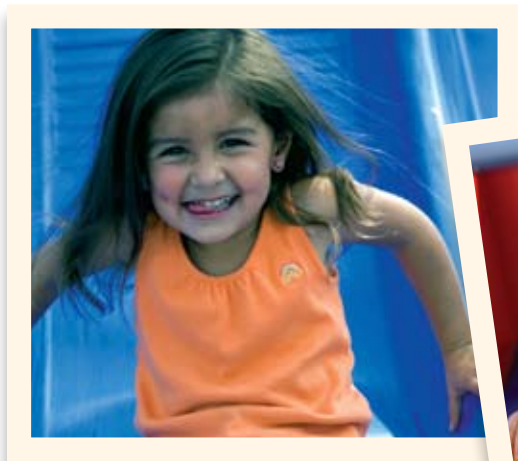


LESSONS LEARNED

FROM THE QUALISTAR RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM
RAND VALIDATION STUDY



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Introduction

In 1995, the *Child Care Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study*¹ was released. This study, which in part was conducted in Colorado, found that the quality of child care was directly linked to children's academic success and social skills. Further, the study found that upwards of 87 percent of child care was considered poor to mediocre. In response to this demonstrated need to improve child care quality, child care advocates, educators and researchers across Colorado came together to help solve this critical problem.

In 1999, Qualistar Early Learning (formerly Educare Colorado) was created with the mission of improving early care and education experiences for children and families across the state. One way in which Qualistar sought to do this was to develop and implement a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). A QRIS provides families with an easy to understand gauge (such as 0-4 stars) of child care quality. They offer child care funders an accountability measure, and they offer child care providers a detailed quality improvement tool. The Qualistar Rating combines multiple research-based indicators of child care quality into a composite rating. These indicators are:

- > Learning Environment
- > Adult to Child Ratios and Group Size
- > Staff Training and Education
- > Family Partnerships
- > National Accreditation by Professional Early Care and Education Associations

Qualistar was one of the first in the country to develop a QRIS. These tools are gaining ground as a promising strategy for early childhood education reform. They are rapidly becoming an essential component for a comprehensive early childhood system.

As a pioneer in the early care and education industry, Qualistar understood the importance of examining the effectiveness of its QRIS at improving child care quality and children's learning experiences. In 2000, with support from The Colorado Trust and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Qualistar contracted with The RAND Corporation to evaluate its rating system, marking one of the first comprehensive evaluations of a QRIS. In this research brief, Qualistar presents key lessons learned from this evaluation to assist QRIS developers, child care policy advocates and QRIS evaluators in creating an effective QRIS.



Qualistar's Mission: Improving early care and education experiences for children and families across Colorado.

Key Learnings:

- > Investing time in researching and improving individual QRIS quality components is critical to developing an effective QRIS. Components that Qualistar spent time researching and improving are demonstrating better validity.
- > Center and family homes that participated in the Qualistar Rating System improved in quality.
- > Developing and evaluating a QRIS is an iterative process that takes time with clear steps. Embarking on a child outcome study should only occur after piloting and improving QRIS measures and processes.

“What early care and education needs is a set of industry-wide standards that can help assure that all children – regardless of who pays for their care and education – receive high-quality services. And we need financing linked to those standards, so that programs are able to offer high-quality services at affordable prices. Right now our field is struggling with multiple standards, policies, procedures and funding streams. At best, the result is parallel play; at worst, lengthy and expensive turf battles. We can do better. QRIS offers a unique opportunity to craft industry-wide standards and supports that not only embrace and link existing silos but are market-based, so that even families or ECE programs with no connection to government funding can participate.”

– Louise Stoney, Co-Founder
Alliance for Early Childhood Finance



Measuring Child Care Quality

An effective QRIS offers a framework for assessing, improving and communicating the level of quality in an early care and education (ECE) setting. The approach should be uniform, state-wide, and apply to a broad range of ECE programs (center-based child care, family child care, public and private pre-kindergarten, and Head Start) regardless of the funding the programs receive. Developing a QRIS is a complicated task that requires multiple trade-offs. On the one hand, a QRIS must be accurate (reliable and valid); on the other hand, it must be cost effective to administer. Effectively balancing these needs is key to success.

