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Staff Preparation, Reward, and Support:

Are Quality Rating and Improvement Systems
Addressing All of the Key Ingredients
Necessary for Change?

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Introduction:

Research documenting the negative effects of the mediocre quality of most early care and education settings on children's learning and development underlies nearly three decades of debate about the most effective strategies to improve services for young children in the United States.¹ While strategies focused on increased professional development and education for individual members of the workforce have historically dominated policy and practice, in recent years more comprehensive approaches to quality improvement, those which focus on the program as a whole, have garnered increased public attention and resources. These comprehensive approaches were initially exemplified by center-based and family child care accreditation by professional organizations; now they include state or local government quality rating and improvement systems, defined as a "systematic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality" in early care and education programs (see box 1).²

Reflecting the growing momentum in support of quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs) as a key strategy to improve early care and education quality,³ significant amounts of public dollars have been devoted to their development and implementation.⁴ The federal Office of Child Care, Department of Health and Human Services has identified the expansion of QRISs as a strategy to improve the quality of early care and education that low-income children receive, allowing states to expend federal dollars on QRIS efforts.⁵ The Office of Child Care has also announced its plan to create new national technical assistance centers, one of which is the National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement. This center is intended to offer support to states as they "build quality improvement systems that create pathways to excellence for child care providers."⁶

Beginning with the implementation of Oklahoma's Reaching for the Stars in 1998, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) have rapidly

emerged as a leading strategy for improving the quality of early care and education programs. Thirteen states implemented a QRIS by 2004 and the number of QRISs in a pilot or full implementation phase doubled by the end of the decade.⁷ In a 2010 report, Child Trends assessed twenty-six quality rating systems across the country. While the majority of QRISs operate statewide, the Child Trends report included three pilot QRISs operating as locally based systems, as well as one state pilot that was on hold due to budget constraints. In addition to those included by Child Trends, our web-based search conducted in March 2011 identified eleven additional states that are developing or piloting a QRIS, bringing the total number of QRISs in operation or being developed to thirty-seven (see figure 1). Such growth demonstrates the focus on QRISs as the key quality improvement strategy, and thus, highlights the critical need to understand and examine how such systems define quality, the benchmarks used to indicate quality, and the opportunities in place to support improvement.

Box 1: A quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is a "systematic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality" in early care and education programs (National Child Care Information Center, 2006), sometimes referred to as a quality rating system (QRS). QRIS and QRS are frequently used interchangeably, though the term QRS may imply that a system is concerned primarily or exclusively with rating programs, and not focused on their improvement. Here we refer to all such systems as QRISs, as all reviewed for this brief include some form of services aimed at helping programs improve.



Note: As QRISs are being developed and implemented across the country on an on-going basis, this map may not include states that began developing or launched a QRIS after CSCCE completed this research.



Limited research has been conducted on QRISs as a strategy to improve quality, and evaluations to date have shown mixed results. It is unclear if these findings reflect the QRIS strategy itself or particular features of individual systems.⁸ In addition, no comprehensive and consistently collected data are yet available that would have allowed us to assess the percentage of programs in a state or other jurisdiction participating in a QRIS or how many individuals are benefiting from various provisions related to professional development, improved work environments, and increased reward in their systems. Yet, as suggested by Zellman and Perlman (2008),⁹ the elements included in a QRIS communicate important messages to an array of stakeholders, including practitioners and policymakers, about the values and priorities that are deemed most important to ensuring quality early care and education.

