

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 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.

Many states 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.

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

Standards to be evaluated by the system:

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

Through funding from the Department of Health and Social Services, Best Beginnings led an Alaska advisory committee with three national consultants to develop a quality rating and improvement system for Alaska. This system is poised for implementation to increase accountability, quality of programs, and assist parents in choosing the best option for their child.