Alliance for
Early Childhood Finance

An Actionable Federal Framework
to Promote QRIS in the States

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States across the US are engaged in crafting accountability systems aimed at improving the quality of early care and education and afterschool services provided in a range of settings – Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). A QRIS is a systemic strategy to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education programs[1]. A key reason that QRIS is a powerful strategy is that it can serve as a 'big tent' and unifier, embracing a wide range of early care and education (ECE) programs and services located in many settings and funded by many public and private sources – including parent fees. Thus, QRIS can simultaneously encourage continuous quality improvement while also serving as a tool for system reform, helping align public and private ECE policy and finance.

Our nation is at a key moment in history. We are simultaneously challenged by a recession economy, state budget deficits and growing data on the key role that high-quality early care and education plays in children's early learning and their later success in school and life. QRIS can be a helpful roadmap to guide decisions on how to target resources, focus dollars on results, streamline administration, and build quality. In addition, QRIS can help to quantify (and through financial incentives hopefully help narrow) the gap between what families can afford to pay and what it costs to provide high quality services.

The United States' early care and education policy is, by and large, crafted by states individually and is very fragmented, especially by funding source. However, the federal government can – and should – help to promote best practice and move toward nationally consistent standards and measures for early care and education programs and practitioners. QRIS can help achieve these ends. This briefing paper outlines short- and longer-term steps the federal government can take to support state development of effective QRIS.

Summary of Recommendations
1. All states should be required to establish a statewide early childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System that includes the following five essential elements:

   - Common standards for programs and practitioners that apply to all early care and education settings and funding streams in the state (e.g., child care, Head Start, pre-K, early intervention, and others)[2];

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[1] While this memo focused on early care and education, it is important to underscore that many state QRIS' serve a broader age spectrum. The recommendations can also be applied, with some modifications, to QRIS systems that include afterschool programs.

[2] In some states it may not be feasible or appropriate to require public school-operated ECE programs to participate in QRIS; in this case states should be required to establish standards for school-operated ECE programs that align with the QRIS and ultimately serve as a bridge to connect these two sub-systems into one, coordinated state early care and education system.

- A coordinated/aligned system of accountability to ensure that compliance with QRIS standards is monitored, and data on the scope of – and participation in – QRIS is documented;
- Program and practitioner outreach and support to ensure that a wide range of programs and practitioners are able to effectively participate in the QRIS and focus on continuous quality improvement (e.g. access to technical assistance, professional development);
- Financing and financial rewards that are intentionally linked to compliance and improved quality as measured by the QRIS standards, including, but not be limited to, on-going operating assistance, compensation support, and/or tuition subsidy;
- Consumer, provider and practitioner outreach and engagement to ensure that stakeholders understand the QRIS and use it to guide decision-making.

2. Each state's QRIS standards should be required to include, at a minimum, the following three components. States may choose to include additional rating categories..

- ***Staff Qualifications and Professional Development*** – The QRIS should include pre-service requirements (e.g. credentials, degrees and/or completion of specific training) as well as in-service requirements (e.g. specific number of annual training/continuing education hours). Both of these requirements should be progressive, that is, increase with the level of the QRIS and should incorporate and align with the steps included in the State's early childhood career lattice.

- ***Learning Environment*** – The QRIS should include a requirement that programs participate in some form of observational assessment, using a valid and reliable tool such as the Environment Rating Scales (ITERS, ECERS, SACERS, FCCERS) or the Classroom Assessment Scoring Instrument (CLASS). Requirements would increase as quality levels increase. For example, the requirement at lower quality levels could include training on how to use the observations in self-assessment. At the higher quality levels, the requirement is a specific score resulting from an assessment by independent, trained, reliable observers.

- ***Alignment with State Early Learning Standards*** – The QRIS should include progressive engagement with the State's Early Learning Standards (ELS). For example, at the beginning level, programs are aware of and have copies of the ELS; at higher levels, teaching staff have successfully completed training on implementation of the ELS and the program is using developmentally appropriate curricula and child assessment tools that align with the ELS.