Qualistar's evaluation focused on how well the individual Qualistar Rating components functioned. This important information can be used by other states when selecting quality measures and in deciding how to administer them in the most effective ways possible.

The RAND evaluation produced many findings, and those with particular relevance to QRIS planners and implementers are summarized in this document.



Effectively achieving balance is the key to success.

Learning Environment:

Most QRISs, including the Qualistar QRIS, use The Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) to measure the classroom learning environment.² The ERS provides a measure of the physical environment, the health and safety practices, the teacher-child interactions, the curricular materials and the daily schedule of early care and education classrooms. Both research and practitioner wisdom support the idea that when children are provided a stimulating learning environment and supportive interactions with teachers, they are more likely to have better school readiness skills.³

The Qualistar evaluation offered the following helpful information on the ERS:

- > A sample of 12-15 items on the ERS can be used to achieve an accurate score.
- > ERS scores do not appear to vary between classrooms in a program. Administering the ERS to 50 percent of classrooms with the same age group provides an accurate score.
- > Programs that are nationally accredited tend to have higher ERS scores.
- > While the ERS purports to measure seven distinct aspects of child care quality, it appears to measure one comprehensive aspect of quality that primarily represents the physical environment of the classroom. Less emphasis appears to be placed on instructional quality and supportive teacher-child interactions.

Implications:

If ERS are included in a QRIS, there are effective ways to reduce the cost of administering these tools (e.g. sampling items or sampling classrooms). Using ERS may be important for programs that are working on improving the basic health, safety and physical environment of classrooms. Using learning environment measures that focus more on the instructional support and the quality of the teacher interactions may be more directly related to improving children's school readiness skills and may be more helpful for programs that already have good classroom physical environments.



² Harms, T., Clifford, D. & Cryer, D. (1993). *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised*. New York: Teachers College Press.

³ Burchinal, M. R., Howes, C., & Peisner-Feinberg, E. S. (In preparation). Development of academic skills from preschool through second grade: Family and classroom predictors of developmental trajectories.

Classroom Ratios:

Low child to staff ratios make it more possible for teachers to plan and implement individualized learning. Past research has consistently shown a link between lower classroom ratios and better school readiness skills in children.⁴ The ratio of children to staff is included in some QRISs, most typically in states where licensing ratios are higher than recommended by early childhood experts.

The Qualistar evaluation offered the following helpful information on measuring ratios:

- > In many center-based programs there is a large and predictable change in classroom ratios throughout the day. Using one ratio count during morning programming does not accurately portray the ratios children experience. To produce an accurate account, eight specific time periods should be observed.
- > Relying on teacher/director self-report of classroom ratios does not produce an accurate account of the ratios children experience. In Colorado (where ratio monitoring is not stringent) relying on licensing compliance as a measure of classroom ratios does not produce an accurate representation.
- > Classroom ratios appear to vary from classroom to classroom in a program. Relying on a sampling of classrooms does not yield an accurate account of classroom ratios.

Implications:

QRIS developers will need to consider their state's licensing compliance history and the degree to which licensing standards support developmentally appropriate ratios to determine if this costly ratio collection strategy is an appropriate and worthwhile investment for a state.



Staff Training and Education:⁵

Research and practitioner wisdom support the notion that when early care and education staff have more knowledge about children and effective early education practices, they are more apt to respond to children sensitively and provide developmentally appropriate instruction.⁶ All QRISs, including Qualistar's, measure the professional development levels of child care staff. The Qualistar evaluation offered the following helpful information on staff training and education:



- > To meet mandated ratio requirements, many center-based programs move teachers and children to different classrooms throughout the day. When this occurs, children interact with many different teachers – not just the head teacher assigned to their classroom.
- > When the amount of time that children experience each teacher is considered, teachers with B.A. degrees (or higher) and with more experience appear to be more effective in promoting and enhancing children's literacy skills.
- > Since children receive large amounts of care and instruction from assistant teachers and teacher aides, promoting their professional development through a QRIS is important to improving children's literacy outcomes.

