

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and Head Start Alignment

*A discussion paper by Anne Mitchell and Gerry Cobb
QRIS National Learning Network
September 2011*

As states move ahead in the development of their Early Learning Challenge grant applications, a key component of their work will be the development and expansion of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). In the executive summary of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Program (ELC), one of the QRIS-related requirements is the extent to which states are:

(B)(2a) “Implementing effective policies and practices to reach the goal of all publicly funded Early Learning and Development Programs participate in such a system, including programs in each of the following categories—

- (i) State-funded preschool programs;*
- (ii) Early Head Start and Head Start programs;*
- (iii) Early Learning and Development Programs funded under section 619 of part B of IDEA and part C of IDEA;*
- (iv) Early Learning and Development Programs funded under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; and*
- (v) Early Learning and Development Programs receiving funds from the State’s CCDF program.*

While participation of all these programs in QRIS is likely a high priority in a state, the focus of this brief is the participation of Early Head Start and Head Start programs (HS/EHS) in QRIS. Regardless of whether a state is applying for an ELC grant, all states can place a high priority on the development and expansion of QRIS to assure greater alignment between QRIS and Head Start and ultimately full participation of these programs within QRIS.

Federal Position on Head Start/QRIS Alignment: The 2009 Head Start Roadmap to Excellence¹ states that Head Start State Collaboration Offices (HSSCOs) are to promote Head Start participation in state and local early childhood systems building. Specifically the Head Start State Collaboration Offices will work to promote interoperability between the Head Start data system(s) and those of state preschool and K–3 systems;

¹http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Head%20Start%20Program/Initiatives/roadmap/Head_Start_Roadmap_to_Excellence.pdf

collaborate with institutions of Higher Education to promote professional development through education and credentialing programs for early childhood providers in states; and *work to encourage that Head Start Program Performance Standards are included in state efforts to rate the quality of programs (often called Quality Rating and Improvement Systems) and to support Head Start programs in participating in these rating efforts.*

Information to inform planning for Head Start State Collaboration Offices² (HSSCCO) states the three primary priorities: School Transitions, Professional Development, and Child Care and Early Childhood Systems. Child Care and Early Childhood Systems intends that HSSCOs will coordinate activities, referrals, and resources with the state agency responsible for the state Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program and resource and referral, to make full-working day and full-calendar year child care services available to children. They will also *include the Head Start Program Performance Standards in state efforts to rate the quality of programs (Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)) and support Head Start programs when participating in QRIS and partnering with child care and early childhood systems at the local level.*

Activities of collaboration offices include, but are not limited to:

- Promoting collaboration between state education agencies and state child care licensing agencies to improve the standards of quality and reduce regulatory barriers facing early childhood programs, and *encouraging the inclusion of the Head Start Program Performance Standards in state efforts to rate the quality of programs (often QRIS);*
- *Supporting Head Start programs participation in state efforts to rate the quality of programs;*
- *Promoting the inclusion of the Head Start Program Performance Standards in state QRIS standards to support state system building efforts and eliminate duplicative and burdensome requirements. The Office of Head Start (OHS) will provide documentation that local programs can use to participate in a state's QRIS.*

On July 20, 2011, the Office of Head Start (OHS) issued Program Instruction³ ACF-PI-HS-11-03 to all grantees stating:

OHS expects all grantees in States that receive a RTT-ELC grant to participate in the State tiered quality rating and improvement system. States will also be asked to develop data systems, a Kindergarten entry assessment, and supports to improve the early childhood workforce and OHS encourages grantees to participate in these reforms to the fullest extent.

Current Status: Head Start Involvement in QRIS

While Head Start/Early Head Start is a federal program with local grantees, effectively it functions more like a federal funding stream with strong performance measures (and a well-known name). There are relatively few grantees that receive only HS/EHS funds; increasingly grantees also receive child care and state Pre-K funds, and a few receive early childhood special education funding. Recognizing this, some states have already given thought to how HS/EHS can best be integrated into a state's QRIS. To that end, some of the early adopter states (New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee) integrated QRIS into the state child care regulatory system, essentially making all regulated settings subject to the requirements and benefits of QRIS.

²<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Head%20Start%20Program/State%20collaboration/HSSCO/hssco-priority-areas.pdf>

³http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Head%20Start%20Program/Program%20Design%20and%20Management/Head%20Start%20Requirements/Pis/2011/resour_pri_003_071311.html

This approach brought most, if not all Head Start/Early Head Start programs, into QRIS as a requirement of licensing. (Regulatory exemptions based on hours per day of operation may exclude some part-day HS/EHS programs.) This approach also allowed Head Start participating programs to take advantage of QRIS-related resources such as financial incentives, technical assistance, etc.

