Communications Strategies for Expanding QRIS: A Primer for Reaching Policy Audiences

2017

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About the BUILD Initiative

BUILD is a national initiative that supports state leaders across the early childhood spectrum—adults dedicated to family support and engagement, early learning, health, mental health, nutrition, and more. BUILD brings these leaders together to promote opportunities for all children from birth through age five to start school healthy and prepared for success. Since 2002, when the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative designed and launched the initiative, BUILD has partnered with state-based organizations, early childhood innovators, business leaders, government offices and others to build early childhood systems by developing infrastructure, connecting programs and services for young children that functioned in isolation, at cross-purposes, or without the sufficient resources to meet critical needs, and by advancing quality and equity.

BUILD:

- Provides tailored and timely technical assistance to leaders in partner states.

- Facilitates learning communities that share the latest research and promising practices.

- Serves as a knowledge broker by shining a light on promising early childhood systems efforts and highlighting new ideas and successful innovations.

- Supports new and emerging leaders and works to ensure diversity and equity in all aspects of early childhood systems building.

- Informs and influences state and national conversations and policy decisions by highlighting emerging issues, innovative approaches, best practices, and results from the field.

To learn more, visit The BUILD Initiative.

QRIS 3.0 Tools and Resources

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are evolving rapidly. QRIS leaders are evaluating their systems to identify opportunities for improvement, trying new strategies and, in some cases, creating new models. To contribute to the evolution of QRIS, BUILD is creating resources to address the continuing challenges of financing, QRIS design and implementation, and the need to gain adequate public investment to support QRIS sufficiently to meet its full potential. This publication is part of the series, QRIS 3.0 Tools and Resources, available at http://buildinitiative.org/Resources/QRIS30ToolsandResources.aspx

Child care leaders first designed QRIS in the 1990s, and there are now systems in nearly every state and many U.S. territories. QRIS emerged as a strategy largely in response to the enormous gulf between the minimum level of quality required by states to open and operate a child care program and the recognized level of quality that optimally supports child development and learning.

States implement QRIS for varying purposes (outlined in BUILD's 2015 study, *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Stakeholder Theories of Change and Models of Practice Study Report, Expert Panel Reflections and Recommendations*). QRIS may apply to child care, Head Start, and state pre-K programs, or to only some of these programs. The QRIS may be voluntary or mandatory. Those that are mandatory can be embedded in child care licensing or connected to publicly funded programs such as child care assistance or state pre-K. QRIS can be the framework for quality improvement and quality assurance for early care and learning services for children birth to five, or QRIS can unify a state's early care and learning, K-12, and higher education to form a comprehensive P-20 education system for children from birth through college. Similarly, QRIS can be part of a broader strategy for a comprehensive and equitable early childhood system in which all the state's children have access to care and learning accompanied by health/mental health, social support, and family engagement, as needed. QRIS is an early learning strategy that shares responsibility for equitable child outcomes with other early learning strategies as well as with other systems such as health and education, and with communities and families.

Through the series, QRIS 3.0 Tools and Resources, BUILD explores several timely, critical issues related to QRIS.

We are grateful to the Alliance for Early Success for its support of this series and its ongoing commitment to support so many early childhood organizations.

I. Introduction

This primer was developed for our colleagues who are creating strategies and messages to effectively reach out to and communicate with policymakers—non-profit policy groups, public and private agencies, academic experts, think tanks, foundations, civic and corporate leaders. If you have ever visited with state legislators or your governor, you know they must learn about and address dozens of issues. They hear daily from constituents, lobbyists, subject experts, and other lawmakers. They attend hearings, develop and debate legislation, and make decisions on billions of dollars of state funding. In short, these are important, busy people with broad responsibilities. Careful planning and execution of communications strategies to promote QRIS policy is essential to conveying your perspective and to making progress on continuously improving the funding, policies and infrastructure for quality early learning.

As state early learning leaders continue to improve and expand your QRIS, having policymakers understand and value the integral role it plays in ensuring your state's early learning system works for all young children is essential—especially as their support is critical for confident investment of public resources. Communications to these decision makers matters. Communication—whether carefully planned or done haphazardly—frames an issue, informs an audience, influences public opinion, shapes policy, builds support, and prompts action. Identifying an effective individual and/or team responsible for QRIS communications strategy for public policy purposes is essential.

II. Review of the Communications Cycle

When developing communication strategies to reach policymakers, a series of integrated steps is required, each of which needs advance planning and analysis, and ongoing information to improve and alter the work as it is being executed. The graphic found on the next page depicts these steps, which we then discuss in greater detail.

ABOUT OUR PARTNER

Child TRENDS

About Child Trends

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that, for nearly 40 years, has studied children at all stages of development. Its mission is to improve the lives and prospects of children and youth by conducting high-quality research and sharing the resulting knowledge with practitioners and policymakers. To learn more, childtrends.org

Methodology

This primer, jointly produced by BUILD and Child Trends, focuses on communications and public policy. Sharpening QRIS communications strategies for public policy audiences is essential to stabilizing and growing QRIS. Together, BUILD and Child Trends interviewed legislators, governors' staff, and QRIS administrators and advocates across the country to gain insights into how administrators and advocates frame communications to support quality improvement efforts such as QRIS, and on how state policymakers view QRIS.

The primer is based on interviews of more than 20 officials and advocates from 10 states about their views on effective messages and communications, and the QRIS Compendium's information on financing (types of funding and lesser to greater amounts invested) and implementation depth. In addition, to select geographically diverse states for interviews, we consulted with the National Conference of State Legislatures on executive and legislative party leadership.

Within these states, we interviewed leaders with different political party affiliations and with varying levels of knowledge about QRIS. We interviewed leaders from states that have well-established QRIS as well as from those that are newer to developing QRIS. We spoke to leaders in states that have used QRIS primarily to focus on elevating quality in child care, as well as those whose QRIS seek broader school-readiness impact and include child care, pre-K and Head Start settings (cross-sector QRIS). While we sought a representative group for these interviews, we caution that this is a small group. The responses on which we report should be understood within this context as we think about how best to communicate about QRIS to public policy audiences.

