

A System of Standards-Based Early Care and Education

All children in early care and education programs deserve to be in a high quality program. Parents who are working want to ensure that their child is in a safe environment receiving quality care, and early childhood educators want to provide quality care. The challenge is that Alaska has no framework to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality of early care and education programs.

Several states have looked at this problem and have implemented a framework called a Quality Rating System (QRS) or Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). In 2003, Fairbanks piloted a QRIS and found it improved the quality of child care in that community. In addition, a QRIS can equip parents with the information they need to make good choices for their family.

Regardless of whether states choose to implement a QRIS or to use another system to address the problems stated above, there are some common features.

The voluntary system usually encompasses the following early care and education programs:

- Head Start
- Child Care Centers
- Child Care Homes
- Certified Preschools
- School District Preschools

Components of the system typically include:

- Quality standards for programs and practitioners
- Assessment, monitoring, and quality ratings of programs
- Financial support to ensure access and parent choices
- Incentive payments and technical assistance to improve program quality
- Supports for professional development
- Rating results and consumer education relating to quality

Some possible standards that could be evaluated by the system are:

- Staff qualifications
- Environment
- Curriculum and learning
- Leadership and management
- Family engagement

Currently, through funding from the Department of Health and Social Services, Best Beginnings is working with an Alaska advisory committee and three national consultants to explore what a quality rating and improvement system might look like in Alaska.