

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As more states and communities develop and adopt child care Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) as a mechanism to improve the quality of their early care and education programs, stakeholders are seeing opportunities for QRIS to also serve as a potential system-building agent within the fragmented early childhood care and education (ECE) system. At this time, little has been documented across states implementing QRIS about their interest and active involvement in integration of the early care and education (ECE) system or, importantly, about what such involvement actually entails and how it could be accomplished and measured. Recognizing this gap in information about QRISs, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) supported this in-depth exploration of the QRIS and how it functions within the ECE system through the Child Care Quality Rating System Assessment (QRS Assessment) project.¹

In the early stages of system development, definitional work is necessary in order to identify quantifiable indicators of progress that can be tracked over time. This report focuses on approaches in use by QRIS in Indiana and Pennsylvania to connect with and build on the programs and resources that exist within the ECE system. Lessons from these states about how to define and measure system development and change can help other states and stakeholders as they plan for system integration and track progress toward system goals over time. Ultimately, the evaluation of a systems-building approach would examine the degree to which redundancies have been eliminated and efficiencies gained (such as in staff time, program requirements, and funding streams) and the overall effectiveness of the approach in achieving better outcomes for children and their families.

A. Research Questions and Study Methods

We drew from prior work by the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force (in 2007) and others, to focus on eight components of an ECE system (Exhibit ES.1). Using these components of a system as an organizing framework, this in-depth study examined the following two primary research questions:

- What role do QRISs have and to what extent do they contribute to integration through each of the ECE system components?
- How could states and localities assess the extent to which QRISs are contributing to ECE system development?

Indiana and Pennsylvania were purposefully selected for in-depth study because preliminary information suggested that the QRIS model itself was relatively well-defined in each state and that intentional goals and efforts to connect the QRIS with other ECE programs and services were in place. As such, their experiences are not reflective of all states. Nonetheless, examining these two states as possible front-runners in using the QRIS to unify and integrate early care and learning experiences for children can help define what system building looks like from the QRIS perspective.

¹Mathematica Policy Research is conducting the QRS Assessment in partnership with Child Trends and Christian and Tvedt Consulting.

The intent was to gather information about which approaches are possible and have been attempted; it is beyond the scope of the study to make any assessment about which approaches actually work.

Exhibit ES.1. Eight Components of the ECE System for Use in Analysis

Governance	Early Learning Standards
Extent to which the leadership, administration, or oversight of programs is integrated across ECE programs	Alignment of a set of early learning and program standards with curricula and child assessments across ECE programs
Provider and Program Engagement	Professional Development (PD) and Training
Range in programs and the density of their use of QRIS or similar standards in order to maintain children within a system of high quality ECE programs	Extent of coordination in defining and aligning skills, education, and training across ECE programs and ensuring PD programs are up to date and focused on early learning standards
Financing	Dissemination of Information
Ways in which QRIS funds are used to set common goals for ECE programs or support common initiatives	Extent of and coordination in efforts to inform the general public about the importance of quality in ECE programs
Quality Assurance Mechanisms	Accountability and Data Systems
Extent of shared practices in standards, monitoring, or quality improvement activities across ECE programs	Extent of integrated (or linked) data systems across ECE programs to monitor program, provider, teacher, and child outcomes

Source: Adaptation of frameworks presented by Kagan and Neuman 2003; the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force 2007, and Tout et al. 2009.

B. The QRIS Role Across Eight System Components

The QRIS in Indiana and Pennsylvania have developed approaches to each of the eight system components that provide information about the function of QRIS in system integration. The two QRIS often have similarities in their approach, but they are pursued or implemented to different degrees given the context and resources within each state.

1. Governance and Infrastructure

From the two study states, the QRIS emerged as an organizing framework for system integration. It was not necessarily the catalyst for integration in each state, but each QRIS does now serve as an overarching governance body for quality initiatives and, perhaps more importantly, it has become the key infrastructure for delivering a wide range of services to child care providers that may benefit children and their families.

- A QRIS focuses the intention and organization of quality initiatives both from a fiscal and administrative point of view. Specifically, much of the structure and services for the QRIS in Pennsylvania and Indiana already existed; respondents in both states reported that the QRIS brought them together in a more systematic and organized way.
- The QRIS is credited by respondents in each state with pulling the strands of different programs together and housing their delivery within key partner agencies at both the state and local levels.

