



**Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for
Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book**

Build
INITIATIVE
Strong Foundations For
Our Youngest Children

Preface

Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (ELC) is the major federal funding initiative seeking to support states in developing high quality early childhood systems, especially targeted to children with high needs. Launched in 2011 as a joint initiative of the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, there have been three rounds of major grants under the ELC, with 20 states now participating and funding that totals just over \$1 billion.

This federal initiative had particular meaning to the BUILD Initiative and its founders, members of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative. For more than a decade, BUILD has served as a catalyst for change and a national support system for state policy leaders and early childhood systems development. Not only did BUILD’s work help shape the federal initiative, but it was also the fulfillment of the founders’ most fervent hopes—that states could create detailed blueprints for an early childhood system, with budgets to support significant infrastructure development. BUILD staff, consultants, and many colleagues in the field rose to the challenge and provided extensive support to states as they applied for, and now implement, the federal opportunity.

The Early Learning Challenge supports states in their efforts to align, coordinate, and improve the quality of existing early learning and development programs across the multiple funding streams that support children from their birth through age five. Through the ELC, states focus on foundational elements of a state system: creating high quality, accountable early learning programs through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems; supporting improved child development outcomes through health, family engagement and vigorous use of early learning state standards and assessments; strengthening the early childhood workforce; and measuring progress.

Thirty-five states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico applied for the 2011 round of the Early Learning Challenge grants with nine states initially and then five more selected from this pool for funding. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia responded to a new 2013 third round of grants; six were selected.

Round 1: California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington

Round 2: Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin

Round 3: Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont

Since the launch of the ELC, grantee states have rapidly moved from concept to implementation. Through this E-Book, we share learnings from the initial implementation of the efforts, highlighting experience, trends, and reflections stemming from the significant federal investment in this strategic work. The chapters are authored by experts who have worked in tandem with state leaders to gather information. By documenting the experience of the states, captured through interviews with state leaders, *Rising to the Challenge* provides a source of learning for all fifty states and territories and puts into practice our leadership commitment to continuous learning in the best interests of the children and families to whom we are all dedicated.



Harriet Dichter
General Manager and Editor, *Rising to the Challenge*



Susan G. Hibbard
Executive Director, BUILD Initiative



Chapter
8

**Impact of the Early Learning Challenge
on State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems**

*Debi Mathias
2015*



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Introduction and History of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems¹

In 2015, 44 states and territories are implementing Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)—systems for assessing, improving and communicating early care and education quality. In many states, the QRIS is administered by the state agency that oversees child care, which typically is part of the state’s human services infrastructure. However, state education agencies and governors’ offices also design and administer QRIS—especially those developed in more recent years.

QRIS have been in existence for about two decades, during which time, these systems have evolved. The initial focus in the 1990s was on addressing low quality in child care. The theory behind this focus was that providing parents and the public with a transparent and easily understood child care quality rating would increase their capacity to make more informed choices and would give child care providers an incentive to engage in quality improvement activities. For the most part, these systems built on the child care licensing standards. They identified levels of quality, based primarily on the providers’ ability to achieve program standards within a cost-constrained financial environment.

Those engaged in early QRIS efforts accepted as a given the overall low level of public and private financing for child care and their ambitions were to improve quality within that context. This led to consideration of standards in key areas such as ratios and group sizes; improvements in health and safety beyond the licensing floor; and improvements in staff qualifications and continuing education. Use of Environment Rating Scales (ERS) was a common approach to determining whether the learning program for the children was appropriate and it also provided steps for improvement.

These early efforts identified various levels of quality as well as an achievable pathway for providers to improve services. The ratings provided information to the public and other early childhood providers to quickly identify child care providers who were offering higher levels of quality. The ratings also provided an indicator of quality that other early childhood sectors—such as Head Start, Early Intervention, and public pre-k—could use to assess potential child care partners. Some initial efforts included additional funding for providers to engage and make progress in quality improvement, as well as funding for infrastructure to market quality levels, provide professional development, including technical assistance, and to monitor and rate programs.

¹ Information in this section is drawn from a forthcoming BUILD paper by Diane Schilder and Iheoma Iruka with Harriet Dichter and Debi Mathias, *Quality Rating and Improvement Stakeholder Theories of Change and Models of Practice*, which will be available on the BUILD website.

A Note on Terminology

In this chapter, we use the terms “early care and education,” “child care,” “early learning” and other similar terms interchangeably, based on those used by the states and key informants. Similarly, we use the terms “provider,” “service provider,” “teacher,” “administrator” and “leader” interchangeably.

