



Aligning QRIS and CCR&R Goals to Support a High Quality Early Learning System

A **QRIS** is a method to assess, improve and communicate the level of quality in early care and education settings. QRIS can exist on a spectrum in terms of their development and implementation and can operate statewide or in a local area. A fully functioning QRIS, however, includes the following components: (1) quality standards for programs and practitioners, (2) supports and an infrastructure to meet such standards, (3) monitoring and accountability systems to ensure compliance with quality standards, (4) ongoing financial assistance that is linked to meeting quality standards, and (5) engagement and outreach strategies. *Definition from Child Trends, 2009*



Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies provide local and statewide services including (1) guidance and referrals for parents seeking child care; (2) the collection of information about the local supply of child care; and, (3) provider training and support. Some CCR&R agencies also administer child care subsidies. *Definition from Child Care and Early Education Research Connections*

As of 2014, nearly every state and territory had established a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) or is planning for one. Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) play an important part in the implementation of QRIS in most states. Early childhood leaders in numerous states are rethinking the roles of CCR&R and several asked BUILD to help them better understand how states have restructured the role and funding of CCR&Rs to support QRIS implementation.

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Late in 2014, BUILD conducted a survey of states and augmented this research with interviews with state leaders in five states. This BUILD brief shares the results of that research. We hope it will be useful to state leaders as they think strategically about how best to partner with CCR&Rs and how to use existing resources to support the partnerships in support of their QRIS goals.

Shared Roles for Supporting Providers to Increase Capacity for Quality

At the most basic level, QRIS and CCR&Rs are linked by their intent to increase public understanding of the importance of high quality early childhood settings. In addition, both share the common purpose of bolstering the capacity of providers to deliver high quality care and education to young children. The result of this shared purpose can be an important foundation for partnership if the goals of both are aligned around a common framework.

Over the years, as the federal Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) has required consumer education efforts, ensuring access to training for providers and other quality initiatives, CCR&Rs have been a significant resource and partner within state early learning systems. For decades, many states have entered into contracts with statewide CCR&R networks or with individual CCR&Rs to provide



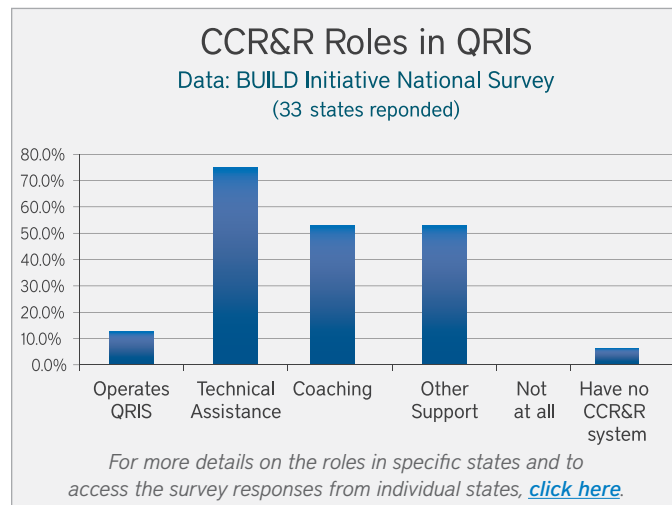
information to parents about choosing high quality early care and education, and to improve the supply of and demand for high quality early childhood programs. In many states, CCR&Rs are the lead partners at the state, regional or local level within professional development networks. Because CCR&Rs exist also to support providers, they can be a lynchpin of successful training and technical assistance. As a result, the role of CCR&Rs in the development and implementation of a strong QRIS is fundamental in many states to the creation of high quality early care and education. To achieve a strong partnership though, numerous states are now restructuring their relationships with CCR&Rs and their role in a QRIS to improve early care and education.

