

**Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and National Women's Law Center**

***Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: A Conversation with Center Directors***

**Audio Conference Call**

**April 25, 2012**

**3:00 p.m. EST**

HANNAH MATTHEWS, CLASP: Thank you. Good afternoon and welcome to today's audio conference call, "Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: A Conversation with Center Directors."

This is Hannah Matthews from the Center for Law and Social Policy, CLASP. And I have here with me Karen Schulman from the National Women's Law Center.

In February, CLASP and the National Women's Law Center released a joint report: [\*A Count for Quality: Child Care Center Directors on Rating and Improvement Systems\*](#), which presented the experiences of over a dozen child care center directors who are participating in QRIS in several states.

QRIS are a strategy to improve families' access to high-quality child care. They assess the quality of child care programs, offer incentives and assistance to programs to improve their ratings and given information to parents about the quality of child care.

These systems are operating in a growing number of states. Approximately 22 states now have statewide QRIS and more have pilots in particular communities.

QRIS are designed to give providers incentives and support to improve quality. Under QRIS, child care programs receive progressively higher ratings as they meet progressively higher quality standards. Our report discussed the key challenges and benefits of QRIS from the directors' perspective.

Today, we are very excited to have with us three of those directors to continue this conversation about QRIS. With us today are Camelia Babson-Haley, the director of Youth and Family Outreach in Portland, Maine; Dana Ramsey, the vice president of operations at Child Care Network's Child Development School, Inc. in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Kathleen Zdenek is the child development director at Easter Seals in State College, Pennsylvania. Thank you Camelia, Dana and Kathleen for joining us today.

MATTHEWS: We'll begin today's conversation with several questions that we have and then we'll open it to all of you on the call.

Due to the large number of participants today, all lines have been muted. So please e-mail your questions to [efirgens@clasp.org](mailto:efirgens@clasp.org) at any time during the call. We'll try to answer all of the questions that we receive.

Before we get to those questions, we wanted to provide a very brief overview of QRIS that are represented on this call. QRIS vary significantly by state. They vary in the number of quality levels they have, in the standards that they set for achieving higher-quality ratings and the extent to which they provide financial and other supports to help programs improve.

So today we have directors from Maine, Pennsylvania and North Carolina. North Carolina is one of the longest-existing QRIS, having been in place since 1999. Participation in QRIS is mandatory for licensed programs which all receive one star out of a five-star system. North Carolina's QRIS includes grants and awards, scholarships, technical assistance, tiered reimbursements for child care subsidies and wage enhancements to help providers move to a higher star level.

In Pennsylvania, QRIS participation is voluntary. Programs receive a rating out of a four-star system with additional requirements beyond basic licensing being required at the star one level. Pennsylvania's QRIS also included grants and scholarships, technical assistance, tiered reimbursement and wage enhancements. Pennsylvania has also offered training for providers through the QRIS.

Maine is the youngest of our QRIS on this call, having just been adopted statewide in 2008. In Maine, QRIS participation is voluntary but all programs who are serving children in the state's child care subsidy program are required to participate in the system. Like Pennsylvania, Maine is also a four-star system. Maine's QRIS includes scholarships and training, and tiered reimbursement for providers. Maine also offers tax credits for providers who pay state taxes and make investments to improve quality, as well as tax credits for parents who are using higher-rated providers. Maine is also unique among these three QRIS because it does not include an observational assessment as North Carolina and Pennsylvania do. And you may hear more about that.

So with that brief introduction, I'll turn it over to Karen who will move us to our conversation with our guest speakers. As a reminder, please e-mail any questions you have throughout the call to [efirgens@clasp.org](mailto:efirgens@clasp.org).

KAREN SCHULMAN, NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER: Thanks, Hannah. I know you're all eager to hear from our great guest speakers. So I'm going to just be asking them to respond to a couple of questions.

The first thing I would like each of you to talk about is what the biggest benefit of QRIS has been to your centers. So if we could start with you, Camelia.

CAMELIA BABSON-HALEY, DIRECTOR, YOUTH AND FAMILY OUTREACH: Yes. I would say, first, that the biggest benefit to our center – toward families really had been that they do get a double child care tax credit on their state taxes. And families do ask about that when they call to enquire about our program. I would say, secondly, that the validation that we receive for being, you know, at a certain level on the Quality Rating System has been a huge benefit to our staff. It feels good. And we receive a quality bump – a monetary quality bump from the state. For our families that are subsidized we get a 10 percent increase. And then, also, we do get scholarships for staff to further their education, another huge benefit to our program.