Our communication process involves a series of strategic steps:
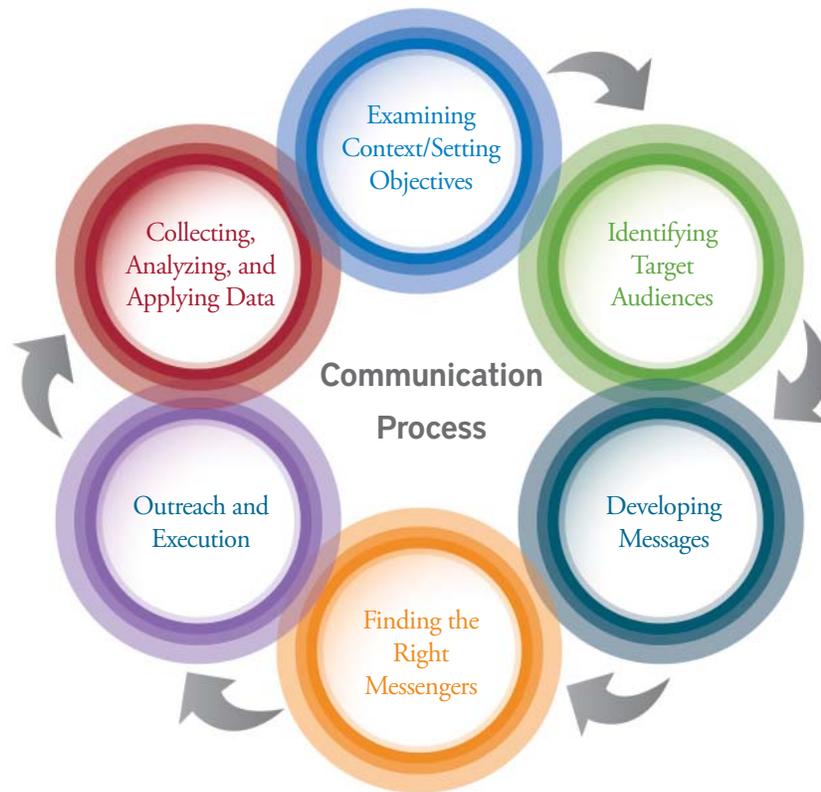
III. Examining Context/Setting Objectives

Prior to setting objectives for the communications work aimed at policymakers, we suggest a careful examination of state and/or local context. The recommendations below can assist your communications strategies aimed at gaining policymakers' understanding and support of QRIS. These recommendations address critical areas such as the public policy (including funding) goals for the QRIS as well as current messaging frameworks and messengers, and how they relate to the public policy goals. The existing QRIS profile for public policymakers in each state, or in the case of a locally driven QRIS, each community, will be unique, and so it is essential to critically examine not only the policy goals but also the current understanding of and support for QRIS and, more generally, for early learning and young child well-being.

Policy Goals and Context

Identify the following:

a. The emphasis of your QRIS public policy work, according to the continuum, below:

Raising Awareness— what it is and why it is important

Increasing Salience— why it should become a higher policy priority

Taking Action— how policymakers can improve and expand QRIS

b. Significant opposition voices whose opinions need to be changed or neutralized;

c. Policy supports, including investments, needed to improve, sustain, or expand the QRIS, as well as evidence to justify these policy supports;

d. The current level of state and/or local funding for the QRIS, as well as what is needed;

e. Efforts to expand, maintain or reduce funding underway or any that are planned;

f. Efforts to change QRIS policy (design or implementation) that involve policymaker decisions or opportunities to influence; and

g. How QRIS relates to other public policy initiatives and priorities and if higher priority efforts exist to which QRIS can it be linked.

Targeting Messages and Messengers

Identify the following:

a. The engagement of the governor, the mayor or county executive (if a local QRIS), and legislators;

b. The communications focus with these leaders, i.e. to build awareness, communicate progress and needs, or primarily to secure policy and funding advances;

c. The manner in which the governor and/or local executive elected leaders, as well as state and/or local legislators, learn about the purpose and progress of the QRIS;

d. The messages used to communicate about the QRIS to the governor, local elected chief executives (if local), and state or local legislators;

e. How the messages are received and if they are simple and compelling;

f. The best spokespersons (messengers) to communicate about the QRIS to the governor or local elected executive and legislators and why. Ask, for example:

- Are they already part of the stakeholder group or do they need to be cultivated?

- Are these messages tailored to the messenger?

g. The most important legislators to target for your outreach effort and what makes them key targets;

h. How critical the governor, mayor or local elected executive is to your effort and why; and

i. The concerned stakeholders (e.g., business leaders, principals and superintendents, child care administrators and teachers, higher education leadership and faculty, civic leaders, families, unions, tribes) and if:

- They have a shared commitment to the QRIS in general and to the public policy needs of the QRIS;

- They are well positioned to influence the thinking and decisions of the key decision makers; and

- Supporting the QRIS is a top priority for them.

Timing

Identify the following:

a. How the election cycle impacts communication efforts for QRIS policy, e.g., regarding new opportunities or potential obstacles;

b. How the state or local legislative session calendar impacts communications strategies, as well as the opportunities and obstacles it brings;

c. How the state or local budgeting processes communication and what opportunities and obstacles it brings; and

d. Other timing factors that could influence audiences and messages.

Resources

Identify the following:

a. The financial and human resources needed to support this effort; and

b. The financial and human resources available to support the policy-oriented communications strategies.

Communications objectives will vary by state, county, or local community, and objectives are likely to change as the QRIS evolves. Within the context of your state or community, determine the public policy communications objective. Defining the objective is crucial and is informed by the initial situation analysis, which must consider the policy and political context of the state; the capacity, standing, and priorities of the stakeholders who will work together to advance the QRIS; and feasibility. It is also critical to balance both means, i.e. the process and details and ends, i.e. the bigger picture and values.

Messages, messengers, and strategies will be different depending on local context as well as the endpoint you seek to achieve.

- Is raising awareness of the QRIS and its contribution to high-quality early learning critical at this point?

- Is there sufficient awareness that the focus is on engaging public decision makers about the progress being made and future plans?

- Is the focus on improving the QRIS policy (increased funding for early learning programs in the QRIS, quality improvement to support the early learning programs, resources for the state or local rating process and accountability efforts, marketing to parents, etc.)?

- Is the objective defensive in nature, i.e. to preserve or sustain the QRIS in light of new developments (evaluation study findings, changes in funding, provider discontent)?

How you articulate values must be in keeping with the vision and mission of the messenger, the stakeholders, and the policymaker you are seeking to reach. Keeping the endpoint in mind is critical to the ongoing strategy development and implementation.

IV. Identifying Audiences

Just as QRIS designers and implementers develop messages and strategies tailored to providers to enlist their participation or to parents to promote the provider ratings or resources available, this plan should focus on policymakers. Analyzing the role of policymakers is critical.

Determine whose support is needed to achieve your objective. Then identify:

a. Where policymakers are in their own understanding and commitment;

b. Policymakers who don't know what a QRIS is and how it relates to outcomes and values they care about;

c. Policymakers who know about QRIS but need support to move it to a higher place in their own priorities for action;

d. Policymakers who are primed and ready to act- and just need a plan; and

e. Naysayers who need to move from opposed to neutral.

Determine who is appropriate to "micro" target to help you achieve your objectives. These might include those who chair or are members of oversight or funding committees, those who serve in leadership positions, those who are members of an early childhood caucus in your state legislature, the governor, or key aides to the governor (e.g., chief budget officer, policy advisor, chief of staff, legislative advisor, etc.), and/or any key agency officials who oversee or interact closely with the QRIS. Depending on context, other key audiences might include the state board of education, state early learning council, and, locally, early learning coalitions, and local or county officials.