The degree of attention in a given QRIS paid to the workforce itself through such factors as staff education and professional development, compensation and benefits, and work environments – factors which have been linked to program quality improvement and sustainability¹⁰ – 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 this brief, we report on our investigation of both quality rating and improvement system supports for professional development and on rating rubrics¹¹ related to staff formal education, compensation and benefits, and adult work environments in center-based programs.¹² Here, we examine the extent to which these key ingredients for program improvement are

included within and vary across quality rating and improvement systems. We anticipated that staff qualifications and professional development, as they have largely been the focus of improvement efforts in the early care and education field, would be consistently included in systems. As QRISs are becoming the primary strategy for quality improvement, we were also interested to learn the extent to which QRISs attend to the other key ingredients – compensation and factors related to work settings – that have been linked to quality.¹³

This investigation describes the variety of ways in which different QRISs identify and define these key elements associated with supporting staff, both as individuals and as a group, to improve and sustain quality.¹⁴ We used the Child Trends *Compendium of Quality Rating Systems and Evaluations* as our major source of information of QRISs.¹⁵ To gain additional insight into how systems are operationalized, we conducted interviews during spring and summer 2010 with key stakeholders from four jurisdictions with varying QRISs characteristics, Colorado, New Mexico, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia (D.C.). To clarify particular elements of some QRISs, we also reviewed individual QRIS websites and corresponded with administering agency directors.

Four components of QRISs as described in system plans constitute the focus of this investigation:

- 1) Staff qualifications;
- 2) Financial incentives for professional development;
- 3) Direct compensation, including salary and benefits; and
- 4) Adult learning environments.

Findings:

1) Staff Qualifications

The professional development of practitioners is universally recognized in QRISs as a key ingredient to improving the quality of early care and education. The *Compendium*¹⁶ reported that all of the 26 center-based systems include staff qualifications as a quality element. Not surprisingly however, given the complex and varied nature of early care and education professional standards and pathways, QRISs vary in how they set qualifications for similar roles and approach their incentive and reward strategies differently.

Specifically, we found variation in amount and content from entry to highest levels of education that QRISs include as indicators of quality, and that all QRISs identified in the *Compendium* include both teacher and director education levels and training in their systems, with less than half specifically identify qualifications for assistant teachers. Of the QRISs that do not identify assistant teacher qualifications, the majority refer more generally to teaching staff in their benchmarks, like Indiana, which requires programs at the entry level have twenty-five percent of their teaching staff with a CDA, early childhood degree, or the equivalent.¹⁷

In some systems, teaching staff at the entry level are required to meet the state's minimum licensing requirements, which may not include any early childhood specific preparation. Others require at least a portion of teaching staff to be working toward attaining early childhood related education at the entry point into the QRIS. Iowa, for example, requires teachers at the entry level to meet licensing standards – which include training hours and, though college-level education can be substituted for training, education is not required¹⁸ – and allows points to be awarded toward higher tiers if one staff member in a center has a bachelor's degree.¹⁹ Ohio requires programs at the entry level to have at least one lead teacher with an associate's degree in early care and education or the state equivalency and half of the lead teachers must have

an associate's degree or state equivalency to be eligible for the next level.²⁰ Slightly more than half of the programs identify a bachelor's degree in early care and education or a related field among the quality indicators for teachers, and more than half of the programs identify this as a quality indicator for directors. Still the rating or tier levels at which the degree is included as an indicator varies by system.

2) Financial Incentives for Professional Development

As an improvement system, a QRIS typically offers two types of financial incentives to promote quality improvement. One type focuses on incentives to *programs* to improve or enhance quality, to encourage their participation in the QRIS, and/or to reimburse them at a rate influenced by their quality rating.²¹ Such incentives are often offered as financial quality awards or improvement grants or are directly connected to child care subsidies by linking a program's rating to a tiered reimbursement system.²² In most instances, resources that are directed toward the program are not required to be used for staff related costs – such as increasing compensation of staff that have advanced their education – although some systems explicitly permit funds to be used for such purposes. Absent comprehensive data, it is difficult to judge the extent to which programs actually expend these funds for compensation as it is an allowable, but not required, use.

The second type of incentive is directed toward *individuals* working in programs to promote their education and professional development. Typically QRISs build upon existing professional development programs, such as T.E.A.C.H.[®] (see box 2), to support efforts to improve staff qualifications by offering a financial incentive.²³ Scholarships for higher education classes are the most common way in which QRISs use individual financial incentives to support teachers and directors to attain education and training.²⁴

Eighteen QRISs, for example, include scholarships as part of their system,²⁵ the vast majority of which are T.E.A.C.H.[®] scholarships.

