
Silver State Stars: Quality Rating Improvement System Project

Year Four Final Evaluation Report
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About the Nevada Institute for Children's Research and Policy

The Nevada Institute for Children's Research and Policy (NICRP) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan organization whose primary goal is to advance the well-being of children in Nevada. As a research center in the School of Community Health Sciences at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, NICRP is dedicated to conducting academic and community-based research that helps guide the development of policies, practices, and programs which serve to enhance the health and well-being of children and their families. For more information about NICRP, please contact us or visit our website at <http://nic.unlv.edu>.

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Introduction and Background

Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) are being developed across the country to improve the quality of early childhood education centers. These systems have been developed to provide a more objective way to assess quality in a center providing childcare. Currently, there are Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) in 26 states or local jurisdictions in the United States and the remaining 25 states are in the process of developing a QRIS. Each of these systems varies slightly in its requirements and protocols, but all have the goal of improving the quality of early childhood education. The pilot project in the state of Nevada, which started in 2010, is the first QRIS in Nevada and has been working to test and refine the program processes before moving to full implementation.

To begin the process of implementing a QRIS, experts in early childhood education in Nevada were assembled to form a QRIS Workgroup. This workgroup created the Silver State Stars QRIS, including the structure of the system (a 5-star rating system), the quality indicators used to create the star rating, and the process for technical assistance and grant funding for quality improvements in centers.

In the Spring of 2009, the QRIS Workgroup, along with the Nevada Office of Early Care and Education, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE), and the Nevada Institute for Children's Research and Policy (NICRP), implemented the Silver State Stars QRIS Pilot Project. This pilot project was designed to implement the program in 24 child care centers, over the two year period from 2009 to 2011, to evaluate the utility of the star rating system and processes designed to improve center quality. After working with the first 2 years of centers, changes were made to the program and improvements made to the associated processes and an additional six centers were chosen to pilot the revised program from July 2011 to June 2012.

In July 2012, the Division of Welfare and Supportive Services, Office of Early Care and Education officially launched the Silver State Stars QRIS in Southern Nevada. This new quality initiative is open to licensed child care centers in Southern Nevada. When the initiative started, it was determined that all licensed centers would automatically be considered a one star center. For a center to attempt to increase their star rating, they must complete the Silver State Stars QRIS process.

Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) Process

The following will describe the process a center must go through in order to apply and receive a star rating from the Office of Early Care and Education. First, a center director and/or owner must attend a four hour orientation that provides an overview about QRIS and the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS). Orientation dates and locations are provided on the Nevada Registry website.

After the orientation, a center may do one of three things: 1) apply for coaching to obtain assistance in preparation for the application process, 2) prepare and submit a binder to begin the rating process (express track), or 3) decide that they do not

want to participate in QRIS. Centers that are not interested in submitting an application or applying for coaching after the orientation can always do so at a later date.

Coaching - If a center feels that they need assistance to make improvements to their center prior to submitting an application, the center can apply for a coach through the Children's Cabinet. The program center director or owner completes a Coaching Request Form and then a coach is assigned to the center. Before coaching begins, an Environment Rating Scale assessment is conducted in order to inform the coach and the center of areas that need improvement. Once the assessment is complete, the center director or owner signs a Memorandum of Understanding and coaching begins. The coach and the center director or owner develop a Quality Improvement Plan based on the assessment results and determine materials or trainings that the center needs in order to improve their quality. Coaching is available for a maximum of 18 months. Coaches develop specific benchmarks that centers need to meet in order to remain in the coaching program, and these benchmarks are reviewed every six months. During the last three months of coaching, centers are able to apply for a Program Improvement Grant in order to purchase materials that will enhance their classrooms and improve the quality of their center. If the coaches determine that no materials are needed, a center may be able to request funding for training with the purpose of helping them improve the quality of their center.