SCHULMAN: Great. Thanks. Dana?

DANA RAMSEY, VICE PRESIDENT OF OPERATIONS, CHILD CARE NETWORK'S CHILD DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL, INC.: Yes. I think that we have found that at least – especially in the interest of parents who are trying to choose care and – here in North Carolina. And competitively speaking, it sets a bar and creates an even playing field among providers by creating that awareness and expectation and quality standards that are based on research and best practice.

It also creates a community and staff standard and allows for the recognition of individuals who attain it. And we use that as a management tool and the state uses it of course with the tiered reimbursement as well.

We've found that our parents become much more engaged in the process. And as far as managing our staff, it helps us provide a model and mutual goals and a rallying point which is really exciting for them professionally. And, of course, when it's tied to tiered reimbursement, as ours is, that makes it even more worthwhile to participate.

SCHULMAN: Great. Kathleen?

KATHLEEN ZDENEK, CHILD DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, EASTER SEALS: Thanks. I think one of the biggest things has been that, for early education in Pennsylvania, it's really raised the standard so that we're no longer viewed in the public's eye as simply babysitting, you know, just keeping children warm and safe, but having expectations and providing them something enriching each day when they're in our care and that's been huge.

And the general establishment of expectations of what quality of care means and that it encompasses a broad spectrum, everything from the materials that are available to the communication with parents and interaction with the community has all really set the bar a lot higher.

And I think as others have already said, the increase in subsidy is a nice addition as well as grants and merit awards and especially the mutual goals and expectations for the staff. It kind of gives everybody I guess one place to look. It's not just the director anymore saying, "Because I said so," or "Because I know better or did this research." Or because it's what parents want, we're looking at it from a different lens, I guess – a more informed lens.

SCHULMAN: That's great. It's great to hear all of those positive things. But I know from our conversations (that) you've also faced a lot of challenges.

So I was wondering if you could each talk about what the biggest challenge is for your center and other centers trying to participate in the QRIS and to improve your QRIS rating.

Camelia?

BABSON-HALEY: One of the barriers that we face is getting the word out to families and we work really hard at this. But it's fairly difficult to get the word out about what the difference is between QRIS level four and a QRIS level one and why should you choose the four versus the one, in educating parents about what that difference is and what it might mean for their child looking at the big picture.

I would also say for centers – and I worked on a project, kind of a peer support programs – that we're trying to move up the Quality Rating System. And so I heard some of these difficulties first hand.

One of them was also that they can't really charge anymore. Having higher-qualified teachers, you want to be able to pay them a little bit more. But you can't really increase your revenue because you can't charge families any more than you're already charging because they can't really afford it, so trying to figure out where to bring in extra income to help offset some of the expenses that might come with moving up the Quality Rating System.

And then another challenge for our Quality Rating System, we require additional training hours per year for staff. And sometimes it can be difficult to find affordable and varied training for staff. And so that was also a barrier for providers.

SCHULMAN: All right. Dana?

RAMSEY: I agree. I think limited funding is probably one of the biggest challenges. We are on a tiered reimbursement in North Carolina and in the interest of attaining higher stars it's very easy to get way ahead on your investment in that quality. And sometimes the rate increases – well, the rate increases hopefully do follow. But they're always generally six months or even a year behind, if you're talking about your investment in educated staff, when you can actualize that rate. So you're going out on a bit of a limb and waiting for that reimbursement to come in. It can be difficult.

In lieu of the adequate funding, I think the high level of support in training and technical assistance is necessary. Without it, sometimes I think it can be an afterthought and without the funding that's probably the biggest thing I can say we would be able to use wholeheartedly if it was more available – just to have people involved in our school and following up with our staff and doing some training and some supporting the effort on a more regular basis.

It's really difficult when the bar is moved or goals are changed and that frequently happens in a progressive situation and environment like we're in here. And so we're not taking the same staff – the same group of professionals from A to Z. And we're not all actualizing these goals at the same time.

In this industry, by the time you get to Z, you've probably turned over a staff and now you've got a few that are A and some that at Z and everybody in between. And it's a constant process.

And it's something that, you know, I feel like states and systems need to allow for that – for the understanding that you need to constantly work to attain the goal. You get to the end, by the time you're there, you have to start back at the beginning again.

And so, for as much stability the system can provide in consistency and well-defined expectations that stay consistent, I think you're going to get farther ahead and have more success and growing from there as everybody gets caught up, I guess.

It's also a big challenge, depending on how intricate the assessment program is, to have appropriate materials and reference materials to train your staff. And we found that we've written basically books about it that we train our own staff on. But, again, depending on the level of intricacy – if you're just using the ECERS assessment, say, there are a lot of resources for that.