When targeting audiences, spend time developing lists of exact names, titles and contact information rather than just listing generic titles of people to reach. When your exact targets are developed, identify:

a. The values that match your audience with your organization;

b. What you are asking your audiences to do that reflect both yours and their values; and

c. What the benefit is to the audience of doing what you want or need.

It is essential that your work relates to your audience interests, your audience values, and your audience engagement in the end-point you have in mind.

Finally, a brief reminder that elected officials are influenced by their constituencies and donors; it is important to know who influences your significant audiences and to consider this as you develop and implement your communications strategy.

V. Developing Messages

Messages are effective when they communicate something you, the sender, want to convey in a way that the receiver understands and responds to in a positive fashion. In the realm of communications strategies to promote QRIS policy, this means having something to say that a legislator or executive-branch decision maker wants to know or cares about and that s/he might act on in support of your objectives. Credible messengers are a critical component of being able to convey information effectively.

Using information gleaned from our interviews, we provide a chart that summarizes and compares what policymakers and state administrators and advocates shared. These are discussed more specifically below but we note that these are a compilation of what others shared with us as their messages.

Policymakers and State Administrators/Advocates

QRIS Messaging

We heard four core messages in the states about how people are framing QRIS messaging. These are:

1. QRIS means high quality;
2. QRIS is a mechanism for accountability and trust/QRIS is an improvement and accountability system;
3. QRIS should drive improved child outcomes/QRIS supports school readiness and early education; and
4. QRIS is complex.

Table 1 compares the basic messages on QRIS that we heard from state policymakers and state administrators and advocates. Significant overlap exists between the two groups, which suggests that the messages being used are being heard by policymakers. We stress that we have compiled the information we heard; these messages can be improved and streamlined and other messages can be used and developed.

Table 1. Messages Used and Heard in States

Message	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/ Advocates
QRIS means high quality early learning	✓	✓

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

Across the board, policymakers associated QRIS with "high quality." However, policymakers had different viewpoints about whether QRIS was meant to support high quality in child care or high quality in all early learning programs, i.e. pre-K, Head Start, etc. Some lawmakers saw QRIS as a strategy for child care quality improvement. For example, one lawmaker said, "We need a quantity of child care providers to serve our children, but if we're not looking at quality and at this as part of the education system that enables every child to start kindergarten ready to learn, we're cheating ourselves." Another lawmaker noted that the association of QRIS with high quality was restricted to child care, stating that QRIS is both "complementing and competing with pre-K." For this lawmaker, QRIS complements pre-K by stressing quality child care for children of many different ages but competes with pre-K for attention and for public investment. Another lawmaker indicated that the state was using the QRIS as the "framework…to pull all of early learning together," unifying the state's child care and pre-K program.

The theme of high quality, regardless of whether the QRIS is dedicated to child care or more broadly conceived, resonates with both Republican and Democratic policymakers. There is support for the association of QRIS with high quality because QRIS creates a foundation for quality child care for all. One state official noted, we've "seen our participation numbers just rise and rise. [We] are definitely progressing. It's…an initiative that we'll see to the finish." For others, pre-K was mentioned as the optimal quality pathway for preschool age children, with QRIS providing a quality child care option, not necessarily on par with pre-K, when there was not enough pre-K to go around for this age group.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocates Perspectives:

Across the board, state administrators and advocates are seeking to associate the QRIS with high quality. They are working to communicate that "quality matters," quality is at the heart of the QRIS, and that the QRIS incorporates the best of what is known about supporting high quality. Leaders are drawing from general research to define high quality, citing teacher-child interactions, in particular.

Message	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/Advocates
QRIS is a mechanism for accountability and trust/QRIS is an improvement and accountability system for early learning	✓	

While policymakers are explicit that this is what the QRIS represents, this does not seem to be a leading message from QRIS proponents. At the same time, most states interviewed included rating as a core part of the QRIS, are explicit about setting standards in the QRIS, and support a continuous quality improvement philosophy.

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

QRIS is viewed as an assurance that standards are being set and met. The lawmakers we interviewed noted their overall confidence in their state QRIS approach to quality; they relied on subject matter experts to inform the design and implementation approach. Lawmakers see the QRIS as a productive way to determine if public investment is having the intended results. One lawmaker put it this way: "If we're putting state money in, we want to know if they [the programs] work." For these decision makers, the QRIS presents a valid, common way to see how the state is doing in systematically offering quality services. These lawmakers are endorsing their state's approach to standards and rating as being "on track."

In this way of thinking about the QRIS, the QRIS is closely associated with trust. One lawmaker said the QRIS is meant to "provide some level of security." The QRIS allows lawmakers, families, and others to have trust.

Message	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/Advocates
QRIS should drive improved child outcomes/QRIS support school readiness and early education	✓	✓

Whether state leaders were explicit about a role for QRIS in driving improved child outcomes or not, many public policymakers expressed support for QRIS due to their interest in child outcomes. State administrators and advocates tended to couch their child outcome messages in "school readiness" and "early education" language rather than as explicit "child outcome" language.

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

Interestingly enough, while many of those interviewed did mention that they associate QRIS with improvements in outcomes for children, few started with this when talking about their perception of what QRIS is. Some lawmakers noted that the QRIS does not predict student outcomes, and thought that QRIS revisions would be needed over time to drive improvement in the QRIS. In talking about child outcomes, some noted that legislators in general believed that pre-K does impact child outcomes and readiness for school but that QRIS and other programming most closely associated with child care is not seen in this same positive frame. In other words, as one lawmaker said, "there's a negative connotation with child care that it's not providing true educational outcomes." QRIS is a way to counter this but it has not yet attained the same status as pre-K as a successful strategy for children's learning.

At the same time, for some policymakers the issue of child outcomes went in another direction. They expected the QRIS to contribute to better outcomes for children but thought that the conversation about child outcomes had to be framed well beyond early learning and education programming, and to take into account the totality of the child's environment (family and community) and its contribution to children's outcomes. These decision makers are grappling with an expectation that early learning can and should improve outcomes for children as well as the realities that early learning in and of itself, whether expressed through a pre-K initiative or QRIS or some other approach, cannot do this work alone. At the same time, many lawmakers believe that there is a more favorable perception of the role of pre-K in addressing child outcomes and readiness for school than there is of QRIS as a central strategy for child outcomes.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

We heard the use of a school readiness impact from QRIS as one central and resonant message. For those focusing on school readiness, this meant associating the QRIS as part of the solution with regard to positive child outcomes and as a connector to primary and secondary education.

Different reasons were offered for the use of this messaging approach. Some said that they used a school readiness/early education message as a way to broaden what's included in education, trying to move towards a view of child care as early education, and QRIS as a transformative strategy to accomplish that goal.

