



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

ROY COOPER
GOVERNOR

KODY H. KINSLEY
SECRETARY

March 28, 2024

SENT VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

The Honorable Joyce Krawiec, Chair
Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on
Health and Human Services
North Carolina General Assembly
Room 308, Legislative Office Building
Raleigh, NC 27603

The Honorable Donny Lambeth, Chair
Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on
Health and Human Services
North Carolina General Assembly
Room 303, Legislative Office Building
Raleigh, NC 27603

The Honorable Larry Potts, Chair
Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on
Health and Human Services
North Carolina General Assembly
Room 307B1, Legislative Office Building
Raleigh, NC 27603

Dear Chairmen:

Session Law 2023-40, Section 2, requires The North Carolina Child Care Commission to complete recommendations for quality rating improvement system (QRIS/Star-Rating System) reform by March 31, 2024, and submit its QRIS reform recommendations to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services before the 2024 Legislative Session begins. Pursuant to the provisions of law, the Department is pleased to submit the attached report on behalf of the Commission.

Should you have any questions regarding this report, please contact Karen Wade, Director of Policy, at Karen.Wade@dhhs.nc.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

Susan Osborne

on behalf of Kody H. Kinsley

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Kody H. Kinsley
Secretary

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AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY / AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EMPLOYER

**Recommendations for
Quality Rating Improvement System Reform
(QRIS/Star-Rating System)
from the North Carolina Child Care Commission**

Session Law 2023-40, Section 2



**Report to
The Joint Legislative Oversight Committee
on Health and Human Services
By
North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services**

March 28, 2024

Reporting Requirement

North Carolina Session Law 2023-40, Section 2, directs the North Carolina Child Care Commission (Commission) to complete recommendations for quality rating improvement system (QRIS/Star-Rating System) reform by March 31, 2024, and submit its QRIS reform recommendations to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services before the 2024 Legislative Session begins.

The Commission's QRIS reform recommendations shall include accreditations from national early childhood education (ECE) accreditation organizations as an alternative pathway for licensed child care programs to earn a star rating equivalent to each accreditation's standards, including accreditation from any of the following organizations:

- (1) National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation.
- (2) National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC).
- (3) National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA).
- (4) National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC).
- (5) American Montessori Society (AMS).
- (6) International Montessori Council (IMC).
- (7) Cognia (formerly AdvanceED).

Current QRIS/Star-Rating System Overview

In 1999, the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), formerly known as the Division of Child Development, implemented a Star Rating System consisting of three components: staff education, program standards and compliance history. This new system was voluntary for child care facilities based on achieving enhanced standards in addition to the minimum requirements for licensure.

In 2006, the Star Rated License system was revised to give parents a greater indication of quality, awarding a facility's star rating based on two components: staff education and program standards. The compliance history component was revised to be an eligibility standard for all Two through Five Star Rated Licenses.

Issuance of a One Star Rated License indicates that a child care facility is following all minimum licensing standards. Child care facilities may choose to apply for a Two through Five Star Rated License when implementing QRIS standards outlined in N.C.G.S. 110-85(3), 110-88(7), and 110-90(4) and as specified by the Commission in Child Care Rules 10A NCAC 09, Section .2800.

Current QRIS standards evaluate two components of quality and an additional quality opportunity within a point based system.

- **Staff education standards** vary by point level and include requirements for each type of staff position including credentials, college coursework, degrees, and experience. A maximum of seven (7) points may be earned in this component.
- **Program Standards** vary by point level and include items such as reduced staff/child ratio requirements, enhanced space requirements, curriculum requirements when four year olds are served, and program assessment using the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) tool and threshold scores. There are four versions of the ERS that measure program quality items depending on the type of facility and ages served: The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R), and The School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale-Updated (SACERS-U). A maximum of seven (7) points may be earned in this component.
- **Quality Point Opportunities** include items that address educational and programmatic standards. A child care facility may choose to earn one (1) additional point by demonstrating compliance with a single option.

A total of fifteen (15) points is possible. The total number of points earned by a child care facility determines the Star Rating issued to the child care facility:

Total Number of Points	Star Rating
4 through 6	Two Stars
7 through 9	Three Stars
10 through 12	Four Stars
13 through 15	Five Stars

NC Child Care Commission's QRIS Modernization Plan (QRIS Reform)

In February 2023, the Commission initiated a project to modernize North Carolina's QRIS, commonly known as the Star Rated License, in anticipation of impending legislation. The Commission formed a QRIS Sub-Committee that was tasked with developing recommendations for QRIS Modernization.

In June 2023, Session Law 2023-40 became effective and required a plan for QRIS reform, including use of national early childhood accreditations within QRIS, to be completed by March 2024.

Throughout the QRIS Modernization Project, the DCDEE has provided support to the QRIS Sub-Committee in their work by gathering data, research, and resources; coordinating work sessions; scheduling and facilitating outreach efforts; and preparing information for the Sub-Committee's review.

Community Outreach Efforts and Data

The QRIS Sub-Committee identified the need for community outreach efforts to frame the work of the QRIS Modernization Project. A series of open-ended questions were developed and used consistently in a variety of formats to solicit feedback from parents, teachers, administrators, owners, and partners. The questions focused on identifying what works in the current QRIS system, what quality care looks like, how quality care can be provided continually, challenges/barriers, family and community engagement activities and culturally responsive practices.

All outreach efforts began with an overview of the QRIS Modernization Project, the timeline of the project and the questions that were being discussed. Attendees were offered an opportunity to submit written feedback as well as a discussion time for each question. Noted below are the community outreach activities that occurred during May 2023 through July 2023:

- **2 Webinars**
- **8 Community Meetings**
Locations: Asheville, Charlotte, Greensboro, Fayetteville, Jacksonville, Morganton, Raleigh, and Williamston
- **QR Code Survey Data**
Available on DCDEE website, distributed using DCDEE email list and shared during all events.
- **DCDEE Feedback**
Policy Chats with DCDEE Regulatory Staff and QR Code Survey shared with all DCDEE Staff.
- **Focus Groups**
Centers, Family Child Care Home operators, NC Licensed Child Care Association, School-Age Program operators, FCCH Advisory Council, and Head Start
- **Child Care Resource and Referral Council Outreach**
Focused approach to engage parents and the Cherokee Nation.

- **Feedback received via email** at DCDEE_QRIS@dhhs.nc.gov

This email address remains active, and all interested parties have been encouraged to provide feedback via this method throughout this project.

