

## QRIS & Work Environments

Research documenting the negative effects of the mediocre quality of most early care and education settings on children's learning and development underlies decades of debate about the most effective strategies to improve services for young children in the United States.<sup>86</sup> There is no single ingredient to effectively prepare teachers of young children and to support their continual growth as professionals on the job. While strategies focused on increased professional development and education for individual members of the workforce have historically dominated policy and practice, the ingredients that influence early childhood workplace environments — what teachers need in addition to training and education in order to help children succeed — have been routinely overlooked in quality improvement efforts. Just as children's environments can support or impede their learning, work environments promote or hinder teachers' practice and ongoing skill development.<sup>87</sup>

Teachers in the K-12 system can typically expect their work environment to implement program policies that allow for and promote teacher initiative and that support teachers' economic, physical, and emotional well-being. They can rely on such provisions as a salary schedule that accounts for experience and level of education, paid professional development activities, and paid planning time, as well as access to such benefits as paid personal/sick leave and health care. Nonetheless, early childhood teachers routinely face insufficient teaching supports and inadequate rewards for their education and commitment (e.g., low pay and lack of benefits). These shortcomings contribute to poor program quality and fuel high levels of teacher turnover, preventing program improvement and making it increasingly challenging to attract well-trained and educated teachers to work in early learning programs.<sup>88</sup>

### SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY UNDERLYING ADULT LEARNING (SEQUAL)

Gathering teachers' perspectives on the features of their work environments that best allow them to apply their skills and continue to develop their knowledge is a starting point for generating new avenues and solutions that can lead to enhanced performance. Other industries, such as health care, have used this approach and have engaged practitioners themselves in strengthening organizational capacity.<sup>89</sup> SEQUAL<sup>90</sup> is a multi-purpose, validated tool developed by CSCCE to gather teaching staff perspectives about quality improvement. SEQUAL addresses five critical areas of teachers' learning environments: teaching supports; learning opportunities; policies and practices that support teaching staff initiative and teamwork; adult well-being; and how supervisors and program leaders interact with staff to support their teaching practice.

SEQUAL brings teacher voices into quality improvement strategies, provides contextual information about workplace conditions that impact teacher practice and program quality, and builds a vocabulary for the field around teachers' needs for workplace supports. SEQUAL is used by researchers and policymakers to understand the interplay between teacher education and the work environment and as a technical assistance tool to guide improvements to program policies, practices, and conditions necessary to support teachers' work with children.

In recent years, more comprehensive approaches to quality improvement in early childhood education — those that focus on the program as a whole — have garnered increased public attention and resources. These program approaches were initially exemplified by center-based and family child care accreditation by professional organizations; now they include state or locally governed Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). States have an opportunity to encourage quality programs through their QRIS by including workplace and compensation policies among their quality criteria, focusing on teaching supports, adult well-being, and learning opportunities.<sup>91</sup>

## WHAT IS QRIS?

“A QRIS is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs.” QRIS administrators “award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards.” See the [QRIS Resource Guide](#).<sup>92</sup>

Although participation in QRIS varies, as most systems remain voluntary<sup>93</sup> and participation is limited, they have become the predominant quality improvement strategy in most states.<sup>94</sup> As of 2015, 36 states had an operational QRIS, with some states, such as California and Florida, operating multiple QRIS at the regional or local levels.

This growth highlights the critical need to understand and examine how these systems define quality, the benchmarks used to indicate quality, and the opportunities in place to support improvement. QRIS ratings are based on standards — or “agreed upon

markers of quality established in areas critical to effective programming and child outcomes” — and the elements incorporated communicate important messages to stakeholders, including policymakers, teachers, and administrators, about the values and priorities that are deemed the most important areas for focusing resources and attention.<sup>95,96</sup> The degree of attention that a given QRIS pays to the workforce through such factors as staff education and professional development, compensation and benefits, and work environments — factors that have been linked to program quality improvement and sustainability<sup>97</sup> — may determine how practitioners invest their energies to enhance programs for young children, how public resources are prioritized and allocated for quality improvement, and the ultimate success of the QRIS strategy itself.