Others indicated that the QRIS would serve as a boost for the K-12 system, allowing it to more fully educate children who would be better prepared at kindergarten. This linkage of QRIS to K-12 education is pragmatic: K-12 may be viewed as a priority area for the state and initiatives that can help support K-12 may, themselves, garner more support. Additionally, some of the states that emphasized the payoff for public education had to win the support of the state's Education Committee and shaped their messaging to do so.

Message	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/ Advocates
QRIS is complex	✓	

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

Policymakers raised this as a perception of QRIS, and as a "message" that they have about QRIS. As might be expected, administrators and advocates did not indicate that they were trying to message to policymakers that QRIS is complex. Lawmakers talked about this as an issue that came to their attention while working with providers. Some policymakers proactively used messaging on QRIS as a workforce support to proactively avoid what they heard as negative feedback about the complexity of QRIS. This perception of QRIS was a downside, and one they were concerned about when thinking about its long-term success. One lawmaker said, "I heard a lot of pushback about the program being tough, complicated."

Public Policy Justification for QRIS

We inquired about public policy justifications for QRIS, and advocates, administrators and policymakers offered the following as public policy rationales for having a QRIS:

1. QRIS is a framework for quality;
2. QRIS impacts education;
3. QRIS results in economic impact and savings;
4. QRIS helps close the opportunity gap;
5. QRIS enables quality early learning programs;
6. QRIS is a workforce support;
7. QRIS is a national movement; and
8. QRIS supports parent choice.

Table 2 discusses what we heard from the policymakers, state administrators, and QRIS advocates about the public policy justification for QRIS. In some instances, only one group discussed the issue, which is shown in the table and the discussion of the key points that policymakers, administrators and advocates made. While several public policy justifications were cited by both groups, some were held only by administrators/advocates or only by the policymakers interviewed. Additional information is found below.

Table 2. Public Policy Justifications for QRIS

Public Policy Justification	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/ Advocates
QRIS is a framework for quality		✓

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspective:

The policymakers did not cite this as the rationale for QRIS as a public policy program, but we did hear this from some of the administrators and advocates we interviewed. In this approach, QRIS is messaged as a framework for quality, whether applied to one (e.g., child care) or more (e.g., child care, pre-K) settings. One state leader said, "Using QRIS as a frame, there was recognition that these are [our state's] standards of quality and that is what you build everything off. It's not a thing; it's a framework."

Those using this approach mentioned the importance of articulating key elements of their quality standards and what they mean for children. They tried not to talk about QRIS as a program but as a method that could align all programs and create a more robust and seamless system of high-quality services. One state leader summarizes this message: "We describe QRIS as a framework for ECE settings and a way to measure quality consistently across programs."

Public Policy Justification	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/ Advocates

QRIS impacts education

	✓	✓

This way of thinking about QRIS promotes it as a boost to K-12 education by offering higher quality prior to the start of kindergarten, creating a strong education system from birth and leveraging all investment.

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

Most fundamentally, regardless of political affiliation, most told us that the justification for the QRIS is education outcomes for children. A state lawmaker said the basis for public policy to support QRIS is simple: QRIS provides "a basic way to make our enormous investment in K-12 pay off by having children ready when they start school." Another lawmaker had a similar comment: "The real justification is to have the K-12 system work better for children and families." These decision makers believe that the quality of a child's early learning experiences contributes to his/her success in K-12, and they want to invest in a strategy (QRIS) that is designed to better leverage primary and secondary education. They are linking QRIS to a high-priority policy area that consumes vast public resources and is available to all children in their states.

Some lawmakers focused on pragmatic arguments for this justification for QRIS. They indicated that it is easier to get political support for anything that is framed an educational initiative compared to human services and/or child care. One of them said, "the more we talk about early ed, the more receptive people are to it and the more people understand it as more than a child care thing."

This narrows the public policy justification for the QRIS to its contribution to a child's education, not just during the infant-toddler-preschool years but also during the K-12 years, potentially placing an enormous responsibility on the QRIS about effectively responding to decision-maker assumptions and beliefs about how it is improving children's readiness for school and how it is contributing to lasting impact for children in the elementary school years and possibly beyond.

Another theme focused on education as the public policy justification was put as "learning doesn't begin in kindergarten;" it begins earlier. These policymakers did not necessarily indicate that the public policy justification was the contribution of the QRIS to later educational success. Instead, they focused on the learning capacity of young children, starting at birth, and justified the QRIS as a strategy to focus on children's learning during this time period.

QRIS results in economic impact and savings

	✓	✓

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

These justifications, as with the education justification noted above, mirror the general policy arguments used for public investment in early learning. "This is important for the state's economic future." Another noted that the "QRIS is a financial investment; long term, we'd pay less money."

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

Just as policymakers justified QRIS from an economic impact perspective, so do some state leaders. This translated into an argument about efficiency, which one leader expressed as follows: "If we're not spending it on quality, we're throwing our money away."

Other leaders used the general "savings" arguments in areas such as school remediation and juvenile correction to make the case for QRIS.

Public Policy Justification	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/ Advocates

QRIS helps close the opportunity gap

	✓	✓

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

Policymakers defined the opportunity gap in different ways, primarily focusing on income inequality as an important reason to undertake QRIS. On a bi-partisan basis, lawmakers working in states with high poverty levels, as well as those with more moderate levels of poverty, advanced this argument. "Policy justification is that it is taking a bite out of income inequality." Some lawmakers also see the opportunity gap on the basis of rural versus urban geography, citing an important role for the QRIS in opening up opportunity in rural and urban areas.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

Some administrators and advocates justified the QRIS on the basis of the opportunity gap. For those who were specific about this approach, they were either general—calling out "children furthest from opportunity"—or when specific, focused on gaps based on race and income.

QRIS enables quality early learning programs

		✓

This rationale was offered by administrators and advocates rather than policymakers during the interviews.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

This rationale for QRIS is best understood as a pathway for a quality early learning program. This message focuses on QRIS as an enabler of quality.

This approach has two components: first, setting an expectation for what constitutes a quality early learning program and second, stressing the improvement aspect of QRIS. This two-part message incorporates both the process of improvement and results from improvement. The "result" does not seem to be the school readiness of children per se, but more of a program that is meeting the QRIS' definition of quality and providing a total quality environment for children. The QRIS is a capacity-building approach for high-quality programs. One state leader noted, it "took a really long time to really convince our policymakers that quality early learning environments are critical…We worked on that message for many years. We did a lot of work to ensure that we were leveraging the research around quality and early learning and how this matters."

It seems that for some states, the message about QRIS enabling early learning is also being linked to the state's interest in and support for state pre-K. QRIS is promoted as a way to help prepare child care programs participate in the state's pre-K program. Those using this message are linking QRIS to an existing high priority in their state, promoting the QRIS as a way for policymakers to succeed on issues that are known to matter to them.

