QRIS 3.0 Tools and Resources

Toward Coherence: State Approaches to Integrating Pre-K in QRIS

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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.

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- 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.

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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

In recent years, the United States has seen unprecedented policy focus on and investment in initiatives to improve young children's care and education. At the state level, both Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and pre-kindergarten (pre-K) are on the rise. In 2016, 39 states have statewide QRIS[1] and 42 states have state-funded pre-K.[2] The growth of QRIS and pre-K demonstrates how early care and education (ECE) stakeholders across the country are working toward providing children with access to high-quality ECE.

The need is great. Despite decades of research affirming the significance of positive early learning on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, far too many children in the United States still lack access to excellent ECE. The challenge is acute for young children from linguistically, racially, and economically marginalized communities.[3] Disparities in children's development emerge well before kindergarten entry and high-quality care can ameliorate disparities.[4] QRIS and pre-K can be part of the solution.

The ongoing advancement of both QRIS and pre-K offers challenges for states interested in creating coherent ECE systems in which new investments build on one another and in which equitable access to high-quality services is provided. Currently, QRIS and pre-K sometimes work at cross-purposes and may make the ECE system more complicated due to lack of coordination in an already complex system. We argue that when carefully coordinated, QRIS and pre-K can build a strong and equitable ECE system that supports children, families, and educators. Recent federal policy has promoted this approach (see textbox, page 2) and states are responding in different ways.

In this paper, we explore cross-sector QRIS, which we define as QRIS that are inclusive of child care and pre-K programs. The paper aims to support policymakers and advocates as they examine their existing approaches and strive to increase coherence, effectiveness and equity. Our analysis draws from reviews of several summative resources that describe current QRIS and pre-K approaches, including the QRIS Compendium[5] and the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) State Preschool Yearbook as well as discussions with several QRIS administrators who lead cross-sector QRIS.

We begin with a discussion of the history of the ECE system that has propelled QRIS and pre-K. We describe several common dimensions of QRIS and pre-K and explore the implications of taking an approach in which QRIS fully embraces both child care and pre-K. The paper shares QRIS models that include pre-K and the trade-offs inherent in each approach. Our paper concludes with a discussion of strategies for continued efforts to implement pre-K and QRIS within a coherent ECE systems-building approach.

II. Context: The Emergence of Pre-K and QRIS

We start with a brief history of the development of QRIS and pre-K initiatives that expand quality early learning. The mostly separate development of these approaches is part of the legacy of two different conceptualizations of governmental support for young children: "child care" designed to facilitate parental employment and "early education" designed to promote children's development before beginning kindergarten.

QRIS are rooted in the child care context: care provided in home and centers for children from birth-through-kindergarten entry. In the late 1990's, QRIS emerged to encourage child care programs to offer more developmentally responsive care. For decades, federal and state governments have funded child care subsidies to facilitate workforce participation for low-income families and states have set child care licensing standards to ensure that young children are safe and healthy in their care environments. Even with subsidies, family fees are the main source of funding for child care programs and parent choice in child care arrangements is a priority. Child care funding and licensing standards have always been highly varied across the country. They do not ensure that child care programs provide young children with high-quality learning. QRIS aim to overcome shortcomings in child care licensing standards and investments to provide the standards and funding mechanisms to make higher quality care accessible to families. Each state's approach is unique but in general, "a fully functional QRIS includes the following components: (1) quality standards for programs and practitioners; (2) supports and infrastructure to meet such standards; (3) monitoring and accountability systems to ensure compliance with quality standards; (4) ongoing financial assistance that is linked to meeting quality standards; and (5) engagement and outreach strategies."[6]