- The QRIS infrastructure now plays a central role in reaching child care providers and programs. QRIS specialists connect providers with technical assistance, professional development opportunities, licensing staff, subsidies, early intervention specialists, infant/toddler mental health specialists and other supports for providers or the children and families they serve. Prior to the QRIS, there was less of a sense of this “one-stop shop” nature to the services that can support early care providers.

2. Provider and Program Engagement

The role of QRIS program engagement in ECE system integration can be explicit or implicit: explicit by deepening the reach of QRIS within the child care market and, potentially, across varied ECE programs, and implicit by sending a signal about the commitment to quality through participation. Integration can also be apparent in the messaging about program participation—through: (1) the multiple avenues to reach providers and bring them into the QRIS and, (2) the goals communicated to providers about quality in care and professionalism in the workforce.

- Indiana and Pennsylvania have achieved relatively high density in the degree of participation among child care providers. The majority of licensed child care centers participate in the QRIS at 81 and 67 percent in Indiana and Pennsylvania, respectively. Participation levels among family child care providers are markedly lower at 49 and 33 percent in Indiana and Pennsylvania, respectively.
- Participation among Head Start programs is not fully known, but appears to vary from about 40 percent in Indiana to minimal in Pennsylvania.
- Administrators in Indiana believe that the key in promoting participation in QRIS is in showing respect for providers. They report that “everyone is recruiting” to bring providers into the QRIS, without being judgmental about where a provider may fall on the rating spectrum.
- It is possible that QRIS participation signals an external perception of the commitment to quality and professionalism among child care providers and, in turn, has the potential to encourage integration with other ECE programs through shared goals and equal partnerships.

3. Financing

The direction and use of funds reflects the policy priorities of administrators, law-makers, and key stakeholders. In the same way, administrators can use financing methods to achieve specific goals. In the case of QRIS, the first goal for administrators in Indiana and Pennsylvania was to find a way to launch the effort within the parameters of existing resources. The QRIS, once launched, became a vehicle in both states to advance cross-program goals through the use of financial incentives and joint funding endeavors between the QRIS and other programs.

- By identifying ways to support the QRIS with existing resources, the two states embedded an approach focused on shared system goals from the start by considering (1) what programs, initiatives and services fit together; and (2) how can they be delivered most efficiently?
- Two funding strategies used to promote program integration and advance shared goals emerged from Pennsylvania and Indiana:

- Pennsylvania uses participation in the QRIS as a gateway through which child care providers and programs can access additional funding and QRIS provider incentives are used to promote the goals of other programs.
- Both states mix QRIS and other sources of funding to support specific, joint efforts such as TEACH scholarships (in Indiana) or training around special initiatives (in both states).

4. Quality Assurance

The experience of the two states suggests three mechanisms through which to assess the degree of system integration with regard to quality assurance: (1) the use of licensing as a foundation for the QRIS, (2) aligning quality requirements across child care settings and ECE programs, and (3) the use of common supports and tools for quality improvement across ECE programs.

- The message that QRIS administrators in Indiana and Pennsylvania chose to convey was that licensing sets the initial standards; the QRIS builds on those standards and adds content to support children’s learning. The QRIS specialists in both states typically have specific training in early childhood education and/or development and, therefore, bring a different set of skills and perspective than licensing staff.
- The QRIS has emerged as a means of defining quality primarily for child care providers within an environment in which other standards already exist, such as accreditation and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). By involving representatives of the various ECE programs in the development of the QRIS standards, the QRIS standards in both states better reflect the common perspectives and various requirements across programs.
- Activities for quality improvement that have been implemented by the QRIS in Indiana and Pennsylvania largely stay focused within the QRIS given that ECE programs have their own sets of standards that they must meet (for example, HSPPS), and the concept of progress along a continuum is specific to the QRIS. For example:
 - financial incentives and awards to support continued quality improvement are provided only to programs participating in the QRIS
 - technical assistance is targeted toward participating QRIS programs (and to a lesser degree programs attempting to enter)
- In Pennsylvania, two tools adopted or developed for use in the QRIS are also required in other state-funded ECE programs—Pre-K Counts and Head Start State Supplemental Programs. Specifically, these programs must use the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) to assess global quality and the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plans to map progress in improving quality.

