



## Issue Brief: Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

### *Parents Deserve to Know the Level of Quality They are Buying for Child Care*

Parents are their child’s first and most important teachers. Yet most parents of young children are also bread-winners, working outside the home to make ends meet. That means they rely on child care programs to support their children’s development and learning during working hours.

Parents and caregivers rely on ratings and information labels when making choices about everything from movies to videogames to the nutrition value of foods. But unlike many other states, Washington’s parents don’t have the same help to guide their child care choices. A voluntary five-star quality rating system will arm them with the information they need to make informed decisions. It will also give child care providers support and incentives to continuously improve the services they offer. As providers earn stars by improving quality, they will receive higher rates of reimbursement.

Research shows that **high-quality** care and education is a key to success in school and life for many kids. Providers are doing the best they can, but program quality varies widely.

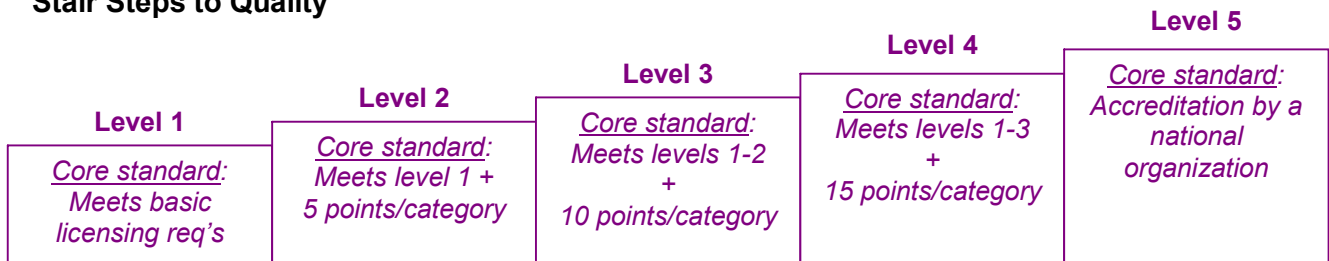
### QRIS: A Five Star Quality Rating and Improvement System

Today, family child care providers and center-based providers in our state must be licensed. But these licensing standards are minimal – they do not measure important quality indicators like learning environments, nurturing adult/child interactions, and teacher-child ratios.

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), or a five-star system, is a voluntary method to assess, improve, and communicate about the level of quality in child care. Market forces and financial incentives improve program quality. Providers get a clear map of how to earn stars while receiving the support they need to improve quality. For parents, there is finally better information to help them make informed child care choices.

As part of its directive from the Legislature, the Early Learning Council developed a QRIS model. Five steps, each tied to higher reimbursement, will promote higher quality in child care.

#### Stair Steps to Quality



## Child Care Quality in Washington

In Washington, approximately 43% of our children under the age of 5 are in licensed child care and thousands of others are in unlicensed or “license-exempt” care. **Of the 2,052 licensed centers in our state, only 165 would meet the level five standard; a mere 8%. And just 16 – or 0.3% – of the 5,626 family child care homes are nationally accredited.**

## Child Care Professional Development

Upgrading the skills and knowledge of child care workers is a critical component of a rating system. Today, providers can connect their staff to far too limited training and education through local resource and referral agencies, ESDs, and community and technical colleges. The Legislature has also taken initial steps to boost staff credentials with pilot programs like Spokane’s successful demonstration of financial rewards for more qualified staff.

The five-star rating system will provide additional resources for program improvement including training and reimbursement of charges for accreditation fees. With these incentives in place, providers will be able to better recruit and retain high-quality staff and, as a result, build stronger relationships with the families and children they serve.

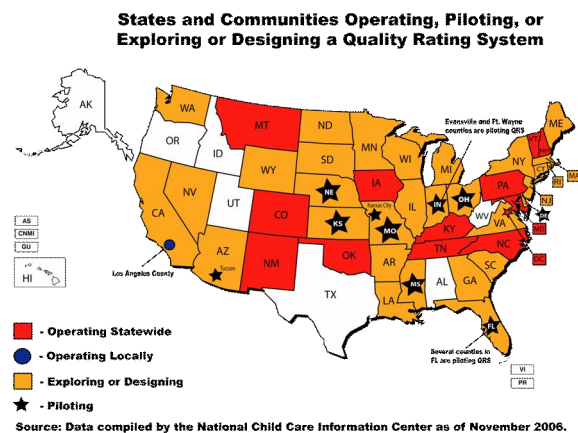
## Why is Quality Care Important to School Readiness and Where Does Washington Rank?

Today, we know more than ever about how much the first five years shape a child’s life. Experts in economics, education, public health and neuroscience agree that high quality early learning gives young children a fairer start to begin school ready to succeed.

In 2004, only 44% of children entering school were fully prepared according to an Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Kindergarten Readiness Survey.

Washington has fallen behind. Other states are ahead of us in building and operating rating systems that boost quality and provide accountability for families and funders.

Many states are seeing progress. In Pennsylvania, a QRIS is helping child care programs improve their overall quality, reversing negative trends evident in the late 1990s. In Tennessee, a voluntary rating system helped improve child care quality across the state, and rates of kindergarten readiness are on the rise.



## The Right First Steps

Governor Gregoire’s cross-sector Washington Learns committee spent 18 months exploring ways to build a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational system and recommended creating a QRIS as a key component of this goal. Washington stands ready to join successful states in improving choices for families.

The first step to improving quality is to pilot the voluntary five star system in three communities across Washington to include:

- Program assessment along with teacher training, program supports, and incentives
- Incremental increases in reimbursement as programs elevate from two to five star ratings
- Providing information to families to help them make informed choices about child care.