

Table 9. Assessment of the QRIS Website

Survey item	% Agree / Strongly Agree	n
The QRIS website is user friendly.	100%	31
The QRIS website has useful information about the QRIS process.	93.6%	31
Overall the QRIS website is a useful tool.	93.6%	31

Only one respondent commented about the website, indicating that they have looked but cannot find on the website how to apply to begin the QRIS process.

FOCUS GROUP WITH COACHES

Two focus groups were conducted with the coaches in the last month of the project year in order to solicit feedback to identify areas in the process that are working well and those that may need improvement. Interview questions were based on information provided from previous project years. The focus groups were conducted by region (north and south) with nine coaches total providing feedback. The overarching themes are presented in the sections below.

Interactions with Center Directors and Center Staff - Most coaches reported visiting each of their sites two to three times per month. Each visit lasted approximately three to four hours per visit, which is consistent with previous years. The center based coaches use a standard timeline when working with centers while assessing their progress toward benchmarks. The coaches indicated that once the centers enter the maintenance period, they begin to receive monthly visits which the coaches report as being crucial for the centers' continual progression. The coach that is working with the Nevada Ready Pre-K sites, indicated meeting with the sites every other week for four to six hours. However this coaching model was different because these sites had a restricted time frame to receive coaching so the coaching was more intensive over a shorter period of time. Currently, the coaching model and standard benchmarks for the Nevada Ready Pre-K sites, which include school district Pre-K sites, are being developed and should be implemented in the fall of 2016.

When providing centers with suggestions for improvement, coaches reported that some centers are more receptive to feedback than others. In general, after rapport with the center staff is built, staff become more receptive to feedback. The coaches also reported that buy-in to the program generally varies from person to person, however at some centers coaches find that all individuals are on board with the program. It was also noted that many sites, specifically ones that have been on the waiting list to enter the program, are very excited once coaching begins.

Coaches reported that upon entering the program, some center staff are afraid of the increased time commitment to already stretched schedules, as well as fear that the coaches are coming in to change their centers completely. The coach that worked with the pilot district Pre-K sites reported that the teachers were also concerned about coaching causing an increased workload, but as the program progressed the coach stated that she was able to reinforce the importance of the program by relating it to the learning experiences of the child.

Quality Improvement Planning (QIP) - Once a center begins to work with a coach, the coach is tasked with developing a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). Coaches review the results from the Pre-ERS with

the center directors and help them determine areas in which improvements can be made. This information helps the coaches create the Quality Improvement Plan with a center. Similarly to last year, coaches indicated that the process for creating the QIP is time consuming and the format is difficult. One coach felt that while the information is good for the centers, the amount of time dedicated towards creating the QIP outweighs its utility. Coaches indicated that there have not been any improvements to the process from the previous year, however some coaching staff have begun looking into a different program to create the QIP to recommend for standard use across the program. When asked why they think the current program continues to be used despite its challenges, the coaches were unsure. One coach stated, "We can't get any data from it, [there are] no reports we can run from it. I don't know why we use it."

Environment Rating Score (ERS) – The coaches reported that the feedback they provide to the centers regarding their Environment Rating Scores (ERS) tend to be "eye-opening" to the center directors. The coaches indicated that upon presenting the ERS results to the centers, the directors tended to feel that the process would be too time consuming. Other directors were hesitant to make changes because they felt the feedback was too harsh. This was especially true if rapport was not built with the director prior to giving them the feedback. In order to mitigate this, coaches have begun to describe the process time line in detailed order before sharing the ERS results with the directors. One coach indicated that sensitivity in delivering the results is key, even during maintenance periods, to prevent staff and directors from taking feedback personally and to continue to build relationships.

E-Portfolio - Coaches indicated that directors waiting until the last minute to complete the binder/e-portfolio is the biggest barrier when assisting directors in the collection of documentation. The coaches reported that the process of putting the binder/e-portfolio together is helpful for the directors, but that some centers wait until the last minute to begin because they are unsure how to do it. The coaches are working to finalize a tool they created to help the center directors collect and organize the documentation needed for the binder/e-portfolio. The coaches indicated that early versions of the tool have been very helpful.