QRIS is a workforce support

		✓

This rationale was offered by administrators and advocates, rather than by policymakers during the interviews. When policymakers talked about the workforce, they spoke about the overall economic impact of QRIS as an economic development strategy but not as a way to support the development of early childhood teachers.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

Some states are starting to promote QRIS by focusing on the importance of the early childhood workforce and how the QRIS is an essential strategy for workforce development and advancement. As one state put it, "QRIS are making investments in people and helping them to advance." Ohers said that the workforce support message is important in addressing the criticism that QRIS is "hard," noting its role in professionalizing the workforce and in providing workforce supports.

Public Policy Justification	Noted by Policymakers	Noted by Administrators/ Advocates
QRIS is a national movement		✓

This public policy rationale was offered by administrators and advocates, rather than by policymakers during the interviews.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

States spoke about messaging the QRIS as a national movement, trying to help policymakers understand that they needed to be keeping pace with other states. A state that was relatively new to QRIS said, "One of the things that helped initially was to frame QRIS in terms of national movement. Almost every state has one."

QRIS supports parent choice	✓	✓

Discussion of Policymaker Perspectives:

A few policymakers noted that QRIS is a way to inform families about their choices as part of an overall commitment to parent choice.

Discussion of Administrator and Advocate Perspectives:

States spoke about messaging QRIS to support parents and parent choice. For these states, the QRIS allows families to make the best choices for their children. They have quality options for making their own decisions about their children.

Insights About Communications

Naming/Branding/Framing. For the most part, state leaders sought to promote the name of their QRIS rather than the words QRIS. One said, "QRIS is a wonky term and we try to speak in plain English." Another state said, "We definitely branded and talked about [name of state QRIS]. That had a life force of its own." However, not all states saw it this way. One state was not currently attempting to name its QRIS since it wanted to have it apply across multiple programs and thought branding it would get in the way of the QRIS serving as a unifying quality framework. But most actively sought to name the QRIS, not only to help reach parents but also to help draw attention to it from policymakers.

Focus on What the QRIS Means, Not What It Is. One of the most frequent comments we received about messaging pertaining to QRIS was to "focus on what the QRIS means, not what it is." Administrators and advocates did not focus on the granular aspects of the QRIS. They told us that they were not particularly interested in messaging about the components of the QRIS—standards, quality improvement supports, outreach, rating, financing strategies—other than at a very high level. They offered two reasons for this: first, they believed that focusing on a bigger picture was more persuasive in convincing decision makers to support and invest in their QRIS and second, they thought that the granular aspects of the QRIS were simply too detailed and distracting for the public policy audience, and presented a level of complication that would not be helpful or useful to advancing policy support and action for QRIS.

Instead the focus is on what the QRIS accomplishes and what problems it is helping to solve rather than the details of the QRIS.

Tailoring for Democrats and Republicans. Some state leaders felt that they tailored their core messages based on party affiliation of the policymaker while others said that the core messages were tailored based on the specific interests of the policymaker. Those who thought there was some distinction based on party affiliation discussed tailoring for Republicans to the total population of children, economic development for the state and the relationship of the QRIS and high-quality ECE to economic development, supporting small business owners through the QRIS, and advancing parent choice. For Democrats, they focused on the importance of meeting the needs of at-risk children and how the QRIS does that.

Examples of QRIS Messages

Understanding the purpose of your QRIS, as well as the larger landscape for early learning in your state, is crucial in shaping the messages for public policy and advocacy purposes. To help develop messages, we have provided a framework or "message box" to help you think about structuring your messages in support of your state's QRIS. With this approach, you establish a core message point not to exceed 20 to 30 words. This is the key overall message you want your policy audiences to receive about your QRIS.

Why Use a Message Box

Political commentators frequently discuss messaging, saying things like, "That candidate really had a message that resonated with voters." The process of creating a message box allows you to determine the most important and compelling points about your QRIS that that you want to convey to policymakers. Putting them down on one page forces you to prioritize your key points. The creation of the message box allows you to focus on language that is accessible and relevant to the policymakers you intend to reach.

The message box itself is an internal document, but it is used throughout the communications process for supporting QRIS policy in many ways, e.g., to guide one-on-one conversations, shape fact sheets or other written material, and inform your social media approach. The state leaders we interviewed all discussed the enormous effort they put into thinking about messages, creating message points, simplifying messages, and tailoring these messages for specific audiences.

Message boxes are also a great way to keep various spokespeople and other messengers coordinated on the key messages in simple, straightforward language. A one-page message box with 3 to 4 key messages is now a preferred way to share framing of issues as opposed to a 4- or 5-page message memo.
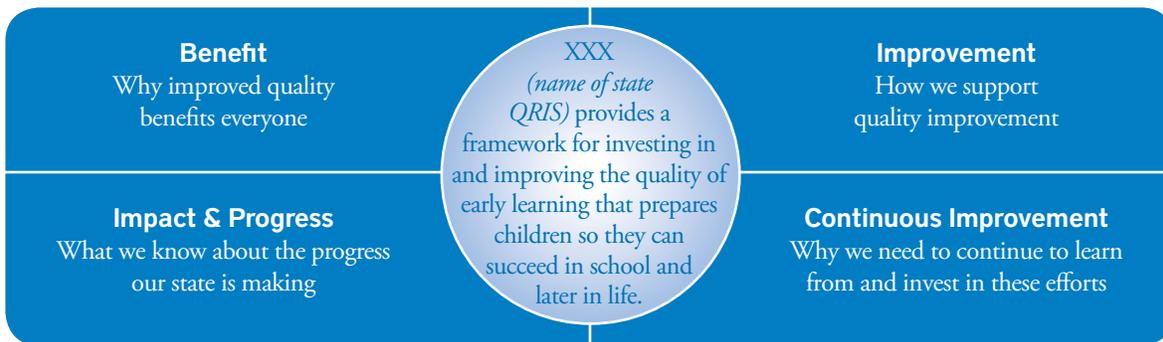
In the message box on the next page, the core message is in the center. Then four supporting points that bolster the core message are established. The idea is to get key messages on one page and to make them as concise and compelling as possible.