But just to get that level of understanding, we are always teaching teachers how to improve. And so that's a given in the field that's forever. And we just need really good materials and probably consistent materials to use with everybody trying to get to a higher quality rating.

SCHULMAN: Kathleen?

ZDENEK: Yes. Actually, I really like what was just said about the stability of expectation. That is something that, in talking to other directors and my own staff, we all feel is a bit of a challenge.

Not that we don't expect changes to happen; we do. And we value that our system has a continuous quality improvement plan in place. But sometimes it seems that there's a difficulty in the communication and disbursement of information.

I think a lot of people try. But sometimes it seems that things get lost in translation. And with all the changes that happen, whether with staff turnover, with the economy and other things that impact it; that's a really difficult piece to start off with.

The standardization, which we've talked about a little bit, and increasing expectation have been fantastic. The one piece that we feel personally that's missing, and I know other centers such as a monitoring program to throw out an example; there's not accommodations for the diverse populations and philosophies.

And I think they still have a place within quality especially because we don't want to limit parents' choice. It's not every parent's choice to be at your quote/unquote "typical center".

We at Easter Seals are an inclusive center and that's our mission. And we've, I think, worked really well with the individuals we've been in contact with from Stars to share information back and forth about how – yes, we are the square peg trying to fit into this round hole. But maybe that round hole can have a little more wiggle room going forward.

And I think the other thing, and we have this a lot, is we have our own opinions about the environmental rating scale. But when the report comes, it's so nice to see that we scored really well. But it would be really nice to know, well, what was it that made us do really well in that area, so that we can keep doing it.

And as a director, I'd like to know not just what's not working but what is working in a little more detail. So that across our program, we can be sharing ideas a little more fluidly because, unfortunately, I think it can be a little discouraging when staff only hear about the things that they scored low on.

OK. So we'll fix those. But what about the things that we did well? "Great. We got a seven." But why did we get a seven? So those are kind of the biggest challenges for us.

SCHULMAN: Thanks so much everybody for sharing those. That was really helpful to share about all the different challenges you're working through.

And so now I'd like to ask you each to talk about the one thing you would do to improve your state's QRIS if you could. Camelia?

BABSON-HALEY: Well, as you said, Maine does not have observational assessments. And I think that that's something that I would change, which goes along with my other thought about what I'd like to see different, which is just more accountability.

We, in Maine, have just four levels. So to be a level four you have to be accredited by NAEYC. And so we're accredited and we have been accredited for a number of years. And so sometimes that comes with a little less attention because we have that attention from NAEYC. We have unannounced visits from them and scheduled visits with them.

But I'd like to see our QRIS system also do that as well. I just think the more we have professionals coming in, taking a look at things and as Kathleen said before, giving us feedback about what we're doing well and what we're not and how could we do this better in offering support for those areas of weakness. And that goes back to earlier in the conversation too about that technical assistance being so important.

So I guess, for me, the biggest challenge is just wanting to have more accountability within the system.

SCHULMAN: Dana?

RAMSEY: I think I'd like to see allowance for more autonomy and decisions and for the diversity of the program, strategy – recognizing that one size doesn't fit all.

There's a real risk of having a very homogenized delivery system and there are so many components, culture and community expectations and parent choice, teacher education levels, available funding, different service models and really all should be considered when you're assessing quality and the potential for increasing quality as a provider serving families directly and considering them at every turn.

You know, I'd prefer to be allowed to be held – certainly held to a standard of expectations, but not necessarily on how to make those expectations come to reality. And that's just, to me, I think, an

area that, if that autonomy was allowed, we would continue to see some unique environments for children and that allow for parent choice and, the example used is a great example.

But in our state, they're considering a list of approved curriculums and, of course, different requirements for teachers and teachers pay and administrative requirements. And all of those things somewhat limit your ability as, really, a small business operator to do maybe what you think will be good for your customers or your children or your business and sometimes, I think, there's a better way.

So it's – I don't know exactly what that – what that way would be. But, I think there should be a lot of thought given to that idea.

SCHULMAN: Kathleen?

ZDENEK: (Thanks). I actually agree with that as well. And, along with that, I'd like to see I guess a little more variation in – I don't want to call it tracks, but for lack of a better word – for programs because a program like ours, and I'm very proud to say this, we already have staff functioning at a higher level of education and quality.

And so what's really discouraging is you have, for instance, prescribed trainings that are, every year, they need to, for instance, have a training on inclusion. Well that would be fine if there were higher-quality trainings in that area.