Overall Program Improvements- At the end of the focus groups, the coaches were asked if they had any recommendations to improve the program. One coach suggested that centers should not undergo the ERS pre-assessment until they have completed the introduction and the meet and greet. This coach indicated that sticking to the timeline sets the stage for future success with the centers and that allowing steps to be completed out of order can create future challenges.

Additionally, coaches reported that in-depth meetings with assessors and the coaching team have been beneficial and should continue. During these meetings they review the ERS subscales and indicators which helps the coaches in speaking to the centers about their scores and recommendations for improvement.

Lastly, coaches indicated that there is a cost barrier to centers receiving higher rating scores, specifically regarding staffing. The coaches recommended that some grant money be available to use for training and professional development, allowing for funds to support staff coverage if there is a training or professional development opportunity occurring during the day. The coaches reported that this is most crucial during the maintenance period, indicating that it would be beneficial for staff to have the opportunity to attend trainings outside of the QRIS.

INTERVIEWS WITH FAMILY CHILD CARE OWNERS

During this project year, NICRP conducted telephone interviews with three of the seven owners that participated in the Family Child Care QRIS Pilot. These interviews assessed the experiences of the owners with different elements of the QRIS pilot process to determine what, if any, recommendations for improvement could be made. Specifically, the owners were asked to comment on the Introduction session, environment ratings, coaching, grant funds, large scale implementation of the program, and their star ratings. What follows is a brief summary of the interview findings. A full report of the findings was provided in the Year 7 Quarter 2 Evaluation Progress Report and some changes to the Family Child Care QRIS process have been implemented since that time to address concerns voiced by the owners.

Overall, the owners that were interviewed indicated that the QRIS was not specific enough for family child care providers. They reported that the assessment used did not take into account that homes are designed differently than centers and that assessing them by the same standards is not appropriate. In addition, the owners stated sensitivity to the way feedback is being delivered is necessary to keep family child care providers engaged in the program. One owner stated that coordinators and coaches who are empathetic to the emotional attachment that family child care providers have to their home environments would help ease frustrations of participants.

When discussing the environment rating process, the owners mentioned that the policy that the assessors not interact with the children in care might need to be reconsidered with regard to family child care programs. They pointed out that, as compared to a child care center, there are very few strangers that visit the home based programs and that the assessors and coaches that work at the home based programs should be introduced to the children to make the children feel more comfortable.

With regard to challenges, the owners cited poor communication by the QRIS program coordinator throughout the pilot as a challenge to participation. One owner indicated that the expectations of participating in the pilot were not well explained during the Introduction which contributed to an overall sense of “confusion and frustration” by participants.

Finally, although all of the centers of the owners that were interviewed received high star ratings, the owners questioned whether the assessment and the star rating truly represent their degree of quality. One owner indicated that parents will perceive the star rating in the same way hotels are rated, with one or two being of relatively low quality as compared to a three or four star hotel, even though the rating system does not mirror this. She stated, “Two stars is actually not bad, but it sounds bad. So it’s going to look like we don’t have quality when we do.”

INTRODUCTION FEEDBACK

During this project year, NICRP staff attended an Introduction session for centers interested in participating in QRIS in order to provide feedback to QRIS staff for improvement. NICRP identified four areas in which improvements could be made to the Introduction session. These areas include the Introduction materials provided to the participants, the explanation of how stars indicate quality, the time devoted to teaching participants how to score the ERS, and handling participant feedback. Detailed recommendations for improvements in these areas were provided in the Year 7 Quarter 3 Evaluation Progress Report and are provided below.

On March 24, 2016, NICRP staff attended an Introduction session for centers interested in participating in QRIS in order to provide feedback to QRIS staff for improvement. The presenter was extremely engaging and quickly established excellent rapport with the attendees. Below are some suggested improvements in four areas that could be made to help clarify information for the center staff in attendance. These slight revisions to the Introduction might improve center staff understanding of the program.