Although the first QRIS were conceived to focus on the child care sector, more states are taking cross-sector approaches as they move into the second and third iterations of their QRIS.[7] Indeed, QRIS are now commonly seen as a state-based framework to define and support high-quality ECE. For many states, QRIS encompass far more than child care and intend to incorporate state-funded pre-K and Head Start as well. The contours of states' QRIS, however, continue to vary. Some states take a "raising the bar for health and safety approach," focusing primarily on child care; others adopt a more comprehensive school-readiness approach. States with the former approach tend to focus on the child-care-provider community while those with the school-readiness framework may elect to include other programs, such as pre-K.[8]

Federal Government's Promotion of Cross-Sector QRIS

The U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services have promoted policy shifts to make QRIS fully inclusive of pre-K and, likewise, to inform pre-K policymakers about the benefits of QRIS participation. Specifically, the federal government's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grant competitions (2012-2016) and Preschool Development Grant (PDG) competitions (2014) included language that encouraged coordination.

Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant: The ELC competition aimed to improve the quality of early learning and development for children with high need. ELC grants were awarded to states with plans to improve early learning and development programs in five key reform areas. One area focuses on cross-sector QRIS that include pre-K, Head Start, and child care programs. The grant specifically asked states to **"**define high-quality, accountable programs by creating a common tiered-quality-rating-and- improvement system (TQRIS) that is used across the state to evaluate and improve program performance and to inform families about program quality."[9]

Preschool Development Grant: The PDG competition invited states to apply for funding for development or expansion of pre-K. The PDG guidelines referenced QRIS. First, states were asked to ensure "the quality of existing early learning programs that receive state funding, including State Preschool Programs, as evidenced by policies and program data that demonstrate the state's commitment to the components of a High-Quality Preschool Program; compliance with Program Standards; and support for program monitoring and improvement, which may be accomplished through the use of a TQRIS." Second, states were asked to "implement a system for monitoring and supporting continuous improvement … to ensure that each Subgrantee is providing High-Quality Preschool Programs which may be accomplished through the use of leveraging a TQRIS."[10]

State-funded pre-K is rooted in the education context. For more than 50 years, states have funded pre-K programs that serve 4-year-olds, typically with a primary focus on early education and kindergarten readiness. In its earliest years, pre-K commonly served children from low-income families by allocating resources to school districts based on family income and/or establishing eligibility requirements for children based on their at-risk status. Recent advances in pre-K have led to more universal approaches with states and metropolitan areas making commitments to design and fund a model to reach all age-eligible children. Every state's pre-K has a unique design but most allocate funding to public schools and community-based organizations to deliver the pre-K program. In contrast with child care that is primarily funded by parent fees, pre-K funding rates are generally set to cover the full cost of providing services that meet pre-K program quality standards. Pre-K has grown substantially in the last 20 years. In 1991, 28 states had pre-K programs serving 290,000 children; by 2014-2015, enrollment grew to almost 1.4 million children in 42 states.[11] In many instances, pre-K has elevated the expectations and overall investment in ECE and forged greater connections between ECE services for children (from birth-through-kindergarten entry) and the public school system.

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Despite their common goal of providing young children with high-quality early learning, the different origins and approaches of QRIS and pre-K present challenges for building a comprehensive ECE system that is inclusive of both initiatives. When pre-K and QRIS are separated, the lack of coordination can create conflicting directives and multiple administrative requirements that challenge providers (both administrators and teachers), policymakers, and families alike. In their review of monitoring procedures, for instance, Maxwell and colleagues note, "Research has shown that even though QRIS are an opportunity to align program standards, monitoring of the program standards is often conducted by separate entities in an uncoordinated approach."[12] There are many ways in which QRIS and pre-K may be coordinated so that they can support the vision for an equitable early learning system.

III. Common Dimensions of QRIS and Pre-K

QRIS and pre-K share many common structural dimensions. Here we provide a side-by-side comparison of seven dimensions that influence the implementation of each approach: (1) governance; (2) funding and then the five components that characterize QRIS described above; (3) quality standards for programs and practitioners; (4) supports and infrastructure to meet such standards; (5) monitoring and accountability; (6) financing quality standards; and (7) engagement and outreach.