However, most states have developed *voluntary* not mandatory QRIS. This means that states must develop an intentional pathway for Head Start into QRIS. These strategies have included⁴:

Streamlined Access:

- Maine offers a streamlined application and review process for Head Start programs that have no compliance issues in their federal review although they do have to meet some additional criteria to rate at the top level.
- In Vermont, those Head Start/Early Head Start programs that have achieved a Blue or a Gold designation from the Office of Head Start (after a triennial performance review), have been in operation for five or more years with no regulatory compliance issues, and are Specialized Child Care² providers, receive 5 stars within Vermont’s QRIS.
- In Maryland, including documentation that indicates proof of meeting HSPPS is recognized at all levels as meeting QRIS standards as well.
- Massachusetts also offers a documentation option for Head Start programs.

Designation of Head Start Program Performance Standards as a Tier:

- New Hampshire’s top level is either NAEYC accreditation or meeting federal Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).
- In Minnesota’s pilot QRIS, programs that meet standards of another entity are automatically eligible for four star status. These programs include Head Start, public school-based programs and accredited programs.
- In Pennsylvania, standards on staff qualifications and professional development at the Star 1 level require that facilities comply with Head Start Program Performance Standards if they are Head Start sites within the QRIS.

Incorporation of HSPPS into Point Scoring:

- In Iowa, on levels 3-5, ERS environment points are awarded for programs that comply with Head Start Performance Standards.
- In Wisconsin, if a program is in compliance with all Head Start Performance Standards, then they can receive an automatic star-5 designation (the top level of the QRIS).

As noted previously, the benefit of HS/EHS participation in each of these examples is that the programs are able to take advantage of any QRIS-related financial or program benefits available within these systems.

Why does Head Start participation in QRIS matter?

Families seeking programs for their children benefit from information on the relative quality of potential choices which, prior to QRIS, was unavailable. Consumers are best served if quality rating information is easy to access, understand and use – and when the state’s QRIS has all program types (including HS/EHS) in it.

⁴ “Head Start/Early Head Start and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems” Compiled by Nan Simpson and Dawn Miller, Oldham Innovative Research, September 7, 2011

For *state policymakers* concerned about accountability (getting what they pay for) and quality assurance (assuring it is worth the price), a QRIS in which all program types are participating makes good sense from a policy perspective. States can then require that any programs receiving public funding are “rated” and can further designate that only programs at a specified quality level have access to public funding.

Head Start/Early Head Start programs benefit from participation in QRIS because it allows them to access additional resources – both funding and technical assistance – to support their programs. Since some states condition access to public funds, such as child care subsidy, quality improvement grants, professional development scholarship funds and/or wage supplements, on participation in QRIS, this has been an incentive for HS/EHS participation in the QRIS. Public recognition of their high quality standards, through a high QRIS rating, is another important factor to incentivize HS/EHS participation in QRIS.

Issues to Consider

How do the program and practitioner standards align? States in the process of developing or revising their quality standards should review the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) and consider the possibilities for alignment. How do they compare? Are there HSPPS standards that should be integrated within the QRIS standards? One example is the State of North Carolina. As part of the revision of its star-rated license, North Carolina has proposed adding family engagement and governance categories into its quality rating system, which already includes learning environment and practitioner qualifications. These proposals were directly informed by the HSPPS. (Note: While working to align standards, states should also be careful not to overburden programs with too many standards.)

Can monitoring requirements be streamlined for HS/EHS programs? HS/EHS grantees undergo a significant level of monitoring by the federal government to assure that they are meeting the HSPPS. Is it necessary to layer another level of monitoring on these programs as a result of their participation in QRIS? Can a system of QRIS monitoring for HS/EHS programs be crafted in a way that benefits both the state and federal level, reducing monitoring costs and eliminating redundancies? With the assistance of the federal Office of Head Start through its regional offices and/or each state HS/EHS Training and Technical Assistance system, states can construct a crosswalk between the QRIS and the Head Start monitoring systems to reveal the areas where HS/EHS monitoring does and does not match the QRIS criteria and design a monitoring strategy that reflects the results of that crosswalk.

How can HS/EHS resources support grantees to participate in state QRIS and be extended in support of QRIS participation for other ECE programs? Training, technical assistance and professional development in HS/EHS is an extensive system with several parts. Under this system, which was re-designed in 2010, half of the funding for HS/EHS Training & Technical Assistance (T&TA) continues to go to grantees as direct funding. The other half supports national resource centers and state T&TA centers connected to each HS/EHS Regional Office. National centers reflect the key elements of HS/EHS. One center is devoted to Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. The others address key areas listed below with hyperlinks to further information.