We provide two examples based on what we heard from our interviews. Both options include improved outcomes for children as an essential part of the messaging. These examples are based on the information gleaned during the interviews with policy and advocacy organizations and their leaders.
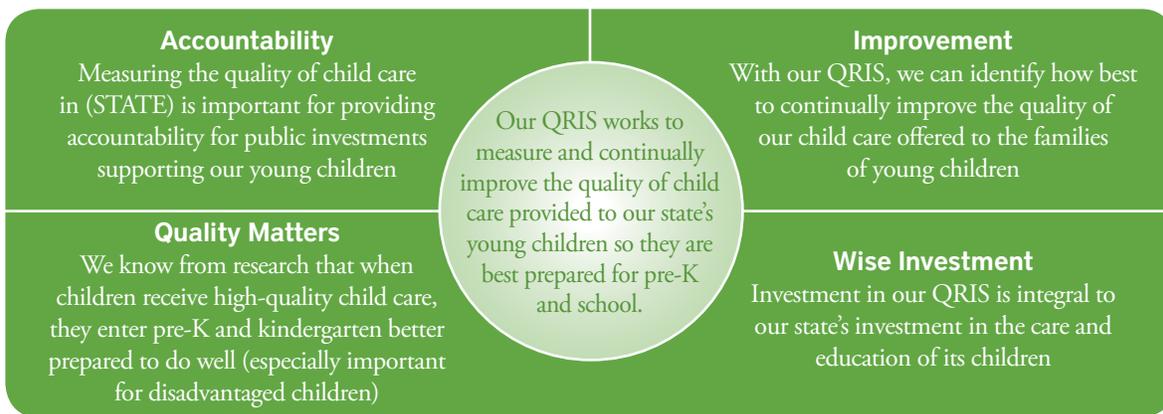
Example 1 presents QRIS as a framework that focuses on investment and improvement. This is applicable to states that are seeking to create a multi-program QRIS spanning programs, such as child care, pre-K and Head Start, in which the QRIS is applicable to all programs and serves as a unifying quality framework.

Example 2 is based on the central concept of measurement and improvement to support children's readiness for school. This option assumes a child-care-only focused QRIS, but the option could be modified for a QRIS that is supporting other early childhood settings as well.

Example 1: QRIS Framework Investing in and Improving School Readiness

Benefit
Why improved quality benefits everyone

Improvement
How we support quality improvement

XXX *(name of state QRIS)* provides a framework for investing in and improving the quality of early learning that prepares children so they can succeed in school and later in life.

Impact & Progress
What we know about the progress our state is making

Continuous Improvement
Why we need to continue to learn from and invest in these efforts

Example 2: QRIS Measures and Improves Quality for Children's School Readiness

Accountability
Measuring the quality of child care in (STATE) is important for providing accountability for public investments supporting our young children

Improvement
With our QRIS, we can identify how best to continually improve the quality of our child care offered to the families of young children

Our QRIS works to measure and continually improve the quality of child care provided to our state's young children so they are best prepared for pre-K and school.

Quality Matters
We know from research that when children receive high-quality child care, they enter pre-K and kindergarten better prepared to do well (especially important for disadvantaged children)

Wise Investment
Investment in our QRIS is integral to our state's investment in the care and education of its children

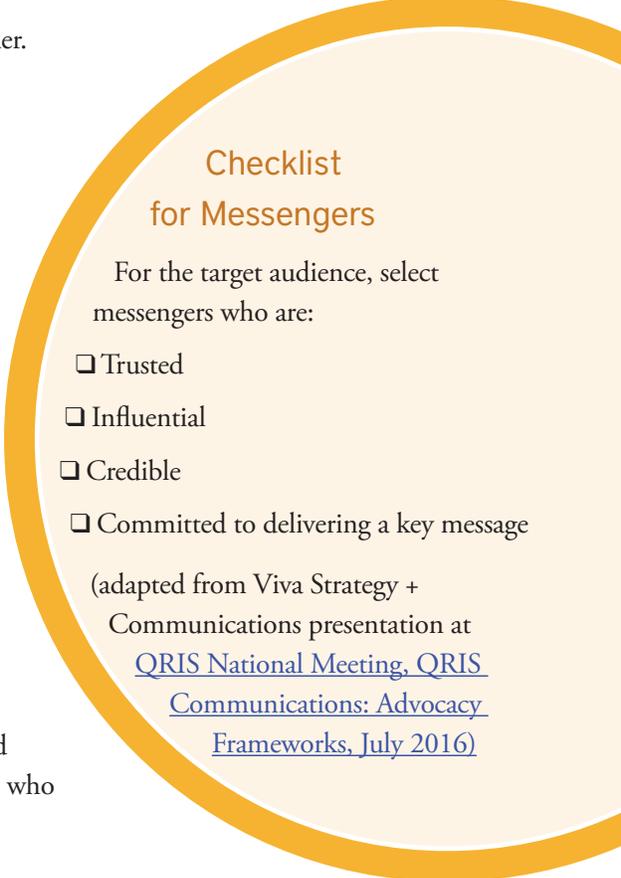# VI. Finding the Right Messengers

Finding the Right Messengers

In thinking about messengers, there are several issues to consider.

Spokespeople

When building relationships with legislators and the governor (and his/her appointed staff), consider who is best equipped to represent the QRIS and talk about the value of investing in the QRIS as an early childhood "solution." For example, if the CEO of a large employer in a legislator's district is a champion of early childhood in your state, he or she may be a good spokesperson for QRIS.

In our interviews, we heard that business leaders, child care and early education providers, education leaders, unions, parents, and community leaders can be effective spokespeople. We heard from the state leaders about the value of recruiting providers, families, business leaders, health care leaders, and local officials in particular. A diversity of messengers is generally needed to reach the target audiences, providing the opportunity to cultivate and deploy multiple spokespeople who play different roles in the community. Legislators and/or governors themselves can make highly effective partners in advocating for a QRIS. Indeed, we heard from policymakers who saw themselves as champions, and in those states, administrators and advocates also identified them as key champions who helped to make significant QRIS public policy advances.

Checklist for Messengers

For the target audience, select messengers who are:

❑ Trusted

❑ Influential

❑ Credible

❑ Committed to delivering a key message

(adapted from Viva Strategy + Communications presentation at QRIS National Meeting, QRIS Communications: Advocacy Frameworks, July 2016)

Preparation

In finding messengers, keep in mind that they need to be properly prepared to communicate your messages and must be provided with what they need (e.g., training, tools, communications materials) to be successful.

Personal Relationships

Research[1] has shown that building personal relationships with the governor and his/her key aides along with key legislators and their staff is one of the most important things you can do to gain support. And those we interviewed spoke about this over and over again as well.

In our research, we found that the best way to reach important policymakers is through personal contact. Given the importance of personal communication, securing opportunities to meet legislators and key executive-branch decision makers in their offices for a conversation that advances your objectives is one approach. Another approach is to invite policymakers to visit a high-quality (high-ranked) provider at the local level to learn firsthand what makes a program high quality. As one state leader said, "these visits include hearing from families and teachers themselves and seeing it in comparison with other programs so they can see firsthand…These visits [are] very effective."

Creatively engaging with legislators and executive-branch decision makers to form personal connections and to build relationships is essential. When the target audience is governors and legislators, a great outcome is when they become primary stakeholders themselves and are proactively seeking to prioritize the well-being and advancement of the QRIS. One state decided that it needed regular conversations with key decision makers, including the house speaker, and formed a workgroup. When it came down to promoting the particular QRIS issue as a policy issue, it was successful, and they attribute this in part to the workgroup.