The statements within the table represent generalizations in states' approaches, informed by the NIEER Yearbook and the QRIS Compendium[13] as well as the QRIS Resource Guide;[14] we note that no two states have precisely the same approach to state pre-K or QRIS.

Table 1. Comparison of Core Dimensions Across QRIS and Pre-K

Dimensions	QRIS Purpose: Enhance the quality of ECE programs How: Provide standards, incentives, supports, and financing Age range: Children birth-through-kindergarten entry	Pre-K Purpose: Promote school readiness for children before beginning kindergarten How: Provide standards and program funding Age Range: 4-year-old children and in some states, 3-year-old children
1. Governance	State agency that is responsible for child care often in partnership with non-profit partners to rate programs and provide quality-improvement services.	State education agency often in conjunction with local education agency (for delivery) and/or other provider types.
2. Funding	**Source:** Primarily funded through the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) requirement to allocate 4% of total funds to support child care program quality. **Amount:** CCDF was $2.9 billion in 2015 and the quality set-aside amount was $116 million. A portion of this money may fund states' QRIS.	**Source:** Primarily funded by state funds, with some federal and local contributions. **Amount:** State funding amounted to $6.2 billion in 2015.
3. Quality standards for programs and practitioners	QRIS program-quality standards are organized in rating levels, with the highest level and most rigorous standards reflecting high quality. QRIS practitioner standards typically address qualifications for all program staff, including directors. Many QRIS rate programs based on the percentage of staff that have met particular qualifications and professional development standards. QRIS practitioner standards tend to address educators' level of education and participation in ongoing professional development. The standards may align with a state's career ladder.	Pre-K has one set of program-quality standards representing high quality. Pre-K standards typically address qualifications for lead teachers and teacher aides. Pre-K standards generally require lead teachers to have a BA and specialized education in early childhood and participate in ongoing professional development or require an early childhood related teacher license.
4. Supports to meet quality standards	QRIS include supports, such as training, technical assistance, and coaching to help programs achieve higher levels of quality. QRIS may leverage supports from the state's ECE professional development system.	Pre-K supports often include coaching and guidance related to program quality. This may be addressed at the local level as a component of the public school or community-based organization quality improvement efforts.

Dimensions	**QRIS** Purpose: Enhance the quality of ECE programs How: Provide standards, incentives, supports, and financing Age range: Children birth-through-kindergarten entry	**Pre-K** Purpose: Promote school readiness for children before beginning kindergarten How: Provide standards and program funding Age Range: 4-year-old children and in some states, 3-year-old children
5. Monitoring and accountability	QRIS monitoring often includes: structured observations of classroom and/or program quality, program self-assessments, and document reviews and verifications. Some states include documentation of children's learning and/or child outcomes.	Pre-K monitoring often includes: structured observations of classroom and/or program quality during on-site visits; document reviews; program self-assessments; and documentation of children's learning and/or child outcomes.
6. Financing quality standards	QRIS provides financial incentives that may include subsidy payments for low-income children at higher rates; bonuses; loans; or tax credits based on quality-rating levels; grants for programs; provider wage initiatives; and/or scholarships linked to QRIS participation.	Pre-K funding is typically allocated to sites to implement the program based on a per-child cost rate that is expected to cover the cost of meeting program standards; in some cases a local match is required.
7. Engagement and outreach	**Family engagement:** QRIS typically include family engagement standards that address parent involvement activities and supports, such as referrals to social services. **Outreach:** QRIS provide a framework for educating families about ECE and most QRIS award symbols, such as stars, to programs to inform families about the quality level of care of rated sites.	**Family engagement:** Pre-K program standards commonly include parent involvement activities and supports, such as referrals to social services; parent conferences; and transition to kindergarten activities. **Outreach:** Pre-K outreach is often addressed at the local level as a component of public school or community-based organization public awareness and enrollment practices.