- [Quality Teaching and Learning](#)
- [Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness](#)
- [Program Management & Fiscal Operations](#)
- [Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#)
- [Health, Oral Health, Mental Health & Nutrition](#)

National centers are tasked to communicate “best practices” and provide resources to state and other T&TA Specialists. National centers can provide training at state, regional and national meetings but do not provide on-site T&TA to grantees. They work with the local HS/EHS grantees via online discussion boards, conference calls and other electronic means. The focus of the national centers’ work aligns well with the content of state QRIS.

Each state has a state Head Start Technical Assistance Office that employs between 1 and 15 Early Childhood Education Specialists who are assigned a caseload of grantees in their state to work on the Office of Head Start school readiness agenda with managers and education staff at the local programs. Each Regional Office also has between 1 and 10 Grantee Specialists, who are deployed by the Regional Office to work with grantees in the region when needed, to support a grantee with areas of need, non-compliance or deficiency. These resources, particularly the ECE Specialists, may be able to support grantees’ participation in their state QRIS, allowing the state to direct its resources to support other programs.

How can early childhood programs other than HS/EHS access these resources? The state T&TA office connection provides an opportunity to consider how the resources of HS/EHS grantees’ professional development funds and the state, regional and national HS/EHS T&TA system may be opened to other early childhood programs in a state, in particular those in the QRIS. These will be questions to pursue in the future through efforts at the local, state and federal level to better align QRIS and Head Start efforts.

How can QRIS and Head Start data systems be integrated? Achieving genuine efficiency, consistency and ultimately reciprocity between systems requires two-way communication among data systems. Is there the potential for such two-way communication between the QRIS and Head Start data systems? How can this be accomplished? Could there be a way to share Head Start monitoring data with states as a way to reduce QRIS monitoring requirements for HS/EHS programs? Similarly, can state professional development registries be intentionally designed to capture the personnel data that HS/EHS grantees require for federal reporting? Is there a way to integrate Head Start program and child data in each state into a state’s data warehouse for a more comprehensive understanding of child well-being and outcomes?

How can QRIS/Head Start alignment improve services for children? QRIS/Head Start alignment can help maximize opportunities for vulnerable children who need high-quality, full-day, year-round services and would benefit from attendance in a Head Start program for more than one year. Policy options enabled by this partnership include:

- **Lengthening Eligibility on State Head Start Contracts:** Lengthening eligibility re-determination periods for child care subsidy to one year ensures that vulnerable children are able to remain in the same program even if their parent loses their job or ends a training program and hasn’t yet found work, or experiences any other change in employment status or income. Continuity of service, especially of caregiver-child relationships is crucial for all young children, and particularly those who are vulnerable and those who are younger (infants and toddlers).
- **Adopting Head Start Enrollment/Attendance Criteria:** States considering changes to their subsidy policy might also consider adopting the HS/EHS enrollment and attendance criteria for all programs that they contract with through the subsidy system. Eligibility for Early Head Start extends to age 3; eligibility is re-determined for enrollment in Head Start and continues until a child reaches the age of kindergarten entry. The Head Start grantee must document its efforts to work with a family when a child’s attendance falls below 85%. Similar agreements can be offered to both Head Start programs participating in the subsidy system and child care providers. To that end, the state policy could enable payment of the child care subsidy if the enrollment/attendance targets are met.

Conclusion

The Head Start/Early Head Start system provides, in every state, significant federal funding for a standards-based approach to quality care and education for young children. The Head Start Program Performance Standards represent a set of high quality standards that are consistent across all 50 states and that are regularly monitored to assure that they are being met by participating programs.

While every state creates its own quality rating and improvement system, alignment with Head Start can encourage movement toward more national consistency in quality standards. To this end, it makes sense to:

- assure that the systems are aligned and integrated as much as possible;
- learn from and integrate those essential aspects of Head Start's high performance standards into state QRIS program and practitioner standards;
- create an integrated system that allows families to better understand, recognize and access quality; and
- use local, state and federal public dollars in the most effective ways possible.

Finally, it is important to note that this is an evolving process. There is much work that must be done between state and federal government leaders to better align the two systems. Through this brief, we have sought to propose some possible ideas for alignment. We urge state leaders to align the two systems where it is already feasible and to begin considering ideas for how you may be able to work with the federal Office of Head Start to pilot some new strategies designed to create a more aligned, efficient and effective system that best serves children and families.