But a lot of times they feel like, "OK, well. I'll do this. But I'm not learning anything new." And, thankfully, I value the fact that my staff and many staff in centers in this area really want to go for additional training on their own and not just what's required. But to have additional and improved quality of training would be huge and, actually, something else that just came up for us this year.

And I do understand the changes with the staff scale and where staff fall; whether they're a level one or a level four, depending on their credentials. I have no qualms with that. However, it was unfortunate and caused a real risk with staff to find out that one year they could get a merit award and the next year they couldn't and why.

And so I think it would be nice to see maybe a tiered approach to merit awards. We do that with regards to how many hours staff work. So maybe it could be something that's considered for the number of credentials they have as they're working up.

So maybe they aren't eligible for the same amount of a merit award to continue schooling, but they're eligible for a little less because they're on that path. And there haven't been some accommodations made for people that sign up and have a plan to go to school.

But even for the ones that are working on and then really putting in the same effort, that's hard to have them know that their peers are getting rewarded and they're not. So that's been a challenge that we'd like to see change.

SCHULMAN: Well thanks for all of those comments. That was really helpful in getting an understanding of all the challenges you face and how you're working to overcome those challenges and what more could be done in terms of providing more resources to support you and more training, more technical assistance, more flexibility and more communication.

So we have a lot of questions from all the people listening to this call. And I hope to get in as many as possible. And I would like to start with a question we got.

The question was, "What has been the positive and negative feedback you have received from your teachers regarding participation in QRIS?" Who wants to take that on first?

RAMSEY: This is Dana. I think the positive aspects are the professional recognition and the opportunities to build on their experiences for their own careers and being acknowledged for what they are doing in a bigger way than maybe just within the walls of their school. And I think that has been really beneficial for our professionals.

And then, the opposite of that is, it can be stressful, especially here where the assessment basically of a classroom happens in a portion of one day. And it's very stressful to the teachers to go through that type of assessment especially if they're new or even if they're experienced but new to that school. And just depending on when that assessment occurs, that can really throw people off.

I've had times when we've even lost a few staff going up to an assessment period because they just don't personally feel ready for it or they just don't feel that they're up to that level of scrutiny.

And so it can be tough. But, generally, the outcomes are great and the whole school gets to celebrate together. So I think, overall, obviously, we've enjoyed that.

SCHULMAN: Did either of you have anything to add to that?

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen. I agree that just the increase in professionalism has also opened doors for more opportunities to share expertise with others. We have more staff that are invited to present at conferences and things of that nature, which is, just really a boost to – I guess it kind of just reminds them that they're doing a great job and they're more invested.

The things that I've heard them say about our challenges, number one, they would, like I said, like to hear more about why they got a good score, not just the negative things. But administratively, it does become a little time-intensive.

And there's only so many hours in a day. And with our program, doing all of the progress reports, then lessons and things that you're already doing plus working on individual education plans, to add an additional – to the extent that we have an administrative load can be a real challenge.

SCHULMAN: Great. That's helpful. I want to move to another question. It was, "How do your states support programs that are participating financially or with technical support or training or support from universities that offer BAs in Early Childhood?"



You talked a little bit about the supports that are there. Do any of you have anything more you wanted to talk about in terms of financial or technical assistance?

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen in Pennsylvania. I guess I'd like to add how much I appreciate that the local universities are getting a bit more involved.

We're right here in Happy Valley where Penn State is. So that's great for people who can go to classes. But recently Lock Haven University, which is just a few miles outside of town, has begun to offer online ECE courses which is great for some of our parents who are also teachers and they don't have the time to get to the classes or it's not working for one reason or another.

So that's really nice. And having vouchers available through the state makes it more likely that we're able to help them get through courses as they want to further their education.

RAMSEY: And this is Dana. And, of course, North Carolina having been established so long with quality rating has basically built up around it and over the years. And so it's embedded in our whole delivery system.

But there are scholarships for employees, Smart Start Scholarships, technical assistance all the way through material grants for quality enhancement.

Of course, our budgets have been cut this year. But that has been a strong aspect in past years and hopefully, will be again. And, of course, at this point, our colleges are doing what they can too – and community colleges to support these educational requirements and adapt their schedules and their ability to serve people that are teaching in the field when it's convenient, when they can do it.

And so that's been an appreciated collaboration in the last couple of years especially, and even our Department of Public Instruction and our school system here have been starting, more especially with North Carolina's Pre-K Program, in other ways to allow some mutual trainings and some mutual work with the public school teachers. And I think that's helped further our teachers as well.