Overall, there were approximately 1,800 participants in community outreach events. The webinars included a total of 1,000 participants and the QR Code Survey had 317 responses. The in-person meetings, focus groups and other outreach group sizes ranged from 5 – 34, not including Child Care Commissioners and DCDEE staff that were present. Commission members were present for both webinars and six (6) community meetings to listen to feedback directly.

Questions	# of Responses
What works in our QRIS?	424
What does a great child care program look like to you?	738
How would you provide that continually?	506
What are your current challenges with our system?	1099
Are there barriers that you experience in using our system?	567
How can we include family and community engagement in our system?	445
How can we ensure our process is culturally responsive (equitable, diverse, access)?	365
Parking Lot/Other	59

Common Themes from Responses

Due to the open-ended nature of the questions used to solicit feedback, responses resulted in qualitative data analysis, focusing on common themes and related quotes.

What works in our QRIS?

- QRIS holds programs accountable, is standardized, is objective and does measure some quality standards.
- Acknowledgement of some positive outcomes in QRIS but an emphasis that the system needs to be updated or improved.

- Some participants noted positive comments about the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) used for program assessment. Material and environment expectations were noted as familiar and useful to programs.
- Other participants asked for an update from ERS-R editions to the ERS-3 edition or to include the use of a different program assessment tool in QRIS.
- The modified assessment process and self-study were noted as positive outcomes from the Hold Harmless period.
- Technical assistance, resources and incentives were noted as strengths in encouraging staff and giving programs/staff a goal to work toward.

What does a great child care program look like to you? How would you provide that continually?

- Appropriate curriculum, materials, and interactions were the characteristics most frequently noted when discussing quality child care practices.
- Safe and healthy environments were described by participants when talking about great child care.
- Staff education and support were identified as critical in creating great child care environments.
- Training, coaching, mentoring, and resources were identified as assisting programs to continually provide great child care.

What are your current challenges with our system? Are there barriers that you experience in using our system?

- Staff shortages and turnover.
- Staff education requirements, including opposing views regarding higher education requirements vs. experience based knowledge.
- Montessori programs do not feel represented and experience barriers.
- Financial challenges were frequently noted as a challenge and barrier.
- External program assessment was frequently identified as “stressful” for providers and a barrier for some programs.
- QRIS requirements were described as “rigid” or that there is only one way to achieve a high star rating.
- Family Child Care Homes were described as unique programs that should have different requirements than centers.
- Understanding of the Star Rated License System in general.
- Language barrier identified by the Cherokee Nation regarding program assessment.

How can we include family and community engagement in our system?

- Participants indicated that asking families for their input, making it convenient for the families to participate, and being inviting/welcoming to families is critical to building relationships.

- Incentives and funding were noted as challenges.

How can we ensure our process is culturally responsive?

- Responses indicated that intentional planning, community input, and training are important components in being culturally responsive, acknowledging diversity, and creating equitable opportunities for families and programs.
- Staff compensation, cost of training and subsidy reimbursement variations were noted as challenges.

QRIS Purpose Statement

The purpose of NC's QRIS is for the Child Care Commission, the DCDEE, Partners, Owners, Administrators and Teachers to work together toward great licensed child care in every community for each and every family that needs and/or wants quality child care services. The QRIS supports family understanding of the rating system and quality practices for the selection of child care.

“Great Licensed Child Care” means:

- Integrity at heart of QRIS - authentic quality practices that focus on children and build strong families in an environment of kindness.
- Commitment to a journey toward quality practices with an emphasis on foundational quality, health, and safety.
- Programs participate in an accountability system that supports quality practices and achievable standards for owners, administrators, teachers, and support staff.
- Programs understand their community and individual family needs and use the information for responsive program planning.
- Learning opportunities are demonstrated in various ways throughout a child's day, in their indoor and outdoor environments.
- Child progress toward individual goals in meaningful ways.
- Systemwide supports, structures, processes, and resources for success within QRIS.

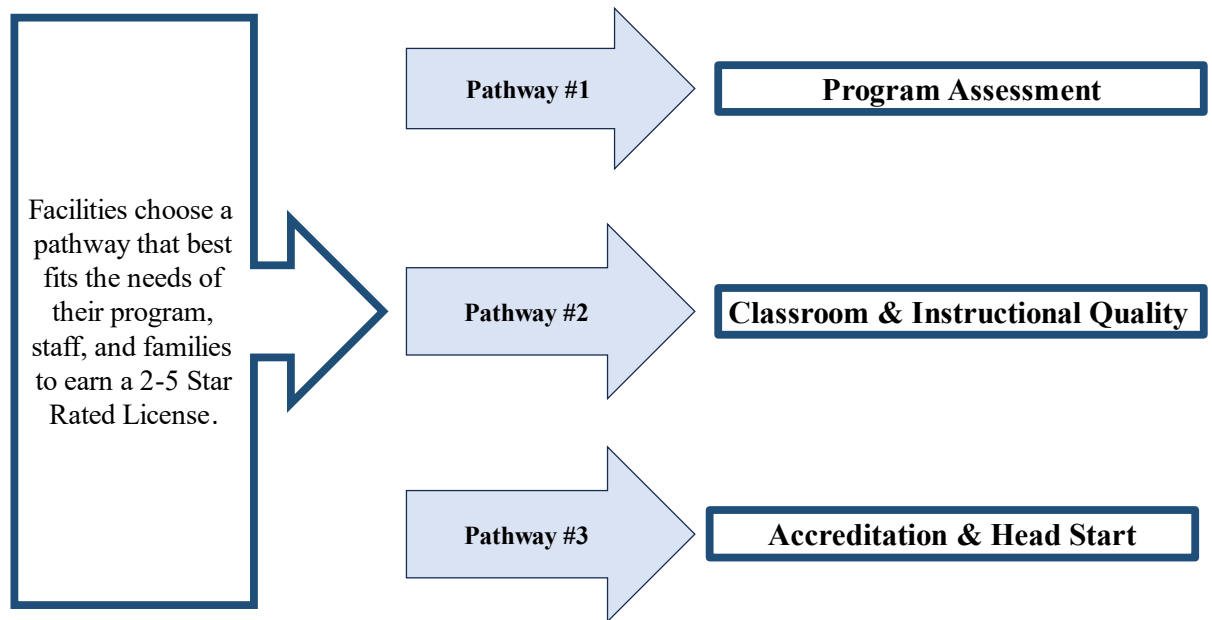
Recommendations for QRIS Modernization (QRIS Reform)

The Child Care Commission recognizes that modernizing the state's QRIS system provides one small step towards improving the early care and education system in our state. It does not, and cannot, address the ongoing, critical issues of funding for child care access, affordability, compensation, and quality in the state of North Carolina. The recommendations noted below are reflective of the feedback received and represent the Commission's intention to meet the needs of licensed child care operators and staff throughout North Carolina.

