

**Recommendations for a Connecticut
Quality Rating and Improvement System**

DRAFT

“...the quality of a child’s early environment and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial in determining the strength or weakness of the brain’s architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will be able to think and to regulate emotions.”¹”

Introduction and Background

Connecticut General Statutes 10-16s (b) (1) (2) established the Early Childhood Education Cabinet (ECEC) in 2005. These statutes were amended by Public Act 07-03 (Appendix A for relevant legislation)² and charged the Cabinet with developing *“minimum standards and a range of higher standards of quality for all early care and education programs receiving state funding”* and with the development and implementation of *“an accountability plan for early childhood education services.”* The Cabinet is required to report on these plans to the relevant committees of the General Assembly no later than December 31, 2008.

Established by Executive Order of the Governor of the State of Connecticut in 2006, the Governor’s Early Childhood Research and Policy Council (Council), advises the ECE Cabinet on investments in early childhood initiatives. The ECE Cabinet asked the 31 member Council to develop a set of recommendations for a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). In response, a 25-member Quality Rating and Improvement System Work Group (QRIS Work Group) was convened representing early childhood care and education organizations, state agencies, programs, providers, parents and other related stakeholders to generate the recommendations (see Appendix E for Work Group members). This group has met for a full day each month between February and October of 2008.

To support and oversee this work, the Council established the Quality Rating and Improvement System Guiding Committee. This committee ensures that there is a shared and consistent perspective between the Work Group and the Council on the emerging recommendations. Members of the Guiding Committee met on a monthly basis and reviewed the Work Group’s progress, provided input on behalf of the Council and addressed any barriers to progress that arose in the process. Recommendations regarding providing sufficient funding and incentives necessary to implement this system (see systemic recommendations, p.4) were supported by the Guiding Committee early in the development process.

In order to solicit public input, the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Governor’s Early Childhood Research and Policy Council, hosted a number of public forums. A Community Forum to launch the development of a QRIS was held in February, 2008. Anne Mitchell and Louise Stoney, co-founders of the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance and national experts on the development of QRIS, presented the purpose and basic components of a state QRIS, the experiences and choices made by other states and the benefits a QRIS can impart to children, families and the ECE community. A diverse assembly of 150 stakeholders had the opportunity to exchange ideas and information around the concept of a QRIS for Connecticut. In May, 2008 two additional community forums were held, these forums hosted experts from Maine, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, who shared the QRIS development and implementation processes in their states. Over one hundred citizens attended these forums. An additional set of community forums were held in August, 2008 to share emerging recommendations with the ECE community and receive public feedback. These meetings were hosted by Work Group members. Additional forums are contemplated to gather community feedback on the recommendations put forth to the Council.

QRIS Work Group meetings were open to the public, and offered an opportunity for public input. Meeting and forum documents were posted on ecpolicycouncil.org for public access and dissemination.

¹ Handoff, J.P. (2007) Working Paper: The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain Architecture. <http://developingchild.net/pubs/wp-abstracts/wp5.html>

² Connecticut statute reference section 20 of Public Act 07-03; and Connecticut statute reference section 19 (d) (1) of Public Act 07-03.

The QRIS Work Group identified the following goals and guiding principles as a foundation for their work³.

In developing and implementing a Quality Rating and Improvement System for early care and education and after school programs in Connecticut we are committed to recommendations that:

Improve the well-being of children in Connecticut;

Achieve high quality across ALL early care and education programs in all areas of Connecticut by providing:

- financial and other resources to programs to continually improve;
- information to parents so that they can make educated decisions; and
- a common system of accountability for ALL public agencies and funders.

The Connecticut Quality Rating and Improvement System will:

- Create a meaningful and commonly accepted understanding of early care and education and school age program quality;
- Be a reliable, trustworthy and dynamic system with high integrity;
- Coordinate the existing early care and education standards in Connecticut to strengthen and simplify the regulatory and monitoring environment;
- Promote parent and provider buy-in and public investments by ensuring the integrity of the quality assessments and information it provides;
- Advance the availability of high quality early care and education and school age programs for all children and particularly for children most at risk;
- Support alignment across all sectors involved with early care and education and school age care programs and reduce redundancy for community participants in these programs;
- Provide reliable information about the quality of early care and education and school age care programs to families who are consumers of those services; and
- Provide reliable information about the quality of early care and education and school age care programs and the resources available to support continuous quality improvement of these programs to policy makers to inform decision making at all levels.

What is a Quality Rating and Improvement System?

