

QUALITY FOR EVERY CHILD:

DEVELOPING A CONTINUUM OF QUALITY STANDARDS FOR RHODE ISLAND'S EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS





INTRODUCTION

Program quality standards play a key role in defining, measuring, and holding providers accountable for the quality of experiences offered in Rhode Island's early care and education settings. Historically, Rhode Island has had three different sets of program quality standards administered by three different state agencies. The state's successful Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge proposal committed to revising and aligning these different sets of program quality standards. As part of an ambitious plan to increase the number of disadvantaged children enrolled in high-quality early learning programs, the state initiated a standards revision and alignment process that resulted in a continuum of aligned program quality standards. Although each administrative agency retains authority for the standards under its purview, the continuum creates more uniformity across the different standards and provides a clear pathway to higher quality for programs serving young children.

From a state perspective, such a continuum can unite different state agencies around a common conception of program quality and supports the streamlining of regulatory processes ranging from licensing application to monitoring. The continuum also provides a common definition of program quality that can be more easily articulated to parents and policymakers and that creates an incentive for all types of early childhood providers to strive for higher quality. Equally important, the continuum creates a higher "floor" of quality through a revision of the state's child care licensing requirements to better protect the health and safety of children in early childhood settings. At the same time, the continuum also clearly defines the highest levels of quality using those program and provider characteristics that matter most to supporting school readiness and closing achievement gaps.

From the stakeholder perspective, the continuum creates quality levels that provide a clear point of entry for providers and a meaningful progression toward higher quality across a number of program indicators. Creating levels of standards also works to eliminate redundancy among the different sets of standards

and creates a pathway of incremental steps from a basic level of quality to the gold standard. Using the continuum, providers know where they are on the quality scale and understand the next logical step in their progression toward higher quality.

Given the importance of program standards in promoting quality, the state engaged in a rigorous and inclusive approach to revise and align Rhode Island's existing standards to form the continuum. This paper describes the approach and outlines the resources that will be available to promote successful implementation and to incentivize and support quality improvement. The approach used in developing the continuum ensures that the standards represent a progression of program quality that is enforceable and research-based, as well as seen as credible and useful to early childhood stakeholders. The steps that were taken and decisions that were made to meet these criteria are described below, including the ways in which the state created a robust public input process.

What is Rhode Island's Continuum of Early Childhood Education Program Quality Standards?

As is true in every state, Rhode Island has a mixed delivery system of early care and education, consisting of different types of providers funded with a mix of federal and state dollars and parent fees. Due in part to the requirements of a fragmented early childhood system at the federal level, three different Rhode Island administrative agencies oversee program standards for the state's early care and education programs: the Rhode Island Department for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF); the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS); and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). Representatives of each agency came together to form an inter-agency Core Team with the purpose of developing an overarching frame for the continuum and providing oversight of the revisions of each set of standards. Each state agency promulgated the set of standards under its purview in accordance with the respective statutory requirements and the revised standards were then aligned and ordered to create a continuum.

The three sets of standards were:

1. Child Care Licensing Regulations

Administered by DCYF, these regulations apply to all early childhood providers caring for more than three unrelated children in a home-based setting and to all child care centers serving children from 6 weeks to age 12. Typically, licensing standards are considered a "floor" of program quality that offer basic assurances to parents that children are being cared for in safe, healthy, and nurturing environments by professional staff. The revision and alignment of the child care licensing regulations was particularly important as it had been 20 years since the standards had been revised. The revision allowed the state to update the standards based on research and best practices and to infuse additional quality components into the regulations, including a stronger focus on curriculum and the implementation of the state's early learning standards.

2. BrightStars (Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System)

Administered by DHS and operated by the Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children, BrightStars is the state's Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) and works in conjunction with the state's professional development network for child care and early learning programs. BrightStars includes early childhood centers and preschools, family child care homes, and licensed school-age child care programs. Launched in 2009, BrightStars was developed with the leadership of DHS, United Way, and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and a 20-member Steering Committee, including representatives from RIDE, DCYF, and the Rhode Island Department of Health. The design and development process included extensive work with experts from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill to identify research-based standards and criteria and to pilot test the framework with programs in Rhode Island and make needed adjustments. Historically, BrightStars has been a voluntary program with some incentives for participation, but the state recently mandated participation for child care providers who receive funding

from the state's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).

BrightStars uses research-based program standards to measure and rate program quality, which allows for the identification of areas that need improvement, informs consumers about a program's quality, and helps to target technical assistance. BrightStars gives parents information to make choices about their children's care and education and helps early care and education providers establish a continuous improvement process and apply best practices in their programs.

3. Comprehensive Early Childhood Education (CECE) Standards for Approval

Administered by RIDE, the Comprehensive Early Childhood Education (CECE) Standards for Approval apply to early care and education programs serving preschool and kindergarten children. Additionally, programs participating in Rhode Island's state-funded preschool program are required to hold CECE Approval. CECE approval can be granted to individual classrooms and to programs overall, when all the preschool classrooms have met the approval standards. Whereas the child care licensing standards discussed above are considered "Tier 1" or "Foundational" aspects of quality, the Standards for Approval represent "Tier 2" or "Comprehensive" levels of quality that ensure programs work to develop each child's full potential in addition to enjoying the benefits of a safe and healthy learning environment. Early childhood programs in public schools are not subject to DCYF child care licensing regulations so the Basic Education Program (BEP) Regulations are the environmental, health, and safety regulations for preschool programs in public schools.¹ The CECE Standards were last revised in 2008 and the minor revisions that were implemented as part of the development of the continuum, with a few exceptions, focused on making them consistent with the other standards. The revisions capitalized on the latest research in the field, as well as the work to develop Common Core Standards for Math and English Language Arts. RIDE CECE approval is voluntary in the state with the exception of state-funded preschool programs as noted above.

