Strengthening Quality Rating Improvement Systems for School-Aged Childcare

Summary

State Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) can effectively support the improvement of school-age childcare programs by leveraging Program Quality Assessments (PQAs) alongside structured improvement planning and professional development. Real-world implementations in several states underscore the impact and adaptability of the PQA within QRIS, emphasizing its role in fostering a culture of improvement and the importance of investing in well-trained staff to ensure positive outcomes for school-age children.

I. Background

Quality Matters. High-quality programs for children and youth have been linked with a multitude of positive outcomes, including enhanced cognitive development, social skills, and overall well-being.\(^1\) Elements essential for high-quality programs have been identified, tested, and supported by research, state standards, and practitioners. While brain science has elevated the importance of quality early childhood education for children under five, it is equally important to note that developmental science is clear that the benefits of high-quality learning experiences continue through the elementary school years and beyond.\(^2\) As the evidence of the benefits of high-quality programming has grown, the need for structured mechanisms to assess and improve the quality of programs caring for children of all ages has become increasingly evident. Recognizing this, federal, state, and local systems and funding streams often have an explicit focus on providing support aimed at improving the quality of programs serving children and youth. State-run Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) in federally funded childcare programs play a pivotal role, offering a transparent framework for evaluating program quality, empowering parents to make informed choices, and inspiring and equipping providers to strive for excellence.

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**QRIS Overview.** Since 1998, states have been developing Quality Rating Improvement Systems to support the monitoring and improvement of the quality of childcare programs. Most states fund QRIS through Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grants administered by the Administration for Children and Families Office of Child Care at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The CCDF is authorized at over $5 billion annually, and when CCDBG and TANF funds are combined, actual childcare spending has been over $10 billion annually since FY 2001. Eligibility for funds varies by state system. While a state agency administers most QRIS systems in partnership with other public sector entities, the information provided applies to both State and County Administered systems. The lead agency provides oversight for how program ratings against quality standards described in the QRIS determine funding levels; they also provide clear expectations and supports for how programs can improve their quality (and, in turn, increase funding). As states and counties refine their approach to implementing QRIS, structures and supports that incentivize improvement represent stronger approaches than programs narrowly defined solely by quality ratings. Emphasizing and supporting continuous quality improvement and providing lower-stakes pathways for participation are ways in which QRIS can support more equitable childcare systems, more equitable allocation of funds across communities, and increased access to quality programs by families.

**QRIS with School-Age Programs.** Although the federal Office of Child Care which administers CCDF funds aims to improve the quality of care for children through age 12, structures for measuring and improving program quality in state QRIS have traditionally been focused on the early childhood years. However, some states have created differentiated standards based on the ages and developmental needs of children served in childcare programs – with different measurement frameworks and supports available depending on whether the center or program is serving infants and toddlers or school-aged children. This approach in Michigan, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania will be highlighted in this brief. An explicit focus on the quality of school-aged childcare programs can strengthen childcare systems across the country, providing critical support for development and learning for children in grades K-5, outcomes that state human services commissioners are interested in for measuring economic mobility.

**II. PQA: An Assessment Supporting Continuous Improvement**

For programs receiving CCDF funds for school-age childcare, the choice of quality assessment impacts the kinds of practices that are the focus of site-level improvement activities. The Forum for Youth Investment’s Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality has created evidence-based quality assessment tools focusing on the interactions and experiences that impact children most directly. The School-Age Program Quality Assessment (SA PQA) is a research-validated instrument designed specifically to assess quality standards for staff practices in youth programs serving children in grades K-5. The Social and Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA) is another research-validated instrument that is appropriate for use in grades K-12. Either the SA PQA or the SEL PQA are appropriate assessment tools for measuring quality in school-age childcare programs and can be integrated with existing QRIS, along with a set of professional development resources to support the implementation and improvement of high-quality practices in school-age childcare settings. The Organizational Quality Assessment (OQA) is a companion tool that focuses on programs’ organizational practices that also support these higher standards of care.