Application for a Star Rating - Once a center feels they are ready to apply for a star rating, the center director or owner completes and submits an application binder to the Office of Early Care and Education. Once the binder is received, a QRIS rater contacts the center to schedule an Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) assessment. After the binder is reviewed by the Office of Early Care and Education, staff informs the center if the binder is missing pieces or does not meet certain criteria. At this point the center has two weeks to respond with any changes. Once this is complete and the formal ERS assessment has been done, the center is assigned a star rating that is valid for two years. The center is notified by mail of their official star rating. If a center is unhappy with their star rating, they may reapply, however, if they choose to do so prior to the two year period, the center must pay for the ERS assessment process.

Evaluation Description

Data Tracking System- During the first quarter of Year 4, NICRP created an Excel tracking spreadsheet to allow program staff to monitor center progression through the QRIS process. This spreadsheet tracks which centers have completed particular steps in the process and allows a quick count of the number of centers that have completed particular steps or how many are in a particular phase of the process. The tracking spreadsheet has been through several revisions to be sure that it is tracking information most relevant to program staff. These spreadsheets were scheduled to be submitted on a monthly basis to NICRP so that program progress could be reviewed.

Post-Orientation Survey- During the last two weeks of the project year, NICRP sent an electronic survey to those that attended a QRIS orientation this project year. The

survey assessed attitudes toward the orientation and QRIS in general. Additionally, those who work at centers that had begun the QRIS rating process (as indicated by their survey responses) were also asked to rate their experiences with the different steps of the process. Specifically, questions were included to assess participants' experience with coaching, the application binder, the formal ERS assessment process, and the star rating system. Participants were only asked to rate the steps of the process with which they had experience.

Focus Group with Coaches- At the end of the project year, NICRP conducted a focus group with the coaches that worked with centers over the course of the project year. The purpose of this focus group was to solicit suggestions for improvement and continued success of the program.

Findings

Data Tracking System

To date, NICRP has received 8 completed tracking spreadsheets. Program progress to date can be seen in the table below:

Progress Summary to Date	
QRIS PROGRAM	
Number of Orientations Held	12
Number of Centers Attending	81
% Centers Requesting Coaching	48.1%
Number of Pre-ERS Conducted	22
% of Attendees that Signed an MOU	23.5%
Number of Centers Currently Enrolled in QRIS*	18
Number of Centers Applied for Funding	0
QRIS STAR RATING SYSTEM	
# of Binders Submitted	1
Number of Formal ERS assessments conducted	1
# of Centers Rated	1

**Centers are considered "currently enrolled" if they have a signed MOU and are still receiving coaching as indicated by the Excel tracker as of 5/31/13.*

During this project period, 11 of the 12 orientations were held in Las Vegas and one was held in Reno. A total of 39 centers (27 in Southern Nevada and 12 in Northern Nevada) applied for coaching and have been assigned a coach, and the Pre-Environmental Rating Assessment has been completed for 22 centers. A total of 19 centers have signed an MOU with their coach and have begun their Quality Improvement Plans. Of those 19, 11 centers have reached their first 6 month benchmark period and coaches indicated that all 11 centers had met their benchmarks and have continued their coaching. At this time, one center has

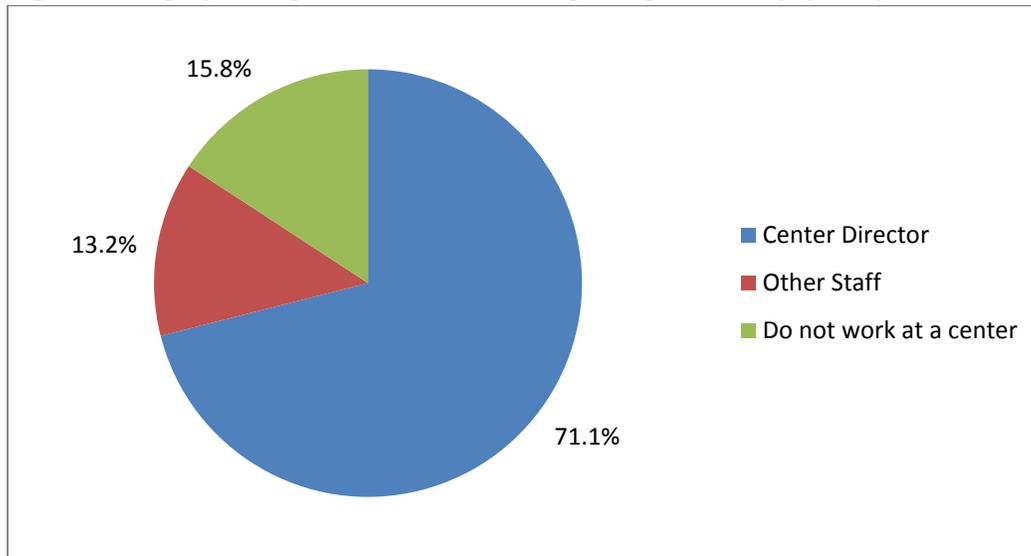
discontinued participation in QRIS program due to a change in their center director. With regards to funding, centers typically request funding in the last three months of their coaching experience and currently none of the centers have reached the point to apply for funding.