¹This applies to 50 school-based preschool programs across the state.

Although developed by different agencies for different purposes, each of these three sets of standards shared many similar dimensions of program quality including:

- Physical Facilities (DCYF and RIDE standards only)
- Health, Safety, and Nutrition
- Staffing Qualifications and Ongoing Professional Development
- Administration
- Early Learning and Development
- Family Engagement

Within these dimensions of program quality, however, each set of standards had different indicators representing different levels of quality.

The final continuum document contains six dimensions of quality. These are:

1. Health, Safety, and Nutrition
2. Enrollment and Staffing
3. Staff Qualifications and Ongoing Professional Development
4. Administration
5. Early Learning and Development
6. Family Engagement

For each of these dimensions, specific indicators are provided to form a continuum of seven levels of quality. The seven-level continuum consists of child care licensing standards as a point of entry or the “pre-level” of the continuum followed by the five levels of the BrightStars rating system, and culminating—for preschool programs—with the highest-level standards included in the RIDE CECE Standards for Approval.

Every aspect of the continuum—from the way it is organized to the way each set of standards was revised—is grounded in a strong rationale based on research, best practices, expert opinion, and public input. The development process and the rationale behind key decisions are discussed in detail below.

Developing the Continuum: Leadership and Phases of Development

Although the revisions of each set of standards were conducted by workgroups led by the state agency responsible for those standards,² the overall process of developing the continuum was coordinated by a Core Team primarily consisting of representatives from DHS, RIDE, DCYF, the Rhode Island Department of Health, and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT staff as liaisons to the state’s Early Learning Council. The Core Team was advised by the Council’s Program Standards Alignment & Measurement Subcommittee, which consisted of early childhood practitioners and advocates in the state.³ Accordingly, the Core Team and Subcommittee brought together the key state and stakeholder perspectives to ensure the continuum of program standards meaningfully differentiated quality and was clear to families, stakeholders, and the community at large.

The revision and alignment process was conducted over a 13-month period from May of 2012 to June of 2013. A two-phase approach was created for developing the standards, with each phase including a robust public input process.

Phase I

Since a different state agency led the revision of each set of program standards, the goals of Phase I development were to create a common overarching framework for the three separate revisions; to agree on a common organizational structure and terminology for the respective revisions; and to collect public input on specific program quality areas in need of stronger alignment across the standards. Accordingly, Phase I began with the creation of a guiding document that would be used as a roadmap by each agency throughout the revision and alignment process. This document articulated the mutually agreed-upon goals for the revisions and alignment, a coordinated set of vision statements for each agency, and a common set of guiding principles. In addition, the Core Team agreed upon a common overall organizational structure for the program standards, as well as naming conventions for every dimension of the standards.

² DCYF, DHS, and RIDE are identified by statute as the agencies responsible for the development and implementation of their respective regulations. As such, they have final decision-making authority for the content of the standards under their purview.

³ Appendix A lists the members of the Core Project Team for the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Program Standards Alignment and Measurement Project as well as the experts involved and their role in the review process.

In addition, public input was gathered from May to September 2012 and focused on specific changes to the regulations and standards, and on the best ways to align the three sets of standards. The state sought input through public forums, focus groups, and an online survey. The focus groups and forums drew from a diverse group of participants from Rhode Island's early childhood stakeholder community including good representation from center-based child care, family child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, and state pre-K and public schools. One focus group was devoted specifically to the perspective of preschool special education. In addition, one forum was hosted in Spanish to ensure that input was received from the state's Latino early childhood stakeholders.

The response to the Phase I public input process was strong, with the state receiving feedback and suggestions on numerous aspects of current standards as well as the revision and alignment process. The Core Team reviewed the feedback and created two summary reports: the *DCYF Child Care Licensing Forums Report and the Program Standards Alignment Public Forums and Focus Group Summary Report*.⁴ The input was used by the workgroups to inform the revisions and was considered in light of the principles and purposes that guided each set of standards/regulations. Public feedback was also shared with the Program Standards and Alignment Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Early Learning Council for discussion.

Phase II

Phase II of the process focused on revising, aligning, and reviewing the standards. After the initial public input process was completed, workgroups used the agreed-upon organizational structure and naming conventions, as well as the public input to conduct an initial round of revisions to update the standards, strengthen the alignment across the standards documents, and to develop the continuum.

In Phase II, agencies partnered with an expert consultant or organization where necessary to ensure that each revision was

research-based and responsive to public input. A brief description of the process for each agency is discussed below.

DCYF's Revision of the Child Care Licensing Regulations for Centers

DCYF worked with the National Association of Regulatory Administrators (NARA) to draft the revisions to the child care center licensing regulations. NARA and DCYF hosted the Phase I forums and sought feedback from licensing staff and local quality monitoring and improvement experts.⁵ In addition, all licensed early childhood and school-age centers in the state were invited to participate in a series of forums specifically for child care providers. Other Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant stakeholders also provided input.