3. The requirement that states establish a QRIS, as well as funding and supports targeted to this purpose, should be included in all federal legislation, rule or regulation that authorizes, funds or creates early care and education programs or initiatives. This would

include, but is not limited to, the following: the proposed Early Learning Challenge Fund, the state Early Childhood Advisory Councils, the Child Care and Development Fund, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, ESEA Title I, Head Start/Early Head Start, the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems initiative, early intervention (IDEA), and family support initiatives. Such action at the federal level will model for and support the states in their effort to align their early care and education policy, funding and systems in a collaborative manner around a core set of agreed upon program standards.

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4. The Child Care Bureau and the Department of Education should jointly prepare a biennial "State of QRIS" report that includes data on state QRIS systems and participation levels. In addition to information on state QRIS standards and how they align with national benchmarks, the report should include, at a minimum, data on:
   - the proportionate level of participation, at each quality level, of each type of ECE provider in the state (including regulated center-and home-based child care programs, public and private preschools, programs that receive Head Start funding and programs that provide early intervention services);
   - the percentage of low-income (Head Start/Early Head Start or subsidy-eligible) children enrolled in programs at each quality level;
   - the percentage of children receiving child welfare services enrolled in programs at each quality level; and
   - the percentage of children under age five enrolled in Title I funded programs at each quality level.

5. The Head Start Bureau should articulate Head Start Program Performance Standards with the QRIS standards framework, i.e., at least the three components/rating categories noted above. The Head Start standard(s) in each category could serve as a quality benchmark that is not only nationally consistent, but also exists to some degree in every state.[3] These will be beyond some states highest QRIS level and will match others. Promoting these national quality benchmarks to states could help to serve as performance measures or targets for the design and/or revision of state QRIS standards. Additionally, understanding how the Head Start benchmarks are monitored and Head Start grantees are supported could help states to align/coordinate QRIS program monitoring and support with the Head Start monitoring and T/TA systems.

6. The Child Care Bureau, working in partnership with the major national accrediting bodies, should add to the above by creating a cross-walk of national accreditation standards with the QRIS standards framework (i.e., the three components noted above.) The range of accreditation standards in each category could serve as benchmarks, making it easier for states to not only align their QRIS levels with the various accreditations but also align/coordinate program monitoring and support.

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[3] Head Start could require its grantees to participate in state QRIS.

7. Ensure that the training and technical assistance contractors that participate in the Child Care Training and Technical Assistance Network (CCTAN), the Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Network, and the CACFP sponsors that provide monitoring and support all understand the key role that QRIS plays in ECE quality improvement and system-building, and are focused on helping states develop, strengthen and expand their QRIS.

8. Encourage states to use QRIS as a framework for reforming a range of child care and early learning policies, and allow states to waive federal rules to test new options that promote quality. New policies could include, but are not limited to, the following: rate-setting (e.g., structure rates based on the cost of providing services at QRIS levels, rather than the price of care in local markets), reimbursement policy (e.g., paying on the basis of enrollment, rather than attendance, in higher quality programs), eligibility (e.g., authorizing annual eligibility in higher quality programs), and financing (e.g., creating new or expanded financing strategies linked to QRIS levels such as tax credits and/or base funding.)

9. Focus research grants across agencies, to the extent possible, on studies that will inform policy and help states to a) validate their QRIS; b) learn more about effective, measurable quality standards that go beyond staff qualifications, learning environment, and alignment with early learning standards, and c) learn about effective practice in QRIS implementation. Research on effective quality standards could help the field learn more about how to incorporate meaningful measures of parent engagement, program administration and child outcomes into QRIS standards. Implementation research could include studies that help guide: improved and more cost-effective QRIS monitoring, more effective QRIS technical assistance, and financing strategies that are most likely to result in higher participation overall and more programs at higher quality levels.