

Rhode Island | Race to the Top

EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE GRANT

Informational Brief

Program Standards and Alignment

Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Goal

As outlined in a recent publication by the QRIS National Learning Network, the foundation of a standards-based early education system include three sets of standards that are most effective when connected and aligned.

These are:

1. *Learning and development standards for children* – often called ‘early learning guidelines’ that describe children’s learning across content areas and progress in domains of development.
2. *Practitioner standards* – the core knowledge and competencies that qualify adults to work with young children, expressed as credentials (degrees, certificates, licenses), which vary by program type and funding source and are often presented together as a career lattice.
3. *Program standards* – the criteria that permit programs to operate (licensing rules and regulations) or receive certain funding (State Pre-kindergarten Standards, Head Start Early Head Start Program Performance Standards) and standards that define good to excellent practice such as national accreditation or the progressive levels of a State’s QRIS.

Rhode Island’s goal is to revise and align all three components of its existing program standards continuum (#3 above) for early childhood programs to ensure a coherent pathway of increased quality and aligned systems of application, approval, and monitoring. This program standards continuum includes:

- foundational criteria that permit programs to operate, e.g. DCYF licensing regulations
- tiered standards that measure and differentiate higher levels of program quality, e.g. BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement Standards (QRIS)
- comprehensive educational program regulations, e.g. RIDE Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program (CECE) standards for preschool and kindergarten programs

Research Statement and Rationale

“Quality Rating and Improvement Systems have the potential to harmonize and unite the range of practitioner standards and the various program standards and to integrate early learning guidelines (ELGs) into practice. QRISs also have the potential to promote reflective practice and continuous

quality improvement in all types of early learning and development programs, in the program and among practitioners.”¹

High quality early education can help to close the achievement gap between low income and high income children and improve long-term outcomes. However, program quality varies widely across the state. A continuum of program quality standards helps programs improve quality by building on the foundation of licensing and adding multiple steps between basic licensing standards and higher quality criteria. The types of standards that are used at each step are founded on evidence-based research and recognized as best practice in the field of early childhood of high quality programs that produce positive child outcomes.

Rhode Island’s Approach

Rhode Island’s state plan, calls for revising all three components of the program standards continuum at the same time. All three sets of regulations/standards were first revised to align with each other in terms of structure and terminology. Then, each set was revised using the lens of best practice appropriate for each part of the continuum. The revisions to the standards were based on research and/or strong rationale about the characteristics of programs that produce positive child outcomes.

Emerging considerations and questions from the field regarding the program standards alignment:

Will there be one entity governing all three sets of program standards?

During the RTT-ELC application writing, a visual graphic of the program standards continuum was developed for illustrative purposes. This graphic depicted the three sets of regulations/standards under an umbrella. This umbrella served to illustrate the alignment between the three sets of regulations/standards and should not be interpreted concretely to indicate that the three components will be governed or administered by one entity. In fact, DCYF, DHS, and RIDE will maintain the authority issued to each by state statute to promulgate and implement its regulations, with DCYF having responsibility for licensing regulations, DHS having responsibility for the QRIS standards, and RIDE having responsibility for the Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Approval standards.

Although each component of the program quality standards continuum will be administered by the state agency responsible for implementation, as listed above, the associated application, approval, and monitoring processes will be streamlined and coordinated once final regulations/standards have been promulgated. This process will be designed to eliminate duplicative requirements and measurements and streamline the experience for providers. Information sharing agreements among the three state agencies will facilitate this streamlining.

Will there be aligned approval and monitoring processes?

Once final regulations/standards are in place, DCYF, DHS, and RIDE will work together during May and June to coordinate and align application, approval, and monitoring processes for each respective set of

¹ QRIS National Learning Network: Considerations for an efficient, inclusive, implementable Quality Rating and Improvement System September 2012

program standards. These processes will be established and put in place to ensure interagency coordination and reporting.

When will the revised Quality Standards be in place?

In keeping with our alignment efforts, all of the revised program standards – Licensing regulations, BrightStars quality standards, and CECE Approval standards - will all be effective as of July 1, 2013. However, timelines for reaching full compliance will be determined as part of the transition planning process.

Will BrightStars be mandatory? For which programs?

Rhode Island’s RTT-ELC Application outlines the State’s goal of 100% of programs participating in BrightStars by December 2013. Various strategies were outlined to achieve that goal, including financial incentives and programmatic requirements. Financial incentives are currently being made available to those programs participating in BrightStars – (See Program Supports Informational Brief for additional information) - and the effectiveness of those incentives in encouraging participation will be monitored. In addition, programmatic requirements continue to be explored by the State Departments as a means of achieving the ambitious goals set forth in the RTT-ELC Application.

Decision-making process and opportunities to provide input/feedback:

The program standards alignment process has been led by a Core Team consisting of representatives from DHS, RIDE, DCYF, HEALTH and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. The Core Team has also received input from the Rhode Island Early Learning Council’s Program Standards Alignment & Measurement Sub-Committee and sought stakeholder and expert input and feedback throughout the revision and alignment process.

In addition, DCYF, DHS, and RIDE, are identified by Rhode Island statute as the agency responsible for the development and implementation of their respective regulations, are accountable for those regulations, and have final decision making authority for their individual sets of regulations.

The alignment, revision and decision making process is outlined below:

Initial Input& Drafting: May to December2012

- Stakeholder input was sought on areas to strengthen the alignment and improve effectiveness of all the current regulations/standards prior to revisions. Opportunities for public input included Focus Groups, Open Forums, and an on-line survey.
- DCYF hosted community forums to gather input to inform revisions to the DCYF Child Care Center regulations, last updated in 1993. (Family Child Care Regulations, last updated in 2007, will be revised this spring)

- RIDE hosted two stakeholder focus groups, which included community-based and public school programs, to gather input to inform revisions to the RIDE Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Standards, promulgated in 2010.
- National experts and organizations on regulations, TQRIS and program quality standards provided input and research, including:
 - National Association for Regulatory Administration
 - Kelly Maxwell, Ph.D. Senior Scientist and Associate Director, of FPG Child development Institute.
 - Deborah Mathias, Director of the BUILD - QRIS National Learning Network
 - National Association for the Education of Young Children

Feedback: January to February 2013

Stakeholder feedback was sought on draft regulations and standards (DCYF regulations for centers, BrightStars QRIS standards and RIDE Approval Standards) following initial revisions. Opportunities included Focus Groups, Forums, and an on-line survey.

Further Revisions: March-April 2013

Stakeholder feedback on initial draft is being considered by the Core Team and will inform the development of final draft regulations and standards.

Public Hearings and Comments: April - May 2013

Public hearings will be held for the DCYF Child Care Center Regulations, DCYF School Age Regulations, and RIDE Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Standards in April of 2013 and for DHS QRIS standards in May 2013. Written comment will also be accepted during this time.

Technical Report: April to May 2013

A national expert has been secured to write a technical report detailing the process and rationale for the identified key decision points for final revisions to DCYF Child Care Regulations, BrightStars Standards, and RIDE Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Standards. This paper will include a review of the research used and how expert consultant feedback was incorporated throughout the process.

Monitoring Alignment and Approval Process: May to June 2013

DCYF, DHS, and RIDE will work together during May and June to coordinate and align monitoring requirements for each respective set of program standards. Processes will be established and put in place to ensure interagency coordination and reporting.

Programs will begin to be monitored according to the new sets of regulations and standards beginning 07/01/2013.

For more information regarding Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge, Program Standards Alignment, please contact Michele Palermo at Michele.Palermo@ride.ri.gov or (401) 222-8941.