In addition to the public input, NARA used the latest research and knowledge about best practices to guide the revisions. The resources that were used included *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition*; a white paper by NARA entitled *Strong Licensing: The Foundation for a Quality Early Care and Education System*; as well as Oklahoma's regulations, which are listed by Child Care Aware of America as some of the best in the country.⁶ The revised regulations were then cross-walked with RIDE CECE Standards for Approval with a focus on streamlining health and safety and facilities requirements and ensuring structural and language alignment.

Revision of the BrightStars TQRIS Standards for Centers and Family Child Care

The Program Standards & Alignment Core Team drafted the revisions to the BrightStars TQRIS standards. A key goal of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant was to support the revision of Rhode Island's quality rating and improvement system to better differentiate levels of program quality. The Early Learning Challenge grant also requires a validation study of the revised system to better understand how effectively the

⁴These reports can be accessed at www.earlylearningri.org.

⁵This included representatives from BrightStars TQRIS, RIDE preschool approval, the Rhode Island Child Care Support Network, the Rhode Island Child Care Facilities Fund, Ready to Learn Providence, the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards project, and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

⁶Child Care Aware of America. (2013). *We can do better: 2013 Update: NACCRA's ranking of state child care center regulations and oversight*. Retrieved from <http://www.naccra.org/publications/>

system works to measure and support quality improvement and how the quality levels are related to child outcomes. To be considered a successful rating system, programs at a higher rating level on BrightStars should produce stronger child outcomes than programs at lower levels. Accordingly, the BrightStars revisions focused heavily on identifying and measuring those aspects of program quality that would have the most impact on child outcomes.

The Core Team worked with Kelly Maxwell, Ph.D., Senior Scientist and Associate Director of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. Dr. Maxwell provided research support and used data collected from a methodologically rigorous pilot study of BrightStars to inform the initial development of the standards, as well as baseline studies of center quality, family child care quality, and school-age child care quality.⁷ The team was also informed by work conducted on other state systems, national research on TQRIS, and other relevant research. The revisions to the rating system focused on the following areas: the scoring system, staff qualifications, accreditation, ratios and group size, curriculum, child assessment, and family engagement.

RIDE's Revision of CECE Standards for Approval for Preschool Classrooms

With the goal of incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives, RIDE created an in-house team with wide-ranging experience and content area knowledge. Team members included early childhood teachers, administrators, education coordinators, and technical assistance providers from public preschool and community-based programs. The team also included Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards trainers, early childhood education college instructors, and state monitoring and technical assistance staff. In this way, the development team reflected multiple perspectives including preschool special education, child assessment, Head Start Program Performance Standards, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation standards, and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices. The goal of the minor revisions to these standards was to ensure that they were informed by research, grounded in a

strong rationale that met or exceeded NAEYC standards and national pre-K benchmarks, and better aligned with the other sets of standards.

Using community feedback from Phase I, the team reorganized, revised, and aligned the standards by using a crosswalk of the DCYF licensing regulations (for community-based early learning centers) and Basic Education Program Standards (for public schools) to determine which structural standards (e.g., facilities, health and safety, enrollment and staffing, staff qualifications and professional development) should be added to or retained in RIDE CECE standards. The team also drew upon resources to guide the revisions including: the Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards, the Rhode Island Early Learning Standards Professional Development Module, the Common Core Standards for Kindergarten, the DEC Recommended Practices, and the NAEYC Accreditation standards.

Although conducted separately, the revisions to each set of standards were highly coordinated, making it easier to integrate the standards into one continuum. This continuum was then subject to an expert review. Debi Mathias, Director of the BUILD-QRIS National Learning Network reviewed and commented on the changes to the BrightStars standards and the overall alignment of the program standards continuum. In addition, a second round of public input was sought on the standards and additional revisions were made based on the expert recommendations and additional public input.

After all standards and regulations were finalized, DCYF, DHS, and RIDE collaborated to coordinate and align monitoring policies, procedures, and forms. Processes were also established to ensure interagency coordination and reporting.

The Rationale behind Key Decisions Related to the Program Standards Revisions and Alignment

As described above, over a period of 18 months Rhode Island early childhood administrators and stakeholders engaged in an intentional, coordinated process to revise and align the state's early care and education program standards. The important decisions that were made throughout the process and the rationale behind them are discussed below.

⁷ Reports from the pilots and baseline quality studies are available at www.rikidscount.org.

How did the state decide the specific program areas upon which the standards are organized?

Throughout the process, stakeholders urged the state to organize the DCYF licensing, BrightStars, and RIDE CECE standards around common program areas and to use consistent terminology across each set of standards. The state agreed with this input, and consistency across the program standards was in fact a fundamental reason for the revision and alignment. Accordingly, each set of standards is now organized into the seven program areas discussed above, which represent the core components of high-quality early care and education settings. The Core Team, which consisted of representatives from the three agencies administering the different standards, met repeatedly to come to agreement on an organizational structure for the standards and common terminology. The final organizational structure was the result of public input, expert consultation, and a crosswalk of the different standards documents to determine common elements. The specific program areas and terminology used to define each area best reflect the content across the different standards documents and is the most universally applicable to the different types of programs and providers that are regulated by the standards.

How did the state decide on common staffing titles?

Another common theme throughout the public input process was the need for consistent staff titles across the standards documents, as well as clearly defined role descriptions for each staff title. This input was consistent with NARA's recommendation to clarify the definitions and terms for staff titles and qualifications. However, providing common staff titles can be difficult given the diverse set of program and providers that offer early care and education in the state. As such, the continuum uses different terminology for staff in center-based and family child care homes.

