# Recognizing Quality: Building a Quality Rating and Improvement System that Works for Massachusetts

**What is a Quality Rating and Improvement System?**

**A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)** is a way to provide families with information about the quality of programs their children attend. It is also a tool to give programs and providers the support, technical assistance, and incentives needed to engage in continuous quality improvement.[2] Over the last 10 years, 17 states have implemented QRIS, while over 30 more are in various stages of designing their systems.[3]

**Why a Quality Rating and Improvement System?**

More than 92% of young children and 20% of school-age children in Massachusetts receive care outside of their homes to support their learning and development.[4,5] Families, however, generally have little access to information about program quality. When it is available, families can use that information to better understand high quality care and make informed decisions about which programs in their community best meet their families' needs. A well-designed quality rating system can encourage an increase in the demand for quality care, support program improvements, and enhance professional development opportunities for providers.

> *"Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are a way to recognize, communicate and promote high quality care in programs serving children."*[1]
>
> —Anne Mitchell, Early Childhood Policy Research

**How is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Approaching QRIS?**

With the support of a nationally recognized QRIS consulting team and a group of 24 external stakeholders, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) began the planning process for QRIS development in March 2008. Together they worked to develop recommendations for QRIS goals, scope, and standards. Work continues in order to achieve alignment in the design and to identify supports and incentives.

In July 2008, Massachusetts' first public QRIS forum was co-sponsored by EEC and the Schott Fellowship in Early Care and Education, a program of the CAYL Institute. Over 160 stakeholders from across the Commonwealth engaged in dialogue with each other; with nationally recognized speaker, Anne Mitchell; and with experts from Pennsylvania and North Carolina.[7] Guest speakers provided an overview of QRIS and shared lessons learned from other states. EEC also provided a preliminary and ambitious QRIS timeline that aims to launch a pilot of the QRIS by the fall of 2009, leading to full implementation by January 2011. In Massachusetts, QRIS would engage programs and providers serving children age birth to 14 in the new system.[7]

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## Three Lessons Learned from Other States and What Massachusetts Stakeholders Are Saying

To help inform the creation of a successful Quality Rating and Improvement System, Massachusetts can look to other statewide systems for *Lessons Learned* and to *Voices from the Field* gathered during the forum. (The states using specific strategies are indicated in parentheses.)

### Lesson #1: A Strong Infrastructure is Essential

- Ensure adequate funding to support and sustain the system overtime (PA, MO, NC)

- Create a seamless statewide system that aligns and unifies agencies, programs, and initiatives serving children and youth (PA, OH, WI, CO, NC)

*Voices from the Field* - A Successful QRIS for Massachusetts Needs to:

- Secure funding to ensure that program incentives, supports, and accountability measures are readily available and maintained.

- Create a system that coordinates with related state agencies and programs to eliminate fragmentation and duplication.

- Strategically align quality improvement initiatives, such as workforce development, the new licensing regulations, universal preschool (UPK), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and other accreditation systems.

- Develop provider- and consumer-friendly data collection systems to streamline reporting requirements needed to evaluate and share information about the quality of care.

### Lesson # 2: Effective Communication Strategies Must Be In Place

- Establish a clear process for ongoing, two-way communication to ensure that the system is responsive and functions effectively (PA, NC, CO, OH, IA)

- Engage families by finding out what they want to know and providing information in easily accessible formats that all families can understand (PA, MI, NH, RI)

*Voices from the Field* - Stakeholders are Eager to Have On-going Opportunities to Provide Input

Some suggested strategies:

- Provide information that families, educators, and providers want through strong public awareness campaigns in multiple languages, media, and formats, keeping all stakeholders well informed.

- Make basic information about QRIS available via the web, including the rationale, goals, and philosophy of the system.

- Use existing local and professional networks to share information and gather input by hosting regional focus groups and conducting quarterly surveys.

- Designate EEC personnel to respond to the public about QRIS.

**Lesson #3: Programs Require a Coordinated System of Support and Incentives to Build and Maintain Quality**

- Offer meaningful support to help programs and practitioners achieve high quality (PA, OH, NC, IA)

- Provide tangible incentives such as bonuses, quality grants, scholarships, higher reimbursement rates, and tax incentives for families to encourage the participation of all providers, programs, and families (CO, IN, IL,NC, VT)

- Make sure there is adequate capacity for monitoring and developing a process that ensures consistent interpretation, verification, and implementation of quality criteria (TN, PA, MI, NC)

*Voices from the Field* - Resources and Supports Need to be Equitable to Ensure Participation and Quality Improvements.