1. The Commission recommends the following name for North Carolina's QRIS:



2. The Commission recommends that Star Rated Licenses are earned by meeting a **standardized set of requirements for each star rating**, rather than the current point based system. In this type of approach, a child care facility would meet all applicable requirements for the star rating desired. This simplifies the evaluation process and sets clear expectations for each star rating level.
3. The Commission recommends **three pathways to earn a 2-5 Star Rated License**, rather than a single approach to evaluating quality practices. This reflects community feedback received regarding the many ways to provide quality child care, concerns related to current external program assessment tools/measures, and the need for more flexibility for child care facilities to choose what best fits their philosophy and goals, the ECE professionals they employ and the families they serve.



4. The Commission provides the following system overview for reference.
Recommendations for each of the pathway requirements follow this overview.

Star Level	Pathway #1 Program Assessment ↓	Pathway #2 Classroom & Instructional Quality ↓	Pathway #3 Accreditation & Head Start ↓	
2 Stars	All 2 Star Standards	All 2 Star Standards	NAFCC NECPA AMS IMC	NAEYC NAC COGNIA Head Start
3 Stars	All 3 Star Standards	All 3 Star Standards		
4 Stars	All 4 Star Standards	All 4 Star Standards	AND 4 Star Education Standards	
5 Stars	All 5 Star Standards	All 5 Star Standards	AND 5 Star Education Standards	

5. Pathway #1 – Program Assessment

This pathway option is the most similar to current QRIS standards. Child care facilities that are interested in demonstrating quality through external program assessment procedures may continue to do so using an updated edition of the Environment Rating Scale (ERS). This addresses the needs identified by the ECE community to include measures of interactions in assessing quality while also supporting programs who voiced concerns over using an unfamiliar program assessment tool.

Family Child Care Home (FCCH) Operators

2 Star FCCH	3 Star FCCH	4 Star FCCH	5 Star FCCH
No enrollment reduction	No enrollment reduction	No enrollment reduction	No enrollment reduction
Operator meets 2 Star Education Standards	Operator meets 3 Star Education Standards	Operator meets 4 Star Education Standards	Operator meets 5 Star Education Standards
Family & Community Engagement* Foundational Practices	Family & Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family & Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family & Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices
CQI** Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual
Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment	Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment, FCCERS-3 Completed, and results used for CQI only.	Approved curriculum used when four-year-olds are enrolled. Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment, FCCERS-3 completed, and Required Score of 3.5.	Approved curriculum used when four-year-olds are enrolled. Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment, FCCERS-3 Completed, and Required Score of 4.0.

*Family & Community Engagement described in Item #8.

**CQI = Continuous Quality Improvement described in Item # 7.

Items to note for FCCH:

- **Removal** of reduced enrollment requirement for the number of infants served.
- **Revised** education standards apply and offer more options.

- **Revised** edition of the ERS program assessment tool from FCCERS-R to FCCERS-3.
- **Addition** of Family & Community Engagement standards.
- **Addition** of Continuous Quality Improvement standards.
- Curriculum requirements **remain applicable** when 4 year olds are enrolled at a FCCH that has earned a 4 or 5 Star Rated License.

Child Care Centers

2 Star Center	3 Star Center	4 Star Center	5 Star Center
Enhanced Ratio OR Enhanced Space	Enhanced Ratio OR Enhanced Space	Enhanced Ratio OR Enhanced Space	Enhanced Ratio, Enhanced Space Optional
50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 2 Star Standards	50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 3 Star Standards	50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 4 Star Standards	50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 5 Star Standards
Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices
CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual
Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment	Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment, Formal Assessments Completed, and results used for CQI only	Approved curriculum used when four-year-olds are enrolled. Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment, Formal Assessment Completed and Required Average Score of 3.5 for ITERS-3 and ECERS-3 and Required Score of 4.0 for SACERS-U.	Approved curriculum used when four-year-olds are enrolled. Program Assessment Self-Study & Self-Assessment, Formal Assessment Completed, and Required Average Score of 4.0 for ITERS-3 and ECERS-3 and Required Score of 5.0 for SACERS-U.

Items to note for child care centers:

- **Removal** of reduced, enhanced ratio requirement at the highest level.
- **Revised** enhanced space requirement to be optional at all star levels.
- **Revised** education standards apply and offer more options for all positions.
- **Revised** edition of the ERS program assessment tool from ITERS-R and ECERS-R to ITERS-3 and ECERS-3.
- **Addition** of Family & Community Engagement standards.
- **Addition** of Continuous Quality Improvement standards.
- Enhanced ratio as noted in the chart above is a **current** QRIS requirement.
- SACERS-U is the School Age Care Environment Rating Scale that is **currently applicable** for classrooms that serve school age children. An updated edition of that program assessment tool is not available.
- Curriculum requirements **remain applicable** when 4 year olds are enrolled at a child care center that has earned a 4 or 5 Star Rated License.

6. **Pathway #2 – Classroom & Instructional Quality**

Pathway #2 is a new recommended option in QRIS. This pathway was designed for child care facilities that feel they demonstrate quality in ways that are not adequately measured through program assessment tools. Lower staff/child ratio or enrollment requirements are combined with an emphasis on curriculum, child assessment, and coaching/training as a complete pathway toward quality.

Curricula provides guidance for content-specific teaching, rich and varied learning experiences, and supports for children to meet their developmental milestones, using standards from North Carolina Foundations for Early Learning and Development: https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Portals/0/documents/pdf/N/NC_Foundations.pdf?ver=2017-05-16-105950-953. Curricula in early childhood settings promote inclusive practices, including cultural, linguistic and ability adaptations. “Approved” curricula refers to curriculum that is reviewed by the Commission as well as volunteers including early childhood teachers and administrators.