Survey Information

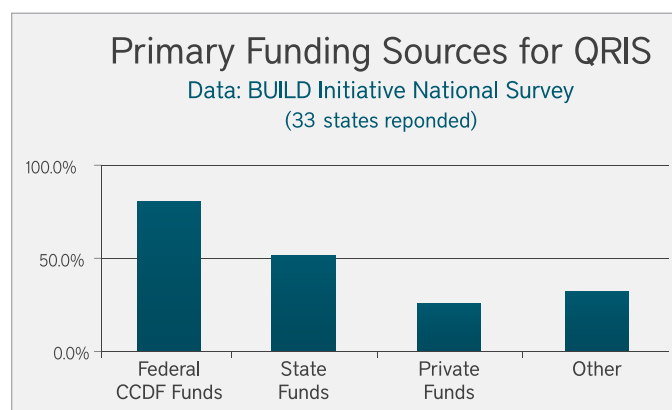
To better understand the relationship of CCR&Rs and QRIS, the BUILD Initiative conducted a national survey (with responses from 33 states), asking how states partner with their CCR&R system to support their goals for programs and families under QRIS. Responses, primarily from State QRIS and child care administrators, provided important information on the connection between a state's QRIS and its CCR&R. The results of the survey indicate that most states rely on CCR&Rs to include information on QRIS in consumer education materials, as well as to provide training and technical assistance to providers participating in the QRIS. In some states, CCR&Rs are also responsible for provider recruitment for QRIS participation.

States have begun to redesign professional development and training to align with both QRIS program standards

and state early learning and development standards. CCR&Rs play an integral role in developing and conducting these trainings; they also help providers complete individual professional development plans that align with QRIS goals. In many states, there are positions embedded within CCR&Rs that provide coaching and mentoring for providers as they participate in the QRIS.



States often link QRIS to tiered reimbursement for child care subsidy payments. This can be an incentive for providers to participate and reach the higher rating levels. Some states also use targeted quality funds to provide one-time incentives for joining or advancing in the QRIS, whether at the beginning or the end of that process. In some states, CCR&Rs may play a leadership role in helping providers access those resources, and may also distribute the quality funds to providers.



As indicated by the chart above, the primary source of funding for QRIS and all other quality initiatives and consumer education is the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Often, the state funding is part of the CCDBG required maintenance of effort

or matching funds. State agencies responsible for administering CCDBG typically contract with CCR&Rs, higher education systems and other stakeholders to implement the goals and objectives identified in their CCDBG plan. In recent years, a growing number of CCDBG policies at the federal level have focused on improving the quality of experience for children in early care and education, as well as on ensuring an effective investment of public dollars. This is particularly true under the CCDBG reauthorization that was approved by Congress in December 2014.

With the launch and expansion of QRIS across the country, states have adjusted and revised many of their relationships with other stakeholders in the early learning systems and, in particular, the partnership with CCR&Rs. To that end, states have modified their contracts and memorandums of understanding with CCR&Rs to better align the work of CCR&Rs with the goals and outcomes of a state's QRIS framework.

The survey results showed that there are many different approaches states have taken to facilitate the collaborative work of QRIS and CCR&Rs. In the states that have used their federal and state funding as a lever, the roles and responsibilities of the CCR&R have been completely redirected toward supporting the implementation of the QRIS. Many of these states have centralized the resource and referral functions of the CCR&R in order to ensure sufficient resources at the regional level that support provider participation in the QRIS. Other states have chosen to keep the two systems more separate but still work to ensure cross-systems communication and collaboration.

Creating this type of systems change is more about approaching the work from a full systems perspective, than about having additional financial resources. The states profiled below represent this approach. Although three states are RTT-ELC grant recipients, the work began well before the funding was awarded. The other two states do not have RTT-ELC grants, and have successfully moved these two systems toward greater alignment.

Georgia



Georgia's voluntary QRIS, called Quality Rated, began in 2012. Quality Rated is composed of three levels and uses a points-based rating structure. Programs are evaluated on structural and process quality indicators. This work was fully launched statewide in 2012 but efforts

expanded in 2014 with the state's receipt of its RTT-ELC grant. Under this grant, the state has committed to a significant increase in the number of programs participating and advancing in the QRIS as part of the goal for increasing families' access to quality early care and education programs.

Prior to the launch of Georgia's QRIS, there were 14 regional CCR&Rs. The state provided funding but their work was primarily focused on helping families enroll in programs and providing technical assistance to programs seeking national accreditation. The work was not specifically aligned to the QRIS framework. Prior to the QRIS launch, the decision was made to reduce the number of CCR&R regions to six, aligning them with the state's child care services regions. At this same time, it was determined that all quality improvement - including on-site coaching and mentoring; professional learning opportunities; communities of practice; and parent referrals - would be consolidated under CCR&Rs. (QRIS assessments and ratings are centralized under the Department of Early Care and Learning.) State leaders restructured contracts with CCR&Rs to include benchmarks for the number of programs they must recruit to the system, get rated and then move from one level to another. Contracts also included benchmarks around training that is linked to QRIS. CCR&Rs are now viewed as the "operational" side of QRIS. They provide technical assistance through a cohort method that is based upon a system around implementation science and constructive feedback loops. They do a baseline assessment using the Environment Rating Scale and incentive funding is available for materials and supplies. Once a program is rated, it receives bonuses (via a non-profit partner) and technical assistance to start moving to the next level.