Post-Orientation Survey

Respondents - After receiving all of the Year 4 orientation sign in sheets from program staff, NICRP contacted the individual attendees by phone to request their email addresses. NICRP was able to collect email addresses for 89 of the 107 orientation attendees. On June 19, 2013, a link to the survey was emailed to the orientation attendees for whom NICRP had obtained an email address (n=89). On June 24, 2013, a reminder email was sent which also contained a link to the survey. Attendees were asked to complete the survey by June 26, 2013. Of the 89 orientation attendees who were emailed the survey, 38 responded to the survey by the deadline (42.7% response rate).

Individuals from 23 different child care centers completed the survey. Six respondents reported that they do not work at a child care center. The majority of the survey respondents self-identified as a Center Director. No teachers or teaching assistants completed the survey. Figure 1 illustrates the reported employment position of those completing the survey.

Figure 1. Employment positions of those completing the survey (n=38)



Attitudes Toward the Orientation - The majority of respondents had positive attitudes regarding the orientation. Table 1 indicates the percentage of respondents that either agreed or strongly agreed with each survey item related to the orientation.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with survey items assessing attitudes toward the orientation.

Survey item	Percentage that agree or strongly agree
The orientation was well organized.	100% (31/31)
Those conducting the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) portion of the orientation were knowledgeable about the topic.	97.0% (32/33)
Those conducting the QRIS portion of the orientation were knowledgeable about the topic.	93.9% (31/33)
The orientation clearly outlined the process a center would need to go through to obtain a star rating.	87.5% (28/32)
The orientation clearly outlined the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) process.	79.4% (27/34)
The orientation was helpful in determining whether or not my center was ready to proceed with the QRIS process.	71.0% (22/31)

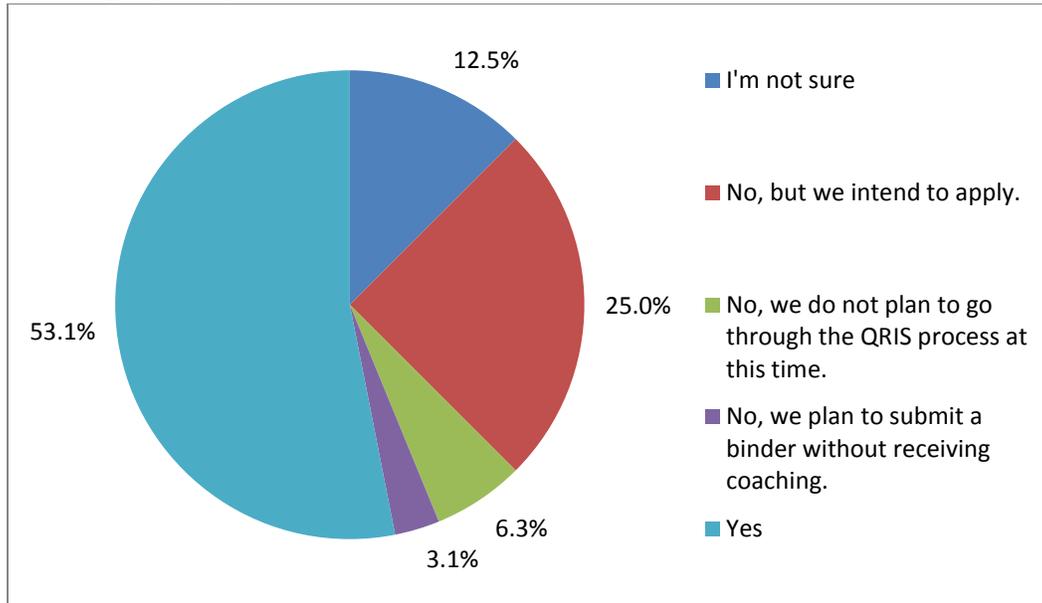
Comments about the orientation from those who rated the orientation as “Good” or “Very Good” expressed that the presenter “did a very good job of explaining the process” and that they were “a little confused at the beginning” but because of the orientation they have a better understanding of the process. One respondent indicated that they were “very excited about participating in the QRIS program!”