The Early Learning Challenge (ELC) was a game-changer. While its goal—closing the achievement gap for children with high needs—was not new, the approach of focusing squarely on systems building and encouraging states to create integrated standards, supports and financing structures for early learning was new. Central to this work was the creation of a system—with largely voluntary program participation—to include all publicly-funded early learning and development service providers, regardless of auspice or funding stream, in a Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS, more generally known as QRIS). Because it was a competition, states were challenged to put their best foot forward, try new ideas and establish ambitious goals. Nine states were selected as Round I winners (California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island and Washington), five states as Round II winners (Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon and Wisconsin) and six states as Round III winners (Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Vermont). Although each has met with multiple political, financial and structural constraints related to QRIS and, at times, has struggled to reach proposed targets, the overall result has been extremely positive.

This chapter discusses the impact of what many consider to be the centerpiece of the ELC: the requirement that states establish a tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), and describes benefits, early lessons, opportunities and future QRIS challenges.²

The diagram on the next page shows the standard components of a QRIS. These components, which provide the structure for this chapter, are intended to improve outcomes for children, families and communities. The ELC includes a strong focus on systems building and the QRIS is a central part of that focus.

² The Appendix provides additional resources, including links to the *QRIS Compendium*, which provides a state by state overview. The *Compendium* also offers information specific to the ELC states, which may be accessed [here](#).



The information in this chapter was obtained through interviews with state leaders throughout 2014.

In addition, websites, reports, the *QRIS Compendium* and other published information about the states were consulted as part of the information gathering process.

Highlights of State Innovations and Trends

Below are nine of the many noteworthy ways in which states have met the ELC challenge. Following this list of trends and innovations is a state-based chart.

1. Promoting School Readiness: States are increasing rigor and a focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes at the upper levels of their standards. Many states have addressed the teaching context by:

- Adding standards for planning and/or preparation for supporting children’s learning.
- Altering staff evaluation.
- Improving staff benefits.

2. Continuous Quality Improvement: States are envisioning the ‘T’ in QRIS and incorporating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) by:

- Embedding CQI plans as a required element of the
- QRIS at all levels—sometimes in all areas and in other states limited to specific areas.
- Supporting CQI through technical assistance and coaching focused on CQI.
- Developing CQI for the QRIS system with providers, advocates and implementation partners providing routine feedback on indicators and opportunities for improvement.

3. Bringing Together Child Care, Head Start

Pre-K: States are refining, establishing and tracking the participation of cross-sector programs to understand how the cross-sector framework is working. They are:

- Focusing on increasing participation of market-based child care programs in QRIS by enacting or proposing policy to require market-based child care participation or by making the first-tier equivalent to state child care licensing; and/or by making or planning to make participation in the QRIS a funding requirement for CCDF child care assistance.
- Seeking to engage state-funded pre-k, Head Start, and/or nationally accredited centers in their QRIS.
- Focusing on building the infrastructure and administrative capacity to slowly grow participation in all settings.
- Making regulation-exempt family providers a QRIS target.

4. Reaching Children with High Needs.

States are ensuring policy and supports are focused on building quality early learning for various populations of children at risk including children with disabilities, dual language learners and low-income children, among others.

Approaches include:

- Embedding standards for accepting children with disabilities at all levels of the QRIS, not just at the higher levels.
- Creating “badges” or “awards of excellence” in areas such as Inclusion of children with special needs, linguistically- and culturally-appropriate practice.

- Developing standards for cultural and linguistic diversity with indicators in multiple areas, i.e. curriculum, environment and interactions, and family partnership and engagement.
- Requiring programs taking public funding through child care assistance or state pre-k to participate in the QRIS and/or reducing co-pays in child care assistance for families selecting a higher level QRIS program.
- Using early childhood “navigators” to assist low-income families select higher quality programs.
- Leveraging data analysis and data measurement to identify and increase participation of low-income families in higher level QRIS programs, and to bring programs into the QRIS.

5. Revisiting Rating and Monitoring. States are re-visiting rating and monitoring and experimenting with various new approaches. They are:

- Introducing technology to make rating and monitoring more efficient.
- Limiting or removing on-site verification prior to the assignment of ratings and experimenting with other strategies (portfolio reviews by teams, random site visits, etc.).
- Introducing curriculum implementation and fidelity monitoring.
- Building robust data transfers between QRIS, licensing, and subsidy to assist with rating and monitoring.
- Leveraging licensing monitors as part of the rating and monitoring process.

6. Trying New Tools. States are diversifying the number and use of research-based observational tools and revising the frequency of administration of tools and the aspects to be maintained. Approaches include:

- Using both the ERS and the CLASS to inform ratings and experimenting with when and how they are used (i.e. removing Personal Care Routine from the ERS, using these tools for quality improvement and not rating purposes).
- Developing new research-based observation tools.
- Administering tools anywhere from annually to every three years.