As we examine the intersection of QRIS and pre-K, we briefly explore the implications of each dimension for building a cross-sector QRIS that includes pre-K.

1. Governance: A QRIS that includes pre-K warrants careful planning in light of the distinct governance structures that typically guide QRIS and pre-K initiatives. For each approach, there are multiple levels of government that drive funding, design, and implementation. QRIS are often conceptualized at the state level and funded, in large part, with federal CCDF dollars that a state's CCDF administrator allocates to the system. Pre-K initiatives tend to be driven by state investments that are allocated through the State Education Agency, frequently through the Local Education Agency (LEA) level. It is unusual for one entity to have oversight for both pre-K and child care. In building a cross-sector QRIS, state-level partnership is likely to be critical, with robust communications and planning. And, given the local aspect of each system, coordination, communications and planning is needed among leaders at the state, regional, and local levels of the system.

2. **Funding:** Funding includes the sources and amount of money to implement QRIS and pre-K. Because different appropriation processes typically determine system financing for QRIS and pre-K, there is a need to engage a broader group of stakeholders to fund a cross-sector QRIS and to determine how the ratings, financial incentives, and supports for program quality will be funded so that the cross-sector approach benefits the full range of participants.

3. **Quality standards for programs and practitioners:** Across both pre-K and QRIS, program quality standards commonly address the learning environment, educator qualifications, family engagement, program leadership, and other structural quality indicators like adult-child ratios and class size. With a well-coordinated cross-sector QRIS that includes pre-K, there can be alignment in the way that pre-K and QRIS standards indicate high-quality ECE. Indeed, a cross-sector QRIS structure has to incorporate the pre-K program so that the pre-K does not see QRIS as "below" the pre-K expectations. This issue is particularly relevant when it comes to educator qualifications. In addition, when building a cross-sector QRIS that fully incorporates pre-K, comparable expectations for educators' qualifications should be matched with comparable supports, such as compensation parity and equitable access to professional development, as discussed below.

> With a well-coordinated cross-sector QRIS that includes pre-K, there can be alignment in the way that pre-K and QRIS standards indicate high-quality ECE.

4. **Supports to meet quality standards:** QRIS and pre-K tend to have similar approaches to supporting program quality: assessments of quality combined with technical assistance, coaching, and professional development that aligns quality improvement plans. There may be differences, however, in the implementation of these efforts. For example, a QRIS may focus on overall program quality assessment and associated improvement activities whereas a pre-K initiative may be more focused on particular teaching practices. A cross-sector QRIS with a unified framework for quality improvement can lead to a streamlined approach that recognizes multiple facets of high-quality ECE and differentiates supports to meet the diverse needs of programs and teachers.

5. **Monitoring and accountability:** QRIS and pre-K monitoring share similar features, but may also have important differences. Substantively, pre-K monitoring may include documentation related to children's learning whereas QRIS tend to focus on global assessments of quality and sometimes assessments of teacher-child interactions. Differences in the stakes are also important. QRIS monitor programs against tiered standards, leaving participating programs with a pathway toward improvement whereas pre-K monitoring holds all programs to one level of standards and programs are either in or out of compliance. There are operational implications as well. For programs that participate in multiple policy initiatives (which may be programs that serve the most vulnerable children), anything short of a well-coordinated monitoring approach presents challenges for early educators and administrators striving to provide children with excellent care. For example, in states with an integrated approach to QRIS and pre-K accountability, documentation from various components of the system could be shared to verify compliance with QRIS standards to simplify participation or a single monitoring and accountability system could be developed.

6. **Financing quality standards:** Financing for quality standards within a QRIS is typically thought of as financial assistance to help programs meet quality standards, funding to support quality services and resources needed to administer the initiative. With a cross-sector QRIS, the integration of pre-K raises funding opportunities as well as challenges. To secure cross-sector participation, it is important that financing is available for all participating sites. Community-based programs that meet high-quality standards may house pre-K *and*

receive financial benefits from receiving a high rating that can yield sufficient resources to offer high-quality care. At the same time, there are implications for how, at the state level, funds are blended to ensure adequate financing of rating and accountability, quality improvement, and direct service resources.