The amount of the incentive and the required effort on the part of the participant ranges across QRISs. In Colorado, a staff member in a program participating in the QRIS who enrolls in 12 credit hours of higher education over the course of one year, can receive a T.E.A.C.H.[®] scholarship which covers 80 percent of the cost of tuition, and requires the staff member's employer to pay an additional 15 percent of the tuition, with the individual responsible for the remaining five percent. Additionally, the staff member receives a \$375 bonus when the 12 credits are satisfactorily completed, to be matched by a \$325 bonus from their employer.²⁶ Kentucky, in contrast, offers an annual tuition scholarship of up to \$1,800 and limits enrollment to no more than nine credit hours per term.²⁷ Scholarship requirements also varied by other characteristics, with some QRISs setting limitations on maximum earnings or eligible employment settings or job roles.

A limited number of systems offer other types of financial incentives intended to encourage retention. Our review of the *Compendium*²⁸ identified two such categories, wage enhancements and retention bonuses. Eight systems offer some form of these bonuses. Illinois offers both a wage enhancement and retention bonus,²⁹ Minnesota offers only a retention bonus,³⁰ and Miami-Dade County, Oklahoma, and Oregon each offer a wage enhancement.³¹ Three systems (North Carolina, Palm Beach County, and Pennsylvania) offer a bonus that is intended both for retention and wage enhancement.³²

The aforementioned incentives are paid in the form of bonuses or stipends to individual practitioners and, although they can constitute a sizeable supplement to income, they are not a stable and continuous salary increase for two reasons.³³ One, recipients are guaranteed an incentive only for a discrete period of time, and must re-apply for subsequent payments. Second, such supplements, though they may be available year to year, are not fixed costs built into the operating expense of QRISs. They are typically supported through funding streams such as the federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), private foundations, or targeted state dollars such as tobacco taxes that are sensitive to the changing political and economic conditions, and may be reduced or eliminated due to budget cuts, spending freezes, and

Box 2: T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood[®] is a strategy that aims to create access to higher education for early care and education practitioners and, as of this writing, operates in 22 states and the District of Columbia. T.E.A.C.H. provides scholarships to enable early childhood teachers to take coursework leading to credentials and degrees, and requires financial commitments from the individual participant (typically minimal), a participant's employer, and a funder such as a private foundation, private business, public sector entity, or some combination of sources. T.E.A.C.H. also requires participating employers to commit to providing time off for participants to attend school. T.E.A.C.H. models are designed to meet the particular needs and professional development systems of the participating states and therefore, specific participation requirements and scholarships benefits vary by program.

The Child Care WAGE\$[®] project, which, as of this writing, operates in four states (Florida, Kansas, New Mexico, and North Carolina), provides education-based salary supplements to low-paid early care and education practitioners and similar to T.E.A.C.H., requirements and wage benefits vary by program.

Sources: T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood[®] & Child Care WAGE\$[®] National Annual Program Report, 2009 – 2010 retrieved from http://www.childcareservices.org/downloads/TEACH_AnnualReport_10.pdf and http://www.childcareservices.org/ps/state_contacts.html

fiscal realignments.³⁴ As Zellman and Perlman (2008)³⁵ report, a budget reduction caused financial incentives to individuals to “dramatically” decrease in Colorado.³⁶ QRIS implementers and administrators we interviewed spoke of the vulnerability and underfunding of such incentives. A representative from D.C., for example, confirmed that requirements for education-based stipends stipulated in the QRIS to achieve higher ratings can be waived due to a lack of funding.

