

Frequently Asked Questions

— for Policymakers

What is Quality Counts California?

Quality Counts California is a statewide improvement initiative intended to ensure a consistently high-quality early care and education experience for California infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children in center-based and home-based programs. The initiative is implemented at the county or regional level through locally tailored and operated Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs).

What is a QRIS?

QRIS is the acronym for a Quality Rating and Improvement System, which provides measures and related supports designed to evaluate, communicate about, and, as needed, improve the quality of both early care and education centers and family child care homes. Broadly speaking, these systems 1) rate programs on the degree to which they meet a common set of program standards for quality; 2) make program ratings available to parents (and others in parental roles) to help them to choose a program for their child; and 3) engage participating programs in a continuous quality improvement process, as needed.

Who administers QRISs in California?

In California, the effort to improve early care and education programs through the use of such systems is a statewide endeavor. It is carried out under the banner of Quality Counts California and under the broad oversight of the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Children and Families Commission (First 5 California), and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) in alliance with regional consortia made up of First 5 county commissions, county offices of education, local child care planning councils, child care resource and referral agencies, and other child-focused partners. Each consortium oversees a local QRIS that uses the same collaboratively developed set of statewide program standards but is tailored to some degree for the local context. This local control suits the state's size and diversity.

Although QRISs can vary to some degree from one another, all the local systems have the same mission, as articulated by the CDE: “Ensure that children in California have access to high-quality programs so that they thrive in their early learning settings and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.”

Focused efforts to expand the availability and raise the quality of early care and education programs in California began in the early 2000s and gained momentum in 2011 when California was awarded a federal Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant, which supported expansion of local QRIS efforts in 16 counties. Built on this grant and state funding, a statewide effort was launched in March 2016.

If each QRIS can be tailored to some degree for local context, are there common components across all QRISs?

Generally speaking, every QRIS has the same five key components: a set of program standards, financial incentives for program participation, program supports, monitoring of program quality, and consumer education.

Program standards

The quality of participating early care and education programs is measured based on a common set of program standards. Program quality improvement efforts are guided by those same standards. In California, the standards used by each local QRIS were developed through a local-state collaboration and are laid out in the [Quality Counts California Rating Matrix](#), which describes quality elements and indicators at five levels, or tiers, in three core areas: Child Development and School Readiness, Teachers and Teaching, and Program and Environment.

In California, as in many other places, state licensing requirements serve as the entry point for program standards; they are referred to in the California standards as Tier 1 of quality, and standards for higher levels of quality are developed from there. For example, to meet the Tier 1 licensing requirements and receive 1 point in the rating system, a child care center in California must demonstrate an adult-to-child ratio of 1:4 for infants as shown in the Quality Counts Rating Matrix (see “5. Ratios and Group Size” under Core III: Program and Environment). To obtain the full 5 points to meet the Tier 5 requirement, the same program must narrow the ratio to 3:9 or better.

Financial incentives

California's statewide QRIS effort allows consortia to allocate stipends and incentives to help engage early care and education programs and help improve and sustain long-term quality. These resources vary by community and may include staff bonuses, quality improvement grants, funding for upgrading facilities, educational stipends, workforce supplies, or other professional development supports.

Program supports

A QRIS provides support for program intervention, which in turn provides incentive for participation and a means of program improvement. For example, many participating consortia provide professional learning support, such as training in child development, age-appropriate instructional practices, or leadership development. QRISs can also provide coaching and mentoring supports, peer learning opportunities, and different types of technical assistance.

Monitoring of program quality

QRIS monitoring helps determine how well programs meet program standards, assign program ratings, and verify a programs' continued adherence to the standards. Monitoring also keeps parents, funders, and others informed about how and when a program quality improves. The CDE, First 5 California, and CDSS, along with many local and state partners, manage and support these processes in California.

Consumer education

A central role for any QRIS is that of educating parents about the quality in early care and education in their area — and about the value and importance of high-quality early care and education. California's locally administered QRISs may use indicators such as stars to communicate levels of quality. A QRIS may post ratings on its website, promote QRIS ratings via news media, and/or provide rated programs with posters, banners, certificates, decals, pins, and other items to indicate participation in a QRIS. In addition, county child care resource and referral agencies play a vital role in providing information on program quality and parent education in their region.

Why is it important to have a QRIS?

Research consistently shows that children who attend a quality early care and education program are more likely to do well in school and less likely to drop out or need remedial supports later in their education. A good-quality early care and education program helps children grow socially, emotionally, and physically by providing a healthy environment and a range of enriching activities.

A QRIS is intended to improve the quality of participating programs through the alignment and coordination of system elements, such as professional development, program standards, public awareness, and accountability.

Do early care and education programs have to participate in a QRIS?

In California, participation in a QRIS is voluntary for early care and education programs. Some programs may elect to begin continuous quality improvement efforts as a way to prepare for participation in quality ratings later.

What kind of commitment does a program make when it opts to be rated?

Programs that want to be rated agree to take a series of steps to measure and improve the quality of their program, including collecting common data and sharing it with their local QRIS, facilitating the use of observational measures such as [Classroom Assessment Scoring System® \(CLASS\)](#) or the [Environment Rating Scales \(ERS\)](#) in their classrooms, and working with their QRIS to implement quality improvement efforts.

What does research say about the effects of QRIS in California so far?

Conducted by American Institutes for Research (AIR) and its partners,^{*} a recent study of California's Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge QRISs looked at the extent to which the quality elements measured in the QRISs relate to each other and how well the QRIS ratings align with independent observations of quality. Preliminary findings on the validity of the QRIS ratings include:

- California's QRISs capture important aspects of quality.
- The quality elements in California's QRISs are not redundant; each element measures a distinct aspect of program quality.
- Ratings function differently for centers and family child care homes.
- Variation in ratings are limited, with the majority of participating programs — both center- and home-based — rated as being in Tiers 3 or 4; no programs rate as Tier 1 and only a few as Tiers 2 and 5.
- Some evidence indicates that the ratings capture meaningful differences in quality; higher-rated programs were found to be of higher quality on some, but not all, independent measures of observed quality.

For more information, visit www.qualitycountsca.net.

^{*}Hawkinson, L. E., Quick, H. E., Muenchow, S., Anthony, J., Weinberg, E., Holod, A., ... Karoly, L. A. (2015). Independent evaluation of California's Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Quality Rating and Improvement System: Half-term report. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. Available at www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/rt/documents/rttelcqrisevalbrief.pdf