



Promoting Quality in Afterschool Programs Through State Child Care Quality Rating Systems

This executive summary is based on the strategy brief of the same name published in September 2007. For a copy of the unabridged brief, go to http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/afterschool/qrs_afterschool.pdf

The development of a quality rating system (QRS) is an increasingly common state strategy to improve the quality of child care. A QRS allows child care providers to voluntarily meet several tiers of state quality standards, above those set by licensing regulations. Typically, providers are recognized for reaching these higher quality standards through a designation, such as a “star rating,” that helps consumers to locate high-quality programs. In addition, state rating systems often provide incentives and supports to encourage providers to reach higher levels of quality.

Most existing rating systems apply to child care programs that serve children of various ages, including school-age children. Since systems were often developed with a focus on early care and education, however, many states have not fully considered how to adapt their standards to support quality in a wide range of school-age care programs.

Applying a QRS to Different Care Settings

While at the most basic level, the core components of quality in early care and school-age care look remarkably similar, there are several key differences that may be considered in the development of a QRS that is applicable to afterschool programs.

- **Developmental Needs:** School-age children have very different developmental needs than younger children and benefit when programming supports their social development and complements their school-day learning.
- **Program Diversity:** School-age programs are more diverse than early care programs, taking place in a range of settings and utilizing different program goals and approaches.
- **Staff Qualifications:** Highly qualified afterschool program staff may have different professional backgrounds than early care providers. For example, an afterschool program provider may have background in elementary education, youth development, or arts education, rather than in early child development.
- **Part-Time Schedules:** Many afterschool providers work part-time schedules, due to the nature of afterschool care and may find it difficult to meet quality standards developed for full-time professionals.
- **Sustainability Challenges:** Afterschool programs may face greater sustainability challenges, as many funding sources, including the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, operate as short-term grants.

Making a QRS Work for Afterschool Programs

In discussions with state child care and afterschool leaders that have adapted a QRS for afterschool, several strategies emerged as successful ways to make a QRS work for a range of afterschool programs. These strategies include:

- **Involving Afterschool Leaders in the Planning Process:** Involvement from the afterschool community in the planning process can ensure that the unique needs of afterschool programs are well represented in discussion about the scope of a QRS, the quality standards, and their implementation. Some states have, for example, developed school-age care planning committees or focus groups to provide input on the QRS. Others have worked closely with an existing statewide afterschool network.
- **Developing Standards that Address the Development Needs of Older Children:** In an effort to recognize the different developmental needs between young and older school-age children, several state rating systems have incorporated research-based standards that

recognize how quality afterschool programs differ from quality early care programs. For example, states have:

- Allowed programs accredited by the National AfterSchool Association (NAA) to automatically reach the highest tier of a QRS.
 - Used the nationally recognized School-Age Care Environmental Rating Scale (SACERS) to assess quality in afterschool programs.
 - Developed research-based state-level quality standards or checklists focused specifically assessing quality in varied school-age care settings.
- Addressing the Unique Qualities of Afterschool Program Staff: With added flexibility around the staff qualifications, it is likely that more afterschool programs would be able to participate in a QRS. While many rating systems require staff to have credentials, degrees, coursework or work experience in early care and education, some states recognize that qualified school-age care staff may have other relevant qualifications, such as a background in elementary education or experience working with youth. In addition, some states have crafted more flexible requirements around areas such as employee benefits or the timing of required child observations to better support programs with largely part-time program staff.
 - Reducing Barriers for Diverse Afterschool Programs to Participate in the System: In many states, school-based afterschool programs are exempt from some or all licensing regulations- typically the first step in a QRS- as they are already monitored by the state education agency. States may consider whether policy changes or outreach to school-based programs can help to bring these programs into the QRS.

Developing a QRS as Part of a Broader Professional Development System

Development of a QRS can highlight needs and provide momentum for a state to build a broader statewide system that supports the professional development of school-age providers and helps to professionalize the field of school-age care. For example, some states have found that a state school-age care professional credential provides school-age programs with an opportunity to more clearly demonstrate and promote the qualifications of their staff. Relevant trainings and coursework can also be key pieces of a professional development system.

Linking Afterschool Quality and Sustainability

Alongside policymakers' concerns about the quality of afterschool programs are growing worries about these programs' long-term sustainability. Afterschool programs often receive ongoing support from parent fees and CCDF subsidies, but they are more likely than early care programs to rely on short-term grants. One state QRS pilot program has linked sustainability planning to their QRS for afterschool programs, allowing programs with a sustainability plan in place to earn points toward a higher tier of quality. This may be a promising state strategy to support both the quality and long-term viability of afterschool programs.

Adaptations in Three States

The strategy brief profiled the efforts of three states to support school-age care through a QRS. The rating systems discussed include:

- Pennsylvania Keystone STARS;
- Ohio Step up to Quality; and
- Missouri Quality Rating System (pilot program)

For detailed information on how these three states have adapted their QRS requirements for school-age care, see the complete text of this brief.