BABSON-HALEY: This is Camelia in Maine. I think we covered most of the monetary benefits that we received as part of QRIS. Our employees are eligible for scholarships if they make a certain income or less.

And we do have a tiered reimbursement system. However, in the current political climate, we're not exactly sure where that's going to be in the next couple of months. It's gone down from a 25 percent as the highest bonus to 10 percent as the highest. That's where we're at right now.

SCHULMAN: What sort of financial cut does that mean for you? What proportion of your children receive subsidies or vouchers?

BABSON-HALEY: Approximately 80 percent of our children. So it's big financial income, big revenue for us.

SCHULMAN: I just wanted to highlight some of the answers you just provided, some really important points you made just about how the QRIS is sort of not – it's not an island. It's really dependent on all of these other things for better or for worse.

If you have the resources of universities and colleges and community colleges that you're all working with, it can be a real boost that QRIS system – the effectiveness of the QRIS depend on these surrounding systems.

Then also to point out that all of these QRIS states are making a lot of progress, but it's all in the context of funding cuts that I know you're grappling with and trying to deal with. That's a tremendous challenge I know you're all dealing with.

So just to move to another question from our listeners. Somebody asked about whether centers are able to increase their rates and charge more when you participate in the star system and get a higher quality rating.

We know that the theory is that the QRIS will point out which programs are doing well and there will be a higher demand for those programs. And the theory of this is the parents will be willing to pay more. But we also know that the parents are already strained to pay for child care as it is.

So I was wondering whether you have been able to increase your rates at all as you've gotten higher ratings and what you're doing to educate parents about this system and what the ratings mean, because all of this depends on parents actually seeing and understanding what the QRIS is and what a higher rating means.

So there were some comments earlier about that. But do any of you want to comment about that a little bit further?

RAMSEY: OK. Well this is Dana. We are highly subsidized, I would say, in most of the areas that we operate in that are in North Carolina and we have almost 60 licenses. And so they're different depending on whatever county they're in. But for the most part we have a high level of subsidy.

It is allowed in North Carolina, and I know it's not in some states, so we could pass additional fees along to the subsidized parent. But we don't choose to. We don't feel that it's something that our parents can afford and, I believe, for every incremental amount that we could raise the parents that could, we would lose a parent that couldn't.

And so we're just kind of locked in with whatever the market rate is in those counties. However, that being said, North Carolina is – I guess compared to other states that we operate in – a fairly higher level of reimbursement for those children. So it's not as difficult a story because of that.

But when it comes to our private families, which should be the other percentage that we serve, we do incrementally increase rates, very small amounts each year. But, it's always justified by what they've seen happening in the school and we tie it back to that in the letter that I put out, which is in no way apologetic.

As always, let's celebrate and let's support what we've done together and give them some examples of things that they've probably seen, including how many of our teachers have increased their education that year and what they've attained and that we've supported that and they've helped to support that.

SCHULMAN: Did either of you have anything else to add to that?

BABSON-HALEY: This is Camelia. I would say, similar to what was just said, that we serve a lot of subsidized clients as well and we do not choose to pass on any increase to them. So we stay with whatever the market rate is in our state.

And we have chosen to keep the rate the same for our private (pay) families as well just based on feedback from our parents. So they're struggling as well. And it's not an easy time right now for anybody to look for increases. And so we do keep our rates the same.

And in terms of the other part of the question which was how do we feel about educating families about QRIS, you know, we post information on our website, on our Facebook page, I mail the brochure for QRIS and NAEYC out with applications that I mail to families. And so it's on everything that we send out just as a method for trying to spread the word.

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen. We also stick with the market rate because we do serve a diverse population and we respect that everybody's struggling financially in one way or another.

We do a fair amount of fundraising throughout the year which a lot of our parents participate in. And also they give us feedback to tell us what kind of fundraising they'd like to do. So they get involved and help out in other ways that are cost cutting and also help add to what we might need to purchase for our center, which is great.

We do vary our rates by the age group because, obviously, we need more staffing at certain ages and more supplies, those sorts of things. And as far as how we educate parents on it, we have a dedicated section on our newsletter and we talk to them about it frequently.

My biggest thing with my staff has always been, you need to be empowered to speak about what you do and why you do it so that it's kind of a common piece of our language when we're talking to prospective and current families.

SCHULMAN: Thanks. Thanks for those answers. Just sitting here listening to you it's interesting. It's hard to think of another business that says, "Oh well, I can't raise prices right now because I feel so bad for our customers."