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6 [Equity is Quality, Quality is Equity: Operationalizing Equity in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](https://www.childrens-equityproject.com), The Children’s Equity Project & Child Care Aware of America.
7 [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/oro/oro_reimagine_hhs_afi_state_and_county_research.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/oro/oro_reimagine_hhs_afi_state_and_county_research.pdf)
8 [www.forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/assessments](www.forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/assessments)
impact the quality of children’s childcare experiences. These assessments are all rooted in the same foundation of evidence and have been adopted by over 4,800 programs and organizations across the country to support a focus on program quality improvement.  

For more than 15 years, the Forum for Youth Investment’s Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality has supported youth-serving organizations across the country to use program quality assessments, along with a range of wrap-around supports for training and technical assistance to strengthen the quality of developmental experiences that children and youth have access to in programs across the country. The program and staff practices described in PQAs are based on decades of research and collaboration with expert practitioners. The assessments are evidence-based and practitioner-validated. A wide variety of programs serving children and youth have successfully implemented the PQA as a critical element of continuous quality improvement aimed at ensuring children and youth have access to high-quality and developmentally rich experiences that support their learning and development. We have worked with national organizations like the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Campfire USA, and YMCA of the USA, and with state entities focused on expanded learning, like Schools Out Washington, and the Michigan Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers programs. We have also partnered with regional and local networks of youth-serving programs, like Prime Time Palm Beach County in Florida, and the Nashville After Zone Alliance in Tennessee. In each organization that we work with, our program quality framework integrates seamlessly into the organization’s program focus and forms the basis of a system for quality improvement.

**Specific to School-Aged Programs.** Quality programs for school-age children reflect their expanding needs, abilities, and interests, including creating challenging and engaging learning environments and encouraging opportunities for self-expression, responsibility, and leadership appropriate for older children. Figure 1 illustrates the components of the SA PQA and SEL PQA, with each bullet point representing a scale of practice within one of four domains of youth work practice. The SA PQA includes standards pertaining to health and safety in the
physical environment and an optional scale for programs that are structured similarly to or are a part of childcare programs that include preschool programs. In contrast, the SEL PQA expands on ways staff support social and emotional awareness, self-regulation, and problem solving. PQA data is based on direct observation of the elements of high-quality practice as described in the tool. The reliability and applicability of the data is supported by an extensive body of resources, including detailed guidebooks full of rich examples. While objective data is gathered by trained external assessors who have met a standard of reliability, self-assessment data gathered by program staff can provide a foundation for reflection and discussion about opportunities for improvement. Guidebooks, training workshops, and other resources can help practitioners in school-age programs see themselves in the described scenarios and apply the principles and practices appropriately to school-aged settings.

**Comparison to another school-age tool.** Although covering most of the same aspects of quality, the SA PQA is distinct from another school-age assessment used in QRIS, the School Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS),\(^\text{10}\) which is an adaptation of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS).\(^\text{11}\) The SA PQA is particularly useful across sectors due to its content neutrality, support for programs with or without explicit academic content, and focus on developmentally appropriate practices for school-aged children (ages 5–12). Both the SA PQA and SACERS assess program quality for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability purposes. Whereas SACERS entails a greater emphasis on structural features, the physical environment, health policies and opportunities for staff development, the SA PQA has a greater focus on practices that support children’s cognitive development. In particular, the SA PQA has more explicit items about children’s sense of belonging, adults’ positive engagement with children, opportunities for children to set goals and make plans, and opportunities for children to take responsibility. Organizational and structural aspects of quality included in the SACERS are covered in the Organizational Quality Assessment (OQA), with the OQA providing greater emphasis on organizational and management practices related to continuous quality improvement.

**Supports a Continuous Quality Improvement Process.** Increasingly, QRIS are structured around the recognition that quality improvement efforts are enhanced when programs are incentivized for participation in a process that includes assessment, self-reflection, goal setting, and supports for improvement. This process is known as Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and is applied specifically in the youth program quality improvement (YPQI) approach. Across the country, Program Quality Assessments anchor the YPQI approach that includes assessment, planning, and improvement within a program. Through the assessment phase, program strengths are recognized, gaps are pinpointed, and improvement priorities are set. The planning phase involves strategizing ways to address identified gaps and improve program quality. This can include targeted training for staff, the introduction of new curricula, or adjustments to the program structure. The improvement phase puts these plans into action, fostering positive changes that elevate program quality. A seminal randomized controlled study demonstrated that full

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participation in the YPQI process leads to improvements in program quality that impact young people’s experience.\textsuperscript{12} Focusing on systematic, ongoing, data-driven engagement in the CQI process, aligns with the broader objectives of QRIS—enhancing outcomes for children.