The National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC) defines a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) as “a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education programs. QRIS can be an effective strategy for aligning components of the early care and education system for increased accountability in improving quality of care.” A well designed QRIS uses valid and reliable assessment tools to measure and monitor a set of research-based standards and indicators of quality. A QRIS “can help maximize resources, inform the general public about quality, enhance coordination of related initiatives, and align efforts related to licensing, standards, professional development, and program accountability.”⁴ A QRIS in Connecticut can offer programs, practitioners, policy makers, parents, and other stakeholders a more uniform and complete understanding of what high quality care looks like and should articulate what Connecticut stakeholders value as indicators of high quality for young children and families in our state.

³ Work Group members are in full agreement that a fully developed QRIS in Connecticut must encompass programs serving all children from birth through age twelve. Given time constraints on this development process and the focus of the convening Children’s Cabinet on early care and education, this set of recommendations addresses early care and education programs specifically for an initial phase of QRIS development focused on birth – age five. The Work Group strongly recommends that any QRIS that is established in Connecticut expand as quickly as possible through a second phase that includes standards and processes for school age programs serving children birth – age nine.

⁴ Child Care Bureau. (2007/2008) Child Care Bulletin: Systematic Approaches to Improving Quality and Care. <http://www.nccic.acf.hhs.gov/ccb/issue32.pdf>

Components of a Quality Rating and Improvement System include⁵:

1. **Standards** based on early care and education research
2. **Accountability**, through assessment and monitoring of identified quality indicators
3. **Program and Practitioner Supports**, include all efforts to encourage participation and support individuals and programs in improving and maintaining quality.
4. **Financing Incentives** which are intentionally linked to program participation and level of quality rating
5. **Parent Education** to ensure parents understand the QRIS and its benefits for their families

Oklahoma was the first state to develop and implement a QRIS 1998. This process for rating quality and supporting improvement in early care and education programs has evolved quickly, emerging as a national movement. Currently 17⁶ states have implemented statewide Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) for early childhood education and care programs and almost all remaining states are developing, piloting or implementing a QRIS at this time.

Systemic Recommendations

The QRIS Work Group was asked to deliberate on the core components of a QRIS in the context of Connecticut's early care and education landscape and provide recommendations to the Early Childhood Cabinet about the development and implementation of a QRIS for Connecticut. Within the constraints of the time frame and resources available to the group, a set of broad recommendations were agreed upon that provides a framework for further development. In most areas, there is additional refinement and expansion on these recommendations that need to take place before the full definition and form of a QRIS for Connecticut is clearly and fully expressed. In some areas, clear consensus could not be established and further deliberation on key questions is advised as the work moves forward. There are two systemic recommendations that represent strong consensus from Work Group members and consistent feedback from community stakeholders that should be considered as required conditions for the success of a QRIS effort in Connecticut.

Advancing and maintaining quality in early care and education requires a substantial increase in investments.

Financial investment in the CT QRIS and early care and education in Connecticut must be sufficient to build and sustain quality programs for all children. The priority of the CT QRIS must be to increase direct funding to programs to support quality and support optimal learning environments for children and staff. Funds allocated to administer the QRIS are necessary but must be secondary to this priority. Funding must be identified to support essential components of a CT QRIS including:

- establishing assessment and monitoring capacities that ensure integrity;
- providing incentives for initial and on-going program participation in a QRIS;
- fully supporting program improvements as well as technical assistance to effectively plan and implement program improvements;
- building administrative capacity and information systems to carry out and communicate quality assessments;
- supporting the current early childhood workforce, and identifying and resolving critical shortages and;
- providing due process protocols and remediation support for programs that fail to maintain the level of quality required for the rating they hold.

⁵ Mitchell, A. (2005) Stair Steps to Quality, p.4.

⁶ The states and years each was launched are: Colorado (2000); District of Columbia (2000); Indiana (2007); Iowa (2006); Kentucky (2001); Maine (2007); Maryland (2001); Montana (2002); New Hampshire (2006); New Mexico (2005); North Carolina (1999); Ohio (2006); Oklahoma (1998); Pennsylvania (2002); Rhode Island (2008); Tennessee (2001); and Vermont (2003)

A number of well-researched recommendations around financing are included in this report to help identify what resources will be needed for each component. *Without a commitment of sufficient resources, the work cannot move forward.*

A true system of early care and education will include all programs and providers serving young children in Connecticut. An effective QRIS must align and coordinate state and local agencies and entities involved with early care and education programs in order to advance a common agenda to promote continuous quality improvement that makes high quality early learning experiences available to every child in Connecticut.