Table 1. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems:
Financial Incentives for Support of Professional Development

QRIS	Financial Incentives Scholarships for professional development	Financial Incentives Wage enhancements & retention Bonuses
Colorado	✓	
Delaware	✓	
District of Columbia	✓	
Illinois	✓	✓
Indiana	✓	
Iowa		
Kentucky	✓	
Los Angeles County, CA		
Louisiana	✓	
Maine	✓	
Maryland	✓	
Miami - Dade, FL	✓	✓
Minnesota	✓	✓
Mississippi		
Missouri		
New Hampshire		
New Mexico	✓	
North Carolina	✓	✓
Ohio	✓	
Oklahoma	✓	✓
Oregon	✓	✓
Palm Beach, FL	✓	✓
Pennsylvania	✓	✓
Tennessee	✓	
Vermont		
Virginia		



3) Direct Compensation

Despite the fact that studies show time and again that compensation is one of the most important determiners of quality of staffing,³⁷ the direct compensation – including both salary and benefits – of practitioners receives much less attention in QRISs when compared to the focus on staff qualifications. Although 18 QRISs include mention of wages, compensation, and/or benefits,³⁸ the type of benchmarks varied widely, and closer examination revealed few benchmarks related to improving salary or benefit level.

Among the QRISs that include benefits, our review found great variation in how systems addressed them (see box 3). Most commonly, QRISs provide programs a menu of benefit options which they can select from for their staff. This menu typically includes paid leave (e.g. sick, vacation, personal), full or partial health insurance, flextime, child care discounts, retirement benefits, professional development, pay increases based on merit and/or education, and professional association membership fees. At the entry level, programs offer none or one benefit and, as programs progress to a higher level, programs are expected to offer more benefits. Most QRISs that include a reference to benefits give programs the choice of what to offer, with little or no guidance as to the priority of benefit types. These benefits vary substantially in the cost to the participating program and the financial value to staff.

To illustrate, at Louisiana's two-star level, programs must provide one benefit to staff from a range of options that includes paid professional association membership, health insurance, annual merit increases, and paid sick leave, among others.³⁹ Because no priorities are set, offering staff a paid professional membership could be deemed equal on the rating scale to offering paid sick leave, the latter of which costs significantly more. Differences in the value of benefits may narrow as programs are required to offer multiple benefits at higher rating levels. However, QRISs that utilize a points-based rating system may provide avenues for programs to earn enough points for higher level ratings without meeting the benefits benchmarks, as is the case in Louisiana. After level two, a program can earn an extra quality point for offering four benefits, but programs can advance beyond level two⁴⁰ and even achieve the highest rating without providing the four benefits.

Based on our review of the *Compendium* and of individual state QRIS materials, we identified 11 systems that include indicators which require that programs have in place an incremental pay scale based on education and/or experience. While a pay scale acknowledges that compensation levels should rise as education and experience increase, it does not ensure that the scale has set wages at a high enough level to make a difference. For example only Los Angeles County and Vermont⁴¹ offer any guidance as to what the wage level should be, and even then, items in Vermont's QRIS that relate to having a salary scale and meeting wage guidelines are an optional indicator⁴² and the highest level rating can be earned without meeting this benchmark.⁴³

It is widely understood that individual programs typically do not have the capacity to support the level of increases in direct compensation required to attract and retain a highly skilled workforce, absent additional resources beyond parent fees or greater public or private subsidies.⁴⁴ While further study is required to document how common a practice it is to waive direct compensation indicators included in QRISs, there is some evidence that – even when valued in the benchmarks – compensation can be omitted in implementation. Our interviews with system administrators and advocates revealed such circumstances. New Mexico reported that many programs struggle to or cannot afford the incremental pay increases required above the entry

Box 3: Kentucky offers an example of a QRIS that prioritizes staff benefits.

The STARS for KIDS NOW system includes the following indicators in their four-level system:

Level 3: Programs must provide staff a minimum of six paid days of leave per year; this increases to 11 days after one year of employment.

Level 4: In addition to the paid leave required to reach level 3, programs must pay at least 50 percent of health insurance coverage for full-time staff.