**Aligned Resources, Including Youth Work Methods Training for the Workforce.** The Forum’s Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality has deep and integrated resources and technical assistance to support all aspects of the youth program quality improvement process. This includes over two dozen training workshops, many with accompanying guidebooks, that align with program quality assessment outcomes or organizational practices needed to enable strategic improvement.\textsuperscript{13} These workshops, called youth work methods, provide a range of practical and proven strategies for engaging and supporting young people, and have a natural synergy with PQA’s focus on positive interactions, skill-building, and meaningful engagement. By tailoring youth work methods to align with PQA dimensions, programs can optimize the impact of their interventions, resulting in more enriching experiences for school-age children.

**III. PQA in Practice: States Using PQA in Their QRIS**

The PQA and its surrounding supports have been successfully implemented in QRIS by states, highlighting the efficacy of this approach in enhancing school-age childcare programs. This section focuses on three states—Michigan, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania—that have effectively integrated PQA into their QRIS to drive quality improvement. Each state has elements and paths to QRIS unique to their state, demonstrating the viability of a range of approaches to incorporating the PQA into statewide QRIS initiatives.

**Michigan – Great Start to Quality**

In Michigan, the Forum’s SEL PQA is used as the assessment tool for all school-age childcare quality ratings. **Great Start to Quality**, Michigan’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System, is administered by the Michigan Department of Education and has been advancing the quality of childcare in Michigan since 2011. After a recent redesign, the system is now more focused on recognizing and improving quality rather than simply rating programs. At all levels, it incentivizes participation in the CQI process by awarding recognition to childcare programs for varying degrees of engagement in CQI practices, including self-assessment, reflection, and data-driven goal setting, and external assessment of quality practices. The highest quality level within Michigan’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System is Demonstrating Quality, which is awarded to programs that meet threshold scores during external on-site observations.

Great Start to Quality has also expanded and improved their support to a broader range of childcare programs, including out-of-school time programs serving only school-age children, as well as childcare programs that serve children from 0-12 years of age. The program’s emphasis on including comprehensive and tailored quality assessment for all types of programs and aligned professional development resources led to selecting the SEL PQA to be the assessment tool for programs with school-age children. The SEL PQA assesses dimensions such as engaging learning environments, supportive interactions, and opportunities for skill-building and leadership in ways developmentally appropriate for school-age children. The SEL PQA also facilitates continuity of assessment, professional development, and approaches to social and emotional development for programs serving a broader age-range, elementary-age and even older children. The evidence-based nature of the PQA enables providers to receive accurate feedback on program quality, which subsequently informs improvement strategies.


\textsuperscript{13} [https://forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/tools-trainings/](https://forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/tools-trainings/)
Arkansas—Better Beginnings

Arkansas showcases using the SA PQA and OQA as part of an integrated continuous quality improvement system. Arkansas’s Better Beginnings, a program of the Arkansas Department of Education, is a voluntary tiered quality rating improvement system that awards star ratings benchmarked against a set of standards and aligned measurement tools. Certain assessments and professional development are required to achieve a particular star level. Thus, professional development, investing in staff and engaging staff participation in a CQI process is incentivized by the QRIS, assessed by the OQA, and supported by aligned resources. The program recognizes that to provide a high-quality environment for children, providers need to be supported by organizations operating in ways that promote high quality policies and procedures and center a culture of continuous quality improvement, so using the OQA along with the SA PQA provides more comprehensive data and effective supports for quality improvement. Arkansas demonstrates its commitment to providing quality school-age childcare experiences by incorporating both tools into a full CQI system, investing in staff, and building a culture of continuous improvement among providers.