After examining public input and soliciting expert recommendations, the following common staff titles were adopted for center-based providers:

- Administrator
- Education Coordinator
- Teacher
- Teacher Assistant

These titles best define existing roles across center-based providers and are the most universally applicable to the different types of center-based programs, including Head Start.

For family child care, the term provider is used. Family child care providers have a parallel progression of qualifications and professional development requirements for the levels of the continuum.

What was the rationale behind the alignment of the structural standards—facilities, health, safety, enrollment, staffing, and administration?

The public input was clear that "structural" standards across each agency should be aligned. Stakeholders commented that there were substantial inconsistencies in health and safety codes across the standards, particularly between the public schools and DCYF licensing. For example, one participant shared an experience where a Head Start program could not open in a public school because the school could not pass the DCYF facilities requirements even though it was allowed to operate a kindergarten program in the space. These inconsistencies were largely due to the fact that public schools are not required to adhere to DCYF licensing, and instead are governed by RIDE BEP Regulations.

The state agreed with this public input and made the consistency of the structural standards a key part of the overall revision and alignment process. The process of aligning these standards began by adopting a set of common terms across the standards in the areas of health, safety, nutrition, enrollment, staffing, and administration. These aspects of DCYF licensing were then revised based on expert input from NARA using the latest research in the field. The new research-based structural standards include enhanced program requirements that work to ensure that children are safe, healthy, and stimulated while also fostering inclusion for children with disabilities and promoting cultural and linguistic responsiveness for diverse children, families, and staff.

To address inconsistencies across the standards, the revised DCYF standards were cross-walked with the RIDE BEP Regulations. In cases where the DCYF structural regulations exceeded BEP, those regulations were included in the revision of the

CECE standards to ensure that public school classrooms meet the same foundational structural standards as community-based programs at the highest level of quality.

How did the state decide on the scoring system for BrightStars?

Nationally, states have taken a number of different approaches to assign ratings for early care and education providers. In some cases, states have used a “building block” system where programs must meet every criterion in a rating category in order to receive that rating. In other cases, states use a “points” system allowing programs to earn points in different areas of quality and then create a threshold where an average score above that threshold will allow a program to achieve the rating. Some states also use a “hybrid” approach where providers must meet all of the criteria for lower ratings and then use a points approach for higher ratings.

Rhode Island uses the building block system of scoring. Currently, a program must meet all criteria for each level to earn that level’s rating. For example, if a program has a two-star rating in one scoring area and a five-star rating in all others, the program will receive a two-star rating. The state received a great deal of public input expressing concern that the scoring system was punitive and a deterrent to participation in BrightStars, particularly when a program failed to receive a higher rating because of one particularly hard to meet standard. Moreover, the scoring system clearly affected the distribution of programs across the rating scale, with most programs scoring at the lower levels. Accordingly, stakeholders felt that this approach was misleading for parents and could hurt a program’s public image. Indeed, although it is possible for parents to examine a program’s ratings on each of the domains, most parents simply look at the overall score as the rating for the program.

The state decided to maintain the building block system of scoring. The rationale behind this decision involved the importance placed on programs addressing every aspect of quality outlined in a BrightStars level. Under the other scoring methods, programs may receive a high rating by scoring very high in a few domains but having low scores in others. This practice would not produce the program quality or the child outcomes desired by the state. Equally important, during the original development of BrightStars, stakeholders expressed

the belief that a score on the rating scale should be consistent and that it was important for parents to be able to expect consistency across program ratings—that is, the same level of quality per star on every dimension of the rating system. As such, the state continues to believe that programs and providers must meet every aspect of a rating under the block system of scoring.

At the same time, the state agreed that one exceptionally hard to achieve standard should not undermine a positive program rating. Using the data from the BrightStars pilot, the state had the opportunity to run “simulations” to look at how programs would score if certain standards were changed and to examine which standards were causing programs not to achieve higher scores. Therefore, in response to public input, and using the results of the simulations, the state revised some of the more challenging BrightStars standards to support higher scores. For example, now it is only required that 75 percent of teachers in a center-based program meet the educational requirements of Star 5 to receive that rating rather than “all teachers.”

What were the major changes to the DCYF licensing standards and the reasons behind them?

As discussed above, DCYF’s licensing standards are considered the “floor” of quality and represent a “pre-level” on the continuum of standards. After 20 years without revision, these standards were revised based on the latest research and knowledge of best practices to promote safer, healthier, and more enriching environments for young children. For example, the standards were revised to require that exterior doors be locked at all times; that classrooms have natural lighting and adequate, safe, and developmentally appropriate spaces to play; and that multiple staff members are trained in CPR. In addition, the new licensing standards clearly define “group size” to align with national definitions and to improve consistency in measurement across BrightStars and RIDE CECE approval. Also, the licensing standards now define “screen time” and, depending on child age, either prohibit or limit the amount of screen time allowed consistent with American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations.

Raising the quality floor must be done with standards that are reasonable, achievable, and enforceable, so great care was

taken during the revision process to update the language used in the standards to reflect current terminology (e.g., day care was changed to *child care*) and to clarify terms to remove ambiguity related to the practices and structures that need to be in place in early childhood settings. Changes to the licensing standards also reflect changes in the employment patterns of Rhode Island parents over the last 20 years. Given today's "24/7" economy, standards were added to address nighttime and overnight care. All of the changes were guided by the latest research in the field, industry best practices, and were responsive to two rounds of public input.

What were the major changes to BrightStars and the reasons behind them?