5. Early Learning Standards

The use of early learning standards can build a powerful bridge between child care and early education programs in joint efforts to prepare young children for school. The QRIS is a mechanism through which early learning standards can potentially penetrate into the knowledge and practice of child care providers and in this way, the QRIS can enhance the role child care providers play in supporting early learning.

- Indiana and Pennsylvania have both developed early learning guidelines and/or standards through joint efforts by the respective state departments of education (the lead agency) and the departments that oversee social services. Both states make the guidelines or standards widely accessible to early care and education programs.
- Pennsylvania and Indiana have attempted to embed the use of early learning standards in child care settings through specific requirements for participation in the QRIS. These requirements begin with a focus on training on the early learning standards, escalate to requiring documentation of the connection between the standards and the curriculum, and ultimately address the connection between the standards and child observation and assessment.

6. Professional Development

The ECE professional development systems in place today in Indiana and Pennsylvania were largely built on infrastructure that was in place prior to the development of the QRIS in each state. These systems have always been complex with responsibilities and initiatives that span a broad range of partners, goals, and funding sources. The QRIS in each state is attributed with developing cohesive goals for professional development activities and bringing intentionality to what were viewed as fragmented professional development systems.

- While the partners in the delivery of professional development remain numerous and varied, the planning, development, and oversight of the system has become more centralized in both Indiana and Pennsylvania as a result of the creation of the QRIS.
- The QRIS in the two states provides both support and incentives to providers moving up the levels beyond licensing and in this way drives the demand for professional development among an increasing number of child care providers.
- Since the development of their QRIS, each of the two states has strengthened their structure of supports for the educational advancement of child care providers through, (1) increased funding of scholarship and tuition assistance (such as TEACH), and (2) increased emphasis on articulation agreements between specific institutions of higher education that allow individuals to apply credits from lower level credit-bearing certificates or degrees toward more advanced degrees (for example, using CDA credits toward an Associate of Arts [AA] degree, or AA credits toward a Bachelor of Arts [BA] degree.)
- QRIS requirements for program directors in each state led to the creation of formal credential programs—the Early Childhood Program Administration certificate in Indiana is the result of the highest QRIS rating that specifies business and administration requirements and the Director’s Credential in Pennsylvania was developed to meet requirements for achieving a rating level of 3 or 4.
- Beyond setting hour requirements, QRIS developers and administrators placed emphasis on defining what would “count” as PD to meet these requirements and increasing accountability and professionalism among the PD instructors and TA providers.
- Respondents in both states indicated that the creation of the QRIS brought increased purpose and use to tools and resources that had already existed in the professional development system without great effect before. For example, with staff qualifications as

an intricate part of the QRIS standards, individual providers and larger organizations have a greater need for a means of documenting completion of approved training and educational courses such as through PD registries or PD plans.

7. Dissemination of Information

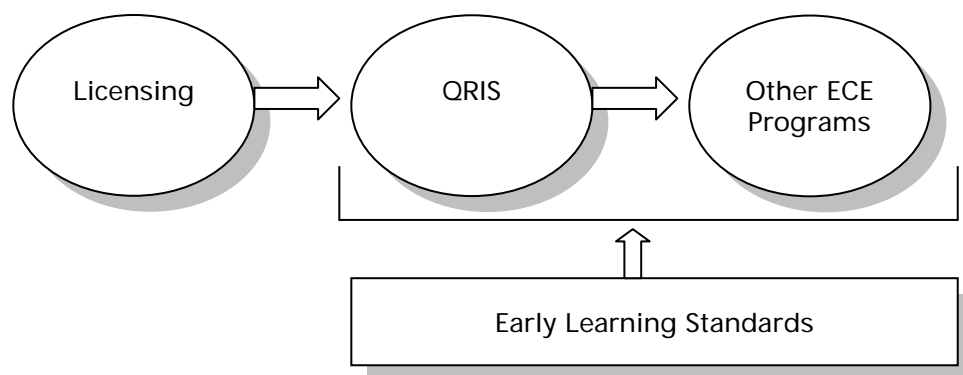
Dissemination of the ratings to the general public, and specifically to families seeking child care, is a key QRIS component that sets it apart from other quality and ECE system improvement efforts. This first objective of dissemination is specific to the QRIS—building the familiarity with the QRIS name/brand, different rating levels, and what they mean. A second objective for dissemination of information—and one that extends beyond the QRIS—is building public awareness about the need for quality in early care and education generally, and what quality looks like.