Stakeholders across Early Childhood sectors share a commitment to the core values established by the Early Childhood Cabinet and the goals for investment laid out in Ready by 5 and Fine by 9. However, the methods of measuring how they contribute toward those ends create confusion and administrative burden for the front line providers responsible for delivering high quality early learning experiences for Connecticut's youngest and most vulnerable children. Early Care and Education in Connecticut encompasses a complex array of state and local agencies and entities distributing federal, state and local funds to a varied set of service providers or programs held to several different sets of program standards. Complexity, duplication of reporting processes and lack of consistency across funding streams and program types was a common concern voiced by Work Group members and community stakeholders.

The opportunity presented by a QRIS for Connecticut is the creation of a set of common standards and processes related to early childhood program quality and program assessment that reduces duplication and administrative burden and establishes a consistent set of high quality benchmarks that all programs may work toward and all funders may support. The Work Group recommendations outline priority standards and measurable criteria that coordinate and align standards and measurement systems already in use in Connecticut. *State and local agencies responsible for overseeing and funding early childhood programs must agree to use these common standards and processes in place of what currently exists*, or the envisioned QRIS potentially increases, rather than decreases, the administrative burden on providers further detracting from their primary mission to serve children and families and giving rise to a disincentive for the voluntary participation in continuous quality improvement that is necessary to move early care and education in Connecticut forward systemically.

Advancing a Universal System

“Children who participate in high-quality preschool demonstrate higher academic achievement, are less likely to repeat a grade or require special education classes, and are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college. As adults, former preschool students are also less likely to be unemployed and more likely to have higher earnings than similar students who do not participate in preschool programs. The positive impact from preschool programs on students’ lives increases the likelihood that these students will become net economic and social contributors to society.”⁷

The CT QRIS is intended to increase the availability of high quality early care and education programs for all children and particularly for children most at risk. It must provide information on quality about all available programs to help families make informed decisions about their early care and education options and choices. It must reliably measure how well programs meet quality standards that have been proven to support positive outcomes for young children and ensure that public and private investments are effectively directed to impact those outcomes for children enrolled in early care and education programs, including infants and toddlers.

⁷ Committee for Economic Development (2006). The Economic Promise of Investing in High Quality Preschool. <http://www.ced.org/projects/educ.shtml>

Only broad participation of diverse programs – a robust universal system - can achieve these ends. The Work Group recommends that the system be open to all early care and education programs and that it provides incentives and rewards that are strong enough to draw the majority of programs in and quality improvement supports effective enough to move participating programs forward. Specifically, the Work Group recommends that the CT QRIS actively seek to engage: all center-based early care and education settings including those that are licensed and those that are exempt from licensing, including public schools; and all home-based early care and education settings, those that are licensed (commonly called family home day care) and Kith and Kin providers seeking a path to licensing and continuous quality improvement.

Family Day Care Homes

Family Day Care Home providers serve a large number of young children in Connecticut, particularly infants and toddlers. Given that all young children from birth to five should have access to high quality services regardless of the setting their parents choose, Work Group members are in strong agreement that Family Day Care Homes need to be included in the CT QRIS from the outset. Also, given the prevalent use of license-exempt Kith and Kin providers for infants and toddlers in the Care4Kids subsidy program, the Work Group recommends that Kith and Kin providers be given the same opportunity as license-exempt center-based programs to enter QRIS as an unrated program (entry level) willing to commit to becoming licensed and improving quality over time.

There was not sufficient time for this Work Group to develop Program Standards customized for Family Day Care Homes in addition to those proposed for center-based programs and there is agreement that participants with greater knowledge of and experience in Family Day Care Home care must be included in any group drafting those standards. Therefore, it is the recommendation of the Work Group that an ad hoc Family Day Care Home sub-committee should be convened as quickly as possible and supported to build on the proposed set of Standards for center-based programs to create a set of aligned and equivalent Standards for use with Family Day Care Homes. Representatives from the current Work Group should participate in this sub-committee with Family Day Care Homes providers and others with relevant expertise.

The charge to the sub-committee should specify that their primary task is to create a set of Family Day Care Home Standards that essentially customize those established for center-based programs for the particular characteristics of Family Day Care Home. To ensure integrity and consistency in the QRIS, parity of quality at each level must be maintained across settings. During this process, National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC) Accreditation requirements should be evaluated against those accreditation/approval systems recommended for center-based program standards to see where NAFCC accreditation would fit on a quality continuum established by setting specific standards that are equivalent at each level.