BrightStars, the state's five-star tiered quality rating and improvement system, is designed to assess and differentiate the quality of early care and education settings on indicators that are most important to improving child outcomes and promoting school readiness. Although the scoring methodology for BrightStars remains the same, a number of changes were made to the standards in an effort to more meaningfully differentiate quality and to include indicators that are more closely linked to child outcomes and school success. For example, the new BrightStars indicators require implementation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum aligned to the Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards to achieve the Star-3 level (previously only required at Star 4 and Star 5). Early childhood curricula support quality by providing a roadmap for teachers to scaffold experiences based on a child's developmental level to promote development and learning. Whereas the early learning standards outline the goals for what children should know and be able to do, a curriculum is essential in providing the "how" to meet these learning and development goals.

Equally important, the BrightStars revisions make important changes to encourage stronger screening and assessment practices consistent with National Research Council's report on Early Childhood Assessment.⁸ To achieve a Star-5 rating, for example, providers must now collaborate with Child Outreach for on-site screenings or provide parents with the dates and locations of available screenings. This change is driven by an extensive body of research charting the relationship between early identification of developmental delays, early intervention, and positive child outcomes. Indeed, in most cases, the earlier a developmental delay is discovered and addressed, the greater the likelihood of a positive outcome.^{9,10}

In addition to the revised standard on screening, programs must also implement a valid and reliable assessment tool to inform curriculum planning in order to reach a Star-5 rating. Given that children develop at different rates and have different experiences prior to entering a specific early childhood setting, such formative assessment is essential for curriculum planning and individualizing instruction.

New standards were also included to support the assessment of the classroom environment and teacher-child interactions. Standards were added or revised related to the use of and scores on the *Environment Rating Scales (ERS)*. For example, Star 2-level programs now must participate in *ERS* professional development and conduct an *ERS* self-assessment. This addition is a logical precursor to the existing Star 3- 4- and 5-level standards that now require that all programs have *ERS* assessments and that all programs meet a certain *ERS* score. This requirement is no longer waived for NAEYC or NAFCC accredited programs.

In addition, the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)* is included at the higher levels of BrightStars. At Star 4, preschool programs must participate in *CLASS* training and conduct a *CLASS* self-assessment (preschool classrooms only).

⁸ National Research Council. (2008). In Snow C. E., Van Hemel S. B. (Eds.), *Early childhood assessment: Why, what, and how*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

⁹ Guralnick, M. J. (1997). *The effectiveness of early intervention*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing; Hebbeler, K., Spiker, D., Bailey, D., Scarborough, A., Mallik, S., Simeonsson, R., & Singer, M. (2007). *Early intervention for infants & toddlers with disabilities and their families: participants, services, and outcomes. Final report of the National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study (NEILS)*. Retrieved from: http://www.sri.com/neils/pdfs/NEILS_Report_02_07_Final2.pdf

¹⁰ Bailey, D.B., Hebbeler, K., Spiker, D., Scarborough, A., Mallik, S., Nelson, L. (2005). Thirty-six-month outcomes for families of children who have disabilities and participated in early intervention. *Pediatrics*, 116(6): 1346-52.

At Star 5, preschool programs receive a *CLASS* assessment from a trained assessor. As research continues to document the relationship between child outcomes and the specific types of teacher-child interactions and classroom practices measured by the *CLASS* (i.e., emotional support, organizational support, and instructional support), training and self-assessment using this instrument is a key aspect of quality assessment. Taken together, the *ERS* and *CLASS* assessments measure key aspects of the early childhood setting such as the space, schedule, materials, and important dimensions of the interactions between teachers and children. Measuring current levels of quality on these dimensions and setting specific goals for growth are a key piece of a program's continuous improvement process.

New BrightStars standards were also included to emphasize inclusive program settings for children with developmental delays and disabilities. Star levels 3–5 now require providers to have a written philosophy statement welcoming and accommodating the inclusion/integration of children with developmental delays and disabilities. To achieve a Star 5-level rating, programs must make staff available to collaborate with Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and Individualized Family Service Program (IFSP) teams (e.g., attending meetings, joint trainings, sharing information, etc.). Research has found that inclusive practices, when well-implemented, can benefit children with and without disabilities, particularly with respect to their social development.¹¹ In general, children in inclusive programs do at least as well as children in specialized programs, and as such, inclusion is considered an important aspect of quality that needs to be reflected in the BrightStars rating.

Finally, additions and changes to the BrightStars standards place a greater emphasis on family engagement. Star 4- and 5-level programs are required to conduct an annual family survey and Star 5-level programs must regularly employ at least three family communication strategies (increased from two). Equally important, there are new, important options for

strategies that have been added that include supporting families during program transitions and connecting families with early intervention and community services as needed. With the release of the *Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework* in 2012, there has been growing recognition of family engagement as a critical component of high-quality early care and education. Indeed, when done well, family engagement practices can support the healthy social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of young children, regardless of ethnic or socioeconomic background.^{12,13} As such, the dimensions of family engagement included in the new family engagement standards—better communication, support through transitions, and connection to services—are key elements of quality from a family engagement perspective that are included in BrightStars and are aligned to key outcomes from the Head Start Framework.

How are NAEYC accreditation and the Head Start Program Performance Standards recognized within the revised BrightStars Standards?