7. **Engagement and outreach:** QRIS and pre-K tend to have different approaches to engaging families. For QRIS, standards address the ways in which programs work with and support families in the course of the service delivery and some states. QRIS aim to encourage families to choose high-quality care. Pre-K tends to engage families through enrollment and by providing families with an accessible ECE option that brings children and their families much needed support. With a cross-sector approach, pre-K may rethink and enhance program support for families and QRIS may also renegotiate the ways they recognize pre-K approaches to family engagement.

IV. States' Approaches to QRIS and Pre-K

In this section, we address different ways in which states integrate pre-K into QRIS. Cross-sector QRIS that fully include pre-K can play an important role in moving toward a more robust ECE system that provides young children with more equitable access to high-quality early learning. The majority of states' QRIS have some degree of cross-sector involvement, but the extent to which QRIS fully reflect and engage pre-K programs varies in two important ways.

Pre-K Participation Policies—Does a state's pre-K policy encourage or mandate pre-K programs to be rated? State pre-K policies can make QRIS participation voluntary or mandatory, with some requiring pre-K to reach a certain quality level. Some states institutionalize their approach through administrative rules or even set expectations in legislation. Pre-K policies that strongly encourage or mandate pre-K programs to be rated are more supportive of our vision for a comprehensive and equitable ECE system.

QRIS Structure — To what extent are the five components of the QRIS inclusive of pre-K? Cross-sector QRIS structures may differ in the degree to which they are mutually inclusive of QRIS and pre-K approaches. We contend that QRIS that explicitly integrate pre-K standards and structures

into the framework are more supportive of our vision for a comprehensive and equitable ECE system.

Combined, the two factors put states on a continuum from no integration at all at one end of the spectrum to fully unified on the other end. We have reviewed QRIS and pre-K initiatives in light of these two factors and identified four primary models. We provide a description and highlight some strengths and challenges of each of these models:

> **Model 1:** No cross-sector integration;
>
> **Model 2:** Cross-sector participation allowed;
>
> **Model 3:** Alternative pathways provided for pre-K; and
>
> **Model 4:** Unified framework inclusive of pre-K.

Model 1: No cross-sector integration

Description: States that fall into this category either do not have a statewide pre-K or QRIS or they have a QRIS designed exclusively for child care programs. To move toward a systemic approach, states may establish new initiatives, like pre-K or QRIS that are intentionally aligned, or they may reform existing initiatives to move into alignment.

Strengths:

- Coordination demands resources, such as time, funding, and political will, that may be allocated to other features of ECE systems.

- Programs focused on the different sectors are able to tailor strategies more narrowly or specifically to the needs in their sector.

Challenges:

- A lack of coordination between QRIS and pre-K reinforces siloes within the ECE system.

- There may be inefficiencies within the system related to redundant or conflicting monitoring and quality improvement supports when QRIS does not include pre-K.

- Divergent perspectives on ECE quality can create a system in which it is challenging for families to access the high-quality choices that reflect their values and maintain continuity of care for their children.

- The ECE system lacks a framework to connect pre-K with all other early learning programs.

Model 2: Cross-sector participation allowed
State Example: Georgia Quality Rated[15]

Georgia's Quality Rated is a voluntary QRIS that targets licensed child care programs. In Georgia, pre-K programs in good standing are eligible to participate even though they are not licensed but there is no pre-K policy that requires state-funded pre-K to participate. In general, Quality Rated and Georgia pre-K have distinct program review processes. There have been some steps to facilitate integration with both programs under the purview of one state agency, the Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning, which is also responsible for child care licensing. For example, when the Quality Rated conducts Environmental Rating Scale assessments, there are parameters to ensure that a Quality Rated ERS visit includes classrooms with and without the state. Community-based programs with pre-K also receive the benefits of participation, including bonus packages that are aligned to the rating level. Additional information about Quality Rated can be found at https://qualityrated.decal.ga.gov/.

