Meeting the Early Learning Challenge:

A Checklist for High Quality QRIS

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Resources and Technical Assistance

CLASP is providing resources and technical assistance to states as they prepare their applications for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), a grant competition to increase the quality of early childhood programs and increase the number and percentage of low-income and disadvantaged children, birth to five, in high-quality programs. For all available resources, visit www.clasp.org/childcare.

CLASP staff are available in person, via telephone and virtually to provide technical assistance on any aspect of the Early Learning Challenge application, including data, model policies, and best practices. Our staff can respond to immediate informational needs or provide ongoing support as your plan is developed and implemented. CLASP is available to provide assistance that is responsive to the needs of individual states. For more information, contact Danielle Ewen at dewen@clasp.org.

By Christine Johnson-Staub

To compete for the Department of Education's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), each state is required to at minimum have a "high quality plan" to adopt a common, statewide tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) based on a set of tiered program standards. While more than half of states currently operate a QRIS, they vary in design and effectiveness. Research has shown that QRIS can have a positive effect on program quality; yet, the design and implementation of each state system impact whether it will actually increase the availability of high quality care for high needs children.[i] State QRIS also vary in their ability to reach, support, and improve the quality of child care and early education programs serving the most vulnerable children.

As states finalize their RTT-ELC proposals, they may wish to consider the state of their QRIS and review their plans to establish or strengthen it to ensure it meets the overall goals of the RTT-ELC. In addition to the usual elements of an action plan – goals, activities, timelines, and indicators – the application includes two key elements in its definition of "high quality plan." States must explain how their QRIS will work effectively across settings and describe how it will reach children with the highest needs.

States can use this document to review their RTT-ELC plans and assess whether they've included important policy goals and recommendations for

designing a high quality QRIS, or strengthening existing QRIS, to meet the challenge.

What if Your State Doesn't Have a QRIS?

Fewer than half of states do not have an operating QRIS. Those states face the challenge of demonstrating a plan that will lead to a statewide, tiered QRIS that will effectively engage programs and connect high needs children to high quality care. This paper addresses specific policy recommendations for states to consider as they design, expand, or improve their QRIS.

For states getting started, the first step is to define the key components of a QRIS:
- A tiered set of program standards that include specific criteria for programs;
- A rating system and process based on those standards;
- Program and practitioner supports to help providers improve quality;
- Financial incentives to help meet the cost of improving quality and maintaining quality levels; and
- A communication strategy that explains QRIS to families, providers and the public.

As states plan for the design of these components, they should consider:
- Who is participating in the design and development of the QRIS? Who must be at the table?
- What has been effective in other state QRIS?
- What research informs the development of QRIS?

Once those initial questions are answered, the remainder of this paper provides a checklist states can use to ensure their QRIS plan meets the RTT-ELCS requirements and the needs of children and families.

Engage All Regulated Settings in the QRIS

A QRIS can only be effective in improving the overall quality of programs and increasing participation in high quality programs if it reaches a significant portion of the child care and early education market, and especially those children who need it most.

States whose plans include the design or development of their QRIS can consider addressing the following priorities in the RTT-ELC plan:

- ☐ States should use data to understand or learn where their most vulnerable children—low-income children, infants and toddlers, English Language Learners, and children with special needs – are being served, so they can incorporate those settings into their QRIS design.

- ☐ As they begin their design process, states should ensure that all target settings are represented at the table and engaged in the process of creating and reviewing proposed standards, rating and monitoring policies, program and practitioner supports, and outreach strategies.

States whose plans include strengthening or expanding their QRIS may consider the following provisions and policies:

- ☐ States should collect and use data to evaluate which settings are currently participating in their QRIS, and at what rates, and how the data relates to where children with high needs are being served.

☐ States may consider how participation of different program settings relates to other elements of their child care system such as licensing, subsidy policy, and informal or license-exempt child care. If the settings serving the highest needs children are not significantly represented in the current QRIS, states will need to incorporate into their plans strategies for engaging those settings in their QRIS.

☐ The RTT-ELC requires states have a plan to make their QRIS available to all licensed settings. If licensing policies are sufficiently strong,[ii] and regulations truly constitute a baseline of quality, states may consider making licensure the equivalent of the first level of their QRIS. But for states that need improvements in licensing regulations to strengthen their health, safety, and other basic requirements, achieving any level of quality rating should require additional criteria beyond licensing to make up for deficiencies in their regulatory policies.

☐ States may consider developing plans to provide supports to licensed programs that are not yet ready to participate in the rating system, and may require interim steps, such as accessing program support and implementing program improvement plans.

☐ If a significant proportion of the state's high needs children are served in family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care or in license-exempt care in other settings, the state may include plans to identify those providers and offer them quality supports within the context of

the QRIS, and perhaps in partnership with other sectors of the early learning system, such as home visiting and professional development.