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While CCR&Rs play no role in the direct assessment under QRIS (that is handled by the Department of Early Care and Learning), they are trained to do technical assistance on the assessment instruments. The state contract with the regional CCR&Rs also includes a requirement as to the use of the state-level data system. Georgia's licensing system includes a licensing portal with a technical assistance tab that captures dosage, content, tools used, and other elements. All of this detail and work by the CCR&Rs will be fully tracked under the state data system by 2017 with CCR&Rs held accountable to specific performance goals.

Georgia leaders noted that they had not always been clear with CCR&Rs as to expectations and that often led to challenges in the partner relationships. Under this new contracting approach, those expectations are now clearly laid out to each CCR&R and fully aligned with the state's goals, as stated in the QRIS framework.

Montana



Montana's Best Beginnings STARS to Quality Program is a voluntary quality rating improvement system that aligns quality indicators with support and incentives for early childhood programs and early childhood professionals. Best Beginnings is a five-star block QRIS with tiered subsidy reimbursement beginning at level two.

Montana leaders have designed the QRIS with three distinct arms:

- QRIS implementation
- Workforce development
- Infrastructure to provide training, coaching, and technical assistance and to validate the STARS system.

Currently, 20% of the licensed providers in Montana are enrolled in the QRIS. While the expectation is that Montana's QRIS will expand, it is currently not accepting new provider applications. Montana has approached enrollment in the QRIS with an initial focus on programs that serve significant numbers of children with high needs. High needs is a criteria defined by the state and includes special populations such as homeless children, children with special needs and in child protective services and children of teen parents and Tribal members.



Montana's Early Childhood Services Bureau contracts with eleven regional CCR&R agencies across the state to help low-income families find and pay for early care and education, provide referrals for families of all income levels, as well as offer training, technical assistance, and support for early care and education providers. Under the contract, funded generally with CCDBG funding, each CCR&R is required to have a QRIS coach to assist programs in quality improvement planning, action planning, understanding the STARS program criteria and steps involved, and meeting individual program goals.

CCR&Rs develop and present training for providers in the areas of: child development, health and safety, infant toddler care and sound business practices. Providers are charged a fee for trainings that are not mandated by the QRIS. Professional development that is required by the QRIS is offered free of charge. Additional one-time funds were made available in the CCR&R contract to cover some of that cost. CCR&R agencies also coordinate mentoring of family child care programs pursuing NAFCC accreditation.

Funding has not been increased despite the additional technical assistance requirements. Montana is completing a functional cost analysis, with the CCR&R staff conducting a time study. The intent is to gather data that will inform the changes in the work practices of the CCR&Rs as a result of the alignment with QRIS, as well as to determine an appropriate unit rate for the work. The CCR&R providers are engaged in discussions with the state administration regarding the current structure of their system, and what changes might be made to create a more efficient and effective structure.

Pennsylvania



Prior to the launch of Keystone STARS, Pennsylvania's quality rating and improvement system, the state had county-level Child Care Information Services (CCIS) agencies whose primary role was to provide information about the state's child care assistance program (Child Care Works) and to manage the implementation of Child Care Works on behalf of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Some of these local organizations, usually run by non-profit organizations and sometimes by county government, also sought to offer training and other support to early care and education providers. Separate from the CCIS network of agencies, a single organization had the statewide responsibility for coordinating professional development and training of early care and education providers across the state.

With the launch of Keystone STARS in 2002 and the creation of the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) in 2004, Pennsylvania shifted its use of resources and restructured its quality improvement efforts for early care and education providers under Keystone Stars. OCDEL consolidated all technical assistance, training and professional development programs via a new approach and structure that specifies a set of implementation organizations known as the state-level Pennsylvania Key and six regional Keys. The state-level PA Key was created as a new organization affiliated with one of the state's intermediate (educational service) units and the six regional Keys were affiliated with pre-existing community level organizations, most of which also ran a CCIS. The specific mission of the Keys was two-fold: to administer the Keystone STARS program within each region and to administer the state's professional development system. These were funded with both federal and state dollars with the goal of improving coordination and maximizing resources. Programs assigned to the PA Key were those that required a state-level approach to ensure fairness and equity, and included the state's T.E.A.C.H. contract, the professional development registry, the higher education voucher program for early care and education professionals, and the system for approving local training. Each regional Key took the lead in Keystone STARS and organized and managed professional development funding for both credit and

non-credit approaches in support of an integrated program-professional approach to quality improvement efforts. The PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning maintains the key policy and program development work for this system, and directly manages contracts with both the PA Key and the Regional Keys.