In a [previous policy brief](#),<sup>98</sup> CSCCE performed a systematic analysis of whether QRIS included benchmarks for teaching supports, adult well-being, and learning opportunities for center-based programs. A key finding was that, while staff qualifications were featured as a quality element in all QRIS, workplace teaching supports and compensation were much less likely to be included.



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## BENEFITS & TEACHING SUPPORTS IN STATE-FUNDED PRE-K

Few states require paid planning time or professional development time for teachers in their state-funded pre-K programs to be comparable with that provided K-12 teachers: New Jersey, Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee are the exceptions that require this provision for lead teachers across all programs and settings.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, while several states require comparable benefit packages for pre-K teachers working in public schools, only Missouri also requires benefit parity for teachers in community-based settings.<sup>101</sup> Hawaii's pre-K system is delivered only via the public school system and also requires benefit parity for all pre-K teachers in the state.<sup>102</sup>

Five years later, it remains the case that staff qualifications and training are one of the most commonly assessed areas of quality and are included in nearly all QRIS for both center- and home-based providers.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, many QRIS include financial assistance and incentives for education and training for staff (see Qualifications, p. 32). However, fewer QRIS acknowledge the importance of positive and supportive work environment benchmarks. For this inaugural edition of the *Index*, we focus on a few, select indicators of whether QRIS include attention to workplace supports and compensation: paid time for professional development, paid planning or preparation time, and salary scales or benefit options, such as health insurance or paid leave from work.

In our assessment of states, we emphasize the importance of taking a multidimensional approach to workplace supports, exemplified through the inclusion of three distinct but related aspects of the work environment, as well as consistency between quality benchmarks for centers and home-based providers.<sup>103</sup> Data for the indicators are drawn from the [QRIS compendium](#),<sup>104</sup> which provides an overview of all operational QRIS across the states.<sup>105</sup> The compendium is a useful resource for understanding what standards are included in QRIS ratings, but it does not provide detailed data on all state standards (e.g., how much paid planning time or what type of workplace benefits are offered).

Additionally, we assess whether QRIS include particular markers of quality in their ratings and not whether programs adopt these standards. For example, some QRIS operate using a "building block" system, where programs are required to meet *all* standards in order to move up in rating; however, many QRIS operate as "point systems," so that programs are not necessarily required to meet all items in order to advance to a higher rating.<sup>106</sup> Where point systems are used, even if paid planning time is included as a standard, programs do not necessarily need to offer it in order to improve their rating. Additional data on early childhood programs by state is required to understand to what extent these standards are being met in practice.

### Assessing the States: QRIS & Work Environments

***Indicator 1: Does a state's QRIS include paid professional development time for center-based programs?***

Continuing professional development is a core aspect of the adult learning environment, yet many staff do not have access to paid time to pursue these opportunities. Only four states include paid time for professional development as a quality benchmark for center-based programs, and none of these states include the equivalent for home-based providers.

***Indicator 2: Does a state's QRIS include paid planning and/or preparation time for center-based programs?***

Paid time for teachers to plan or prepare for children's activities is essential to a high-quality service, but it is not a guarantee for early educators, many of whom must plan while simultaneously caring for children or during unpaid hours. Twelve states include paid time for planning and/or preparation as a quality benchmark for center-based programs, but only six of these (Delaware, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, Washington, and Wisconsin) also include it for home-based providers.

***Indicator 3: Does a state's QRIS include salary scale and/or benefits for center-based programs?***

QRIS could be an opportunity to signal that — just like education levels — compensation and retention are important markers of quality, but not all QRIS include salary levels and benefit packages as part of their ratings. Eighteen states include salary scales and/or benefit options, such as health insurance and paid leave from work, as benchmarks of program quality for center-based programs, while only about half as many include this indicator for home-based providers.

***Indicator 4: If a state's QRIS has one or more of the above benchmarks for center-based providers, does it also include home-based providers?***

Although the diversity of settings in the early childhood field makes consistency across settings a challenge, in principle, a child should be able to receive high-quality services regardless of whether those services are offered in a center or a home. Therefore, home-based providers should also aim for a quality adult working environment and be funded accordingly.