Implications:

These findings have implications for QRIS developers, evaluators and classroom interventions aimed at improving child care quality. Since it can not be assumed that children are assigned to one classroom with stable classroom teachers, it is important to provide professional development and quality improvement activities to all teachers in a program, not just to head teachers or at a classroom level. Many QRISs rate the professional developmental level of just head teaching staff or only require a percentage of teachers to hold degrees. QRIS developers might consider, if feasible, measuring and advancing the education levels of all teachers in an effort to support children's literacy skills.



All QRISs, including Qualistar's, measure the professional development levels of child care staff.

⁵Information provided in this section is taken from data collected through Qualistar's validation project. For more information, please see Setodji, C., Le, V. & Schaack, D. (in preparation).

⁶Howes, C., Smith, E., & Galinsky, E. (1995). *The Florida child care quality improvement study: Interim report*. New York: Families & Work Institute.

Family Partnerships:

Many QRISs, including Qualistar's, offer some type of measure of parent involvement as an indicator of quality. Many early childhood educators agree that when families and child care programs work together, children benefit. However, little is known about the essential ingredients of parent involvement and how the ingredients support children's development. Qualistar and RAND worked together to understand several different types of measures that examine parent involvement and satisfaction.



The Qualistar evaluation offered the following helpful information:

- > Measures of parent satisfaction or surveys about the quality of teacher-parent relationships do not provide much variation in parent response. Most parents respond positively about their child's program or teacher regardless of whether the program offers high quality services or not.
- > A promising new family partnership measure focuses on how well programs communicate with families and supports families by providing them information on child development and developmentally appropriate activities. This measure is showing a correlation with children's social development.
- > Family Partnership self-report measures administered to program directors or family home providers do not correlate with how families respond about the quality of family partnership activities offered in a program. Family responses appear to be a better gauge of the effectiveness of family partnership activities than program self-assessments.

Implications:

It is important to consider the object being measured and the assessor when evaluating parent involvement or family partnerships. Existing measures of parent satisfaction do not distinguish high quality programs from low quality ones. Similarly, measuring parent attendance at meetings or events may not effectively capture the quality of parent involvement activities. Measurements of family perceptions of program communications and support are more reliable and show connections to children's social skills.

How Do the Qualistar Rating Components Work Together?

RAND also examined how well the individual Qualistar Rating components relate to one another. This analysis was used to determine if substantially different aspects of child care quality were being measured in the Qualistar Rating and to determine whether particular components could be dropped from the rating, thereby making the system simpler and more cost effective.

RAND found that the learning environment, classroom ratios, staff training and education and the quality of family partnerships were moderately correlated with one another. This implies that the components are measuring different but related aspects of child care quality. Consequently, it may be important to measure all of these components of child care quality in QRISs.

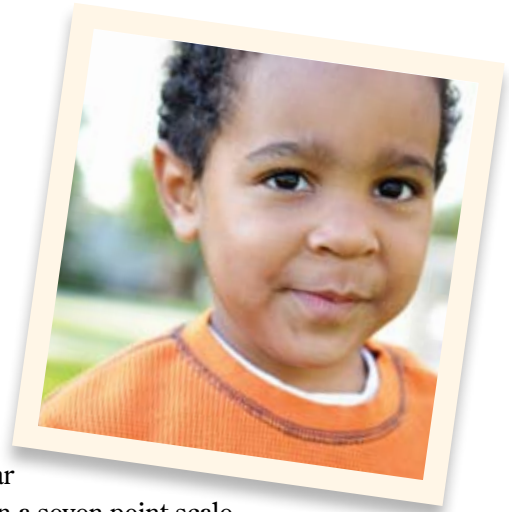
RAND also suggests that because of the high correlations between NAEYC accreditation and other QRIS measures, that national accreditation be dropped from the rating as a way to streamline the ratings process. However, it is important to note that NAEYC accreditation was completely reinvented and a new system launched in late 2006 to address the limitations of the accreditation process noted in RAND's evaluation of the Qualistar QRIS. The new process and accreditation criteria were not used by programs in this evaluation and a very small number of programs in the sample were accredited. Consequently, recommendations in this report on the role of accreditation in QRISs should be considered with extreme caution. Additionally, some states have worked collaboratively with NAEYC to establish a simpler, more streamlined process. In these states accredited programs receive a rating via their accreditation status and do not have to participate in multiple assessments.