Model 2: Cross-sector participation allowed

Description: With this model, states have developed QRIS in which pre-K programs may volunteer to be rated. Some states that fall into this category are able to encourage pre-K programs to be rated. For example, the removal of certain barriers to participation, like child care licensing as a prerequisite to participation, is one way that states sometimes encourage pre-K programs to be rated. When cross-sector integration is allowed, there is no special differentiation in the basic QRIS design related to pre-K programs' unique characteristics and the structures are not designed to be inclusive. Based on the assumption that a pre-K program has its own supports and is funded to produce quality, it is unclear whether QRIS would offer a pre-K program the financial assistance or supports for program and practitioner quality improvement to facilitate pre-K program participation in the QRIS. With this model, monitoring and accountability are not coordinated so that rated community-based ECE programs with child care and pre-K meet both pre-K and the QRIS standards. Finally, QRIS and pre-K likely maintain distinct approaches to family engagement and outreach.

Strengths:

- Participation is flexible in recognition of potentially different purposes of the QRIS and pre-K programs.
- Sites may have the opportunity to blend and braid resources at the service delivery level through participation in both initiatives.

Challenges:

- Incentives must be sufficient and value-added to encourage pre-K programs to participate.
- QRIS child care requirements, such as licensing, may create real or perceived barriers, especially for school-based programs.
- Program-quality standards for QRIS and pre-K may be different, leaving educators without clear guidance on how to best support their children's development.
- Monitoring procedures may be redundant and burdensome, taking educators away from teaching young children and supporting their families.
- Differential funding of direct services, quality improvement, and other key drivers of quality may exist, creating questions about equitable use of public resources as well as impact.

Model 3: Alternative pathway provided for pre-K

Description: Several states have designed a cross-sector QRIS by creating an alternative pathway for pre-K programs to enter the system. Our review indicated that several states have an alternative pathway in which pre-K policy requires participation. In some instances, pre-K programs automatically receive the highest-rating level and in other instances, pre-K programs enter at a specific level and then can demonstrate additional quality indicators to receive the highest rating. With this approach, the two pre-K and QRIS systems remain relatively distinct along all five components; that is, they maintain separate program and practitioner standards, supports for meeting those standards, monitoring, financial assistance, and outreach.

Strengths:

- States facilitate cross-sector engagement in the QRIS without a major change to the QRIS standards that may have been developed to scaffold programs as they exceed a state's child care licensing standards.

- Pathways acknowledge the differences between the governance and funding for pre-K and other ECE programs.

- QRIS financing may focus on programs that rely on child care subsidies, which tend to have a lower per-child allocation than pre-K.

Challenges:

- ECE sites that co-locate pre-K and child care may have to navigate two sets of standards, supports, and monitoring procedures.

- The state lacks one common definition of high-quality ECE that all programs adhere to and uphold: when pre-K standards are more rigorous than the highest level of the QRIS, the validity of the QRIS is undermined.

- The incentives for pre-K programs to participate need to be, and to be seen as, valuable to pre-K educators to motivate participation.