Family Child Care Home (FCCH) Operators

2 Star FCCH	3 Star FCCH	4 Star FCCH	5 Star FCCH
No enrollment reduction	No enrollment reduction	No enrollment reduction	Reduce enrollment of the youngest age child served by one (1).
Operator meets 2 Star Education Standards	Operator meets 3 Star Education Standards	Operator meets 4 Star Education Standards	Operator meets 5 Star Education Standards
Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices
CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual
Curriculum for all ages served	Curriculum for all ages served, Child Observations and Coaching or Training Options	Approved Curriculum and Formative Assessment Tools, Child Observations, and Coaching or Training Options	Approved Curriculum and Formative Assessment Tools, Child Observations, and Coaching or Training Options

Items to note for FCCH:

- **Removal** of program assessment standards.
- **Revised** reduction of enrollment requirements at the 5 Star Level. For FCCH, reduction of enrollment is a **current** QRIS standard. However, it is the least stringent of the two current requirements in QRIS that include reduction of enrollment as an indicator of quality.
- **Revised** curriculum requirements apply to all ages served in this pathway.
- **Revised** education standards apply and offer more options.
- **Addition** of Family & Community Engagement standards.
- **Addition** of Continuous Quality Improvement standards.
- **Addition** of child observations and use of formative assessment tools.
- **Addition** of Coaching or Training options to support classroom and instructional quality practices. NC's early childhood education system **currently provides** support services to child care facilities through partner agencies.

Child Care Centers

2 Star Center	3 Star Center	4 Star Center	5 Star Center
Enhanced Ratio OR Enhanced Space	Enhanced Ratio OR Enhanced Space	Enhanced Ratio, Enhanced Space Optional	Reduced, Enhanced Ratio, Enhanced Space Optional
50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 2 Star Standards	50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 3 Star Standards	50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 4 Star Standards	50% of all Lead Teachers AND 50% of other educators meet 5 Star Standards
Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices	Family and Community Engagement Foundational Practices AND additional choices
CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual	CQI Standards for Facility and Individual
Curriculum for all ages served	Curriculum for all ages served, Child Observations and Coaching or Training Options	Approved Curriculum and Formative Assessment Tools, Child Observations, and Coaching or Training Options	Approved Curriculum and Formative Assessment Tools, Child Observations, and Coaching or Training Options

Items to note for child care centers:

- **Removal** of program assessment standards.
- **Revised** enhanced space requirement to be optional at all star levels.
- **Revised** education standards apply and offer more options for all positions.
- **Revised** curriculum requirements apply to all ages served in this pathway.
- **Addition** of Family & Community Engagement standards.
- **Addition** of Continuous Quality Improvement standards.
- **Addition** of child observations and use of formative assessment tools for some facilities. The use of formative assessment tools is a **current standard** for NC Pre-K Programs.

- **Addition** of Coaching or Training options to support classroom and instructional quality practices. NC's early childhood education system **currently provides** support services to child care facilities through partner agencies.
 - Reduced, enhanced ratio requirement **remains applicable** at the highest level.
 - Enhanced ratio as noted in the chart above is a **current** QRIS requirement.
7. The Commission recommends the addition of **Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) standards** in QRIS for programs selecting Pathway #1 and Pathway #2.

A CQI Plan for each educator is recommended to accompany the Professional Development Plan required in minimum licensing standards. The CQI plan will include identification of goals, resources/supports needed to accomplish goal, and an annual review of the efforts toward completion of goals.

A facility CQI Plan is recommended to include goals, outline necessary actions needed to accomplish the goal, document the reason for the goal, and an annual review of efforts toward completion of the goal. FCCH Operators may use one form to document individual and facility goals.

Note: These standards are not recommended as a requirement for Pathway #3 since accreditation organizations and Head Start address this topic in their standards.

8. The Commission recommends the addition of **Family and Community Engagement standards** in QRIS for programs selecting Pathway #1 and Pathway #2.

Foundational Practices are recommended at the 2 Star Level and include:

- One-way communication (when a program shares information with families).
- Annual family/teacher conference opportunity.
- Annual opportunity for sharing cultural heritage.
- Opportunities for parents to volunteer.
- Coordination of community services by administrator with families as needed/requested.

At the 3-5 Star Levels, it is recommended that Foundational Practices remain a requirement and the child care facility would choose additional options from three categories of engagement:

- Communication may include two-way communication, family resource area, resources in multiple languages, family conferences, and connections to community resources.
- Engagement & Leadership may include family feedback, enrollment orientation, family events, transition plan, reciprocal and responsive program planning, and collaboration with service providers.

- Educational Opportunity may include events for families and educators to learn together, events planned based on needs identified by families, use of local resources and supports for participation.

Note: These standards are not recommended as a requirement for Pathway #3 since accreditation organizations and Head Start address this topic in their standards.

9. **Pathway #3 – Accreditation & Head Start**

Accreditation licensure pathways are a new option for QRIS, as set forth in Session Law 2023-40. There are child care facilities in North Carolina that have achieved accreditation through a national accrediting organization, but that status does not currently count toward earning a star rated license. By acknowledging accreditation in QRIS, it eliminates duplicative standards for child care facilities and enables a dedicated focus to nationally recognized standards. It is also recommended that Head Start programs have a licensure pathway based on their comprehensive federal performance standards.

For all accredited child care facilities and Head Start programs, DCDEE will continue to monitor for compliance with minimum licensing requirements, to investigate allegations of violations or child maltreatment and to ensure that the facilities are in good standing their accrediting organization and Head Start performance standards.

For child care facilities accredited by the following organizations, a direct path to a 3 Star Rated License is recommended, with the option to earn a 4 or 5 Star Rated License.

- National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)
- National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA)
- American Montessori Society (AMS)
- International Montessori Council (IMC)

These accrediting organizations include program requirements that are comparable to or exceed QRIS program standards, including curriculum requirements, program assessment, CQI and Family & Community Engagement.

Child Care Centers with these accreditations will be required to implement enhanced ratio requirements unless the center meets accreditation standards that are more stringent. FCCHs operate with a licensed capacity, rather than a ratio and group size, therefore enhanced ratio requirements are not applicable to FCCHs.

Education requirements for these accreditations vary, resulting in the need for the evaluation of staff education to equitably earn a higher star rating. A child care facility with one of these accreditations may earn a 4 or 5 Star Rated License based on the results of the education evaluation.

For child care facilities that are Head Start or accredited by the following organizations, a direct path to a 5 Star Rated License is recommended.