More than a decade later, the PA Keys still exist and by all accounts the strategy has been a successful one. There are now five regional Keys (down from six).

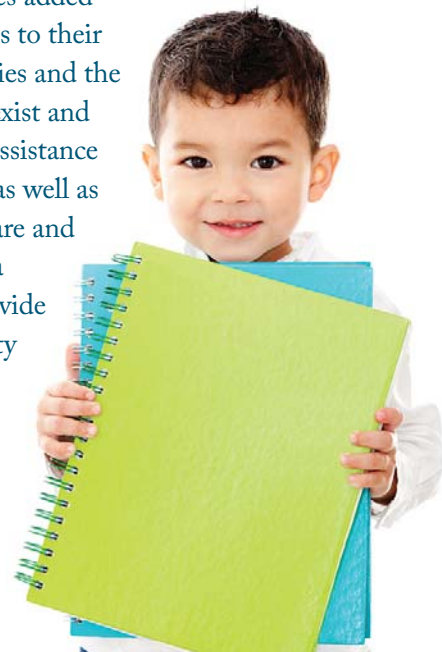
Their role remains the same: coordinating all quality improvement and professional development efforts across a region, maximizing resources, and providing supports that would not be possible through the more localized and narrower CCIS agencies. Shortly after start-up, additional roles were created at the regional key level, and these efforts have been sustained. Each regional Key also houses specialists who provide targeted support to early care and education providers in a region, including an Infant/Toddler Specialist, the Health and Safety Specialist and Mental Health

Consultants, among others. Regional Keys originally coordinated local community engagement groups to promote community education and support for high quality early learning but state funding for this effort has been cut in the past few years. They continue to play a coordination role with higher education, strategically using funds to support early education degrees and CDA programs in a region.

While some CCIS agencies added the Regional Key functions to their organizations, those agencies and the other CCISs continue to exist and administer the child care assistance program at the local level as well as serve as the hub of early care and education information in a county or region. They provide information on high quality early care and education and personalized referral based on specific needs and preferences.



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Virginia



Virginia's voluntary QRIS, the Star Quality Initiative, began in 2007 and is administered through a public-private partnership between the Virginia Department of Social Services' Office of Early Childhood Development (OECD) and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF). This partnership acts as a hub for regional and local efforts to advance the QRIS. Both OECD and VECF have dedicated QRIS staff who process ratings, train and employ quality raters and mentors, and provide guidance for QRIS implementation.

OECD contracts with 8 agencies to lead the QRIS implementation on a regional level. These agencies are not required to be CCR&Rs, although they are sometimes housed within the same larger organization. The contract with OECD requires agencies to have a regional QRIS coordinator and use mentors and raters who have completed state QRIS training. Star Quality mentors provide technical assistance to star-rated programs, which involves helping them develop quality improvement plans, implement changes and connect to other community resources. Engagement with QRIS also happens at the local level through community early childhood systems coalitions, known as Smart Beginnings. This effort is led by the VECF to help communities align and improve their early childhood systems and services.

The CCR&R system in Virginia consists of five regional organizations, with Child Care Aware Virginia as the centralized provider of referral services. The shift to this model occurred in 2013 and was the result of a reduction of state contracting resources and a need to better align the resources to support the QRIS framework. While not required in state contracts to promote QRIS, Virginia's CCR&R databases all indicate a program's QRIS rating, which is linked to a statewide database designed and maintained by Child Care Aware Virginia. Additionally, CCR&Rs help providers recognize that a star rating can be an effective marketing tool.

The QRIS hub staff views CCR&Rs as key partners to the successful implementation and promotion of QRIS. Because participation is not mandatory, the support of local CCR&R staff can significantly influence a provider's desire to enroll. In addition, the essential aspects of consumer education within the QRIS system depend on the willingness of the CCR&Rs to promote rated programs in the referral process.

Washington



Early Achievers is Washington's voluntary quality rating and improvement system, which went statewide in July 2013. Washington's QRIS has five levels that are arranged in a hybrid rating structure. Programs submit an application, attend an orientation and complete a rating portfolio. Additionally, an on-site assessment is conducted. Washington's QRIS design and implementation timeline was part of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant awarded in 2011 but was preceded by extensive piloting and many years of formative development.