Comments from those who rated the orientation as “Average” indicated some confusion about what steps they needed to take next and felt that they needed a more hands on training to help them understand the changes and expectations. One respondent felt that the program is being presented as voluntary but does not feel that this is true because licensed centers automatically receive one star.

One respondent rated the orientation as “Poor” and expressed concern that centers are not prepared for the program and that it is going to cost too much. This respondent also stated some distrust of those that would be completing the assessments and worried that small centers would have difficulty earning a good rating.

Attitudes Toward Coaching – Figure 2 illustrates respondent answers to the question, “Has your center applied for coaching?” for those who indicated that they work for a child care center (n=32). Of the 32 respondents, 17 reported that their center had applied for coaching and 8 reported that they had received it.

Figure 2. Respondent answers to the question, “Has your center applied for coaching?” (n=32)



Only two of the 32 respondents reported that their center does not plan to go through the QRIS process at this time. One center reported that they were currently going through accreditation therefore, it was not a convenient time to complete the process. Another respondent indicated that they work at a small center and did not feel it was “advantageous” at this time to complete the process; they plan to wait until the process is mandatory.

The majority of respondents had positive attitudes toward the coaching process. Table 2 indicates the percentage of respondents that either agreed or strongly agreed with each survey item related to coaching. No respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the survey items related to coaching.

Table 2. Percentage of respondents who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with survey items assessing attitudes toward the coaching process.

Survey item	Percentage that agree or strongly agree
The QRIS coach adequately explained the assessment procedures to me.	87.5% (7/8)
The QRIS coach is/was available to answer my questions.	87.5% (7/8)
The QRIS coach adequately answers/answered all of my questions	87.5% (7/8)
Communicating with my QRIS coach is/was easy.	87.5% (7/8)
My QRIS coach wants/wanted me to succeed.	100% (8/8)
The coaching process is moving/ moved at a reasonable pace.	87.5% (7/8)

Those providing additional comments regarding the coaching process indicated that their coach was non-threatening, gave positive feedback on how to improve, and was knowledgeable. In addition, one respondent reported that their coach was very busy and that they could benefit from having more time with her but that she is not available.

Attitudes Toward the Binder Application Process - No respondents reported that their center had submitted an application binder or e-portfolio. Therefore, there are no findings to report with regard to this part of the process.

Attitudes Toward the ERS Assessment and Star Ratings - No respondents reported that their center had been assigned a QRIS rating. Therefore, there are no findings to report with regard to this part of the process.

Attitudes Toward QRIS in General - All respondents were asked about their attitudes toward QRIS in general regardless of what steps in the process they had experienced and whether or not they work in a child care center. Table 3 indicates the percentage of respondents that either agreed or strongly agreed with each survey item related to QRIS in general.

Table 3. Percentage of respondents who “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with survey items assessing attitudes toward QRIS in general.

Survey item	Percentage that agree or strongly agree
A Quality Rating Improvement System for child care centers is necessary.	83.3% (30/36)
The Quality Rating Improvement System is useful for Child Care Centers.	80.6% (29/36)
The Quality Rating Improvement System is useful for parents.	77.8% (28/36)
The Quality Rating Improvement System will improve the quality of child care in Southern Nevada.	74.3% (26/35)

The majority of respondents had positive attitudes toward QRIS. One respondent expressed gratitude for the coaching and funding and believes that the program will help improve their center. Conversely, one respondent indicated that the program requirements are too strict and do not fit every style of program.