Of states that included one or more of the above indicators of quality for center-based programs, only 10 included them for home-based providers as well. In some cases, states included home-based providers for some, but not all, of the indicators they required for centers. For example, Maine and Pennsylvania both include paid planning or preparation time as well as salary schedules or benefits in their standards for center-based programs, but only included benefits, and not planning time, for home-based providers. In such cases, the lack of consistency meant that the state did not meet our criteria for inclusion. Although we recognize that structural differences between center- and home-based services present different challenges and require varying levels of funding in order to meet these standards, all early care and education services require supportive work environments in order to be effective.

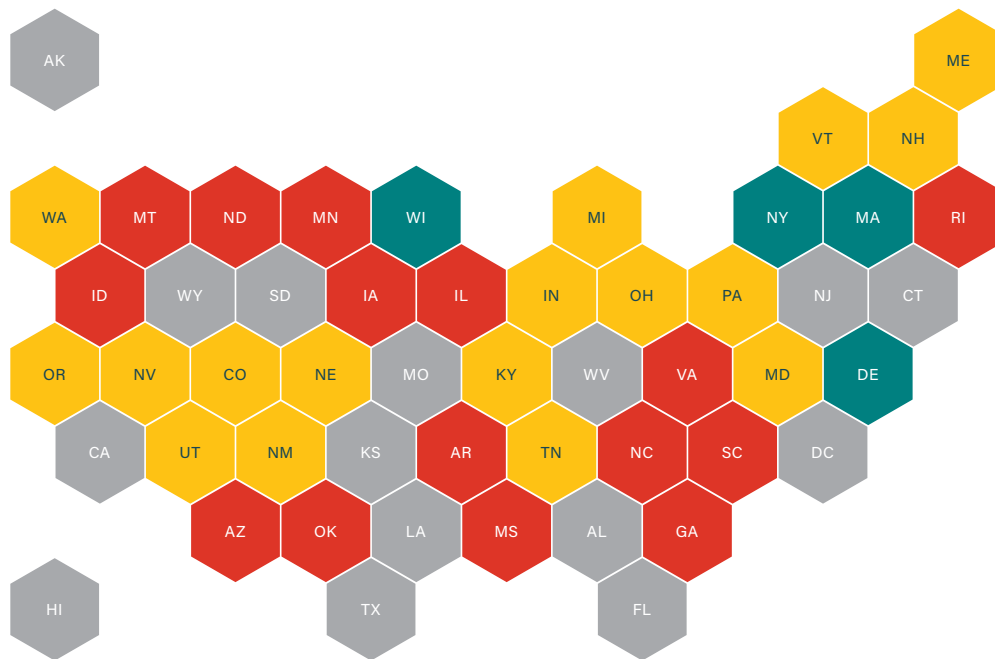
### ***State Assessment***

The 15 **stalled** states met none of these indicators. In all, 17 states are **edging forward**, having met at least one of the first three indicators, but not the last, or having met only one of the first three indicators as well as the last. Four states are **making headway**, having met two out of the first three indicators as well as the fourth indicator. No states met all four indicators. In some cases, this rating meant that they included all three indicators of adult working environment in their quality ratings, but did not also include home-based providers for all of them, such as in Ohio or Vermont. See Table 4.2 for a state-by-state overview of each indicator and the overall assessment.

A total of 15 states (including the District of Columbia) could not be included in this assessment because they do not have a statewide QRIS, their QRIS is currently under development, or data for their state were otherwise unavailable through the [QRIS compendium](#).<sup>107</sup>

**Figure 4.2**

## State Map of QRIS & Work Environments Assessment



**STALLED:** the state has made limited or no progress

**EDGING FORWARD:** the state has made partial progress

**MAKING HEADWAY:** the state is taking action and advancing promising policies

**UNAVAILABLE**

## Policy Recommendations: QRIS & Work Environments

- Develop workplace standards, such as paid planning time, which are necessary for educators to engage in professional practice and to alleviate conditions that cause educator stress, and revise QRIS rating criteria and other state guidelines accordingly.
- Provide financial resources and other assistance to enable programs and providers to comply with standards in a reasonable period of time.

For additional policy recommendations, see the [Early Childhood Workforce Index Executive Summary](#).