The sub-committee should also review Work Group recommendations for other elements of a CT QRIS to identify where specific incentives and TA/program supports should be customized to address the needs of Family Day Care Home providers.

The legislation cited at the beginning of this report mandates participation in the QRIS for any program receiving state funds. The Work Group identified programs receiving state funds as including, but not limited to: Department of Social Services contracted Centers; State Department of Education School Readiness Programs; State funded Head Start Programs; Public Pre-Schools (both Regular and Special

Education); Magnet Schools; and State Charter Schools. It is the recommendation of Work Group that programs and providers receiving Care4Kids reimbursements⁸ are not mandated to participate.

Developing the Elements of a Quality Rating System for Connecticut

Standards and Accountability

Levels of Quality

QRIS Standards establish the set of expectations for program quality that must be achieved at each level of a QRIS. Accountability ensures that the Standards are assessed with rigor, reliability and integrity.

The Work Group has developed a preliminary draft of priority standards and measurable criteria for center based programs that predict/indicate increasing levels of quality using standards and measurement systems already utilized in Connecticut wherever possible. These need additional refinement and must be customized to be applied to all eligible program types but are a sound beginning.

The recommended Standards define a continuum of quality, beginning with state licensing requirements and progressing to specific standards that have been identified as exemplary practices in the field of early care and education and are highly valued in Connecticut. National accreditation and approval systems are included as a means of demonstrating a high level of quality.

The recommended Standards have been developed using a “building blocks” model.⁹ This means that all participating programs will have to meet the same set of specified quality criteria to achieve each level of quality and will not be rated at any level without achieving all of the requirements for that and all preceding levels.

An un-rated entry level and five rated levels are defined as follows:

⁸ It is of particular importance that Care4Kids subsidies, which support early care and education services for economically disadvantaged families, be invested in programs that provide high quality services that improve outcomes for vulnerable young children in those families. However, the Work Group expressed serious concerns that some programs currently accepting Care4Kids subsidies may take a ‘wait and see’ attitude toward an emerging QRIS and stop accepting subsidized children rather than engage as a mandated program. This would create serious access issues for subsidized families seeking services for their children.

Paying higher rates of reimbursements for higher levels of quality (tiered reimbursement) will provide an incentive for high quality and improving programs to accept subsidies. The Work Group recommends that programs accepting Care4Kids reimbursements as their only source of state funding be exempted from mandatory participation in QRIS until it is clear that tiered reimbursements and other incentives have built a capacity of rated programs accepting Care4Kids subsidies sufficient to allow subsidized families access to choices that work for themselves and their children.

⁹ A discussion of this model and alternative models may be found in the United Way Success by 6 publication “Stair Steps to Quality” by Anne Mitchell (p23-25).

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| Entry | <p>Entry level is open to all legally operating, license-exempt programs and providers as a means to enter the CT QRIS and engage in a process of continuous quality improvement with support. Programs entering at this level must agree to become licensed within a designated time frame. They will be oriented to the quality improvement process and have access to technical assistance, quality improvement grants and other appropriate QRIS supports and incentives.</p> <p>Programs participating at this level will be assessed and will develop and implement Individual Program Improvement Plans (IPIP) that include: expected outcomes; timelines; strategies; individuals responsible for implementation; and resources available to the program through QRIS and other sources to address the quality issues identified in the QRIS program assessment. Programs will not be rated at this level.</p> |
| Level 1 | <p>Licensing</p> <p>Licensing regulations provide a foundation of minimum standards related to health, safety, and support for child development that all early care and education programs should be required to meet. In order to achieve this level, programs must hold a valid license from Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH). The licensing division at DPH will be responsible for accountability at this level. DPH must be given adequate resources to monitor additional programs entering through the QRIS, to visit all licensed programs annually, and to provide staff training and supervision to ensure consistent and reliable application of the established regulatory standards</p> |
| Level 2 | <p>Improving Beyond Licensing</p> <p>Program is licensed and implements good practices above and beyond licensing expectations. Programs at this level will have to submit documentation of compliance with standards for certain criteria.</p> <p>The QRIS administrative entity will be responsible for accountability at this level.</p> |
| Level 3 | <p>Consistent Commitment to High Quality Practices</p> <p>Program is licensed, has met all required criteria in Levels 1 and 2, and consistently implements good practices above and beyond licensing expectations in all domains of quality. Programs at this level will have to submit documentation of compliance with standards for certain criteria. The QRIS administrative entity will be responsible for accountability at this level.</p> |
| Level 4 | <p>Moving Toward National Accreditation/Approval</p> <p>Program is licensed, has met all required criteria in Levels 1-3, consistently implements good practices above and beyond licensing expectations and has demonstrated progress toward achieving national accreditation/approval by meeting critical criteria in all domains of quality. Programs at this level will have to submit documentation of compliance with standards in certain domains and will participate in a valid and reliable ERS observation at no cost to the program. At this level, an overall average score of 5 or above in the ERS observation will be required to demonstrate compliance with certain criteria. Programs demonstrate progress toward becoming accredited by embarking on an appropriate Self Assessment Process. The QRIS administrative entity will be responsible for accountability at this level.</p> |
| Level 5 | <p>Nationally Accredited or Approved</p> <p>Program is licensed, has met all required criteria for Levels 1 – 4, and has demonstrated a commitment to establishing and maintaining high quality services for children and families by achieving accreditation by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (NAEYC) or approval as a Head Start by the Head Start Bureau¹⁰.</p> <p>The appropriate accrediting/approval organization will be responsible for accountability at this level. Programs will have to provide documentation of current and valid accreditation/approval to the QRIS administrative entity.</p> |