Model 3: Alternative pathway State Example: Delaware Stars

Delaware's QRIS, Delaware Stars, has standards reciprocity in place for its state-funded preschool program. The state pre-K program, known as the "Early Childhood Assistance Program," is required to participate. ECAP programs that have evidence of successful monitoring are automatically designated a Star-Level 4. To reach a Star-Level 5, programs are required to have an ERS assessment, which is not required by the state pre-K program. State pre-K programs are eligible for technical assistance when actively working on achieving Star-Level 5. State pre-K programs are generally not eligible for any of the financial grants, awards, or subsidy reimbursements associated with the QRIS, all of which are only available to licensed programs. Additional information about Delaware Stars can be found at http://www.delawarestars.udel.edu/

Model 4: Unified QRIS framework inclusive of pre-K
State Example: Ohio Step Up to Quality

In 2012, Ohio launched a revision of its QRIS, Step Up To Quality (SUTQ), to develop a new single framework for quality that applies to all early learning and development programs, including Ohio's pre-K program, preschool special education, and child care in centers and in homes. Legislation passed in 2012 that requires all publicly funded ECE programs to participate in SUTQ as a condition of funding, with a phase-in approach starting with state pre-K and then including subsidized child care programs. A cross-agency team that included staff from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) and external stakeholders led the process. ODE and ODJFS leadership maintain frequent ongoing communications to sustain the unified approach. With STUQ, there is a one set of program standards for all participating programs. The ODE and ODJFS have developed resources to help participating programs meet and then maintain standards, including guidance that describes best practices; professional development offered by ODE, ODJFS and their affiliated State Support Teams and Child Care Resource and Referral Organizations; and T.E.A.C.H. early childhood scholarships for staff working at star-rated programs and those working on becoming rated. Staff from both agencies developed the monitoring process and now ODE and ODJFS cross-train staff members to conduct SUTQ reviews and verify the star rating attained by a program. Additional information about Step Up to Quality can be found at http://www.earlychildhoodohio.org/sutq.stm

Model 4: Unified QRIS framework inclusive of pre-K

Description: States with a unified QRIS incorporate the state's pre-K program structures within a common framework. Within this model, we found states that encourage participation and others in which pre-K programs are required to participate in the QRIS as a condition for receiving public funding. Although some states only require participation for pre-K programs in community-based settings, most require participation of pre-K programs in school-based sites as well. Presumably, when pre-K programs are required to participate, there is a high degree of synchronicity among the key structural dimensions. With this model, there is either one set of quality standards for programs and practitioners or the QRIS makes some distinctions across settings to accommodate differences between community-based and public-school based sites. The QRIS supports and financial assistance offered may be similar across settings and grounded in the results of the QRIS-rating assessment process. It is unclear, however, the extent to which the monitoring, financing, and family outreach and engagement efforts are fully shared and unified in these models.

Strengths:

- There is one common quality improvement framework to which all programs can adhere.

- There is transparency and understanding about the range of programs available in a community.

- When participation is mandatory, many agencies involved in the design and administration of ECE services collaborate to ensure the approach works for all types of ECE programs.

- There are opportunities to make the QRIS of strong mutual benefit to both pre-K and child care.

Challenges:

- Significant investments are needed to ensure the QRIS is robust and also to ensure programs are positioned to succeed in meeting the state's QRIS standards.

- There may be some differences in the standards, monitoring procedures, and deployment of quality-improvement supports based on the different infrastructure undergirding each type of ECE program.

- Ongoing communication is required for policymakers working across sectors within the state and between the state- and local-level stakeholders.

V. Discussion

Our young children and their families benefit from a robust ECE system in which each component of the system is successful and integrated into the whole. A cross-sector QRIS that fully includes pre-K and child care can provide children and families with access to high-quality ECE choices and opportunities to maintain continuity of care. Our review indicates that there is important work going on around the country to try and turn this vision into a reality. Below, we identify a few ideas to support progress for those seeking to better integrate QRIS and pre-K:

Ensure states have a robust governance and advisory system that includes representatives from the agencies administering QRIS and pre-K who actively address the integration of the pre-K and QRIS initiatives to be mutually beneficial, with the goal of strengthening the state's ECE system.

Discussion Questions:

- Does governance include representatives with the authority to make decisions about QRIS and pre-K policy and implementation working together to design and implement a cross-sector QRIS?

- Are teacher and leader representatives from both child care and pre-K programs at the table in the advisory structure?