Source: Kentucky Department of Education, *STARS for KIDS NOW (Quality Rating System)*, retrieved from <http://www.education.ky.gov>

Table 2. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Indicators of Direct Compensation

QRIS	<u>Direct Compensation Improvements</u> Guidelines for salary level and /or employee benefits specified	<u>Direct Compensation Improvements</u> Benefit options*
Colorado		
Delaware		✓
District of Columbia		✓
Illinois		
Indiana		
Iowa		
Kentucky	✓	
Los Angeles County, CA	✓	
Louisiana		✓
Maine		✓
Maryland		✓
Miami -Dade, FL		
Minnesota		
Mississippi		
Missouri		✓
New Hampshire		
New Mexico		✓
North Carolina		✓
Ohio		✓
Oklahoma		
Oregon		
Palm Beach, FL		
Pennsylvania		✓
Tennessee		✓
Vermont	✓	
Virginia		

*A menu of benefits with a range of options for programs to choose from.



level.⁴⁵ The D.C. system is the only QRIS identified in the *Compendium* to state that a goal of its program is to increase compensation for individual practitioners⁴⁶ but, as with the stipends and bonuses mentioned earlier, salary increase requirements are also often waived. Participants in Zellman and Perlman's study⁴⁷ identified the capacity to support increases in direct compensation as a challenge to sustaining quality. They describe a North Carolina interviewee who reported that parents could not afford, and public subsidies were not enough to meet, the increased cost of providing higher wages.

According to our interviews with representatives from D.C. and New Mexico, program improvement efforts are challenged by high rates of turnover, which have been repeatedly linked to low salaries.⁴⁸ Our review identified only three QRISs that include indicators related to staff stability or turnover reduction.⁴⁹ The Los Angeles County QRIS requires average teacher retention to be 80 percent beginning at step three, and 90 percent at the highest level.⁵⁰ North Carolina awards a quality point if, along with meeting other staff criteria, a center has a staff turnover rate that is less than 20 percent in the previous year.⁵¹ The Palm Beach County QRIS requires programs above a level one to report staff turnover monthly to their workforce registry.⁵² Though there are no points awarded or consequences associated with a center's turnover rate, these data are primarily used to encourage directors to develop staffing strategies to decrease turnover.⁵³

A QRIS may not articulate compensation benchmarks but still facilitate improved staff salaries if other, complimentary policy is in place. In 2008, Louisiana enacted an occupational tax credit that allows early care and education directors and staff to apply for a refundable credit, ranging from \$1,500 to \$3,000.⁵⁴ Although several states and even the federal government make tax credits available to certain industries, to date Louisiana is the only state that has established such a tax credit for early care and education practitioners. To be eligible for the credit, individuals must be working at least six months in a program that participates in the state's QRIS and the individual must also be enrolled in the state's workforce registry.⁵⁵ Though little more than 30 percent of licensed centers in the state participate in QRIS,⁵⁶ for those practitioners, this tax credit offers a direct income benefit that may be less vulnerable to budget cuts in public funds or the inability of programs or parents to afford wage increases or bonuses.⁵⁷

4) Adult Learning Environment

We found minimal focus in QRISs on the work environments of early childhood practitioners although these environments mediate how practitioners attempt to implement new or improve upon existing practices. In part, this minimal attention may reflect the limited evidence base and the lack of consensus on the factors that contribute to an early care and education workplace as a learning environment for adults.⁵⁸ Most of the research on teacher effectiveness focuses solely on the contribution of individual teachers to child outcomes.⁵⁹ Seldom addressed are the contexts in which teachers operate and the extent to which these environments support or undermine their ability to apply the knowledge and skills which lead to improved practices. Important contextual variables related to the adult learning environment include such things as the degree of support in the workplace for ongoing teacher development through policies related to professional development opportunities and paid planning and meeting time, and opportunities for teaching staff to make decisions about their practice in collaboration with their co-teachers.⁶⁰