¹⁰ The Work Group recommends that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); the National Association of Family day care (NAFCC) and Head Start (HS) be recognized as accrediting/approval bodies for the CT QRIS at this time and that a process be developed for evaluating any new systems proposed for acceptance in the CT QRIS in the future.

Domains and Criteria

The Work Group recognizes the need to link choices in quality standards to those scientifically shown to produce positive child outcomes. The domains for program quality were selected after reviewing current national research and recognized evidence-based best practices. The Work Group recommends five domains of program quality encompassing 21 measurable criteria that specify how programs will demonstrate increasing levels of quality in the system.

These are:

- I. Staff Qualification and Professional Development
 - A. Director/Administrator Qualifications
 - B. Teacher Qualifications
 - C. Teacher Assistant Qualifications
 - D. On-going Professional Development Plans
- II. Learning Environment
 - A. Space, Routines, Activities and Materials
 - B. Curriculum
 - C. Child assessment
 - D. Adult Child Interactions
 - E. Daily Program Experiences
- III. Health and Safety
 - A. Implementation of Safe and Healthy Policies and Practices
 - B. CPR and First Aid Training
 - C. Nutrition and Physical Activity
- IV. Leadership and Management
 - A. Staff Orientation
 - B. Staff Supervision and Performance
 - C. Staff Compensation and Benefits
 - D. Fiscal Operations (Budget Management)
 - E. Program Evaluation and Data-Driven Improvement
 - F. Consultants and Contract Services
- V. Family Engagement and Support
 - A. Relationships with Families
 - B. Communication with Families
 - C. Cultural Competence

The Work Group recommends that the draft standards be evaluated to ensure that they:

- Are reliable;
- Are transparent and easily understood by families, providers and policy makers;
- Are cost effective;
- Promote continuous improvement and
- Are based on evidence-based best practices for children and families.

Appendix B includes a detailed description of recommended criteria at each level and how these are assessed.

Program and Practitioner Outreach and Supports

In order to improve and maintain quality in early care and education programs and motivate and retain participation in the QRIS, an infrastructure that is separate from the measurement and rating process in terms of personnel and structure must be in place in order to assist programs to meet the program standards endorsed by the Cabinet and embedded in the quality rating system. The process will draw on other resources for professional development and practice improvement and encourage and support programs to take advantage of those efforts.

The program improvement process will include the development of a quality improvement plan and engagement of approved consultants with expertise and training who will work on-site to establish a relationship with staff and assist the programs in implementing quality improvement plans. Programs will be encouraged to use approved consultants to meet licensing requirements, and thus have an ongoing relationship with consultants for professional guidance and support. The consultant with an ongoing relationship with a program will be able to effectively participate in the quality improvement plan as well as provide ongoing support for its implementation. Consultants who are currently working with the program will be used whenever appropriate and involved in the program improvement plan.

Create an outreach mechanism using technical assistance staff that will provide:

- Orientation to the QRIS system for programs interested in the process
- Information for parents
- Supports to unlicensed programs at the Entry Level, in order to facilitate the process of achieving licensure.
- Assistance to rated programs in applying for support in developing an individualized program improvement plan. The plan should incorporate all grants, resources, reimbursements, licensing/accreditation/approval improvement plans and existing consultants that the program uses. Plans should be based on the assessment of the needs of the program informed by the rating and have clear goals and a timeline.