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC)
- COGNIA (formerly AdvanceED)
- Head Start programs

These accrediting organizations and Head Start include education requirements and program requirements that are comparable to or exceed QRIS program standards, including curriculum requirements, program assessment, CQI and Family & Community Engagement.

Child Care Centers with these accreditations will be required to implement enhanced ratio requirements unless the center meets accreditation standards that are more stringent. FCCH's operate with a licensed capacity, rather than a ratio and group size, therefore enhanced ratio requirements are not applicable to FCCH's.

10. For all pathways, the Commission recommends **revisions to staff education standards** that align current QRIS standards with proposed star level requirements. These recommendations reflect the challenges and barriers identified by the ECE community during outreach sessions. Some items to note include:

- It is recommended that the evaluation of education standards for 50% of lead teaching staff remain a QRIS standard, rather than 75%. This reduction was first introduced in SB 570 hold harmless legislation and was well received statewide.
- It is recommended that the evaluation of education standards for 50% of other educators employed at a child care facility be included in the overall evaluation of education standards to earn a star rating.
- Recommended star level requirements offer options for every position at every star level and include:
 - Addition of the Child Development Associate (CDA) as an option for FCCH operators, lead teachers, and teachers.
 - Addition of options that include experience, Continuing Education Units (CEU) and/or a competency evaluation for FCCH operators, administrators, lead teachers, and teachers.
 - Addition of an option for FCCH operators and lead teachers who have earned an early childhood certificate.
 - Addition of an option for FCCH operators and lead teachers who obtain the required coursework for an Early Childhood degree without full completion of the degree.

11. The Commission recommends implementation of **Quality Points of Distinction (QPD)** in QRIS. Community feedback indicated the need to acknowledge quality initiatives that a child care facility may be implementing beyond QRIS standards.

QPDs are not required to earn a star rating but may accompany any Two through Five Star Rated License if a child care facility meets the requirements of a category. The categories include educational and programmatic options that may be a current QRIS quality point standard and other topic areas that have been suggested for inclusion or acknowledgement in QRIS.

Child care facilities may choose if they want to earn one or more QPDs in twelve (12) categories:

- Education
- Professional Development
- Longevity and Experience
- Staff Supports and Benefits
- Program Features
- Health & Wellness Opportunities
- Language Concentration
- Culinary Emphasis
- Ratios & Group Size/Enrollment Practices
- Supplemental Environments
- NC Breastfeeding-Friendly Child Care Designation Program
- Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood – Plus Program (MCCYN-PLUS)

Summary

In closing, the QRIS Modernization Plan is intended to represent the feedback received in an effort to meet the needs of licensed child care operators and staff throughout North Carolina. The Commission is focused on efforts to provide choices for early childhood professionals to demonstrate quality and offer alternative pathways to earn a Star Rated License.

The Child Care Commission recognizes that modernizing the state's QRIS system provides one small step towards improving the early care and education system in our state. It does not, and cannot, address the ongoing, critical issues of funding for child care access, affordability, compensation, and quality in the state of North Carolina.

The QRIS Sub-Committee has provided updates regarding the QRIS Modernization Project at each Commission meeting conducted in 2023. During the November 2023 meeting, initial draft recommendations were shared in order to obtain feedback. Based on that feedback, adjustments and clarifications were made to the recommendations. These changes were provided at the December 2023 meeting.

The Commission notes that details to support these recommendations will be developed and shared during the rulemaking process as required in the Administrative Procedures Act, N.C.G.S. 150B, which includes a public comment period. Once new Child Care Rules are adopted regarding QRIS, the Commission and the DCDEE will collaborate to develop and communicate an implementation plan for the new system that will provide a smooth transition.



Pathways to the Stars: Where Quality and Choice Meet



Star Level	Pathway #1 Program Assessment ↓	Pathway #2 Classroom & Instructional Quality ↓	Pathway #3 Accreditation & Head Start ↓	
2 Stars	All 2 Star Standards	All 2 Star Standards	NAFCC NECPA AMS IMC	NAEYC NAC COGNIA Head Start
3 Stars	All 3 Star Standards	All 3 Star Standards		
4 Stars	All 4 Star Standards	All 4 Star Standards	AND 4 Star Education Standards	
5 Stars	All 5 Star Standards	All 5 Star Standards	AND 5 Star Education Standards	

Appendix A: QRIS Modernization Community Outreach Data Report

Appendix B: Frequently Asked Questions regarding QRIS Modernization

QRIS MODERNIZATION

Community Outreach Data Report

In February 2023, the NC Child Care Commission began to modernize NC's QRIS, commonly known as the Star Rated License. The Child Care Commission formed a QRIS Sub-Committee to make recommendations for QRIS Modernization. The Division of Child Development and Early Education has provided support to the Child Care Commission in their work on this project.

The QRIS Sub-Committee identified the need for community outreach efforts to frame the work of the QRIS Modernization Project. A series of open-ended questions were developed and used consistently in a variety of formats to solicit feedback from parents, teachers, administrators, owners, and partners. The questions focused on identifying what works in the current QRIS system, what quality care looks like, how quality care can be provided continually, challenges/barriers, family and community engagement activities and culturally responsive practices.

All outreach efforts began with an overview of the QRIS Modernization Project, the timeline of the project and the questions that were being discussed. Attendees were offered an opportunity to submit written feedback (chat in webinars, handwritten notes in meetings, QR code survey) as well as a discussion time for each question.

- 2 Webinars
- 8 Community Meetings (Asheville, Charlotte, Greensboro, Fayetteville, Jacksonville, Morganton, Raleigh, and Williamston)
- QR Code Survey Data (Division website, Division email list and shared during all events)
- Policy Chats with DCDEE Regulatory Staff and QR Code Survey shared with all DCDEE Staff
- 6 Focus Groups (Centers, FCCH, NC Licensed Child Care Association, School-Age, FCCH Advisory Council, Head Start)
- Child Care Resource and Referral Council Outreach to parents and the Cherokee Nation
- Feedback received via email at DCDEE_QRIS@dhhs.nc.gov

Overall, there were approximately 1,800 participants. However, a single participant may have provided responses through multiple formats such as submitting a QR Code Survey and attending a webinar. The webinars included a total of 1,000 participants and the QR Code Survey had 317 responses. The in-person meetings, focus groups and other outreach group sizes ranged from 5 – 34, not including Child Care Commissioners and Division staff that were present.