To assess the extent to which the adult learning environment is considered in QRISs, we examined individual QRIS guides for each QRIS included in the *Compendium*. Specifically we looked for the following indicators: professional development plans, paid professional development, personnel policies, staff meetings, paid planning time, and collaborative planning and/or job development.⁶¹

The adult learning environment, if addressed at all, was most often treated as part of another category rather than a freestanding category of indicators. Indicators were typically located in administrative or staff qualification categories. We found a small number of systems that explicitly acknowledged the importance of the adult learning environment. Los Angeles County, for example, includes a section of their QRIS guide labeled "qualifications and working conditions" with indicators such as paid planning time, release time for professional development, and staff stability.⁶² A section of the Pennsylvania QRIS guide is labeled "staff communication and support" and includes an indicator related to paid planning time for teachers and assistant teachers.⁶³

Systems typically included ongoing and annual professional development hours for staff as indicators, but we found only twelve QRISs included an actual professional development plan to be reviewed periodically with the employer.⁶⁴ Two QRISs include financial support provided by the program for professional development as benchmarks. The Los Angeles County QRIS stipulates that in order to achieve the highest rating, programs must provide paid release time for staff to participate in or deliver professional development⁶⁵ and only Missouri explicitly states that financial support must be made available for staff training beginning at level four, of a five-level system.⁶⁶

Pennsylvania states that staff meetings must include “discussions of quality”, and at the top two levels, requires that both teachers and assistant teachers receive paid planning time, separate from times when they have responsibility for children. Four other systems – Indiana, Los Angeles County, Maine, and Vermont – are the only other QRISs identified to include paid planning time as an indicator.

We found indicators such as holding regular staff meetings and paid classroom and curriculum planning time uncommon, despite their relevance to staff learning and improved practice.⁶⁷ Seven QRISs include staff meetings as a quality indicator, though this ranges from a minimum of two meetings per year in the top two levels of Oklahoma’s three-star system,⁶⁸ quarterly meetings in others, and monthly meetings at various levels above entry in Los Angeles County, Maine, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania.⁶⁹ Only New Mexico, which includes quarterly staff meetings in level four of its five-star system, and Pennsylvania, which includes

monthly staff meetings beginning in level two of its four-star system, frame staff meetings as an opportunity for shared learning and development and call attention to the importance of adult relationships. New Mexico labels the staff meeting section of the QRIS guide as “staff communication,” and states that meeting agendas should be co-developed with staff, and “provide a safe environment where staff members can ask questions, present alternative ideas, and share feelings.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Pennsylvania states that staff meetings must include “discussions of quality”, and at the top two levels, requires that both teachers and assistant teachers receive paid planning time, separate from times when they have responsibility for children.⁷¹ Four other systems – Indiana, Los Angeles County, Maine, and Vermont – are the only other QRISs identified to include paid planning time as an indicator.

Indicators related to opportunities for staff to shape their work or plan collaboratively are nearly absent, although recent research suggests their importance to quality improvement.⁷² Only New Mexico, as described above, and Indiana include language referring to collaborative planning, with Indiana requiring implementation of a curriculum in which teachers and assistant teachers together plan daily activities.⁷³ Colorado recognizes the contribution of dialogue among staff by including criteria in the family involvement component that staff “communicate well” with one another in regard to individual children,⁷⁴ though this is not linked to paid planning time for staff.⁷⁵

Two states, Illinois and Ohio, require programs to utilize the Program Administration Scale (PAS), which emphasizes the importance of benefits, staff meetings, and planning time.⁷⁶ However, Illinois requires a composite score on the PAS which can be earned by attending to a range of items that may or may not include benefits or meeting or planning time as indicators. Ohio does not include a specific score on the PAS in the benchmarks, but does require programs to develop an action plan based on the results of a self-assessment of the PAS.⁷⁷

Table 3. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Indicators of Supportive Adult Learning Environments