Focus Group with Coaches

Three coaches from the Children’s Cabinet in Southern Nevada provided coaching for centers during this project year. A focus group was conducted with all three 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 group lasted approximately one hour and the interview was recorded for reference to ensure accuracy. The overarching themes are presented in the section below.

Interactions with Center Director and Center Staff - Coaches are visiting centers approximately once every other week. Coaches reported that they and the center directors felt comfortable with the frequency of visits and that the center directors did not feel that they needed more frequent visits. The coaches reported that they establish a timeline for coaching with center directors and that they are aware of the 6-month benchmarks that determine whether or not coaching will be continued. The coaches explained that they determine whether or not centers have met their benchmarks by examining the progress that has been made, the responsiveness of the director and the staff, whether or not the center is moving toward the goals identified in their Quality Improvement Plan.

When coaches make suggestions for improvement for the center to the director, the coaches reported that the directors are usually very excited to receive feedback and assistance in improving the quality of their center. With regards to the center staff, coaches reported that at times there is a bit of resistance from staff to move away from comfortable strategies and strategies staff believe to be effective, to strategies that reinforce quality and that are better for the classroom. However, coaches felt confident in their ability to adjust their approach when working with these staff to make the staff feel more confident that adjusting their strategies was beneficial. Coaches did mention that feedback is better received at centers where the director and the center staff have good relationships.

Quality Improvement Planning - Once a center begins to work with a coach, the coach is tasked with developing a Quality Improvement Plan for the center based on feedback received from the pre-environmental rating scale (Pre-ERS). 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 (QIP) with a center. When the coaches were asked how the directors responded to the presentation of the Pre-ERS results, coaches indicated that directors were usually surprised and sometimes embarrassed by their results and what happens in their classrooms. However, the coaches said that the directors are appreciative and happy that the coaches are there to help them make improvements to the center and that reviewing these results does not present conflict between the coach and the director or the coach and the center staff.

Coaches indicated that developing the QIP plan was one of the more challenging aspects of coaching. Depending on the quantity of improvements needed by the center, the Quality Improvement Plan can take a few months to review and develop prior to the start of coaching or training. The coaches did indicate that at times, they will begin to work from the plan before it is finalized in order to start making improvements given the 18-month coaching limit for each center. The coaches felt that the QIP could be overwhelming and time consuming, but also stated that they do not currently feel that there are any changes that could be made to streamline or simplify the process. Some of the coaches have researched other programs, but feel that the implementation is too specific to that state to translate to their work.

Maintaining Programmatic Changes - The coaches mentioned that learning new skills, or re-learning appropriate implementation of certain policies for the classroom, took some time for staff to exhibit in a consistent way. On average, staff

would need the information reviewed with them about three times before the changes were sustained. Coaches indicated that center staff often “do what works to get them through the day” and they have formed habits that will take some time to change. Coaches felt that some of the delayed changes are due to staff not actually knowing how to correct their behavior, and that trainings were very effective for center staff in improving their skills and their understanding of the assessment process and the requirements to increase the quality of their center. NICRP staff also asked if any of the centers were asking for funding for materials needed for center improvement and if funding was a challenge. Coaches indicated that most centers do not ask for the funding and if materials are needed, the majority of the time, the centers have the resources to obtain the materials on their own. Coaches also mentioned that the funding requirements (e.g. only used in the final 3-months of coaching and must be spent on materials for the classroom first) were not barriers to centers. If a center needs materials sooner or they have other needs that are not related to materials, the coaches can discuss these needs with the Office of Early Care and Education to determine if an exception can be made. In addition, coaches noted that if a center only joins the QRIS program for funding, they are unlikely to stay in the program.

Because centers often have several changes to make in order to prepare for their application for a star rating, NICRP staff asked the coaches if they felt the centers would be ready to apply at the end of the coaching period, especially given the length of time it takes to develop the Quality Improvement Plan. Considering that it is still early in the coaching process for the majority of the centers, coaches had a difficult time responding to this question. Coaches do see improvements being made by the centers but only time will tell if the improvements can be maintained and if additional improvements can be made so that a center can obtain their desired star rating. NICRP staff also asked the coaches if they anticipated any challenges in the application process for the star rating. Coaches indicated that it seemed to be a very easy process, most of the documentation is easily assessable in the centers, and the coaches did not feel it would be a burden for the centers to submit their application for a star rating.