## PAID PLANNING TIME IN NEW YORK QRIS (QUALITYstarsNY)

New York's QRIS, QUALITYstarsNY,<sup>108</sup> is one of a few systems that includes the provision of paid planning or preparation time in its standards for both center- and home-based providers. As part of its "Management and Leadership" standard category, QUALITYstarsNY outlines the benefits of staff planning:

"It is imperative for the health and well-being of children that early childhood professionals are present and prepared for work. QUALITYstarsNY recommends providing paid planning time and access to resources, so that teachers can be prepared and attentive to children when they are in the learning environment. In the case of a teacher's absence, the program must be prepared. QUALITYstarsNY recommends having a written plan to cover planned and unplanned absences."<sup>109</sup>

However, QUALITYstarsNY is new and is funded to engage only about 4.5 percent of early childhood programs (including child care, Head Start, pre-K, and family child care) in New York at this time.<sup>110</sup> New programs are recruited each year in the interest of reaching the goal of 80 percent center-based participation and 25 percent family child care site participation.

Recent New York QRIS administrative data shows an increase in the number of programs offering paid planning time.<sup>111</sup> Out of a total of 196 programs that received quality ratings in both 2013 and 2015,<sup>112</sup> 180 responded regarding whether or not they met planning time standards.<sup>113</sup> In 2013, 62 percent of these programs offered at least one hour of paid planning time per week to lead teachers. In 2015, this number rose to 74 percent. There was also an increase in programs providing at least one hour every other week of paid time for classroom staff to plan together (away from children): from 52 percent in 2013 to 64 percent in 2015. There is no data about whether programs that are not participating in QRIS also offer these benefits, so it is not possible to say that the standard set by QRIS programs is becoming more widely adopted by non-participating programs as well. This preliminary evidence suggests that New York's approach is promising, but more research is needed to understand how widespread paid planning time is among all New York's early childhood programs and any barriers or challenges to increasing its provision via QRIS funding.

Table 4.2	QRIS & Work Environments Indicators & Assessment by State				
State	Paid Time for Professional Development	Paid Planning and/or Preparation Time	Salary Schedule/ Benefits	Same for Home Providers	Overall Assessment
Alabama	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Alaska	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arizona					Stalled
Arkansas					Stalled
California <sup>1</sup>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Colorado		X	X		Edging forward
Connecticut	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Delaware		X	X	X	Making headway
District of Columbia	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Florida <sup>2</sup>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Georgia					Stalled
Hawaii	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Idaho					Stalled
Illinois					Stalled
Indiana		X			Edging forward
Iowa					Stalled
Kansas	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kentucky			X		Edging forward
Louisiana	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Maine		X	X		Edging forward
Maryland			X	X	Edging forward
Massachusetts		X	X	X	Making headway
Michigan			X	X	Edging forward
Minnesota					Stalled
Mississippi					Stalled
Missouri	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

State	Paid Time for Professional Development	Paid Planning and/or Preparation Time	Salary Schedule/ Benefits	Same for Home Providers	Overall Assessment
Montana					Stalled
Nebraska			X	X	Edging forward
Nevada			X		Edging forward
New Hampshire			X		Edging forward
New Jersey	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
New Mexico		X		X	Edging forward
New York		X	X	X	Making headway
North Carolina					Stalled
North Dakota					Stalled
Ohio	X	X	X		Edging forward
Oklahoma					Stalled
Oregon			X	X	Edging forward
Pennsylvania		X	X		Edging forward
Rhode Island					Stalled
South Carolina					Stalled
South Dakota	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tennessee	X		X		Edging forward
Texas	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Utah	X		X		Edging forward
Vermont	X	X	X		Edging forward
Virginia					Stalled
Washington		X		X	Edging forward
West Virginia	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Wisconsin		X	X	X	Making headway
Wyoming	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	

<sup>1</sup> California's system is administered locally in 27 counties by 23 lead agencies called the Consortia. Some of these localities may include these markers of program quality.

<sup>2</sup> Florida's system is made up of three local QRIS: Strong Minds (formerly Palm Beach Quality Counts), Guiding Stars of Duval, and Miami-Dade Quality Counts. Of these, only Guiding Stars of Duval included any of these markers of program quality: salary scale/benefits.



## Endnotes

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