It is important to track the contacts everyone working on the communications strategy has with legislators and executive branch decision makers. This will be further discussed in Section 5, on collecting, analyzing, and applying data.

Venues

A good place to have a conversation with a legislator is in his or her home district. In these settings, the legislator often has more time to hear about your work and ask questions than when working at the statehouse. As noted above, you can also arrange to have legislators visit an early childhood provider to see firsthand what makes for a high-quality learning environment for young children and to demonstrate what learning looks like for children of different ages.

But there are many venues, and since repetition is a necessary ingredient of effective communication efforts to promote QRIS policy, multiple venues should be considered. This includes executive branch and legislative briefings. Likewise, venues matter to the governor and the staff that she or he relies upon, with community visits providing opportunities for tours and other ways to bring home the work. In addition, community settings can often provide helpful media opportunities for both legislators and governors.

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[1] Feldman, P. H., Nadash, P., & Gursen, M. (2001) Improving communication between researchers and policymakers in long-term care: Or, researchers are from Mars; policymakers are from Venus. *The Gerantologist*, 41(3), 312-321.

VII. Outreach and Execution

Outreach strategy is guided by the objectives for the communications strategies for promoting QRIS policies. While this will vary by state context and the desired changes in your QRIS funding, policy and priorities, in our interviews we heard a core commitment to the basic tenets of effective communications to support QRIS policy, including the importance of developing and maintaining a pro-active presence. Communication work to support policy objectives is generally treated as a campaign that requires developing and maintaining a pro-active presence, simplifying and repeating messages in diverse venues and mediums, cultivating essential stakeholder support and activism, and identifying and leveraging the necessary financial and human resources to accomplish your plan.

One successful state advocate noted the following general "do's" and "don'ts" to consider when executing communications policy outreach work:

? What: Keep it simple

✅ **Do:** Do create the simplest possible set of key messages

❌ **Don't:** Don't use jargon understood only by experts. Not all audiences care as much as you do about QRIS

? What: Always be as clear as possible

✅ **Do:** Do provide the least amount of detail possible

❌ **Don't:** Don't use process-speak or other jargon

? What: Repeat, repeat, repeat

✅ **Do:** Do repeat key messages always and across tactics

❌ **Don't:** Don't be self-conscious about repetition

? What: Have lots of messengers and make strategic matches

✅ **Do:** Do pick the messenger that is the best match

❌ **Don't:** Don't be tone deaf to audiences' preferences

? What: Appropriate control of messengers helps ensure message delivery

✅ **Do:** Do be realistic about how your messengers will deliver

❌ **Don't:** Don't expect to attract people with words alone

? What: Be realistic about your audiences and anticipate their motives

✅ **Do:** Do think beyond what you hear to understand motivation

❌ **Don't:** Don't take everything at face value

? What: Use data to help build a strong case

✅ **Do:** Do use available data to your advantage

❌ **Don't:** Don't be scared to simplify to make understandable

Source: Adapted from Barb Yates, Think Small presentation at QRIS National Meeting, QRIS Communications: Advocacy Frameworks, July 2016

For internal stakeholders and key legislators, you may provide an advance overview of the findings via a high-level presentation. A policy brief and news release may then go to all legislators and key governor's staff when the findings are released.

Policymakers are also impacted by other media efforts, and some states have gathered sufficient resources to have paid media (radio, Google, Facebook, etc.) as well as news media outreach. A typical campaign might include:

- ❑ Media coverage (placed, earned)
- ❑ Social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube)
- ❑ Paid advertising
- ❑ Capitol testimony, letters, handouts, etc.

Timing and the Policymaker Calendar

Most state legislatures assemble at the start of the calendar year. This means a communications plan, messaging, and materials development should all be in place by the fall. Most governors develop their budget requests as early as the summer prior to their introduction. If your QRIS is part of a legislative bill, determine the plan to support this effort. If you are relying on the governor to do the heavy lifting in his/her budget and legislative approach, make a plan to support this effort. If you are a QRIS administrator, it may not be permissible for you to be involved in outreach. Your role will be to support those individuals and organizations who are advocating. Be responsive and available because elected policymakers often need information right away, with little or no advance notice.

Context

It is unlikely you or your spokespeople will meet with legislators and/or the governor to talk only about QRIS. More likely, your references to your QRIS will be in the broader context of how to provide quality services to young children to prepare them for success in school and, more generally, to thrive, especially those children with multiple risk factors. This is why it is important to develop clear, simple and compelling QRIS messages in frames that you readily be inserted into your work, as previously discussed in the section on message boxes.

Materials and Media

It is rare that a legislator or governor will want to read a long report about your QRIS. When providing materials for policymakers, include short documents, for example, a one- to two-page policy brief.

If a QRIS evaluation study is being shared, then this brief can provide an overview, followed by key findings and recommendations or implications. In many states, researchers are completing QRIS evaluation studies. Work closely with the researchers, your communications team, and policy advisors to think about how best to present the findings to policy audiences. Some states that have been very effective in messaging about their QRIS use research findings as a way to emphasize the role of the QRIS in identifying the need for quality improvement, and in supporting strategies for ongoing improvement.

VIII. Collecting, Analyzing, and Applying Data

Data collection is a powerful element in communicating to win policy support for QRIS. We discuss two types of data: 1) data about the QRIS itself as well as 2) data about the communications to promote QRIS policy effort. Identifying a person or people responsible for this part of the work is just as crucial to the success of the communications strategies for QRIS public policy as the steps previously discussed.

QRIS Data

In most states, the QRIS generates important information that is of interest to policymakers and other early learning leaders and can be used to help grow support for your QRIS. Examples include:

- How many providers are enrolled? How has participation grown over the past year?

- What percentage of providers are rated at the higher levels? What has been the growth?

- How many children are being served in rated programs? In higher rated programs? What are the demographics of the children in rated (and higher rated) programs?

- What have QRIS evaluation studies found? What is working well? What can be improved?

- How many providers are enrolled? How has participation grown over the past year?

- What percentage of providers are rated at the higher levels? What has been the growth?

- How many children are being served in rated programs? In higher rated programs? What are the demographics of the children in rated (and higher rated) programs?

- What have QRIS evaluation studies found? What is working well? What can be improved?

Compile the most important information for use when meeting with policymakers. If you are meeting with an individual legislator, you may want to share the details of provider and child participation in the communities s/he represents. Some state leaders have found that mapping is a compelling way to present the information. Others have noted that their QRIS data did not meet the projections that they made—particularly in the states attempting to make rapid advances in the QRIS through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. Some opted to share the data they had, identifying trends and gaps, and providing the "data to policymakers but also giving them our solutions and how we were addressing them….Our communication was 'here's how we are using information. Here's the beauty of the QRIS in that you now have this gift of knowledge and understanding of your program in a way that hadn't been previously available. Here's how we're troubleshooting this [new] system.'"