During the public input process, stakeholders felt strongly that NAEYC Accreditation and designation as a Head Start grantee (accompanied by a successful monitoring review) should positively factor into the BrightStars rating. Stakeholders argued that in order to be either NAEYC accredited or a successful Head Start grantee, programs had to adhere to standards that were more rigorous than those in BrightStars. Stakeholders also noted that numerous states—including other New England states—recognized NAEYC Accreditation and Head Start designation as part of their quality rating standards. Stakeholders argued that the state should use these program characteristics in some way towards the BrightStars rating even if it was unwilling automatically award a high rating to programs that had NAEYC Accreditation or Head Start designation.

¹¹ Odom, S. L., Vitztum, J., Wolery, R., Lieber, J., Sandall, S., Hanson, M. J., Beckman, P., Schwartz, I. and Horn, E. (2004), Preschool inclusion in the United States: a review of research from an ecological systems perspective. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 4: 17–49. doi: 10.1111/J.1471-3802.2004.00016.x

¹² Christenson, S. L. (2000). Families and schools: Rights, responsibilities, resources, and relationships. In R. C. Pianta, & M. J. Cox (Eds.), *The transition to kindergarten* (pp. 143-177). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

¹³ McWayne, C., Hampton, V., Fantuzzo, J., Cohen, H. L., & Sekino, Y. (2004). A multivariate examination of parent involvement and the social and academic competencies of urban kindergarten children. *Psychology in the Schools*, 41(3), 363-377. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/pits.10163>

The state took this public input seriously and did work to incorporate aspects of NAEYC Accreditation and Head Start designation into the BrightStars standards. The original BrightStars frameworks recognized NAEYC and NAFCC accreditation by waiving the *ERS* assessment. As discussed earlier, the goal of the BrightStars revisions was to include those program characteristics that, when achieved, would have the greatest likelihood of producing positive child outcomes. As such, the state included *ERS* threshold scores as part of the rating as research indicates that higher scores on *ERS* observations are associated with children's developmental outcomes.^{14,15} Neither the Head Start Program Performance Standards nor NAEYC Accreditation use *ERS* as a performance indicator.¹⁶ Equally important, in analyzing data from the BrightStars pilot, some the programs that were NAEYC accredited received *ERS* scores as low as 3 (which indicates *minimal* or *basic* levels of quality), which meant that this accreditation in some cases did not translate into an acceptable high-quality score on this important dimension of the BrightStars rating. As such, the state did not feel it was appropriate to use either of these program credentials alone to assign a BrightStars rating or to continue waiving the *ERS* requirements for NAEYC or NAFCC accredited programs.

At the same time, the state does acknowledge that in the areas of curriculum, assessment, and family engagement, the requirements for NAEYC Accreditation and Head Start designation meet or exceed those of BrightStars. As such, the state is accepting NAEYC Accreditation and Head Start designation as evidence that programs are meeting the curriculum, assessment, and family engagement indicators of BrightStars. During the initial implementation of the revised BrightStars system, data will be collected on the curriculum, assessment, and

family engagement practices of NAEYC accredited and Head Start designated programs in order to validate this that these programs meet the BrightStars standards in the areas of curriculum, assessment, and family engagement.

How did the teacher qualifications change in the revision of the BrightStars standards and why?

The revisions to teacher qualifications in BrightStars strike a balance between targeting those qualifications that are most closely related to child outcomes and the staffing realities of early care and education programs. The qualifications focus primarily on a teacher's formal education and provide a progression of standards where higher ratings depend upon an increasing percentage of teachers in a program having college credits in early childhood education, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees with a concentration in early childhood education (ECE) or related field. Although the body of research on the relationship between teacher degrees and child outcomes is mixed, there is evidence that more formal education is associated with higher program quality and stronger child outcomes.¹⁷ Furthermore, researchers have identified the "background climate" of a program (i.e., the percentage of staff with a bachelor's degree and college-level early childhood courses) as a characteristic related to sustained quality.¹⁸ As such, in order to reach the highest level of BrightStars, 50 percent of teachers in a center-based center must have a bachelor's in ECE or a bachelor's degree (regardless of major) with at least 24 college credits in early childhood or a related field.¹⁹ Although this percentage threshold may seem somewhat low, the state did not want to set the threshold at 75 or 100 percent with the understanding that in smaller programs, losing just

¹⁴ Bryant, D., Burchinal, M., Lau, L., & Sparling, J. (1994). Family and classroom correlates of Head Start children's developmental outcomes. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9, 289–309.

¹⁵ Peisner-Feinberg, E., Burchinal, M., Clifford, R., Culkin, M., Howes, C., Kagan, S., et al. (2001). The relation of preschool child-care quality to children's cognitive and social development trajectories through second grade. *Child Development*, 72, 1534–1553.

¹⁶ Although Head Start is using CLASS scores as part of its monitoring reviews, the CLASS assessments implemented as part of these reviews are an abbreviated version of the traditional CLASS assessment that has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of program quality and predictive of child outcomes. In addition, these scores are only obtained every three years on a sample of Head Start classrooms.

¹⁷ Tout, K., Zaslow, M., & Berry, D. (2006). Quality and qualifications: Links between professional development and quality in early care and education settings. In M. Zaslow, & I. Martinez-Beck (Eds.), *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

¹⁸ Whitebook, M., Sakai, L., Gerber, E., & Howes, C. (2001). *Then and now: Changes in child care staffing, 1994–2000*. Technical report (ED 452 984). Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce.

¹⁹ For family child care, a provider must have an associate's degree in early childhood education or an associate's degree with 24 credit hours in early childhood or a related field.

one bachelor's-level teacher could place the program below these percentages.