Child Care Aware (CCA), the state's child care resource and referral network, serves as the implementation partner for Early Achievers (EA). During the development of EA, state leaders debated whether to make the educational service districts partners in the QRIS but chose CCA after much discussion and agreement by CCA leaders that substantial changes would be made in the organization if the Department of Early Learning (DEL) selected CCA as a key partner. As agreed, the new focus of Child Care Aware under the QRIS would be on the QRIS goals with substantially new roles for the organization, including recruiting providers to join, providing technical assistance to get providers ready for the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and ratings process and having administrative oversight of the coaches being used.

CCA, which consists of a managing organization at the state level and now seven regional organizations, had to agree to completely restructure their regional and state organizations in order to secure the state contract to deliver these services. Their mission changed to include a focus on supporting QRIS. The state-level organization doubled in size and became the managing entity over the regional organizations. The number of regions was reduced from 11 to 7 to create more efficient economies of scale. Offices were shut down and new leadership was designated. Accountability measures were put in place to assure





all staff at the state and regional level were meeting performance goals and participation targets tied to QRIS implementation. Language was put into the contract between the Department of Early Learning (DEL) and Child Care Aware which specified all of these changes, including the new organizational structure at the state and regional level and accountability requirements. DEL even retained the right through the contract to approve new hires and their specific roles, and provided guidance on the qualifications of people that should be hired.

New positions hired by Child Care Aware under the DEL contract included a Quality Improvement Director; a Professional Development Director to assure that core trainings were being delivered in a standardized way across the regions; a Technical Assistance Coordinator, who works with regional staff and created a framework for how they would support facilities; and a Coaching Coordinator to support the coaching staff in each of the regions. Staff members also shifted their focus internally to outreach and marketing, assisting in each region with recruitment and marketing strategies. The Washington Scholars scholarship program was also administered through Child Care Aware at the state level.

Washington leaders say the changes have been a real philosophical shift for Child Care Aware as they have changed their primary focus to support early care and

education providers in assuring improved child outcomes under the QRIS. It was a real struggle in the early days to make such a seismic shift. But the end result...an early learning system in which all key components are aligned to prioritize quality improvement and improved outcomes for children...was worth it.

While each state profiled has taken a different approach and has varying levels of resources invested in its QRIS, the bottom line in each example is the importance of aligning resources and performance requirements between the work of CCR&Rs and a state's QRIS to achieve the shared goal of higher quality early care and education for young children and families.

Observations and Recommendations

As states have altered their traditional supports of the early learning system to reflect the increased expectation of funders and policy makers for accountability measures and continuous learning and improvements, there have

been some bumps along the road. Although many providers and leaders in the CCR&R system have worked with QRIS and Child Care State Administrators in the redesign and alignment of the early learning system, others have struggled to see the opportunity in this new approach. Some worry that the increased accountability will result in increased expectations for early care and education providers without adequate compensation. Others worry that unique qualities of early care and education programs will be lost in the movement toward standardized definitions of quality.

It is essential to respect these concerns and engage in a supportive process to arrive at a common understanding of how to best advance the early learning system and solve those issues.

Successful states have worked to incorporate accountability measures into state contracts with CCR&Rs that are designed to inspire continuous improvement towards the standards and priorities of their QRIS. This has required clarity of roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder, a clear process for addressing conflict among various CCR&Rs who may be fearful of losing funding, and flexibility to help facilitate a respectful yet clear process for rising to the new challenges of improving

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the early learning system. Often restructuring has been required as part of this process.

To maximize the potential of high quality early learning programs going forward, early care and education systems need clear accountability measures focused on the program outcomes that lead to successful child outcomes. As QRIS systems grow and evolve, CCR&Rs need to help frame these measures rather than avoid or resist them, and demonstrate leadership for the providers in their community to embrace the opportunities for improving and refining teaching and caring practices. Early learning systems, just like any system, evolve and respond to changes in the environment. With

increased attention on quality early learning as one tool to ensure children with high needs experience success in school and life, the push for well-defined outcomes will continue to grow rather than recede. QRIS has the potential to provide parents and policy makers with clear, understandable definitions of quality early learning.

Like the maxim Stronger Together, QRIS and CCR&Rs are each better able to support providers to achieve higher levels of quality and to ensure that parents understand the role that high quality early care and education can play in supporting their child's healthy development when their missions are aligned.