I mean, I didn't see them saying, "Oh well, let's not raise gas prices right now. It's a hard time for America." So it's just – it's just an interesting business, child care.

Hannah has some more questions that we've been getting from our listeners.

MATTHEWS: Yes. Thank you all. This is just a really rich insight into what it really is like, on the ground working with children and families.

So we have a question that is asking if you could identify the QRIS components that have been the most supportive of quality improvement in your center and that's distinct from rewarding quality standards that may have already existed in your centers in the first place. So what do you think has been the most supportive to improving quality?

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen in Pennsylvania. As you were asking that question I thought of running through my recollection of all the standards – what is it?

And, frankly, I think that the business practices have been huge in the development of policies and procedures because it helped not just the professionalism – the staff knowing more about what they are doing in the classrooms – but really giving us a framework. So that when we're talking to parents we're consistent.

Our message with our expectations is consistent with things even as simple as, "You have to pay your bill and this is why." And, "This is our policy and what happens if you don't." Establishing those sorts of things just really gives us a stronger skeleton I think of a program.

And that has been something new to me who came from the classroom into this director's role because of the fact we're thinking about different things. So that is what I personally have valued I think the most. And I think the staff would probably, if they thought about it, say, "Yes, that's been good too," because it's helped them. Parents aren't complaining to them because things are consistent.

MATTHEWS: Thank you. Do others want to answer that question?

RAMSEY: This is Dana in North Carolina. I think that, to me, the most beneficial has been the material grants that we've been able to get through Smart Start.

I know that sounds, and it is very financially-based, but those are tremendous at that time when you're going through an evaluation and when you're needing to go up to that next level and seeking to go up to that next level.

That kind of support is very important as well as the technical assistance that they provide in helping us train our staff, which is another key piece. So, over the years, that's been something that we've relied on it at different times.

BABSON-HALEY: This is Camelia. I would just kind of echo what's been said. And also just I think that all of them have been helpful because all of them put together support the message to a community that we are an industry – that we are a professional industry in that we are so important. And that's what was said earlier. We're not babysitters; we're educators.

MATTHEWS: Yes. So we have a question as a follow up from a comment that was made about having staff who are required to attend trainings that are repetitive year after year or perhaps too rudimentary for their level of expertise.

And so the question is, how, as directors, you deal with some of these issues in supporting your staff who are either attending trainings that they feel are beyond – are not quite up to their level and/or dealing with staff who may have a lot of experience from the field but may not be meeting some of the teacher education standards that are in place in your QRIS?

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen and I know that I mentioned that. And that's a difficult question to answer.

For those that aren't quite meeting them and can use more of those rudimentary things, not only do I meet with them after they've gone to the trainings, but we ask them to share what they've learned when they're at staff meetings.

So if they can kind of share and get some information and other ideas from the staff and really feel supported in their professional development. We also try to look closely at their goals for the year and see when we observe them, are they putting what they've learned into practice?

For the ones who, you know, they go trainings and come back and they're like, "Yes, I didn't learn anything new. I could have done the training and I.." – that sounds really arrogant but that has happened at times.

Thankfully, they're still very interested when I say, "Well, there's also this training." But the challenge comes in is that with the prescribed training that we have here, they have to be approved through the PQAS [Pennsylvania Quality Assurance System ], which I understand, and yet at the same time, we'd like to see some other ones available.

For instance, if they were to go to the NAEYC Institute, why can't one of those trainings count for their annual inclusion training rather than one that's through the PQAS? And so that's the more difficult one to answer.

I'm grateful that they're still willing to go to other ones. And at times, whenever possible, if I can do a training in-house with my directors, PQAS, on one of the prescribed ones, I will do that and try to expand upon it and get information from them and really think about what we're doing in our center to make it more valuable.

RAMSEY: And this is Dana. One thing I think that's great in our system is that they do not prescribe the exact training. But the staff has to have simply the amount of hours that they need to get.

And they've also given the provider a lot of opportunity to get approved and do your own trainings for your own staff that you (somewhat you) feel like their needs are. So I think that was a real winning move. That even actually got better within the last couple of years for us as a state and has allowed us to be much more effective with our own staff needs.

And the state recognizes that the – some of the training going on out there is not quality. And you try to figure out what those are and what to avoid. But as for us, we've also gotten an online system in place where we pay for the training – the online training and have an open license for each one of our teachers to go online and pick out, out of a course catalog – I don't know what they're up to now, 100 different courses or something – they're more what they think they need. And so that's been a great opportunity that the state has given approval for as well.