Pennsylvania—Keystone STARS

In Pennsylvania, the Forum’s SA and SEL PQA tools are two of many potential options that can be used by childcare programs for quality ratings. Pennsylvania’s QRIS, , is run by the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning and overseen jointly by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. For programs serving elementary-aged children, the SA PQA and the SEL PQA are options on the approved list of program assessment instruments. At the “2-STAR” level, program self-assessment informs goal setting. At 3- and 4-STAR levels, program self-assessment teams are formed to implement a continuous quality improvement process. Pennsylvania’s approach includes the assessment aspect and the subsequent planning and improvement phases. This comprehensive strategy aligns well with the principles of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), leading to enhanced program quality over time. Pennsylvania’s system provides training and technical assistance to a full range of childcare programs. Pennsylvania’s implementation of PQA within QRIS reflects its dedication to enhancing school-age childcare quality.

IV. Lessons Learned

The QRIS systems in Michigan, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania serve as useful examples of the potential of using the SA PQA or SEL PQA, along with the OQA and YQPI supports, to drive positive change within school-age childcare programs. The lessons learned from these states and other continuous improvement systems around the country highlight 1) the adaptability of the Forum’s program quality assessment tools, 2) the power of embedding PQA within a CQI framework, and 3) the critical role of investing in professional learning and development of staff.

PQA is developmentally appropriate for school-age children. One significant lesson that emerges from QRIS systems that are using the versions of PQA is the tool’s adaptability to the unique characteristics of school-age childcare programs that are developmentally appropriate for children ages 5-12. In particular, the PQA assesses opportunities to support growth in leadership, responsibility, collaborative work, deeper reflection, planning, and thinking in ways appropriate to the developmental capacities of school-age children. Using the PQA with its articulation of best practices for school-age settings highlights the growing capacity of children in this age group and points toward ways to improve and support children’s development. PQA observations allow program staff and external assessors to capture the dynamic nature of program quality, which can facilitate actionable and related improvement steps.

Using PQA as Part of a CQI Process Helps Build a Culture of Improvement. Using a PQA as part of a broader program quality improvement process fosters a culture of ongoing improvement among school-age childcare providers. YPQI is a CQI process that involves assessment, planning, and improvement, which supports site-based teams to reflect on the quality of their practices and take practical steps to support improvement. Data from self or
external program quality assessment observations provide actionable feedback and guidance to program leaders and staff, allowing them to address deficiencies and build upon strengths. Programs have both clarity about the actual interactions and structures that comprise their current level of quality and an aligned and actionable set of best practices and standards they then aim toward. CQI is enhanced when there are supports and incentives for engaging in the process. This systematic approach instills a culture of learning and growth, ultimately elevating program quality over time.

**Investing in Staff Professional Learning Creates High-Quality Experiences for Children.** Perhaps one of the most crucial lessons is the recognition that the highest quality school-age childcare programs prioritize investment in professional learning and development of staff. PQA-driven improvement initiatives emphasize the significance of well-trained and engaged staff members. When staff are empowered to be part of the CQI process and equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to implement effective practices, they become instrumental in creating high-quality experiences for children. Robust training and professional development opportunities translate into better interactions, improved learning outcomes, and the creation of safe and supportive environments.

**Conclusion**

State QRIS can support school-age childcare programs to improve their quality through implementing elements of a program quality improvement approach, including assessment with the School Age or SEL Program Quality Assessment, structured improvement planning, and professional development workshops to support improvement. The PQA and YPQI process are specifically designed to support the development of school-aged children, emphasizing engaging and active learning environments, supporting children’s growing capacities for teamwork, perspective-taking, empathy, leadership, responsibility, and more advanced planning. This process enables providers to assess, plan, and implement improvements. The alignment of resources, including youth work methods professional development workshops, ensures that programs have the support they need to improve quality. Real-world implementations in states like Michigan, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania underscore the adaptability and impact of the PQA within QRIS systems. Lessons gleaned from these experiences emphasize the tool’s observational nature, its role in fostering a culture of improvement, and the paramount importance of investing in well-trained staff to create enriching school-age childcare environments. As QRIS systems continue to evolve, these lessons stand as valuable pillars for driving quality enhancement and ensuring positive outcomes for school-age children.

**Connect with us.**

For more information about Program Quality Assessments or the Youth Program Quality Improvement approach, contact us at forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/contact-us.