Materials

Upon arrival for the Introduction, NICRP staff reviewed the folder of handouts provided to those in attendance. It was immediately apparent that some of the handouts overlapped in content but did not provide consistent information. For example, more than one handout poses the question, "What is QRIS?" but the answers, although not incorrect, are inconsistent. It is recommended that a set of handouts be created solely for the Introduction as opposed to using handouts designed for other purposes. This will decrease confusion among those attending the training as well as the number of pieces of paper that the attendees need to sort through. If, after paring down the number of handouts, there are more than ten, it is recommended that the handouts be grouped together in terms of relevance or topic area using paper clips. In this case it might also be helpful to have a list of materials provided that clearly explains the intended use of the materials. For example, if there is a flyer that is intended for distribution to parents, this flyer should be labeled so center staff understand and remember the intended use of the materials. While each of the materials is explained in the Introduction, given the quantity of handouts it is still hard to keep the information organized to reference at a later date. Making this process more organized may help center staff feel less overwhelmed by the information. In addition, all of the materials should be reviewed for content, grammar, and spelling.

Explaining How Stars Indicate Quality

The brief discussion early on during the training about expectations of five star restaurants seemed to provide good perspective regarding the QRIS rating system. Pointing out that most individuals do not regularly eat at five star restaurants but instead often opt for places like Applebee's or Carl's Jr., helped the attendees understand that not all child care centers are five star centers and that a two star center can meet the needs of many families.

This example should be brought up again during, or at the end of the training to help reinforce the meaning of the star levels. It is also recommended that all QRIS program staff become familiar with this example to help them provide perspective to center directors when discussing the rating scale. The comparison of QRIS star ratings to hotel star ratings is often made but this example took it further which really remind attendees of the luxury and quality associated with a five star rating.

During this discussion, center staff brought up their concern about having a one star rating until they went through the program. Although it was explained that a one star indicates participation only, centers are concerned about how this is perceived by the public. Also, it appears that centers, after going through the process, can achieve a one star rating. It is recommended that this process be re-examined as it is a barrier that the QRIS program has the ability to address. NICRP staff will review the processes used by other systems and provide more specific recommendations regarding this next quarter.

Environment Rating Scores

It is recommended that a separate training on the environment ratings be offered to those center directors considering participating in QRIS or for those that enroll in QRIS. The portion of the training that illustrated how a somewhat minor change to the center environment could dramatically improve a center's environment rating score was invaluable. However, there was too much time spent on reviewing and scoring the sample items. It would be preferable to present only one item to the group, briefly explain the scoring, and then provide an example of how a low score could be improved with a minor change. If less time was spent on the ERS, more time could be spent on the QRIS process. It might be helpful to go back after the explanation of the ERS and review the entirety of how a center is rated and maybe give an example of a fully rated program so attendees could see how the final score is made up of the different criteria.

Handling Feedback

During the training, center staff had many questions about the benefits of joining QRIS besides the eligibility for certain scholarships, programs, and services that are now restricted to QRIS enrolled centers. These questions are valid however, during the training, a lot of time was spent trying to combat some of those issues which seemed to ignite more discussion. It is recommended that a basic response, such as, "the intent of participation in QRIS is to improve the quality of care available in our community and to provide parents with a system to allow them to identify levels of quality of care," be provided and then the conversation could move forward. It is also recommended that the presenter acknowledge that feedback on the system is welcome, record that feedback, let those that provided the feedback know that it will be passed along to the program evaluators, and then provide the feedback to the evaluators. This will help to validate center staff concerns and potentially help improve the system. It will also improve the Introduction by allowing the presenter to cover all of the planned material.

OUTCOME EVALUATION STUDY

The purpose of the outcome evaluation study is to determine if children who attend centers with higher quality ratings score better on outcome measures as compared to children who attend centers with lower quality ratings. For purposes of the outcome evaluation study, based on the rating scale itself and the distribution of star ratings among centers, "higher quality rating" centers include those centers with a star rating of 4 or 5 and "lower quality rating" centers include centers with a 2 star rating. The outcome measures on which children are being compared include measures of receptive vocabulary and verbal ability, pre-verbal skills, pre-math skills, and social-emotional development. NICRP has assessed all of the children needed for the lower quality rated centers (n = 50). However, only 35 children that attend higher quality rated centers have been assessed.