Illinois: Incorporating License Exempt Providers into QRIS

When Illinois implemented its QRIS, more children, including infants and toddlers, were in family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care than were in either licensed centers or licensed homes. To ensure the state's QRIS reached these children, Illinois developed a tiered training program within its QRIS specifically for license exempt providers. While exempt providers are not eligible to be rated under the state QRIS, which requires licensing at its first level, they are able to access increasing levels of training that in some cases is moving them toward licensing standards.

Reach Children with the Highest Needs

To work effectively, state QRIS must promote quality standards that improve services and outcomes for children with high needs, including infants and toddlers, English Language Learners, and those with developmental delays and other special needs. States whose plans include the design or development of their QRIS can consider addressing the following priorities in the RTT-ELC plan:

☐ Engage the appropriate experts in the QRIS design process. The state's QRIS design plan should include steps to include experts in infant and toddler development, second language acquisition, immigrant and migrant

communities, cultural competency, and other specialized areas reflecting the population of high needs children in the state and local communities.

☐ Include a plan to review and utilize relevant data in the QRIS process. This may include data regarding child care utilization among minority populations in the state, subsidy utilization among families with infants and toddlers, the service needs of children identified with developmental delays, availability of different provider settings in specific regions of the state, or other topics relevant to your state's population of high needs children.

Indiana: Supporting Teachers in Developing Cultural Competence

In Indiana, the state Bureau of Child Care and Department of Health worked with Head Start and the First Steps initiative to provide funding for infant mental health credentialing among child care providers. The credential, which incorporates cultural sensitivity, meets state QRIS training requirements and better prepares professionals to work with diverse infants and toddlers with mental health needs. The example speaks to the importance of including program supports that promote cultural competence and to having a variety of partners at the planning table who can provide the necessary expertise and resources to meet the QRIS goals.

☐ Consider the experience of other states and their success in reaching high needs

populations. States should include plans for making decisions about how standards will be structured, and whether standards that address the needs of specific populations are embedded across standard areas, or whether there are specific sets of standards for programs serving infants and toddlers, family child care settings, inclusive child care settings or other subsets of programs and providers.

☐ Review the tools available for monitoring and rating in QRIS, and devise a plan to select the tools most appropriate to the state's high need population. States should consider tools that evaluate program quality, child and adult interactions, and child outcomes. In all cases, states must evaluate which tools are designed to reflect the populations of providers and children in their states – whether the tools are available in multiple languages, whether they are designed to be used with infants, toddlers and older children, and whether the tools are appropriate for use in the settings where the highest needs children are being served.

States planning to strengthen or expand their QRIS should include steps to ensure children with high needs are participating in high quality programs that address those needs. Steps may include:

☐ Reviewing other systems to ensure the QRIS standards align with learning guidelines, professional development systems, workforce competencies, state pre-kindergarten standards and other widely used standards like federal Head Start Program Performance Standards and national accreditation standards. States with operational QRIS

should consider revisiting the question of alignment if other components of their early childhood system have changed since the initial development of their standards.

☐ Engaging programs and providers in the state QRIS in a review of their experience in the system. Dialogue with providers currently participating in the QRIS can surface policies and practices within the QRIS that may pose barriers to serving high needs children. Providers can offer feedback on tiered subsidy rates, program standards, rating and monitoring practices, the effectiveness of supports, and other elements of the QRIS that may facilitate or impede their participation in the QRIS.

☐ Strengthening and incorporating QRIS elements that improve services for English Language Learners or culturally and linguistically diverse children and engage diverse providers. States may include plans to review standards and incorporate cultural competence into QRIS program standards. State QRIS may also incorporate provisions into their workforce or professional development standards that support the needs of a culturally diverse early childhood workforce, and implement policies that support limited English proficient (LEP) providers.

☐ Incorporating provisions that help programs participating in QRIS meet the health and developmental needs of at-risk children starts early, with comprehensive services and screening available in early childhood

settings beginning at birth. Plans for addressing health and development may include engaging health and development experts in review of the existing QRIS standards, incorporating additional requirements related to preventive health care and developmental screening into QRIS standards, and including related professional development in QRIS program and practitioner supports.

Pennsylvania: Cultural Competence Across Keystone Stars

Incorporating cultural competence across QRIS standards is critical to serving diverse children and families, but it is one part of a broader QRIS strategy that builds the cultural competence of the field. Pennsylvania has systematically built cultural competence into Keystone Stars, its state QRIS, by:

- Embedding criteria into Keystone Stars standards based on NAEYC's Quality Benchmarks for Cultural Competence project;
- Developing a training module for technical assistance consultants working within the state's early childhood system, based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Race Matters toolkit; and
- Creating an English Language Learner Early Care and Education Toolkit to support early childhood professionals.

Taking these steps ensures that Keystone Stars communicates that cultural competence is a priority for participating programs, the program support system, and administrators.

☐ Identifying and prioritizing elements of the QRIS that provide the most opportunities for strengthening the system. For example, states may focus on collecting better data about QRIS participation, more effectively engaging providers, improving the delivery of program and practitioner supports to increase participation, or strengthening the QRIS standards to ensure they represent high quality services for high needs children.