MATTHEWS: So, actually, a related question that we have is whether there are funds available through any of your QRIS for the cost of substitutes to cover classrooms during times that teachers may be in training or may have to be pulled out to allow time to attend to other reporting requirements and things related to the QRIS.

Could you speak to either whether the costs of that are covered and also how much time you might think that it is that teachers are out of the classroom in order to meet some of them?

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen. I guess, yes, they do and don't. Something that we were able to do through the grant a few years ago was get a portion of a new position as we first developed it which is a floating staff position. We were able to get some monetary funds for that just that one time.

Now, going forward, we've maintained that floater position and that was always our objective. But we have to figure out how to make that work and get coverage so the staff can go to training.

You know, frankly, we just try to do a balance. We try to have them go to trainings in the evenings and the weekends. But, really, you know, they've got other lives and responsibilities and families as well.

So when we can send them to trainings during the day, we do that but we accrue the cost of that time. And the same thing goes for their administrative responsibilities, whether it be progress reports or report writing. We provide them relief so that they can do that. But it is another – it is a monetary burden to us. But it is one that we are happy to provide for them although it is a challenge at times.

BABSON-HALEY: This is Camelia. We have made provisions in our budget for an additional floater. So we have a full-time floater on staff to cover outages, for trainings, for planning time, for them to get out of the classroom to work on assessments.

And that's just the choice that we made. And it supports our program in many, many ways, not just for absences due to things people might need to be doing for the quality ratings.

RAMSEY: And I – this is Dana – believe that there is something available through the teach program here in North Carolina that allows some coverage for substitutes. But we don't use it. The last time I really looked into it was several years ago and I thought it was just a little bit cumbersome so we provide our own floating staff as well.

MATTHEWS: Someone would like to know about what tools are used for observational assessment. So perhaps Dana and Kathleen could speak to that?

ZDENEK: Are you asking about from our QRIS perspective or what we do and how?

MATTHEWS: Asking from QRIS. What does that require?

ZDENEK: OK. So we are evaluated by an assessor – an official state assessor through the Environmental Rating Scale not every year but every other year when we move up. We also do our own (ERS) every year internally and report those scores.

We've also done the program administrative scale on ourselves but it's not yet a requirement. And then we are required to do staff observations and performance evaluations, so the observations twice a year and performance evaluations once a year. And so we do those, but those are internal and they're not prescriptive as far as what tool we use.

RAMSEY: And in North Carolina it's just simple – there's an assessment of your education level of each function of your staff and then aside from that is the Environment Rating Scale used on select classrooms which are just randomly selected out of each age group.

You're given a month window in which they could come at any time to assess. And then they would randomly draw a classroom and that classroom would be evaluated on that day. And our program quality score is based off of the actual score that we get in our ITERS, ECERS and SACERS ratings and then those three scores are the blend of however many assessments you have done, and are averaged for what turns out to be a score that they use for the program.

ZDENEK: And that's how it works in Pennsylvania as well. And you mentioned something else very important is that we do have the career lattice. And so staff credentials and transcripts need to be looked at to see if we have the right percentage of people at the right levels for the star level that we are at.

RAMSEY: And currently, in North Carolina it's assessed every three years, within the three years that you would have had your reassessment – but it could also reassessed periodically throughout that time period if your regulatory licensing consultant came in and determined that there had been a significant change of any type, whether that be a staffing change or a quality change. And so at any point during the three years, we could be asked to be reassessed or it's every three years.

SCHULMAN: We got a question about infant and toddler care and how it fits in to the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, particularly given how important the child-teacher relationship is for infant-toddler care. And so how does QRIS assess the strength of that relationship? Did any of you have any comments on that? Your response?

RAMSEY: This is Dana. I think the best that we do here is using the ITERS scale for the infant room. And having done hundreds of these assessments at this point with as many schools as we have in North Carolina, our ITERS scores are consistently lower than the ECERS and the SACERS that the same school might attain. And it's just – I think it's a real problem.

In some of my schools, we're at a one to four ratio in infants and at some it's one to five. And it's just, trying to balance the relationship and what it takes to have a really high-quality infant room with the many, many regulatory and sanitation requirements and all those things that are tied in.

It's just – it's a difficult balance. It's made it very hard to entice somebody to work in the infant classroom, to be honest. It's just – it makes it very hard on them to do it. I think they want to be doing and then, meet all of those regulations as well, so.

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen. And I would agree to an extent we see a lot of burnout with our infant and toddler staff because they're trying to balance the relationships that they want and intend to have with the children with the daily care routines – it takes a lot of creativity and it takes the right personalities with them. And it can – it can be really exhausting.