Stakeholders had a number of comments and concerns related to teacher qualifications. Most notably, stakeholders were concerned with the treatment of the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential in the standards. In order to achieve a Star-3 rating, 75 percent of teachers in a center-based program must have a CDA and 9 college credits in ECE or a related field, or no CDA and 12 college credits in early childhood or a related field (a CDA is equivalent to 3 college credits at the Community College of Rhode Island). Within the new standards, teachers with a CDA credential alone do not count toward meeting this Star 3-level standard, whereas in the original BrightStars framework they had met that criteria. Stakeholders were concerned that the additional college credit requirement would be an issue particularly for Spanish-speaking providers, who make up a majority of the family child care educators in the state. Stakeholders argued that the absence of early childhood college courses in Spanish would make it impossible for Spanish-speaking educators to meet this requirement. In addition, it would also be difficult for many family child care educators to meet this requirement because, on average, they have lower educational attainment than center-based providers.

There are a number of reasons the state decided to include a college credit requirement with the CDA for a Star-3 rating. First, there is no conclusive evidence that a CDA credential alone improves outcomes for children,²⁰ whereas there is some evidence for a bachelor's degree with an ECE-focus.^{21,22,23} As such, the goal is to develop a progression of BrightStars standards that creates a pathway toward a bachelor's degree, and this is done at the Star-3 level by requiring at least 12 college credits in ECE or 9 college credits in ECE or a related field and a CDA. The state feels that this progression creates the greatest likelihood that the BrightStars levels will show a differential impact on child outcomes in the validation study. With

regard to the issue of college-level ECE courses in Spanish, it is unclear how many educators in the state this actually affects. State-level data indicate that many of the state's Spanish-speaking educators do not hold a high school diploma or GED, which is a requirement of the CDA; thus it does not appear that the credit requirement alone is the impediment to a Star-3 rating. RIDE and DHS have started conversations with the higher-education community to move forward with a proposal to develop and offer college courses in Spanish to support the Spanish-speaking early childhood workforce.

What were the major changes to RIDE's CECE Standards for Approval and the reasons behind them?

The voluntary RIDE CECE Standards for Approval represent the gold standard for program quality for preschool and kindergarten programs in Rhode Island and comprise the top level of the revised and aligned continuum of standards. As noted, the CECE Standards for Approval were recently revised in 2008 and, as such, needed relatively minor revision. A major aspect of the revisions focused on changing the organizational structure of the standards to be more consistent with DCYF licensing standards and BrightStars. The CECE's standards related to administration, for example, were reorganized around three key concepts: general administration, continuous quality improvement, and systems of staff evaluation and development (formerly referred to as the "system of staff support"). This was done to make the document more consistent and user-friendly. In addition, substantive changes were made that further honor RIDE's commitment to improving school readiness and closing gaps in achievement before children enter school, including requiring all programs seeking CECE approval to participate in BrightStars. This requirement was implemented to ensure overall program quality since CECE approval is available at the individual classroom level and just for preschool classrooms and BrightStars looks at the quality of the entire program, including infant toddler classrooms.

²⁰ Tout, K., Zaslow, M., & Berry, D. (2006). Quality and qualifications: Links between professional development and quality in early care and education settings. In M. Zaslow, & I. Martinez-Beck (Eds.), *Critical issues in early childhood professional development*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

²¹ Arnett, J. (1989). Caregivers in day care centers: Does training matter? *Developmental Psychology, 10*, 541–552.

²² Burchinal, M., Cryer, D., Clifford, R., & Howes, C. (2002). Caregiver training and classroom quality in child care centers. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*, 2–11.

²³ Pianta, R. C., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., Bryant, D., Clifford, R., Early, D., & Barbarin, O. (2005). Features of pre-kindergarten programs, classrooms, and teachers: Do they predict observed classroom quality and child-teacher interactions? *Applied Developmental Science, 9*, 144–159.

A major substantive change to the standards involved increasing the minimum amount of time a program needs to operate for CECE Approval from 12 hours per week to 13.75 hours. Stakeholders, particularly school district representatives, expressed concern over this change because of contractual issues that were in place that assumed a 12-hour program. Stakeholders were also concerned about how the increase in program time would impact the number of children served and the amount of teacher preparation time.

The state felt strongly that this increase in program time is necessary for a number of reasons. Since the CECE Standards for Approval apply to both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, the state felt it was important that pre-kindergarten programs have the same minimum amount of instructional minutes as the 13.75-hour minimum for kindergarten. Perhaps more importantly, the state believes that collectively, the quality of a program and the length of exposure to that program are the two necessary conditions to improving outcomes. The state felt that the programming necessary to meet what is described in the standards would require at least 13.75 hours. The state also examined the contractual issues outlined by school district representatives and considered multiple factors pertaining to the program design of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs including the scope of the contracts and other funding streams that could be accessed by public schools. Through this review, the state concluded that it could work with districts to overcome these contractual issues.

Changes were also made to the CECE standards that more clearly and intentionally embed inclusion principles throughout the standards. Although inclusion of children with disabilities was already a key piece of the CECE standards, the revisions strengthened existing standards. The revision was important to the state because of the belief that all children, regardless of disability status, deserve the same early care and education experience.