In reaching out to centers to discuss their potential participation in the study, NICRP has found that the current dosage requirement has limited the pool of centers that are eligible to participate because many only offer services to children 10-12 hours per week. To be included in the study, a child must have attended a center part-time for the past year or full-time for the past six months. Therefore, during the third quarter of this project year, NICRP proposed conducting assessments with 25 children that have attended high rated centers (four or five stars) less than 20 hours a week for at least a year to determine if they differ from the assessments of children that attended high rated centers more than 20 hours per week. If there are no differences between the two groups,

this would suggest that dosage is not a factor in child outcomes and that the assessments of the children that attend less than 20 hours per week could be included in the overall outcome evaluation. This would increase the number of children eligible to participate in the study which would assist NICRP in meeting the goal of enrolling 50 children into the outcome evaluation.

To date, NICRP has assessed 9 children that have attended higher quality rated centers less than 20 hours a week for at least a year. Therefore, assessments need to be completed for 16 more children to determine whether or not there are outcome differences between children that attend high quality rated centers less than 20 hours a week and those that attend 20 hours a week or more.

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

SUMMARY

The current report reviewed different evaluation components of the fourth year of full implementation of the Silver State Stars Quality Rating Improvement System. This project year, NICRP evaluated the system through a data tracking system, a post-introduction survey, focus groups with the coaches, a parent survey, and continued the outcome evaluation.

Data tracking system - Based on the data tracking system, the QRIS has continued to grow over the past year. More centers are volunteering to participate in the process, there is a growing wait list for coaching, and 57 centers received their official star rating.

Post-introduction survey - Thirty seven individuals from 25 different child care providers completed the post-introduction survey. Twenty-eight individuals provided information about their experience in the introduction session over the past year. Similar to last year's results, results of the post-introduction survey indicate that the majority of the attendees agree that the introductions are well organized and that those conducting the introductions are knowledgeable about QRIS and ERS, the session is effective in explaining these processes, and it helps attendees determine if their centers are ready to go through the process.

Of those that responded to the post-introduction survey, 28 had applied for coaching, 3 had not applied but were planning to apply, 12 received coaching, and 11 provided feedback on the coaching process. According to their responses, the coaching process is being rated very favorably. The majority of respondents agree that the coaches explained the assessments clearly, are easy to communicate with, answer their questions and are available to them. A few individuals provided additional comments which were all positive.

Only 6 centers were able to comment on the star rating application process and 4 on the assessment process. Almost all feedback was positive. With regard to the rating application, half of the centers did not feel that the application process in particular was a valuable exercise for the center. With regards to the assessment, only one individual reported that the ERS assessment was not scheduled at a convenient time and that their center did not feel prepared for the process. All other marks were positive.

With regard to QRIS in general, the majority of those that completed the survey agree that QRIS is necessary, useful for centers, and that it will improve the quality of child care in Nevada. While the majority agree that it is useful for parents, this response was not as strong as the other areas where QRIS is seen as useful. However, there is still some concern that the QRIS does not account for varying educational philosophies (e.g. Montessori model) and some feel that not all of the criteria are good indicators of quality, such as the education level of the director.

Results regarding the QRIS website continue to be very favorable with the majority of individuals reporting the website is useful and user friendly.

Focus group with coaches - The results of the focus group with the coaches indicate that the coaching process is going well from all of the coaches' perspective. Similar to last year, most of the center directors and staff are excited about and receptive to recommendations to improve their centers. Similar to the comments received last year, the quality improvement plan continues to feel

burdensome to coaches and this outweighs its usefulness. It is suggested that this process be reviewed to ensure that the limited amount of time that the coaches have to spend with each center is being spent most effectively.

Interviews with Family Child Care Owners - Since this was the first year that family care centers participated in the QRIS as pilot sites, telephone interviews were conducted with the owners. These interviews assessed the experiences of the owners with different elements of the QRIS pilot process to determine what, if any, recommendations for improvement could be made. Overall, the owners that were interviewed indicated that the QRIS was not specific enough for family child care providers. In addition, the owners stated sensitivity to the way feedback is being delivered is necessary to keep family child care providers engaged in the program. When discussing the environment rating process, the owners mentioned that the policy that the assessors not interact with the children in care might need to be reconsidered with regard to family child care programs. Finally, although all of the centers of the owners that were interviewed received high star ratings, the owners questioned whether the assessment and the star rating truly represent their degree of quality.