We do our best to place interns. Not that that's a perfect or permanent solution but for extra support. And the ones that we have placed have really learned a lot under the staff direction and it does alleviate some of that pressure.

And we actually were very lucky, a few of our staff got to participate in an ongoing multi-session training series on the primetime book. I don't know if anyone's familiar. But that was really beneficial to them.

And they've been assessed a couple of times. And, it's really made a nice change for those staff. But it is a challenge.

SCHULMAN: Camelia, did you have anything to add about infant care in QRIS?

BABSON-HALEY: I would agree that it is the most difficult especially in the infant room where it's so necessary for the primary teachers to be there and not to be pulled out to be working on assessments and portfolios and things like that.

They are held to the same requirements as all the other classrooms in terms of that though. So one of the things that we have done is that floater that I spoke about before is somebody that we put in the infant room on a frequent basis, it's almost a daily basis, so that the infants are almost as familiar with her as they are with the other two primary teachers, so that the lead teacher can get out for a bulk of time now and then to be able to keep up with the paperwork that's necessary.

MATTHEWS: Thank you. So it seems like we have time for about one more question here. And I think this is a great one to end with here, going back to what the whole purpose of QRIS really is.

So the question is, how do you see QRIS impacting the quality of care that children receive on a day-to-day basis?

SCHULMAN: After an hour we finally stumped you.



RAMSEY: This is Dana. So I've been doing this in North Carolina for 10 years with the same group of schools. And so I can honestly say that our progression has been great.

I should (read) a lot of it to the standards that have been set and then, you know, our goals to attain five stars in all of our schools and then my team being rallied around that point. And it's become, at a fun-level, competitive within my group of schools and within my group of staff. And, we celebrate scores together, we celebrate, the results and the star levels.

It's given us something to really get excited about as a group and to have some common language about what we're doing, when I'm talking about the entire group of schools that I'm managing and work with.

But I would say it absolutely has enhanced the quality of what's going on in our state and to the point where this state is now revising our Quality Rating System. And I assume probably in a couple of years it will look very much different than it looks right now and be increased standards. And from everything I hear very much increased.

And so it will – it will send us back around again. But we've enjoyed going forward and maintaining our five-star level.

ZDENEK: This is Kathleen. I'm a transplant in Pennsylvania and I've taught in two other states, including North Carolina.

And I was lucky to move here probably the year before that Stars was really something that people were getting involved in and I have seen the changes. And having worked in other states, I've got some perspective.

But I think, as I said previously, it gives us a structure. It gives us our own skeleton from which to move forward, whether you can call it a skeleton or a tree trunk. And so it's providing a little bit of stability.

And while we may not agree with everything and we may advocate for some changes, it's a good starting point. It's a good springboard. And it hopefully can continue to just help us – continue to elevate and continue to improve our quality.

But it does set a standard and a standard that's even higher than what our state licensing is. Well that can get a little confusing especially when you're orienting new staff. That's a good thing that we're trying to raise the bar for the safety of children but also for the quality of not just the care but the education that they're getting at such a young age.

They're with us so many hours of a day and away from their parents that we want parents to feel good about how their children are spending their time. And I think that's the biggest benefit to having programs like this in place.

MATTHEWS: Thanks. Camelia?

BABSON-HALEY: I was just going to say I can't say enough about the correlation between education and quality.

I've watched our program grow over the last 12 years from the program that was not accredited and from being in a state where there was no quality rating system to having been accredited twice now and a level four on our quality rating system.

And with that has come some turnover in staff and some advancement in staff. And I just can't get over the high level of interactions between staff and children when they have had that educational foundation to teach them about why those interactions with children are so important.

MATTHEWS: Thank you all. That was a great way to end I think. It's all the questions that we have time for today.

Karen and I would like to thank all of you who are listening today and especially thank Camelia, Dana, and Kathleen for joining us today. There just really is no substitute for hearing directly from those who have that really tough job of taking all of these standards and policies and turning them into the day to day that happens in a child care program trying to provide very high-quality care for children and families that's so important.

Thank you for all of the questions that came in. I can tell just how interested our listeners have been in all that you have to say.

A recording and a transcript of this call will be available on our website, which is [www.clasp.org](http://www.clasp.org), as well as the National Women's Law Center website, [www.nwlc.org](http://www.nwlc.org); that should be up in the next few days. As a reminder also, our report *A Count for Quality* is also available on both of our websites.

So we thank you all so much for joining today. Good bye.

Female: Thank you.

Female: Thank you.

END