How the State Will Support Implementation

The overall impact of the revised program standards will depend on how well they are able to serve as a guide and impetus for programs to achieve and maintain high levels of quality. Accordingly, the state has developed a comprehensive

transition plan that will facilitate stakeholders' understanding of and participation in the new system of standards. An important result of the standards alignment process was the streamlining of processes such as application, monitoring, and renewal, thus reducing redundancy across systems and the burden placed on programs. Furthermore, the state is working to develop and expand resources to help programs achieve and maintain these program quality standards.

Plans for transition to the new standards

As of November 2013, the revised DCYF child care licensing regulations, BrightStars standards, and the RIDE CECE standards had all been promulgated. Although the revised DCYF child care licensing regulations were released on November 11, 2013, compliance is not required until November 2014 in order to give programs a full year to make any necessary adjustments. A memo was released to programs in October, 2013 in order to notify programs and detail specific changes to the final regulations that were not part of the proposed regulations, but were amended as a result of comments received during the final review process.

The state will continue to offer transition planning assistance to programs moving from the 2008 BrightStars standards to the 2013 standards and has developed plans and procedures for programs new to BrightStars; programs currently participating in BrightStars; and programs that have special designations, such as those that receive funding from the DHS Starting Right Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).

Under the 2013 BrightStars standards, new programs can apply to join BrightStars at any time. Programs that already have a BrightStars designation under the 2008 standards can apply for an increased star rating under the 2013 standards at any time (not just at their annual renewal). A letter went out to all programs explaining this new procedure. BrightStars will honor program ratings under the old standards for the three years agreed to when applications were first submitted. However, all programs are expected to actively be working to transition to the new 2013 standards and to include that transition plan in their updated quality improvement plan. Those updated quality improvement plans will be required to access the quality improve-

ment resources available under the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (see “Supports and Resources” section below).

Programs participating in CCAP will be exempt from having to submit BrightStars applications and were automatically awarded a Starting Star in November 2013—a temporary designation that will disappear on April 1, 2014 unless the program takes further action to engage with BrightStars. The Starting Star offers CCAP programs time to understand the policies and processes of BrightStars, to attend information sessions, and to complete a full application for a star rating. If by April 1, 2014, a program has not engaged with BrightStars either by submitting a full application or by receiving a star rating, they will be awarded a 1-star rating. Those programs will then be required to complete a program profile and quality improvement plan within six months or risk losing their CCAP approval completely. Including the BrightStars framework in the CCAP rules and regulations demonstrates DHS’s commitment—as well as the federal priority—to ensuring that low income children have access to high-quality care.

Streamlined monitoring and application process

In addition to presenting a common conception of program quality for various state agencies and the programs under their purview, the revised continuum also supports the streamlining of regulatory processes such as licensing application and monitoring. For example, the application forms for DYCF licensing, BrightStars rating, and RIDE CECE approval have been compiled into a single “common application,” greatly simplifying and streamlining the application process. In addition, the continuum of standards forms a coherent pathway in which the various standards build upon each other. For instance, with the attainment of a DCYF license, if the program has an improvement plan and can demonstrate compliance with critical licensing standards at a recent inspection, that program can be eligible for applying for a 2-star or higher BrightStars rating.

Furthermore, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been drafted to ensure that all agencies are using common system components (e.g., applications, policies, procedures, measurements, and definitions). For example, a common definition of “early childhood education or related” coursework

has been developed and all agencies will use this definition in assessing coursework for workforce qualifications. RIDE and the Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Child will hire *ERS* and *CLASS* assessors based on the qualifications and updated job descriptions created as part of the alignment process. Additionally, all assessors—throughout the state and across agencies—will be trained in the same way.

Resources and supports for achieving program standards

As stated in Rhode Island’s Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant, it is the state’s goal to promote 100-percent participation in BrightStars across all sectors of the early care and education system. This goal represents a strong, unified commitment to raise the quality of early learning programs beyond basic licensing requirements and mark a course toward continued quality improvement

The state is working to develop and expand resources to help programs achieve and maintain the new program quality standards. Through the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant, the following resources will be available:

- Quality Improvement Grants to help programs make improvements needed to meet licensing regulations, BrightStars TQRIS program standards, and/or RIDE CECE standards.
- Regular, on-going Quality Awards to help child care programs serving 10 percent or more CCAP-funded children maintain higher quality standards in BrightStars.
- Intensive technical assistance for programs seeking to make quality improvements.
- Support for staff to achieve standards related to higher education (through the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship project and through the Community College of Rhode Island Early Childhood Education & Training program).
- Expanded professional development resources aligned with the Workforce Knowledge and Competencies frameworks, including more training available in the Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards and child assessment.

Conclusion

Through the revision and alignment process, Rhode Island has defined a common vision for quality programs serving children birth to kindergarten using research-based best practices for center, home, and public school settings. The resulting continuum of program quality standards creates a clear point of entry for programs, with a common pathway for improvement aligned to what matters most to improve child outcomes. Through a rigorous development process that brought together national experts and key stakeholders from all aspects of the state's early childhood community, the standards have been updated, clarified, and strengthened. In addition, a unified

continuum of guidance materials, applications, monitoring procedures, and assessment policies were developed across agencies and systems to support this work. The resulting pathway to quality improvement for programs will improve effectiveness and efficiency, ensure alignment, eliminate duplicate assessments, and streamline the process for participating programs. Ultimately, the continuum of quality standards will serve as an integral foundation to the ongoing development of the high-quality care and education system that supports the learning and development of Rhode Island's youngest children.



APPENDIX A: RHODE ISLAND CORE PROJECT TEAM FOR PROGRAM STANDARDS AND ALIGNMENT

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