Outcome evaluation survey - The purpose of the outcome evaluation study is to determine if children who attend centers with higher quality ratings score better on outcome measures as compared to children who attend centers with lower quality ratings. The outcome measures on which children are being compared include measures of receptive vocabulary and verbal ability, pre-verbal skills, pre-math skills, and social-emotional development. After a child care center has had a 2, 4 or 5 star rating for six months, NICRP contacts the center director, explains the outcome evaluation study to them, and invites them to participate. To date, NICRP has assessed all of the children needed for the lower quality rated centers (n = 50) and those children have scored average on all of the assessments.

NICRP has assessed 34 children from the higher quality rated centers. Assessments of 50 children from higher quality rated are needed to complete the analyses for the outcome evaluation study. Therefore, no comparisons between the two groups can be made at this time. Many of the higher rated centers do not offer full time care which is limiting the number of children qualified for the study. Since there are so many part time programs, NICRP has added a component of the evaluation to test 25 children attending part time programs to determine if there are any outcome differences based on full time or part time participation. If no differences are found, then the children from part time programs can be added to the 4-5 star grouping for the overall analysis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the QRIS program continues to grow, NICRP has a few recommendations for program restructuring and future research for consideration by QRIS leadership.

Review Variables to Determine Program Effectiveness

For the past two years, a new data tracking system has been in development and full implementation of that system is expected in Year 8. This would be an ideal time to review the data discussed in the annual evaluation report to ensure that the variables included are being used to make decisions about program effectiveness. This will determine if certain variables or information need to continue to be included in the evaluation report. It will also help determine if additional information should be monitored and included in the report. It is recommended that a meeting be held with key staff and stakeholders to review the information being collected and reported and

discuss what information about the program will be most valuable going forward in order to make program improvements.

Re-evaluate Center Designation of QRIS Participation

Currently, when a center enrolls in QRIS, it is assigned a one star rating to indicate that it is participating in the program. However, a one star rating can be easily misinterpreted, not as an indicator of participation but as an indicator of lower quality. Some center directors feel that this can impact their credibility with the families and community that they serve. During the introduction session, it is clearly explained that this is not the intent, but providers are not convinced that this explanation is being conveyed to or understood by parents. To further complicate matters, within the past year, one center that completed the rating process was assigned a one star rating. Therefore, a one star rating has more than one meaning: a QRIS participating center and a center of lower quality. Program leadership should consider revising this aspect of the star rating system so that centers completing QRIS and assigned a one star rating are more clearly differentiated from those participating in QRIS and not yet rated

To assist in better understanding alternatives to this system, NICRP surveyed other QRIS programs to determine their process for indicating that a center is participating but not yet rated. Information was acquired directly from 13 QRIS programs that have been implemented around the country. The majority of the programs (10) do not assign any star rating until the process has been complete. Some of the programs do not have a designation for centers during this period, but many just indicate that the center is “Participating but Not Yet Rated.” Michigan assigns a star rating to every licensed center regardless of participation, which are called “Empty Stars.” This is unique in that it is outside of the actual star rating system which indicates that they are licensed but not participating. A center will have an Empty Star publicly displayed until they have submitted some required materials, at which time the center will display as “Rating in Progress” until their rating process is complete. In another state, their centers go through a review of several indicators above licensing at entry into the program and are assigned a temporary star rating. Once the center receives coaching, it can be re-assessed and have the rating updated.

It is suggested that a discussion be held to determine if it would be beneficial to make changes to this aspect of the QRIS in Nevada in order to encourage more participation and more accurately reflect the quality of the programs.

Re-evaluate Evaluation/Research Question and Activities

For the past three years, similar evaluation methods have been used to track the progress of the QRIS in Nevada. Many of the results, such as the provider feedback and coach feedback, have remained fairly consistent. It is recommended that the evaluation questions surrounding the program’s implementation and effectiveness be revised and updated as appropriate in order to provide more substantial and meaningful feedback that can be used to make program improvements.