Some identified needs:

- Timely and clear information about QRIS expectations and effective assistance for quality improvements to all programs, without additional cost to the program.

- Recognition for accomplishments, monetary awards for professional development, increased reimbursement rates and equitable staff compensation across program settings.

- A coordinated system of program supports that builds on existing delivery networks and is responsive to the needs of the diverse workforce, recognizing regional, cultural, and linguistic differences.

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## Recommendations

QRIS is generating a great deal of optimism and interest. To build on this positive climate, we offer the following three recommendations:

### *Recommendation 1: Secure Adequate Funding From the Start*

We strongly recommend that Massachusetts devise a clear, sustainable, and feasible financial plan before launching QRIS. This plan must include funding for infrastructure as well as for training and technical assistance, compensation for teachers, and incentives to providers.

### *Recommendation 2: Develop Effective Communication Strategies*

Communication was a strongly voiced concern by Massachusetts stakeholders. We are delighted to have offered the first public discussion of QRIS in Massachusetts; however, much more needs to be done. We recommend that EEC design a systematic communication plan including extensive targeted outreach strategies to all stakeholders with significant opportunity for input.

### *Recommendation 3: Build a Seamless System with Alignment*

Eliminating redundancy and the burden of duplicate standards and paperwork is essential for engaging programs and supporting them in their efforts to improve quality. It is vital that Massachusetts state government articulate a cohesive vision that aligns all strategies.

**CONCLUSION** A Quality Rating and Improvement System has the potential to be an essential ingredient for the establishment of "a fully integrated and adequately funded state system of early education and care that begins at birth." Children, families, and providers can benefit from a well-designed, carefully implemented system that makes information about the quality of care readily available. Building a system that recognizes and supports excellence enhances the Commonwealth's ability to provide high quality learning environments for all children.

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## Endnotes

1. Mitchell, A. (2005, July). Stair Steps to Quality: *A Guide for States and Communities Developing Quality Rating Systems for Early Care and Education.* United Way: Success by 6.

2. See endnote 1. Mitchell.

3. National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center.  http://www.nccic.org; *Quality Rating Systems: Definition and Statewide Systems.* (2007, July). Retrieved from http://www.nccic.org/pubs/qrs-defsystems.pdf; *Quality Rating Systems and the Impact on Quality in Early Care and Education Settings.* (2007, February). Retrieved from http://www.nccic.org/poptopics/qrs-impactqualitycc.pdf; *Quality Rating Systems: Quality Standards.* (2007, October). Retrieved from http://www.nccic.org/poptopics/qrs-criteria-websites.pdf; Stoney, L. (2004, September). *Financing Quality Rating Systems: Lessons Learned. Alliance for Early Childhood Finance.* Retrieved from http://www.earlychildhoodfinance.org/handouts/Louise_Stoney_QRS_Financing_Paper.pdf

4. http://strategiesforchildren.org/eea/6research_summaries/07_ParentSurveyBrief.pdf

5. http://massafterschoolcomm.blogspot.com/2007/09/special-commission-issues-press-release_19.html

6. Forum attendees included professionals from center-based, family childcare, public schools, Head Starts, Community Partnerships for Children, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Early Education and Care, Family Networks, nonprofit organizations, and higher education. The majority of the participants were center directors, program administrators, and program coordinators. Attendees worked in 11 of the 14 counties in the Commonwealth.

7. Identified programs and providers for QRIS participation include those serving infants, toddlers and preschoolers in center-based, Head Starts, family childcare, and license exempt programs such as public school preschools and faith-based care and those serving school-age children in after/out-of-school time programs.

8. National Accreditation Organizations. http://www.nafcc.org/documents/FINAL%20Nat%20Acc%20Bodies%20Statement%20and%20Summary%2010.07.pdf

9. The Patrick Administration Education Action Agenda. (2008, June). Retrieved from http://www.mass.gov/Agov3/docs/Readiness%20Final%20Report.pdf

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