- In disseminating information about the QRIS to parents, the QRIS in Indiana and Pennsylvania rely heavily on partnerships with the child care subsidy program and local implementing partners (Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies in Indiana, and the Regional Keys in Pennsylvania).
- Respondents in both states indicated that another important route for sharing information about the QRIS with parents and the general public is through the participating providers themselves. Both states described the use of a broad array of marketing materials—signs, logos, flags, banners, brochures, certificates, pin-on badges, and window clings—that are distributed to providers.
- Other broad quality awareness campaigns may develop separately from information dissemination about the QRIS. The QRIS can link to these broader campaigns and become a readily tangible way of identifying what parents should look for in quality care. Such a campaign is present in Pennsylvania (PA Promise for Children), but not in Indiana.

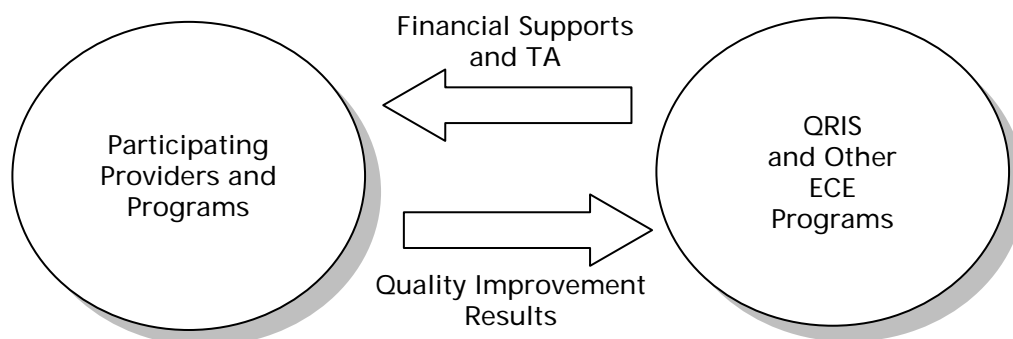
8. Accountability

Ultimately, accountability refers to defining the results a system should achieve and setting goals or benchmarks to achieve them. More broadly, accountability also refers to key agencies and staff being answerable to others concerning the work performed and the results of such work. The QRIS in Indiana and Pennsylvania incorporate accountability in ways that connect the QRIS with other programs within the ECE system. These approaches fall into three categories: (1) cross-program accountability and responsiveness, (2) reciprocal responsibility, and (3) tracking progress and results.

- **Cross-program accountability:** Building interconnectivity between different programs can be a potent method of promoting integration and accountability (see Figure ES.1). In both states, the QRIS flows from licensing requirements that define the first rating level. In Pennsylvania, in particular, QRIS requirements then flow into other programs, such as use of the ERS or the need for a minimum QRIS rating level (among child care centers) to receive state funding for pre-kindergarten or Head Start. When one program's requirements are built on or tied to another, there can be a series of effects throughout the system. For example, a change in licensing requirements or a revision to the Early Learning Standards could necessitate a revision to the QRIS standards.

Figure ES.1. Cross Program Accountability

- Reciprocal responsibility to achieve goals.** QRIS administrators in Indiana and Pennsylvania use incentives and connections with other programs to promote accountability for quality improvement through QRIS (see Figure ES.2). The underlying message throughout the QRIS in the two states is that child care providers must be accountable for quality improvement if they are to receive financial or TA support.

Figure ES.2. Reciprocal Responsibility

- Tracking progress and results.** Each state uses a series of performance measures to promote accountability within the QRIS to assess results of specific activities as well as results across ECE programs. The two states monitor activity in the QRIS and, at times across programs, at the facility-level, the activity or initiative-level, and at the contractor-level. Both states have well-developed and well-specified QRIS data systems that enable the collection and use of detailed data that supports measurable accountability about the inputs (TA, financial awards, and staff contacts) and the outputs (level changes in QRIS ratings) associated with the QRIS.