Overall Suggestions for Improvement - The coaches did not really have any suggestions for improvement at this time. The coaches all indicated that the Quality Improvement Plan was very time consuming, but at this time, only had one suggestion on how to streamline the process. Coaches thought that if they had a designated time period to complete the plan before the actual coaching started, such as 3 months, this would give them more time to work with the centers on the improvements. However, this would also add time to the already 18 month process. The coaches felt confident that as they continued coaching, they would develop ways to improve the process that fit within the system in Nevada and did not feel that there were any programmatic policies or requirements that were impeding the coaching process.

Coaches did mention that since trainings were so successful, it might be beneficial to have trainings at the Children’s Cabinet and staff from several centers could participate. Many centers are often working on the same improvements so larger trainings could allow coaches to provide the information to centers quicker if this approach was used on occasion or when appropriate.

Summary, Recommendations, and Next Steps

Summary of Results

The current report reviewed different evaluation components of the first official year of implementation of the Silver State Stars Quality Rating Improvement System. This project year, NICRP evaluated the system through a data tracking system, a post-orientation survey, and a focus group with the coaches.

Based on the data tracking system, the QRIS has progressed well over the past year. Centers are volunteering to participate in the process and one center that participated during the pilot phase applied for and received their official star rating. According to the data tracking system, almost half of all of the center directors/owners that attended an orientation have signed up to receive coaching. Unfortunately, the tracking system is unable to identify how many centers plan to submit an application binder without receiving coaching. Therefore, it is somewhat difficult to determine exactly how many centers intend to apply for a star rating.

According to the results of the post-orientation survey, all of the attendees agree that the orientations are well organized and the majority of them believe that those conducting the orientations are knowledgeable about QRIS and ERS. The orientations also appear to be effective in explaining the QRIS and ERS processes and help attendees determine if their centers are ready to go through the process.

With regard to QRIS in general, the majority of those that completed the post-orientation survey agree that QRIS is necessary, useful for centers and parents, and that it will improve the quality of child care in Nevada.

Of those that responded to the post-orientation survey, only eight had started to receive coaching. However, 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. All of the respondents agreed that they felt their coach wants them to succeed.

The results of the focus group with the coaches indicate that the coaching process is also going well from the coaches' perspective. Center directors and staff are excited about and receptive to recommendations to improve their centers. However, changing behavior to consistently follow the new procedures can be difficult but the coaches recognize this and are comfortable reviewing the new procedures with staff until they are consistently exhibiting the new behaviors.

The coaches seem to be having some difficulty with the amount of time it takes to complete the QIPs. Depending on the quality of a center when the QRIS process begins, the QIP can be very lengthy and require a lot of a coach's time to prepare. However, the coaches recognize that nothing about the QRIS process can be changed to make this part of the process easier. Also, it seems that because it is the first official year of the project, the coaches are still fine tuning their own processes in how they work with the centers within the QRIS process.

Recommendations

At this time there is only one potential recommendation to be made with regard to the QRIS process. During the focus group, the coaches indicated that many centers are often working on the same improvements. Therefore, it was suggested that it might be beneficial to have trainings at the Children's Cabinet or at another non-center site where staff from several centers could participate. This would allow coaches to disseminate the information to several centers at once.

Next Steps

During the next year of QRIS implementation, it is recommended that the Office of Early Care and Education continue to use the data tracking system to track centers through the QRIS process. It is also recommended that feedback continue to be gathered from center directors and staff to determine successes and potential problems with the orientation, coaching, and application process. Feedback from the coaches should also be collected to determine their perceived effectiveness with the centers and to allow them an opportunity to provide suggestions for process improvement.

In addition, once more centers have received a star rating, an outcome evaluation should be implemented to determine the impact of the Silver State Stars Quality Improvement Rating System on the cognitive and emotional development of children that attend rated child care centers.