Implementation, Monitoring, and Program Supports

The RTT-ELC establishes the expectation that states will use a combination of reliable monitoring and sound data to evaluate the impact of their QRIS over time. States are encouraged to implement comprehensive data systems and to use the data to improve instruction, practices, services, and policies."[iii] To demonstrate success, a QRIS must be soundly tied to reliable indicators of quality and be administered effectively. States should review their plans to design or strengthen their QRIS to ensure they include policies that will result in providing high quality child care and early education to most vulnerable children.

Monitoring

☐ Some states incorporate Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) as a tool for self evaluation and planning, and other states require the use of ERS for rating purposes. However, there have been concerns in some states about the consistency and accuracy of ERS scores provided by outside evaluators. QRIS that rely on program assessment must have a plan to ensure that those conducting the assessments are well trained and reliable and have access to ongoing professional development and quality control.

☐ States must include plans to establish or increase communication between QRIS staff and licensing divisions and staff to ensure that guidance offered to programs is not contradictory, and that licensing and QRIS standards do not conflict. Coordination and communication between the licensing and QRIS systems is also critical to minimize duplication in program evaluation and site visits.

☐ As states design, expand, and improve their QRIS, they must ensure that the standards and criteria they have created for programs actually translate into higher levels of quality. As state QRIS systems are created and changed, validation of the standards is a critical step. This can be accomplished by using the QRIS rating system to evaluate a sample of programs, and using another reliable tool such as Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) to evaluate the same programs. Although the two evaluations may measure slightly different things, the QRIS ratings and evaluation scores of programs should correlate. If they don't, then the standards and criteria of the QRIS may need to be re-evaluated.

☐ If child assessment is a component of the state QRIS – either as part of its quality standards or as a way of monitoring programs and the effectiveness of the QRIS – states are required by the RTT-ELC application to "ensure that early childhood educators have the information they need to understand and

support young children's growth and development across a broad range of domains." [iv] Any child assessment conducted in programs or as part of a larger evaluation should conform to the recommendations of the National Research Council's reports on early childhood. The National Research Council recommends that assessments used to measure learning in early childhood be purposeful, assess the multiple domains of development, and use a tool that is validated and culturally appropriate.

Program Supports

☐ QRIS levels and criteria should be created to challenge programs to improve, while recognizing the current level of quality among providers in the state. States should ensure they have a plan to collect data about program quality early on and regularly, so states can identify where additional standards and related supports may be needed.

☐ States should include in their plans steps to map their professional development system, and ensure it reaches all service settings included in the QRIS. Providers and staff should have access to high quality training and professional development on topics related to caring for infants and toddlers, serving dual language learners, screening and comprehensive services, child assessment, and curriculum development.

☐ States must include in their tiered QRIS sufficient financial benefits for programs to actively participate in the QRIS and improve and maintain their program quality. States should target monetary and non-monetary

supports to help programs achieve greater proficiency in working with infants and toddlers, English language learners, children with special needs, and other high need children.

Conclusion

To meet the goals of the RTT-ELC, states may need to build on and strengthen their existing QRIS systems. By doing so in ways that expand access for low-income and disadvantaged children, encourage partnerships and system integration, and ensure program standards reflect the developmental needs of infants and toddlers, states will not only meet the goals of the RTT-ELC but will more importantly ensure that families are supported and children are receiving the services that most benefit their healthy growth and development.

Additional Resources:

Administration for Children and Families QRIS Resource Guide, available at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/cc/childcare_quality/index.html

Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) Child Care Research *Quality Rating Systems (QRS) Assessment Project, 2008-2011,* available at: *http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/cc/childcare_quality/index.html*

CLASP's *Tool Using Data to Inform a State Infant/Toddler Care Agenda*, available at: http://www.clasp.org/babiesinchildcare/publications?id=0004

CLASP's Selected State and Local Policies to Support Immigrant and Limited English Proficient (LEP) Early Care and Education Providers, available at:

http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0383.pdf

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, available at: http://nrckids.org/CFOC3/index.html

NAEYC'S *Quality Benchmarks for Cultural Competence Project*, available at: http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/policy/state/QBCC_Tool.pdf

QRIS National Learning Network materials, available at: http://www.qrisnetwork.org/

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[i] Child Trends, Early Childhood Highlights, Volume 1, Issue 1, *Quality Rating and Improvement Systems for Early Care and Education*, May 10, 2010.

[ii] To evaluate the strength of child care licensing regulations, states may wish to use CLASP's Tool Using Data to Inform a State Infant/Toddler Care Agenda, available at: http://www.clasp.org/babiesinchildcare/publications?id=0004 States may also evaluate their licensing regulations against the recommendations of *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs*, produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, and the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, available at: http://nrckids.org/CFOC3/index.html.

[iii] Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge. Application for Initial Funding. CFDA Number: 84.412; U.S. Department of Education, 8/22/11, page 9.

[iv] Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge. Application for Initial Funding. CFDA Number: 84.412; U.S. Department of Education, 8/22/11, page 8.