- Is the governance structure responsive and adaptable in order to make adjustments when there are changes to child care or pre-K, or other pertinent early learning early policies? Are advisors with both child care and pre-K expertise and experienced tapped to inform necessary changes?

- Do both the governance and advisory structures actively consider equity in program and policy work?

Ensure funding for each component of the QRIS and pre-K is sufficient to provide children with access to high quality. Review and modify, as needed, allocations for rating and accountability, quality improvement, and program level financing to ensure that these investments are at a level to support the QRIS and pre-K goals.

Discussion Questions:

- What funding mechanisms are used for pre-K and child care direct services, monitoring and quality assurance, and quality improvement supports? How are these linked together through the QRIS?

- Do QRIS and pre-K funding levels for program services, quality improvement, and rating/accountability match the expectations laid out in the quality standards for programs and practitioners, including educator compensation?

- How is funding for QRIS and pre-K leveraged? Is funding looked at from an equity perspective to ensure that the children and families who can benefit most have access to high-quality ECE from birth through age eight?

Use consistent quality standards for programs and practitioners in both QRIS and pre-K. Program standards may be reviewed to ensure they are focused on developmentally, culturally, and individually responsive teaching that is likely to result in significant improvements in children's learning.

Discussion Questions:

- To what extent are existing standards for program and practitioners aligned? What steps are needed to use the same standards for QRIS and pre-K?

- Is there a process to ensure that educators, leaders, and policymakers can support a unified framework with the same quality standards in the QRIS that encompass the pre-K standards?

- Are there mechanisms in place to ensure the quality standards reflect research and continue to serve as meaningful indicators of program and practitioner quality?

Review the QRIS and pre-K supports for programs and practitioners that help them meet high program-quality standards. Typically, supports are differentiated between the QRIS and pre-K. Determine whether a supports-integration strategy would be more efficient and equitable, regardless of program type (i.e. child care vs. pre-K) for the QRIS-pre-K model being developed.

Discussion Questions:

- To what extent are existing QRIS and pre-K helping programs reach and sustain high quality?

- Are supports equitably distributed?

- Are there mechanisms in place to ensure the supports reflect best practices and continue to support program and practitioner quality?

Examine QRIS and pre-K program monitoring to determine the most effective strategies that ease the burden on programs and ensure all ECE programs are held to similar high standards.

Discussion Questions:

- Are the monitoring requirements and procedures for QRIS and pre-K mutually agreed to by all parties? ?

- Are the monitoring and follow-up procedures conducted consistently for QRIS and pre-K?

- What are the pros and cons of integrating monitoring for QRIS and pre-K? Are action steps needed and planned to improve the current situation?

Evaluate different QRIS-pre-K models to better understand the implications of each approach to integrating QRIS and pre-K with regard to the well-being of children, families, early childhood educators, and communities as well as to the viability of the broader ECE system.

Discussion Questions:

- Are resources dedicated to evaluate the implementation of the cross-sector QRIS framework's inclusion of pre-K?

- Are there mechanisms to review administrative data to ensure the system is reliable across settings?

- Is there a broad range of stakeholders invited to participate and learn from evaluation findings?

As state policymakers across the country engage in revisions to their QRIS, we urge stakeholders to carefully examine existing initiatives and pursue an integrated approach to developing, refining, and implementing QRIS so they are meaningful cross-sector frameworks. As pre-K initiatives expand, we argue that they will be more effective when they are connected to states' QRIS. Furthermore, when QRIS stakeholders take steps to ensure the integration of pre-K is mutually beneficial and supportive of high-quality ECE across settings, the QRIS will be robust and can incorporate quality frameworks that the whole ECE system can uphold. A strong state role is needed to leverage resources and maximize the delivery of high-quality and accessible ECE programs. By building the components of the system with strong connections, we can move closer to the goal of ensuring that young children and their families have equitable access to high-quality early care and education.

(Endnotes)

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