Through participation in a learning table led by Kathryn Tout from Child Trends with key QRIS stakeholders, as well as through attendance at the recent BUILD conference, several research questions emerged that warrant consideration for the evaluation during the next project year and beyond.

- 1) Effectiveness of the Coaching Model
 - a. Reviewing Initial 18 Month Coaching Period - Currently 18 months of coaching is provided to all centers who enroll in QRIS. While centers do not have to utilize all 18

months of coaching and can submit a rating application at any time, almost all centers (with the exception of 3) that signed up for coaching have elected to receive all 18 months of coaching. Given that there is a growing wait list, this aspect of the model should be re-evaluated to determine if 18 months of coaching is needed for every center.

Currently used assessments or indicators could help guide the number of coaching hours and/or length of the coaching period for each center. For example, since all centers receive an ECERs/ITERS assessment, it is possible that the results of those assessments could indicate length of time or number of coaching hours provided to a center. Additionally, it is possible to have all centers actually move through the entire rating process and receive a temporary star rating, which may or may not be public. This star rating could determine the number of hours and/or length of coaching. Benefits to the center for going through the entire rating process prior to coaching could be the choice to publish the temporary rating and re-assessment of the star level after the allotted coaching time has been completed.

- b. Coaching Intensity and Coaching Model - While assessing the process above, other aspects of coaching could be explored such as the effectiveness of the number of hours of coaching and how those hours are allocated (e.g. intensive coaching over a short time period versus less intensive coaching over a longer period). Finally, the actual coaching model, how the coaches interact with directors and staff as well as how they determine the material to concentrate on, could be assessed for effectiveness by reviewing areas of concentration and improvements the center makes on outcome measures (meeting indicators and/or ECERs/ITERS assessment areas).
- 2) Effectiveness of the QRIS Model
- a. Validation Study - Currently a validation study of the current model has not been conducted. In the near future, implementing a validation study could help instill confidence in staff and providers that the criterion established at each star level are actual indications of quality and there is a true difference between star levels. One method of validation that could be used in Nevada would be to implement a rating tool, such as the CLASS, which is not currently used to assign star ratings, and determine if there is a connection between the star ratings and CLASS scores. This could be implemented in a sample of the centers as long as enough centers from each star level participated. Other validation ideas can be explored.
 - b. Examination of Indicators of Quality - It is recommended that the different indicators of quality, such as director qualifications, classroom ratios, rating scores, and the area specific indicators, be systematically examined to ensure that they all contribute to differentiating the star levels. For example, some centers are not able to progress to higher star ratings because of the education of the center director. An exploration can be done to ensure that this is a true determination of quality by examining the other criteria met by the centers and other measures of quality (ECREs/ITERS, child outcomes, etc.) to determine if those also align. In addition, a comparison can be done of staff perceptions of the abilities of center directors and their contributions based on center director education. This exploration would give detail on what qualities the director has that may or may not be influenced by formal education in a specific area.

The evaluation/research questions presented above are suggestions for the beginnings of a conversation of how to determine the most effective and efficient way to expand the QRIS without compromising the quality of the QRIS program itself especially given the upcoming government mandates through the CCDBG. NICRP recommends convening a larger stakeholder group to discuss these ideas and determine a list of priorities that will work best for the state.

NEXT STEPS

During the next year of QRIS implementation, NICRP recommends that the Office of Early Learning and Development hold a meeting at the beginning of the year to discuss this report and to discuss possible changes to the process and to the evaluation. It is also suggested that until the Department is confident that the new Branagh system is functional and can provide the necessary reporting data, that inputting data in the current excel tracker continue. As the evaluation of this project evolves, it is also suggested that parent perceptions of the QRIS be assessed. With the exception of the family care center pilot parent survey administered in Year 6, information from parents has not been collected since the original center pilot project. Feedback from parents with children that attend QRIS rated centers could guide how information regarding QRIS is communicated to parents and the larger community. Finally, the outcome evaluation will continue through the next project year until all 100 assessments have been completed.