The Division's QRIS Project Manager and the Regulatory Policy and Planning Unit Program Manager facilitated all meetings. Additional Division staff attended each of the meetings to assist in taking notes of discussion items. Child Care Commission members were present for both webinars and 6 community meetings to listen to feedback directly. Interpreters were offered at 6 community meetings and utilized by a provider at one meeting.

Questions	# of Responses
What works in our QRIS?	424
What does a great child care program look like to you?	738
How would you provide that continually?	506
What are your current challenges with our system?	1099
Are there barriers that you experience in using our system?	567
How can we include family and community engagement in our system?	445
How can we ensure our process is culturally responsive (equitable, diverse, access)?	365
Parking Lot/Other	59

Due to the open-ended nature of the questions used to solicit feedback, responses resulted in qualitative data analysis, focusing on common themes and related quotes. However, this qualitative data could be used to develop quantitative surveys as needed to obtain more information, determine success of changes within the QRIS and to assist in continuous quality improvement at the system level.

Within the data collected, there was an overlap in responses to questions that have been addressed through analysis. All individual responses have been maintained as received in a separate spreadsheet for reference. Information that was outside the scope of this QRIS Modernization project will be shared with the appropriate Division staff and partners.

Question 1 (What Works in our QRIS?)

Participants noted that the current QRIS holds programs accountable, is standardized, is objective and does measure some quality standards.

- "Having a system that holds child care centers accountable for providing quality care."
- "That there is a standardized measure used to determine quality and there are many partnering agencies well versed on the measure to help provide assistance and guidance."
- "NC is lucky, we have a system that works. Other states [are] envious."
- "One of things that works is the accountability and the requirement that programs are re-assessed every 3 years."
- "It keeps providers thinking about their program quality every three years as they prepare for assessment. It helps them to update and reevaluate the learning space especially as there is so much turn over and different teachers in spaces that were previously evaluated etc."
- "Having an independent assessment process from an outside/objective observer to inform state and parents of child care in our state"

There was acknowledgement of some positive outcomes in the NC QRIS but an emphasis that the system needs to be updated or improved.

- "Stars work but not all 5 stars are equal. Some practice 5 star behavior daily and others prepare for stars."
- "Love our system for the most part - it just needs to be unified between agencies - DCDEE- ERS- Health/Sanitation."
- "Having general baseline measures of quality is important. While some of the rules in the rated license system do not make sense or could be tweaked, the system as a whole works"

Some participants noted positive comments about the Environment Rating Scales used to assess classrooms. Material and environment expectations were noted as familiar and useful to programs.

- "The ERS assessments have great qualities [to] them. I like that it monitors classroom environment and materials."
- "ERS – SACERS, ITES, ECERS, FCCRS are approachable and clear with expectations."
- "The opportunity to work towards something in having a quality child care program and something to continue to work towards/achieve in everyday standards. I think in the process, the environmental scales is working."
- "ERS provides a mechanism for objectively measuring program quality; ERS provides TA with a standardized framework within which to focus TA and hold accountable quality improvement strategies and services."

Other participants asked for an update to ERS-3 or to include the use of a different assessment tool.

- "I really like our rated license system but we need to upgrade from ERS-R to ERS-3. We are one of the very last states to implement this new version. As a technical assistance specialist, i have been trained on ERS-R and ERS-3 and I truly think that the 3 is the one we need to use in NC. It focuses more on the interactions with teachers and children and that is so incredibly important."

It will not be a difficult change in the classrooms, but it needs to be monitored more than the sanitation portions that are in the ERS-R.”

- “What works is having a tool to observe for quality. What could be improved is using a tool that relies less on purchasing materials and more on interactions, such as ECERS-3 and CLASS. This would also allow more flexibility for outdoor learning while still providing quality.”
- “Classroom assessments work, but should do more, check in type visits, maybe add more types of assessments (program administration and CLASS)”

The modified assessment process and self-study were noted as positive outcomes from the Hold Harmless period.

- “Loved the modified assessment because it eased the teachers’ anxiety of the ERS providing a transition for them to be able to increase the quality of care particularly with not having the staff we had pre-covid...eases teacher anxiety over process.”
- “We loved the modified ECERS assessment, much less invasive and disruptive to the classroom. That option should remain”
- “We did the modified ERS and I REALLY like the ""self study"" we had to do. I have continued to use them and incorporated them into our orientation.”

Technical assistance, resources and incentives were noted as strengths in encouraging staff and giving programs/staff a goal to work toward.

- “Having resources to technical assistance to prepare for the assessments was great.”
- “It helps staff be accountable for all requirements in this field. We learn and grow from this system. It also motivates staff to do better and encourages them to continue their education and training.”

While several responses reflect aspects of the current QRIS that work, several participants stated either they don’t know what works, they’re not sure what works, or that nothing in the current system works.

- “Nothing about the current entire process (ERS and education scale) is helpful nor does it differentiate between a high quality 5-star center and a bad 5-star center that played the system.”
- “When I was looking for child care I did look at ratings and read reviews. I soon learned that the ratings didn't reflect the quality of care. I am not able to confidently say that it is working at all.”

Question 2 (What does a great child care program look like to you?)

Appropriate curriculum, materials, and interactions were the characteristics most frequently noted when discussing quality child care practices.

- “The program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following areas: social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive. The program uses developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and effective teaching approaches that enhance each child’s learning and development in the context of the curriculum goals.”

- “Age-appropriate”, “Open-ended”, and “Child-directed” were frequently used phrases regarding curriculum.
- “A great child care program should have high quality items and quality staff. There should be plenty of things to do and lesson plans being carried out. Quality vs quantity, its better to have less – more enriching toys than to have more less enriching toys.”
- “Abundant”, “accessible”, and “well maintained” were frequently used phrases regarding materials.
- “Parents are viewed as partners with teachers in their child's learning and development.”
- “This may sound overly simplified, but when you walk into a center and the children are engaged and happy, then I would consider it to be a great child care program. This would reflect that the children’s needs are being met, and if a child is engaged with the items in the 6+ developmental centers in the classroom, then learning is happening. Problem solving must be happening or there would be conflicts shown in the form of tears and yelling.”
- “One where teachers and children are engaged with strong relationships with teachers /children as well as teachers / families. One where teachers are facilitating learning based on children’s interest and ample materials are available to use. One that is safe and healthy”
- “Children and teachers are engaged” and “loving and caring environment” were frequently phrases regarding interactions.