7. Engaging Families. States are using a variety of strategies to enhance families’ decision-making information, engage families in evaluating how services

are working for them and support families as critical players in the early development of their children. Strategies include:

- Holding family focus groups to inform engagement strategies and providing routine family feedback sessions and surveys.
- Reaching out to families through mass and social media, community information distribution, and marketing materials.
- Providing information in multiple languages.
- Supporting provider outreach to families with suites of branding materials and templates for customization by providers.

8. Implementing Financing Strategies. States are trying financing strategies aligned with the goals of the QRIS to improve services and outcomes for children. States are:

- Establishing multiple financial rewards and incentives (i.e. combining awards, tiered reimbursement and targeted grants).
- Establishing financial incentives to serve infants and toddlers and provide increased funding to help address the higher cost of serving this population.
- Using cost modeling to calibrate the necessary financial supports at each level of the QRIS and adjusting financing strategies in response.
- Supporting discounted access to supplies and equipment or providing awards to supply purchasing aligned to their quality improvement plans.
- Requiring QRIS participation (and sometimes at certain levels) to access more favorably funded programs, particularly pre-k.
- Using tiered reimbursement as a routine financing approach.

9. Focus and Funding for Teaching and Learning.

States are adding financing to support their new, more rigorous standards that focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes but this support is outpacing investment in teacher compensation. States are:

- Providing resources for programs to purchase curriculum and assessment tools, and improving technical assistance to support provider implementation of curriculum and assessment.
- Financing acquisition of early childhood credentials and degrees.
- Providing bonuses for acquisition of early childhood credential and degrees.

Below is a chart showing states that have engaged in the nine trends and innovations listed above:

STATE EXAMPLES	CA	CO	DE	GA	IL	KY	MA	MD	MI	MN	NC	NM	OH	OR	PA	RI	VT	WA	WI	
1. Promoting School Readiness. States are increasing rigor and a focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes at the upper levels of their standards. Many states addressed the teaching context by:																				
Adding standards for planning and/or preparation time		✓	✓				✓					✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	
Altering staff evaluation		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Improving staff benefits		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
2. Embedding Continuous Quality Improvement. States are re-visioning the "I" in QRIS and incorporating Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).																				
		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓		✓		
3. Bringing Together Child Care, Head Start and Pre-K. States are refining, establishing and tracking the participation of cross-sector programs to understand how the cross-sector framework is working. States are:																				
Increasing participation of market-based child care programs in QRIS.		✓					✓	✓			✓		✓			✓		✓	✓	
Engaging state-funded pre-k, Head Start, and/or nationally accredited centers in their QRIS			✓					✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓					
Building the infrastructure and administrative capacity to slowly grow participation in all settings	✓							✓				✓								
Targeting regulation-exempt family providers									✓											
4. Reaching Children with High Needs. States are ensuring policy and supports focus on building quality early learning for various populations of children at risk. State efforts are:																				
Focusing on children with disabilities, others on English language learners and several focusing on reaching low-income children			✓		✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓		✓		
5. Revisiting Rating. States are experimenting with approaches to rating.																				
				✓			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						✓	
6. Trying New Tools. States are diversifying the number and use of research-based observational tools and revising the frequency aspects to be maintained.																				
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

STATE EXAMPLES	CA	CO	DE	GA	IL	KY	MA	MD	MI	MN	NC	NM	OH	OR	PA	RI	VT	WA	WI
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7. Engaging Families. States are enhancing families' decision-making information, engaging families in evaluation how services are working for them and supporting families as critical players in the early development of their children by:

Reaching out to families through media, community information distribution, using marketing materials and online and social media tools	✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓					✓				✓
Providing information in multiple language to assist non-English speaking families		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			

8. Implementing Financing Strategies. States are trying financing strategies aligned with the goals of QRIS to improve services and outcomes for children by:

Establishing multiple financial rewards and incentives			✓												✓			✓	
Creating new financial incentives to serve infants and toddlers			✓								✓					✓			
Supporting discounted access to supplies and equipment or providing targeted awards			✓	✓				✓		✓					✓		✓		
Implementing tiered reimbursement as a dominant financing strategy incentive in 13 of the ELC states.		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓

9. Focus and Funding for Teaching and Learning. States are adding financing to support their new, more rigorous standards that focus on school readiness and positive child outcomes. This support is outpacing investment in teacher compensation and it includes:

Financing curriculum and assessment implementation			✓					✓		✓									
Providing bonuses for credentials				✓				✓						✓	✓				✓