C. Assessing the QRIS Contribution to ECE System Development

It is difficult to fully assess the degree to which the QRIS serves as either a catalyst (increasing the rate of integration) or a conduit (providing the means for integration) for each component. In most cases, the QRIS could serve either function depending on the context and the circumstances within the state. The argument could be made, based on the experience of Indiana and Pennsylvania, that the QRIS serves as a catalyst particularly in the areas of professional development and quality

assurance. The purpose of the QRIS and its drive toward increasingly higher PD and program requirements necessitates an intentional and cohesive infrastructure for addressing PD needs and providing supports in the quality improvement process in a way that other programs do not.

The approaches found in Indiana and Pennsylvania could be used as potential indicators to measure progress in the integration of each of the eight system components (summarized in Table ES.1). Future evaluation of QRIS in ECE system integration could make use of these progress indicators to similarly track and assess activities. There may still be other approaches not encountered in the two states, and the details in measuring the indicators need further refinement. However, this framework could be especially useful for states or localities in the early stages of planning or implementation of QRIS. Documenting the current state of the eight system components before or just as the QRIS launches and tracking them over time would be particularly useful in fully understanding the potential changes the QRIS brings to the ECE system.

The information based on the experiences of Indiana and Pennsylvania in defining what role the QRIS may play in ECE system integration can be useful in program planning, goal setting, monitoring, and evaluation. The explanations of the approaches and the development of indicators can inform QRIS development and ECE integration efforts from the start by providing an informed picture of each of the eight components and where and how QRIS fits in. The indicators in Table ES.1 can serve both as goals and as markers of progress by setting a series of benchmarks along the way. And, ultimately, a select few may be the focus of in-depth and robust evaluation over time toward a goal of assessing the efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of early care and education programs and services that improve child outcomes.

Table ES.1. Potential Indicators of the Role of QRIS in ECE System Integration, by System Component

System Component	Integration Indicators
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit systems-building goals and/or conceptual framework is in place • Integrated administration and oversight at the state level of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ child care = subsidized child care, licensing, and QRIS ○ early education = subsidized child care, licensing, QRIS, plus Head Start state representative, and pre-kindergarten ○ services = early intervention, mental health and/or infant/toddler specialists • Integrated administration and/or delivery at the local level of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ QRIS, resource and referral for child care, TA for quality assurance, PD, services for young children in child care (EI, Infant/Toddler) • Use of QRIS infrastructure to disseminate a broad array of information and resources and launch initiatives focused on young children and their families • Bi-directional cross-program participation in advisory or work groups (QRIS representatives to contribute to others; others to contribute to QRIS-focused governance and advisory groups)
Provider and program engagement (scale)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Density of QRIS participation rates among eligible providers, by care setting (center-based or home-care) and program-type (child care, Head Start, pre-kindergarten) • Use of performance targets to increase participation rates • Proliferation of cross-program outreach methods to non-participating providers • Use of shared messages in ECE programs about quality in care and professionalism in the workforce
Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examination of existing programs and uses of funds to reduce inefficiencies in overlapping and potentially disjointed purposes • Use of QRIS participation as a gateway to additional funding sources (such as increased child care subsidy rates or professional development supports) • Leveraging resources across ECE programs to support joint initiatives (such as TEACH scholarships or train-the-trainer events that lead to training on specialized topics for child care providers)
Quality assurance mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational role of licensing in determining the first QRIS rating level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ consequences to QRIS and other program participation based on licensing status ○ common work between licensing and QRIS to align standards in their definition and to measure their presence (same sources of evidence) ○ formal cross-training of licensing and QRIS staff to establish common language in working with providers ○ defined methods and periodicity in communication between licensing and QRIS staff at the state and local levels • Degree of alignment of quality requirements across care settings and ECE programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ level of equity in the definition of QRIS standards and their measurement across care settings ○ common work between QRIS and other ECE programs to align standards in their definition and, potentially, measure their presence (same sources of evidence) ○ use of QRIS ratings as eligibility requirements for participation of child care providers in other ECE programs ○ number of partnerships between QRIS and other ECE programs (such as Head Start and child care partners) • Use of common supports and tools for quality improvement