It is recommended that approved consultants, those consultants who meet discipline specific competencies and are enrolled in the registry, will be engaged to implement the plan. As needed, the consultants will be matched to the needs of the program, as identified by the QRIS, and will take into account any existing consultants or assistance currently involved in the program.

The program improvement process must include the following infrastructure to be effective:

- A pool of approved consultants (for consistency) professionals and agencies able to work with diverse populations and with expertise in education, health, mental health, special needs, English language learners, nutrition and family support.
- Practice and practitioner standards, minimum qualifications, certification and ethical standards for experts and agencies delivering consultation. Recommendations for minimum education and experience requirements for Early Childhood Consultants have been generated by a Consultation Work Group, the CT QRIS should align with these recommendations (See Appendix C for specific degree requirements and training requirements).
- An infrastructure for initial and ongoing training and updates for consultants in early childhood content and consultation skills and knowledge as defined by the Consultation Work Group.
- Use of approved consultants enrolled in the Consultation Registry. The quality improvement process must use approved individual consultants enrolled in the registry to deliver consultation to program.
- Financing sufficient to ensure readily available quality consultation and technical assistance, and support programs, the infrastructure components, and delivery of the quality improvement process. Programs and the state should share the costs of the quality improvement process based on program need and resources and leverage funding and supports for which the program is eligible. The plan should document program and state contributions that will be used.

Financing and Incentives

Financing Structure

Encouraging participation in a voluntary Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) requires a variety of incentives that foster both initial interest and ongoing improvements of Connecticut's early care education centers and family homes. For programs mandated to participate, incentives are designed to encourage and support their efforts to maintain and improve the quality of their programs.

The development of recommendations for financing and providing incentives within a QRIS were guided by the following principles:

- Advancing and maintaining quality in early care and education requires increased investments. Financial investment [in the CT QRIS and] early care and education in Connecticut must be sufficient to build and sustain quality programs for all children.
- The CT QRIS will establish and provide a consistent array of financial incentives and a system of coordinated quality improvement supports for all participating programs, both those that enter voluntarily and those that enter as a condition of state funding.
- A consolidated and uniform rate structure aligned with quality ratings in the CT QRIS will be established for all programs receiving state funding from any source. Current rates will be the minimum starting point (which will be at a level higher than 1 but less than 5) and programs demonstrating higher quality will receive higher rates.
- Technical Assistance, financial and other incentives available to programs participating in the CT QRIS will be directly and intentionally aligned with the strengths and needs identified in the QRIS program assessment.

Incentives

The recommended incentives outlined below best compliment Connecticut's existing infrastructure, are the most cost-effective to implement and will promote engagement in the QRIS system from providers and parents alike. The incentives assume initial and increasing levels of participation by providers across these four categories. Incentives are tailored to target four audiences: Programs (organizations or family day care homes providing early care and education services); directors/teachers; consumers; and businesses.

Provider Incentives

Targeted Incentives which are proposed as new investments tied directly to implementing the QRIS system, and

Linked Incentives refer to incentives or initiatives that already exist or are being proposed through other Cabinet-related planning efforts and can be adjusted or enhanced to reinforce the objective of QRIS of achieving broad participation. The Work Group recommends that whenever feasible any state or philanthropic assistance to providers be linked to or conditioned on their participation in QRIS.

Incentive Options for Directors/Teachers

The Program and Provider Supports Work Group has identified a number of practitioner supports to encourage further education and retention of the ECE workforce. These will be aligned with the work of

the Cabinet Workforce Committee. The components, all of which have been used in other states, include: scholarships; wage subsidy; bonuses; loan forgiveness; health benefits; and tax incentives.

The QRIS should use the existing infrastructures of ECE professional development programs such as scholarship pools, Higher Education, State Department of Education, Social Services, Public Health, Children and Families, State Education Resource Centers, Head Start, Public Schools, Accreditation Facilitation Project, Connecticut Charts-a-Course and Regional Education Service Centers, which offer training, counseling and scholarships to individual practitioners. Centers are currently eligible for professional development planning, director training and quality improvement assistance in order to attain accreditation.

The QRIS Work Group recommends that the individual's workplace must participate in QRIS as a condition of their receiving personal financial support for whatever staff professional development or retention incentives are ultimately recommended by the Workforce Committee.