Safe and healthy environments were described by participants when talking about great child care.

- “Program follows laws, rules, regulations”
- “Supporting children's health with nutritious foods to fuel their rapid growth and development and opportunities for physical activity and outdoor play time, which is critical for motor development, physical health, and Vitamin D production, as well as supporting children's mental health, social emotional development including their ability to focus, and freedom to explore and learn in an unstructured way.”
- “The program has a safe and healthful environment that provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments. The environment includes facilities, equipment, and materials to facilitate child and staff learning and development.”
- “Safe”, “clean”, and “well-organized” were frequently used phrases.

Staff education and support were identified as critical in creating great child care environments.

- “There are a number of research studies that provide evidence that the education of the child’s teacher makes a difference in the child’s learning outcomes. Overall, the results of a review of 45 different studies show that higher teacher qualifications are significantly correlated with higher quality early childhood education and care. The education level of the teachers or caregivers is positively correlated to overall ECEC qualities measured by the environment rating scale.”
- “Balance of education and experience”
- “Qualified team members, including support for children with disabilities on a daily basis.”
- “Education staff that attends trainings and workshops to stay ahead of the demands of working in early childhood education.”
- Low teacher “turnover”, “compensation” and “benefits” were frequently used phrases.

Question 3 (How would you provide that continually?)

Training, coaching, mentoring, and resources were identified as assisting programs to continually provide great child care.

- “Training is also very important. Teachers need to be abreast the most current research and available information out there. Trainings offer hands on materials and ideas that teachers can actually use in their classroom at that point.”
- “On-going training and support so practice is every day not ‘just for the date of assessment’; that perception of ‘ERS for the day’ is still out there.”
- “I think the solution [begins] with quality TA which allows teachers and providers to feel comfortable in their profession that can begin with hands on coaching and mentoring on a continuous basis.”
- Training in general was frequently noted but also specific types mentioned, e.g., cultural competency training, and trauma-informed training.
- “Technical assistance” was frequently used to describe support from a variety of agencies regarding topics such as behavioral challenges, ERS evaluation and preparation, health practices, etc.
- “Frequent observations” and “evaluations” from administrators and agencies that offer “low stakes” technical assistance were identified as important in providing continual quality.
- Finances/funding, compensation, incentives, benefits and supports for staff as described below:
 - “It is very expensive, especially in today's market, to pay teachers well without charging parents more than they can afford. It's like a double-edged sword! In our world today, employees get paid more to work at the grocery store, fast food restaurants and at the gym. Most of those companies also offer benefits. To keep up to star standards with ALL the required classroom materials, it can out cost the center...We definitely would need more help with grant funding in order to continue providing high quality early learning environments.”
 - “Sustainability requires us to compensate educators in a manner that communicates the importance of their work. Offer benefits, provide Personal and Professional Development.”
 - “Focus on staff mental health and staff retention. Invest in their education [and] training. Just like we say care for the “whole child” we must care for our staff the same.”

Question 4 (What are your current challenges with our system?)

AND

Question 5 (Are there barriers that you experience in using our system?)

**These 2 questions had many overlapping responses and were grouped together for theme analysis.*

Staff shortages and turnover

- Providers report significant challenges in finding and retaining qualified teachers. Additionally, there were responses that indicate teachers who have higher education are finding employment elsewhere where they can receive higher pay and benefits.

- “The ability to keep staff definitely disrupts the learning for kids when they feel like they’ve made an attachment to a certain teacher and then they have to turn around and get a new teacher. That’s not the easiest thing for kids to adapt to.”
- “With staff turnover it is challenging to maintain consistent practices”

Staff Education Requirements

- Most responses state that even if they support and agree with teachers having higher education, it is not possible to retain staff or compensate them appropriately/at the rate they expect, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Many responses noted barriers exist for those seeking higher education (e.g., cost, time, inaccessibility).
- "Child care programs with a small number of staff will see a greater impact in education points earned compared to larger programs with more staff because of how the percentage is calculated. "
- "I have worked for many years in five star programs and recently took at director position at a GS-110 center. We provide high quality and meet all program standards and beyond, but have dedicated teachers with years of experience, but not all are degreed. It is sad to think that we don't get any stars or would receive low stars just based on our education points. High quality in this field has a TON to do with experienced teachers. They are the backbone to high quality!"
- "Education requirements are definitely a balancing act. For sure, education and training improves quality and best practice. On the other hand I know some fabulous, passionate teachers that don't have the education and therefore don't qualify for higher ed points, but if they were observed or allowed to show their work, they would be seen as high quality."

Opposing views regarding staff education versus staff experience:

- Advocating for education
 - “But lowering standards or saying teachers shouldn't need education (which supports and expands their experience!) will only leave young children with people who, for the majority, do not understand child development and how to truly teach them. We will end up with just having "child warehouses" in our state with "babysitters." Please do not do this for the sake of the children.”
 - “I believe education is important and does increase the quality of care. I do believe more degrees should be recognized and that if it is currently recognized by the Institute for Child Development professionals then it should automatically be recognized by the state and teachers/schools shouldn't have to pay extra for that.”
 - “Experience is important, but it does not equal education. It cannot be looked at the same way.”
- Advocating for experience and/or flexibility in education standards
 - ““There is far too much emphasis on teacher education which increases turnover as the degreed individuals seek an extra buck around the corner. In consideration of already existing mandatory curriculums (many of which include scripts) and mandatory components of lesson plans, teacher education beyond a CDA is wholly irrelevant. The ERS assessment system is so rigid that bad centers can easily play the system and go back to the same awfulness the next day.”

- “You can have some of the best teachers that may not have the education but has the experience.”
- “Teachers who have years of experience, without the education, should be considered for high quality ratings. What if the staff who has the experience cannot afford to get the education?”

Responses reflected that Montessori programs are not feeling valued and do not feel they are appropriately represented in the current QRIS.

- “We are a Montessori School which means we have materials different than most other day cares. It has not felt in the past that Montessori programs were valued. I have my Master's degree in Special Education from Elon University. My Montessori Training was far superior to getting my Master's degree, yet Montessori training is not counted in the educational rating, nor is Montessori an approved curriculum. This has been so disheartening.”
- “Montessori accreditations should be more than adequate to qualify centers / homes as high quality. Just because they don't use the types of toys or curriculum preferred by the state does not make them inferior. Please take Montessori, Reggio Emilia, etc. into account as being qualified at a 5 star rate. Accreditations are harder to pass than the DCD-EE evaluations; they should be qualified as such.”