Did Child Care Quality Improve?

Ultimately, a critical outcome for a QRIS is to improve the daily experiences of children who receive early care and education services. While the Qualistar evaluation cannot attribute program quality improvement unequivocally to participation in a QRIS process, findings do suggest that:

- > Child care centers that participated in the Qualistar Rating process improved their ECERS-R⁷ scores by nearly one point on a seven point scale.
- > Family Child Care Homes that participated in the Qualistar Rating improved their FDCRS⁸ scores by over one point on a seven point scale.



Improving Children's School Readiness Skills

Ultimately, one of the goals of a QRIS is to support children's development and improve the school readiness skills of children who attend early care and education programs. Unfortunately, RAND was unable to make definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of the Qualistar Rating System at improving children's school readiness skills. The study simply had too many methodological challenges. First, the evaluation was unable to draw from a random selection of child care providers, but instead was based on providers that volunteered for the initiative and had been working on improving their quality for several years. This limited the range of child care quality in the sample, making it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions. Second, programs that dropped out of the evaluation were generally of lower quality; thus restricting the quality range even further. Third, only 7 percent of the children remained in the study for all three years.

Given these limitations, results from this evaluation should not be generalized to the effectiveness of all QRISs to support children's development. In fact, it is unlikely that any conclusions can be drawn about child outcomes until research is conducted with a much larger sample of participating programs and children as well as some assurance that the desired outcomes are aligned with the quality measures embedded in the QRIS. These conditions may not be present for many years. However, the field still needs practical evaluations that help on-the-ground QRIS developers understand how different aspects of QRISs effect children's development. The RAND evaluation of the Qualistar QRIS has contributed to this body of knowledge.

⁷ Harms, T., Clifford, D. & Cryer, D. (1993). *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁸ Harms, T. & Clifford, D. (1989). *The Family Day Care Environment Rating Scale*. New York: Teachers College Press.

“ QRISs are a system reform framework with enormous potential to improve children’s growth and learning, support families and build a sustainable system of early care and education in the states. Children are the immediate beneficiaries. In the long run, we all win. What states need is practical counsel based on better study designs to help states build better systems. ”

– *Anne Mitchell, President
Early Childhood Policy Research*



Conclusion

Qualistar’s evaluation offers lessons for those interested in embarking on QRIS evaluations.

- > Evaluations should start by examining how well individual quality measures function so that improvements can be made to them. The components that Qualistar spent concerted time researching and improving are demonstrating better validity.
- > Evaluations should examine how quality measures function together to determine whether measures can be dropped from the rating.
- > Once measures have been improved and demonstrate good internal validity, a study of the associations with child outcomes might be considered.
- > If child outcome measures are included in an evaluation, it is critical to assure that the desired outcomes are aligned with program quality measures embedded within QRISs.
- > Evaluations should use a random and representative sample of child care providers to assure that there is a wide range of quality represented and children are tracked over time.

Finally, child care advocates should be realistic about the degree to which a QRIS can improve children’s outcomes. Assuring that children are provided rich and stimulating early care and education experiences is important for their development, but many other factors, such as poverty, access to health care, community violence and family dynamics, influence children’s development.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems offer a promising early care and education reform strategy, help to align the myriad of child care standards, promote coordinated accountability among a range of funders, and improve the care and education offered to children throughout the country. Qualistar’s evaluation of its Quality Rating and Improvement System can serve as a helpful resource to both QRIS developers and evaluators.



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