The CT QRIS should align with the Consultation Work Group Recommendations for creating and sustaining a pool of consultants who meet the education, experience and training minimum requirements:

- *Create a network* through strengthening existing networks of quality consultants and supporting the training of qualified individuals to become consultants, under the entity that manages the QRIS.
- Develop a process to support and fund regularly scheduled consultation for early childhood programs
- Recruit consultants with discipline specific expertise and training and coaching in working with young children
- Provide certificates of competency to consultants that meet the requirements and a uniform system to provide accessibility for all programs.

Tax Incentives

Several states, including Maine, Louisiana, and North Carolina, have or are considering tax incentives as part of their QRIS financial model. These are being presented as economic development tax incentives to build and strengthen the ECE industry and support laying a strong foundation for workforce development.

Tax incentives have targeted families, providers/businesses, and practitioners (to support either professional development or retention) and have been scheduled to increase with the quality level of the center or home involved. The Finance Work Group has included some of the most promising models below.

For any tax incentives to be effective, the QRIS rating system must be clear and consistent, and the process of claiming credits, especially for parents, must be simple. The system must ensure that lower income families still benefit from this type of credit even if they do not owe taxes.¹¹ Existing resources like 2-1-1 Child Care and Connecticut Charts a Course can help with outreach to parents, providers, and practitioners to use this incentive.

For each of the incentives listed below dollar amounts will determine in the next stage of system design. Final incentive amounts will take into account the Connecticut standards and the ranges of grants provided in other states.

¹¹ Stoney, p. 23.

| Incentive Options | Summary of Program Incentive Options | |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| New Incentives | Targeted | |
| | Sign On Grants Non state funded Voluntary Program | A small grant should be awarded on sign-up and initial rating to providers who voluntarily enter the QRIS system as an incentive to join and a recognition of the cost in staff time for the work involved in the initial stages of participation. |
| | Attainment Grants Non state funded programs | Attainment Grants are designed to compensate providers for investing the necessary time and resources to join QRIS and progress up through the levels of quality. These grants will target providers (both center-based and home-based) that <u>do not</u> receive state grant funds as a way to draw them into the system (on the assumption that state grant funded programs are eligible for tiered reimbursement). |
| | Program Improvement TA | Ongoing technical assistance increases provider buy-in and is essential for sustainability. (See Program and Practitioner Supports Recommendations) |
| | Program Improvement Grants | These would be one-time grants for work specified in their plan, developed after the QRIS rating, drawn from a pool of funding established for this purpose. Staff professional development to address identified skill needs would be accomplished either through these small grants or through other systematic professional development programs that may emerge from the Workforce Committee. |
| Existing Incentives | Linked | |
| | Tiered Grants (SR, DSS) | Targets the estimated 300 Child Care Centers that receive state grant funds under the School Readiness Program or the DSS Child Development Center Program. Currently through these programs, the state contributes to the cost of serving almost 11,600 children annually. It is required that these providers must participate in QRIS to be eligible for state funding thus creating a powerful incentive for providers to participate in QRIS in order to maintain eligibility for state funding. |
| | Tiered Reimbursement (C4K) | Tiered Care4Kids reimbursement based on QRIS levels will support higher quality with higher reimbursement levels, recognizing the cost associated with providing a higher quality program and expanding the range of options available to low income families. While it is not proposed that these providers must participate in QRIS to be eligible for Care4Kids, tiered reimbursement creates a powerful incentive for providers to participate. The tiered structure for Care4Kids providers who enroll in QRIS insures further incentives for providers to improve quality over time. |
| | Facility: Small Direct Loan Fund (CHEFA) | The Small Direct Loan Fund provides loans of up to \$25,000 for minor renovations, licensure, or upgrading educational equipment for family day care homes and pre-development loans for child care centers. |
| | Facility: Guaranteed Loan Fund (CHEFA) | The Guaranteed Loan Fund provides loans of up to \$2 million for new construction or renovation of facilities. They may also be used for any purpose including working capital and equipment acquisition. These low-interest rate funds are available to experienced, center-based providers. |
| | Facility: Tax Exempt Bond Program | The CHEFA Tax-Exempt Financing Program provides subsidized loans with the state paying at least 80% of the annual debt service for the expansion of child care facilities. Borrowers must be a municipality, local board of education or 501(c)(3) not-for-profit center-based provider. For any project moving forward once the implementation of the QRIS it is proposed that any owner would have to ensure that the program using the space created participates in the QRIS as a condition of their occupancy. |

Implementation and Administration

Building the System to Support the Quality Rating and Improvement System

The following is a framework for envisioning the system for QRIS. It includes administration of QRIS and linkages that will be needed to fully implement to initiative.