Table ES.1 (continued)

System Component	Integration Indicators
Early learning standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ cohesiveness and equity in planning the use of TA services ○ formality of procedures to ensure TA quality through the development of competencies or an approval process for individuals and/or organizations ○ credentialing of QRIS staff and TA providers who work directly with providers and programs ○ shared practices across ECE programs to assess quality such as use of the ERS ○ shared tools to plan and track progress among participating programs in ECE programs, such as quality improvement plans ● Involvement of a range of ECE programs and stakeholders in the development or refinement of early learning standards ● Embedding and aligning early learning standards to QRIS and other program standards ● Responsiveness of QRIS and other ECE programs to revisions in early learning guidelines in order to maintain alignment, if necessary ● Aligning (and conveying) the connection between early learning standards and core competencies for ECE practitioners ● Alignment between early learning standards, curricula, and assessments and common use of curricula and assessments in QRIS and other ECE programs ● Shared requirements across ECE programs for training on early learning standards, core competencies for ECE practitioners, and use of aligned curricula and child assessments
Professional development and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cohesion and integration in assessing PD needs and planning PD delivery with QRIS infrastructure at the state and local level ● Shared requirements across ECE programs for a core series of training on early learning standards, core competencies for ECE practitioners, QRIS and other quality standards, and use of common tools for planning PD and conducting quality and child assessments ● Provision of financial supports and awards for education and training necessary to achieve increasingly higher levels on a career path or ladder for individuals and QRIS rating levels for facilities ● Increase in the number of articulation agreements among institutions of higher education to ease continued progress of individuals in seeking advanced degrees ● Defining core competencies for all directors, lead and assistant teachers, PD instructors, and TA providers that apply throughout the ECE system ● Defining a shared career lattice that can apply to all ECE practitioners ● Credentialing of all directors and lead and assistant teachers across care settings ● Use of formal approval process to review training content and instructor/trainer qualifications to deliver sessions that meet in-service training requirements ● Shared access to PD and training across ECE programs (QRIS and Head Start, for example) ● Use of common tools across ECE programs to track progress toward PD goals and assess PD needs (including a PD registry for individual ECE practitioners) ● Alignment of PD tools to QRIS and other program quality standards (such as connecting PD necessary to progress up the rating levels)

Table ES.1 (continued)

System Component	Integration Indicators
Information dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proliferation in and formality to cross-program efforts between QRIS, subsidy program, and resource and referral services to promote use of QRIS ratings by parents in selecting child care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cross-training between subsidy, resource and referral services, and QRIS staff to establish common messages for parents ○ Extent of use of verbal, written, and online methods to incorporate QRIS rating levels with information on selecting child care • Shared messages and coordination in efforts across ECE programs and/or within overarching campaigns to promote community awareness of the importance of quality in early care and education programs • Common use of QRIS or other program communication devices to share information about quality in early learning with parents, providers, and key stakeholders
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System/program level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of child risk factors and program investments to inform the use of resources across ECE programs (such as the PA Reach and Risk report) • Actions taken to promote cross-program accountability such as revising QRIS standards, policies, or processes in response to changes in other programs and services • Ability to track facility-level involvement, contacts, and history across ECE programs • Integrated or linked data systems to support cross-system analysis of program, practitioner, and child level outcomes • Contractor level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rates of entry into the QRIS and progress in movement up the rating levels among providers • TA provider level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance targets to help providers achieve TA goals and meet higher QRIS quality standards • Child care provider/facility level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic use of financial and TA supports to make quality improvements and progress up the QRIS rating levels • Practitioner level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in PD and education programs to progress up the levels of a career lattice (ideally tracked through a PD registry across ECE programs) • Rates of retention and salary increases associated with TEACH scholarships and increased training and education • Child level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to track child and family involvement, contacts, and history across ECE programs • Collection and tracking of child outcomes such as child assessments across ECE programs and eventual connection with K-12 system

Source: Analysis of interviews in Indiana and Pennsylvania conducted as part of the QRS Assessment project.