Strategy Tracking

Beyond the information about your QRIS, tracking feedback on the communications strategies for promoting QRIS policy outreach adds value to the work. Useful information to collect and review includes:

- Which legislators have been briefed about QRIS? Who in the governor's office has been briefed?

- What questions did they ask, what comments did they provide?

- Which legislators and executive staff members have visited QRIS programs?

- How often do you share information about your QRIS with your target policy audiences? Who is sharing the information?

- What messages are resonating with which policymakers?

- What concerns are you hearing and how can you address these?

The answers to these questions help with strategic examination of the success of the communications strategies for promoting QRIS policies. Just as QRIS is about continual improvement, this same goal applies to outreach efforts with policymakers. You will have to be prepared to adjust your plans as new legislators take office after each election cycle, and as new priorities emerge and available funding shifts. The best way to be successful is to take the time to develop a proactive and strategic plan as to how you want to position your QRIS in your state's broader early childhood legislative discussion.

Appendix: Interview Protocols

This appendix provides the interview protocols that were used to collect the information reported on in this primer.

Interview Questions for State Administrators and Advocates
February 2016

Overview

BUILD and Child Trends are working on a project to help states think strategically about how they message their QRIS to policy audiences in order to communicate progress and build support. We have a series of questions we would like to ask you as part of our research. Your responses will not be made public. They will be used to inform and guide this work. Our end goal is to help create message frames, talking points, and other materials that state QRIS proponents can use in their communication efforts, understanding that each state will have specific information and requirements.

Questions

1. First, can you tell us about the extent of communications you have had with policy audiences over the past 12 months about your QRIS? Whom have you targeted or reached, how, how often, and with what information?

2. What are the specific goals of your QRIS communications with these policymakers?

3. How do you explain QRIS to policymakers; what language do you use?

4. If you are talking about "quality care and education," how do you explain that concept?

5. If you had to pick your three most important QRIS messages you want to convey to policy audiences in your state, what would they be and why?

6. What feedback do you most frequently get from policymakers when you or others in your state talk with them about QRIS? What are some of the questions they have? Concerns?

7. In what ways have you tailored your messages about QRIS based on party affiliation, familiarity with QRIS, and/or geography of the policymakers you are trying to reach? How do you think that approach has that worked?

8. To what extent is your state working with policymakers to establish funding for QRIS beyond the grants from Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge? (as applicable) What have been some of the key messages (from your perspective) that have helped garner support for sustaining QRIS?

9. When you think about the funding and operational needs of your QRIS in 2016, do you think your messaging on QRIS should change, and if so, how?

10. Are there any negative messages about QRIS in your state that you think threaten your communication efforts with policymakers? If so, what are they? How are you responding?

11. When your state has QRIS evaluation studies completed, how do you promote these findings with policymakers? Have the report findings led you to revise your QRIS messaging; if so, how and why? (If no studies completed yet, are you planning communications for when they are?)

12. Can you name other individuals or organizations that support your QRIS communications with policy audiences? If so, name them.

13. What resources have you used to help tell your state's QRIS story to policymakers? (fact sheets, talking points, presentations, videos, website, etc? (Ask to get examples).
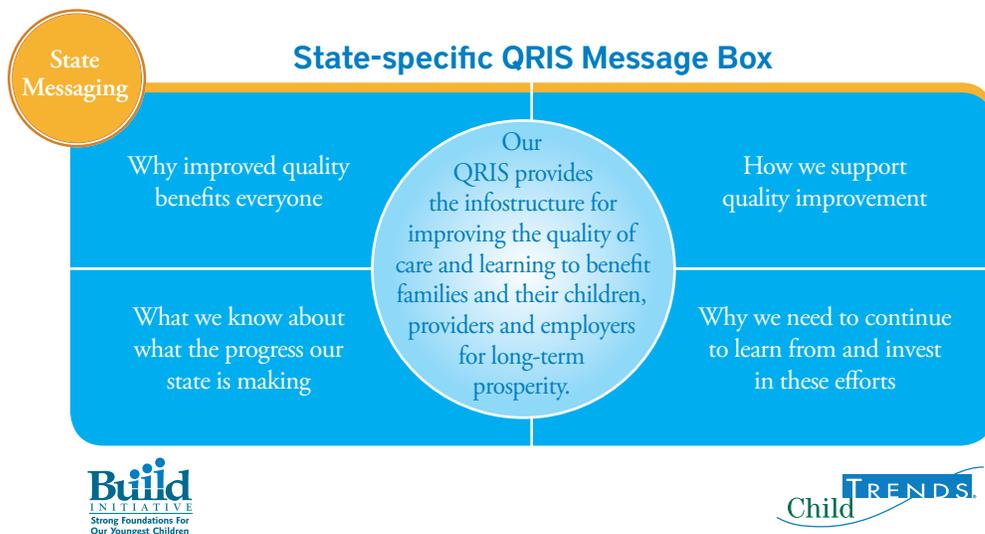
Overview

BUILD and Child Trends are working on a project to help states think strategically about how they communicate with policy audiences about childcare and early education. We are specifically looking at messaging on their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems—or QRIS for short. We have a series of questions we would like to ask you as part of our research. Your responses will not be made public. They will be used to inform and guide this work. Our end goal with this research is to better understand the perceptions and information needs of policy audiences regarding early childhood care and education.

About BUILD: The BUILD Initiative works with early childhood leaders within states and nationally to better prepare all young children, birth to age five, to thrive and succeed. BUILD's vision is of a comprehensive, racially equitable, high-quality early childhood system that ensures all children have an opportunity to develop and reach their full potential without experiencing discrimination or bias.

About ChildTrends: Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization focused exclusively on improving the lives and prospects of children, youth, and their families. The organization does much work in the early childhood realm to help policymakers and program administrators make informed decisions based on research findings.

Questions

1. Can you summarize your experience working on early childhood issues over the past year or two?

2. How well informed are you about the progress of your state's QRIS (very, somewhat, not much, not at all)

3. What are the top three things that come to your mind when thinking about your state's QRIS?

4. Relative to the state's other pre-K, child care, and early childhood initiatives, how important is your state's QRIS? (very, somewhat, not much, not at all)

5. We'd like to share the following concept for your state's QRIS and find out what you think of it. [what do you like? Dislike? Agree with? Do not agree with?]

State Messaging

State-specific QRIS Message Box

Why improved quality benefits everyone

Our QRIS provides the infostructure for improving the quality of care and learning to benefit families and their children, providers and employers for long-term prosperity.

How we support quality improvement

What we know about what the progress our state is making

Why we need to continue to learn from and invest in these efforts

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Strong Foundations For
Our Youngest Children

Child TRENDS

6. In your own words, what is the public policy justification for having a QRIS?

7. Are there any individuals or organizations whose support for QRIS would be meaningful to you in terms of advancing the state's QRIS? Any whose opposition would be meaningful to you?

Acknowledgements

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www.buildinitiative.org