This scope will require an infrastructure to oversee and manage the system. The QRIS Work Group has several global recommendations for administration which include:

- Utilize a competitive process in order to achieve the lowest cost and highest quality of an administrative entity.
- Utilize and redirect current resources, including agreements with state agencies that currently fund and monitor programs.
- Funds should be directed first to programs and providers; and second to administrative infrastructure

The administration of the QRIS can be in a state agency or contractor. It will need to provide or manage the following scope of services:

Licensing System

The existing licensing systems at DPH will need to be augmented to include the recommended inclusion of public schools, and frequency of licensing visits.

Assessment and Ratings of Participating Programs

Assessments of participating program and providers include: training and monitoring reviewers, scheduling and tracking assessments and importing data for an environmental rating, assessment of the workforce and other assessment data on standards.

Calculations of rating and dissemination of reports includes: collecting data from different sources and assigning an environmental rating; data system to record data in records for each participating program or provider (a unique identifier system must be in place); data system to calculate rating and generate a program report on the components of the rating, change from previous ratings, areas for improvement to advance and eligibility for supports and incentives.

Administrative function for the financial incentives and supports includes: taking applications, determining eligibility and administering financial incentives; and referring eligible programs to CHEFA and others with related financial supports.

Consultation and Technical Assistance

Consultation for program improvement includes: operating or contracting the improvement process; outreach to rated programs; an administrative entity to support the consultation recommendations (located in program and practitioner supports, page 10); development of program improvement plan; deploying and monitoring consultation assistance; accessing financial supports; and reporting on results.

Communications and outreach to providers and families include: outreach plan to providers to promote and explain the QRIS; and outreach plan to families who use ECE on the meaning, benefits and usefulness of QRIS.

Evaluation

An independent evaluation of the system and standards involves the continuous refinement of the standards following implementation.

Monitoring, evaluation, research and reporting include: monitoring the performance of the system; research on the effects of the system on programs, families and children; and reporting through RBA to policymakers and the public.

The QRIS will need to develop linkages to the following:

- Early learning and provider standards;
- Licensing;
- Workforce registry;
- Professional development system and programs;
- Facilities improvement programs;
- Consumer and provider engagement initiatives;
- Public financing systems including center funding and Care4Kids;
- Monitoring and accountability through RBA; and
- Supporting a consultation system, referenced in the Early Childhood Investment Plan.

Phased Implementation: A three year plan

Based on the systems design completed to date and recognizing the economic challenges facing the state in the next two years. The Work Group recommends a three-year plan for further development and phased implantation of the QRIS. This schedule recognizes the work remaining to be done and the resources needed to complete it.

Objectives for Year 1:

- Identification of all of the current programs investing resources to the early childhood education and care systems
- The development of the registry and data monitoring systems.
- An understand of how all existing programs can be linked to the QRIS standards and integration of all of the segmented agencies providing services to young children within the QRIS
- Resources need to be focused to providing quality care and education for all children, particularly those at risk. Identification of needed policy changes and rectification of identified changes
- Need for parity of reimbursement across all publicly funded programs.
- Design of the administrative structure to implement the system

Objectives for Year 2:

- Strengthening the infrastructure, administrative body, and all of the linkages highlighted below.
- Continued development of a web-based data management system

Year 3: Applications are accepted for the first year of Implementation.

- Programs will be enrolled (mandated) and invited to participate (voluntary)
- Estimated capacity for the first year of implementation is 10% of programs

Appendix A

Statue/Legislative Mandate

Public Act 07-03 section 20 which states: "The Early Childhood Education Cabinet established under section 10-16s of the general statutes, as amended by this act, shall develop minimum standards and a range of higher standards of quality for all early care and education programs receiving state funding. Not later than December 31, 2008, and annually thereafter, the cabinet shall report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-14a of the general statutes, on the plan developed in accordance with this section to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to appropriations and the budgets of state agencies, education, human service and higher education and employment advancement."

Public Act 07-03 section 19 (d)(1) requires that the Early Childhood Education Cabinet "...shall develop and implement an accountability plan for early childhood education services. The plan shall identify and define appropriate population indicators and program and system measures of the readiness of children to enter kindergarten."

Appendix B
Proposed Standards and Criteria

DRAFT