QRIS	Adult Learning Environment Structural elements**	Adult Learning Environment Paid time elements***	Adult Learning Environment Collaborative elements****
Colorado			
Delaware	✓		
District of Columbia			
Illinois			
Indiana	✓	✓	✓
Iowa	✓		
Kentucky	✓		
Los Angeles County, CA	✓	✓	
Louisiana	✓		
Maine	✓	✓	
Maryland	✓		
Miami - Dade, FL	✓		
Minnesota	✓		
Mississippi	✓		
Missouri	✓	✓	
New Hampshire	✓		
New Mexico	✓		✓
North Carolina	✓		
Ohio	✓		
Oklahoma ¹	✓		
Oregon			
Palm Beach, FL	✓		
Pennsylvania	✓	✓	✓
Tennessee	✓		
Vermont	✓		
Virginia			

** Structural elements are indicators related to staff meetings, staff professional development plans, personnel policies, and/or program goals or mission.

*** Paid time elements are indicators related to paid time to participate in professional development and/or paid planning time.

**** Collaborative elements are indicators or descriptors of indicators that emphasize shared learning and/or development among staff.

Implications:

This review of QRIS indicators reflects the consensus throughout the early care and education field that staff knowledge and competency gained through formal education and professional development are critical to quality improvement, and that incentives to support this are this important. It is noteworthy that a pre-existing mechanism for offering scholarships and other financial incentives was operative in most states including them in their QRIS design, suggesting that a well-established professional development system may be an essential building block for advancing staff education and professional development.

This review also reveals the limited attention paid by QRIS developers to improving direct compensation of early childhood practitioners in child care programs. For more than twenty years, research has demonstrated the importance of direct compensation in stabilizing programs and enabling

employers to recruit and retain skilled staff,⁷⁸ and for at least a decade the role of staff stability as a precondition for improving and sustaining quality has been understood.⁷⁹ In the context of this evidence, the absence of universal recognition of direct compensation benchmarks in QRISs is striking.

Similarly, missing in nearly all QRISs reviewed is consideration of the context in which those working with young children must apply what they have learned and make changes in their practice. This lack of attention to the adult learning environment in QRISs may reflect an assumption on the part of those developing systems that indicators of a productive adult learning environment are routine and included in practice. However, given the explicit naming of other indicators, such as the presence of bulletin boards, types of interactions between teachers and children, and reiteration of labor laws requiring paid breaks, it seems more likely that the role of the adult learning environment as an important factor or priority in improving program quality is not yet widely understood. The early care and education field has yet to develop consensus of the key elements of work environments that are necessary to support adult learning and improved practices. However, quality improvement is about asking adults to learn how to do things in new ways or to hone their skills. Adults, like children, need supportive environments that allow them to experiment, test new approaches, receive guidance, and acknowledge their accomplishments. The collaborative nature of working with young children requires time for adults to communicate, reflect, and plan what they do together. QRISs should be the vehicle for articulating the domains that matter to adult learning and establishing benchmarks for practice and policy.

Incremental by design, QRISs encourage programs representing a wide range of quality to engage in efforts to enhance their services, offering varying levels of technical assistance and financial resources

Box 4: The proposed National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement could play an important role by encouraging states to develop more comprehensive benchmarks that address practitioners' needs for better preparation, opportunities and support to reflect upon and apply what they learn, and reward systems that address adult well-being and turnover. It is our hope that the National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement will also promote improved data systems to deepen our understanding of the relationship between quality improvement, better work environments, compensation, and turnover, and support research that extends our understanding of best practices that promote improved teacher practice.

to assist them, depending on the state or jurisdiction. Yet, QRISs operate in a climate of competing demands and scarce resources. As such, limited attention to compensation, benefits, and work environment benchmarks may stem less from a belief that salary, benefits, and work conditions are irrelevant to quality improvement and sustainability, and more from being confronted with the challenge of how to finance the achievement of these benchmarks in an early care and education system that is severely under-resourced. Nonetheless, if QRISs decouple higher qualifications and financial reward and neglect the work environment, the exit of the most qualified early care and education staff away from direct service or into K-3 classrooms will continue. As a consequence quality will continue to be compromised, and the anticipated improvements for children may not be forthcoming.⁸⁰ Alternatively, a broad commitment across QRISs to

explicitly include better compensation and improved work environments in their ratings and benchmarks could direct new and existing QRIS resources more toward the accomplishment of these goals.

