers). The agency decided that, to be successful, the outreach and implementation activities for the QRIS should be overseen by an organization that was trusted by the

provider community, Child Care Aware® of Washington. Even though Child Care Aware® of Washington is partnered with the Department of Early Learning in the QRIS process, this arrangement allowed providers to have a different perception of the QRIS, and it may have led to greater participation.

This consideration of perception carried over to the overall presentation of the QRIS. To avoid a provider view of the QRIS as something mandatory or even punitive, Washington presented various elements of the program as benefits to providers. For example, the team strengthened provider quality and knowledge by offering four-day Early Achievers Institutes through the University of Washington. Participants attended a variety of sessions in support of quality standards and left with a full parenting curriculum and other tools. The intent was to present the institute—and its emphasis on quality standards—as a gift to providers, rather than a requirement.

Washington carefully considered the effect public ratings could have on parent perception and on providers' willingness to participate in the QRIS. To avoid negative opinions of the QRIS process based on a small number of initial evaluations, it made the decision to refrain from sharing rating information until there was a saturation of ratings in the system. It also chose not to publicly release provider ratings during the first rating cycle. Rather than have stakeholders focus on a misunderstanding of a program's ratings, the public was informed merely that the provider was part of the Early Achievers program. This adjustment made many providers more willing to participate in the QRIS. Those who were initially hesitant now understood that they had time to work through the quality process before their rating was made public.

In addition to waiting to share provider ratings, Washington added Areas of Specialization to the assessment. A provider could earn an Area of Specialization designation in areas such as family engagement and partnerships, interactions and environment, child outcomes, curriculum and staff supports, and professional development. Many facilities earned Areas of Specialization in more than one area. Washington hopes that this will not only provide important recognition to providers for their successes, but will also provide more meaningful information for parents who are choosing programs.

SUMMARY

Washington found success in developing and expanding its QRIS by carefully considering the steps toward implementation and how the program is being perceived by providers, parents, and the public. The QRIS team learned from the phases of the gradual rollout, gathering feedback along the way and making necessary adjustments. It also considered how to effectively disseminate information to different stakeholders and allowed the program to grow organically as providers and parents became more knowledgeable about the purpose of quality initiatives.

WASHINGTON'S KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Present the goal of the QRIS as working toward quality.*
 - *Consider and be responsive to the way the QRIS is perceived by various stakeholders.*
 - *Use and learn from a phased rollout.*
 - *Involve partners that providers know and trust.*
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SUMMARY: INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN THE QRIS

As States develop and implement their QRIS, they have considered how to maximize the system's strengths and usefulness to all involved parties. A major result of this efficacy is high rates of provider



participation in the system. This brief was designed to address the issue of participation, specifically highlighting how three States have found success in their efforts to enroll providers.

The information offered by the interviewed States highlights overarching themes that were key to the success of these States, even when considering their varied sizes, structures, and challenges.

BUILD ON CURRENT SYSTEMS

One of the ways these States solidified their QRIS processes was by building upon and expanding systems already in existence, rather than looking at the QRIS as a unique new entity to be added as a separate piece. For example, Kentucky aligned its licensing process with STARS to streamline the number of visits and decrease confusion for providers. This allowed STARS to be seen as a positive development rather than an imposition. Similarly, when Indiana asked licensing consultants to speak with providers about Paths to Quality, providers began to view Paths to Quality as an expansion of the quality efforts they were already making through licensing.

Beyond linking QRIS with licensing, the States have also built upon existing systems for technical assistance and professional development when incorporating these necessary aspects of the QRIS. States can build the QRIS on a more solid foundation if they seek ways to incorporate it into—or use it to enhance—their current systems.

CONSIDER THE FULL TRAJECTORY OF THE PROCESS

These States envisioned the trajectory of the development and implementation of the QRIS at the outset. All three found that developing a clear plan for outreach that considered the intricacies of the particular State system and the interactions of its stakeholders helped to increase provider participation. They also recognized the need for creativity and flexibility on the part of the QRIS team, whether in response to limited resources or public relations challenges. This is apparent in Washington's phased rollout, which allowed for feedback from stakeholders along the way and requisite adjustments, and in Indiana's efforts to set clear goals and carefully track them throughout the implementation. States should also work, as Kentucky has, to provide timely technical assistance and professional development so the level of quality in early learning and development programs continues to improve as the QRIS expands throughout the State. By clearly delineating the steps in the process before jumping in, these States have been able to keep a reasonable level of control over their QRIS development and implementation and to make the real-time adjustments that keep the process moving.

CONSIDER HOW THE IDENTIFIED AUDIENCES RECEIVE THE INFORMATION

In any policy implementation, considering specific audiences and how they will best receive information is critical to success. These States have modeled these considerations in multiple ways, beginning with their understanding that providers may be confused or skeptical about the QRIS process. While State or local agencies may be clear about the reasons they expect the QRIS to improve the quality of programs, these reasons may not be immediately apparent to providers, who can sometimes feel nervous about the QRIS. With these issues in mind, the three States focused efforts on effectively sharing information. By developing a set of clear, consistent messages, Indiana decreased the potential for misinformation and damaging rumors. This is similar to Kentucky's efforts to provide the same technical assistance to all providers, once again making sure that information is consistent. In Washington, delaying the public sharing of provider ratings helped to ensure that all parties understood the QRIS before they formed opinions about individual providers. All these examples demonstrate the deliberate efforts made by these States to consider how to most effectively share QRIS information in the hopes of creating positive perspectives on the system.

FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, the most central take-home message from the three States is the critical role of relationships in raising provider participation and maintaining a successful QRIS. Each of these States developed ways to build upon existing relationships, create new ones, and recognize provider successes in ways that solidify the providers' role as partners with the State team. Kentucky worked to make its technical assistance process more collaborative in an effort to build partnerships among providers as well as between providers and technical assistance staff. Washington's Early Achievers Institutes gave providers greater knowledge and resources and also showed that the State viewed them as highly skilled professionals. Indiana dedicated significant time to developing and maintaining relationships across stakeholders, focusing on grassroots efforts in communities and creating special recognition programs for providers. All these actions allow the States to demonstrate how important the different stakeholders are to the QRIS and its goals and to let these individuals know that they are part of a much larger team.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ RAND Corporation (2008).
- ² Indiana QRIS Team Interview, personal communication, March 2014.
- ³ Kentucky QRIS team interview, personal communication, November 2013.
- ⁴ RAND Corporation (2008).
- ⁵ Washington State Department of Early Learning (2014).

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