As new QRISs are developed and existing systems revised, there is an opportunity to strengthen QRISs' contribution to the discourse among policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders about the limits of the current system to provide better compensation and work environments for staff. If benchmarks related to these key ingredients for program improvement were more universally aspirational, QRIS data would demonstrate that, absent a fundamental change in how we prioritize and finance the early care and education system, our nation's ability to guarantee all children access to high quality early learning environments will continue to remain an elusive goal.



Endnotes

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- 15 There are multiple reports which review and/or compare QRISs across the country. We choose to use the *Compendium of Quality Rating Systems and Evaluation* as the primary source for this brief as it is the most recent at this writing, reviews the widest range of systems with the inclusion of pilots and regionally-based programs, and provides detail about the types of improvement incentives and strategies included in individuals systems.
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- 75 The Colorado P-3 Professional Development Advisory Group, which advises the state's Early Childhood Leadership Commission, has chosen as a priority project the incorporation of the adult learning and work environment into their QRIS revisions.
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Appendix A

Table 1. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems by Resources and Indicators of Support for Professional Development, Direct Compensation, and Supportive Adult Learning Environments

QRIS	Financial Incentives Scholarships for professional development	Financial Incentives Wage enhancements & retentionBonuses	Direct Compensation Improvements Guidelines for salary level and /or employee benefits specified	Direct Compensation Improvements Benefit options*	Adult Learning Environment Structural elements**	Adult Learning Environment Paid time elements***	Adult Learning Environment Collaborative elements****
Colorado ¹	✓						
Delaware ²	✓			✓	✓		
District of Columbia ³	✓			✓			
Illinois ³	✓	✓					
Indiana ³	✓				✓	✓	✓
Iowa ¹					✓		
Kentucky ³	✓		✓		✓		
Los Angeles County, CA			✓		✓	✓	
Louisiana	✓			✓	✓		
Maine ³	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Maryland ³	✓			✓	✓		
Miami-Dade, FL	✓	✓			✓		
Minnesota ²	✓	✓			✓		
Mississippi					✓		
Missouri ^{3,4}				✓	✓	✓	
New Hampshire					✓		
New Mexico ³	✓			✓	✓		✓
North Carolina	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Ohio ²	✓			✓	✓		
Oklahoma ³	✓	✓			✓		
Oregon	✓	✓					
Palm Beach, FL ¹	✓	✓			✓		
Pennsylvania ²	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Tennessee ¹	✓			✓	✓		
Vermont ¹			✓		✓		
Virginia							

¹ This QRIS awards points to programs that are nationally accredited.

² This QRIS allows programs that are nationally accredited to automatically satisfy the highest rating requirements

³ This QRIS includes national accreditation as one benchmark that must be met at the highest rating.

^{1,3} At least one of the following accreditation standards are accepted: National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Early Childhood Program Accreditation, and/or National Association of Child Care Professionals. Many QRISs accept additional accreditation standards. Accreditation typically includes standards related to the maintenance of a personnel policy that documents programs goals/mission and documentation of salary and benefits, and may include language indicating that benefits are to be offered.

⁴ As Missouri's system is on hold due to funding, there are no active supports in place; only indicators which can be identified in their QRIS guide are reported on.

* A menu of benefits are included with a range of options for programs to choose from.

** Structural elements are indicators related to staff meetings, staff professional development plans, personnel policies, and/or program goals or mission.

*** Paid time elements are indicators related to paid time to participate in professional development and/or paid planning time.

**** Collaborative elements are indicators or descriptors of indicators that emphasize shared learning and/or development among staff.