Financial challenges were frequently noted as a challenge and barrier within QRIS.

- Funding, compensation, cost of care/materials, and subsidy rates were frequently identified issues. Quotes regarding this challenge/barrier are noted throughout this document since it is related to so many aspects of QRIS.

ERS Assessment was frequently identified as “stressful” for providers.

- “It's is stressful and overwhelming. Different evaluations don't consistently score centers the day way, meaning two different evaluators could both be in the same classroom on the day and they both achieve the classroom differently. It should not take an all day session or observation. These classrooms are full of kids and things happen and schedules get off. We have to be flexible, and to be honed a stranger is in the room so the kids are going to be different. No classroom is perfect, but most strive to do great things. One day is not a true picture of a classroom.”
- “...the current ERS system is highly stressful and historically we've had a resignation during every assessment window. We had a teacher have a panic attack, full on panic thought she was having a heart attack and the assessor couldn't complete the visit. If the system was indicative of quality, it would be one thing, but literally the only reason we're doing it is to maintain access to highest subsidy rates. I've literally never had anybody worked up about accreditation because it isn't a scary process or a punitive scoring system.”
- “It's stressful when your program is housed in a school setting, the criteria they use to rate us, is designed for a stand alone daycare, the rules need to change for Afterschool sites that are housed in a school. Often times we are cited for things that are beyond our control.”
- “Overwhelming, like a test, FCCHs providers do not want to do it. Scary to FCCH”

- “It is based to centers (does not bend for FCCH, walls, home layout); needs flexibility in scoring for structural challenges; ex. Having living pet onsite what about homes and families that are allergic; scoring process difficult for FCCH that utilize multiple rooms”
- “Too much subjectivity”

QRIS requirements were described as “rigid”.

- “The system is too tight on the points. That means everything could be good and one thing can cause you to lose your stars that you have or not make it to the next step. It's just too rigid.”
- “ERS are very rigid and the outcome of the scores isn't always realistic”.
- “Ongoing review but giving provider options to meet standards”

Family Child Care Home (FCCH) requirements were described as unique programs that do not fit the same requirements as centers.

- “As far as FCCH I think [there] should be separate rating system. The physical space environment (visual from bathroom), number of staff in classroom setting, food prep monitoring and age ranges varies. We do not have the same advantages as centers in these fields.”
- “1 Star FCCH operator states families do not care about star ratings. FCCH programs are unique: living room is the play area; if operator goes to the bathroom, 5 little ones follow; etc. FCCH programs should not be treated the same as child care centers. FCCH rules and changes have caused operator to consider not doing this anymore. Encourage state to show difference between homes and centers in regard to requirements.”
- “Communication; older FCCH providers that do not use internet and email have struggled to connect and rely on others for help. There is no access to the system except through email or electronic forms of communication.”
- “Give the providers especially FCCH the autonomy to create space for families they are serving. Been in field for 15 yrs, during COVID in home FCCH, in March turned in license, hard to keep up with needs for my family and QRIS. We have a standard, if we have providers with education and experience, there should be trust, the provider is able to serve the children. Freedom to create the space, get away from the center approach and make the home a community environment. Current standards do not allow freedom.”

Program assessment was identified as a barrier for some programs.

- “ECERS is not EC/SPED friendly; inclusive classroom will have to adjust materials; child's needs may not be free-play, need more structure; assessors may not be understanding.”
- “Implementation in an inclusive classroom and classrooms with all special needs even using accommodations”

Understanding of Star Rated License System

- “Staff understanding of concepts behind ERS”
- “The system assumes what quality is. Parents know what they want and what they are looking for in a child care program, and most parents don't know how it works, and what the system uses to determine quality. The education piece is also an issue for me, because as I stated earlier, education points are determined by the teacher with the least amount of education.”

- “Having the understanding that the points are earned and not something that is taken away. Trying to understand how a score in one area can also affect a score in another.”

Language barrier identified by the Cherokee Nation

- “We are an immersion school and we have to have someone that can translate the Cherokee Language in order to be assessed properly.”

Question 6 (How can we include family and community engagement in our system?)

Participants indicated that asking families for their input, making it convenient for the families to participate, and being inviting/welcoming to families is critical to building relationships. Incentives and funding were noted as challenges for this item.

- “Add a family questionnaire for families to fill out on line for classrooms being assessed.”
- “Providing parent trainings.”
- “Making sure that families in NC understand what high quality means - and why that's important.”
- “Family nights, community members sharing with families programs they offer. It has been challenging but one idea I heard was to let parents come and observe in child's class.”
- “Documentation requirements of opportunities and how families are approached with engagement opportunities”
- “Submitting surveys to parents/family & the community to inquire how they feel their childcare centers are performing. Have families & the community be able to attend star rating license requirement meetings to have a better understanding of what is required to receive a star rating.”
- “Head Start agencies have parent councils and parent committees for their centers and grantees. Instituting something like that on a state level, where parents would actually have a say in what happens at their children's program, would be awesome. Perhaps compensate those providers who institute parent policy council type programs, and/or those that at least have regular (1-2x/year) parent-teacher conferences, to get real feedback from parents rather than just lip service paid to "offering" parent programs that parents don't want to engage in”
- “Ask the PARENTS what they look for! Collect data on what they look for since they are the consumers. Most don't care about a rating! They care about safety, trustworthiness, and affordability.”
- “Include family and/or community engagement as part of the quality piece in order to receive credit for the quality point.”

Question 7 (How can we ensure our process is culturally responsive?)

Responses indicated that intentional planning, community input, and training are important components in being culturally responsive, acknowledging diversity, and creating equitable opportunities for families and programs.

Staff compensation, cost of training and subsidy reimbursement variations were noted as challenges.

- “Take into consideration where different child care settings are (urban, rural, family child care home, church based, military community etc.) Parenting styles will vary widely and there is no one size fits all.”
- “Engage with community partners to specifically and intentionally examine systems to determine where structural racism is present with the school and community and take active steps to eliminate that racism.”
- “input, questionnaires, surveys, open discussions, collaborative thinking, etc.”
- “Providing materials for families in their home languages and having translators to translate.”
- “Include an equity measure in the rating system, with examples of and training for high-quality equity practices.”
- “There needs to be consideration of cultural and socioeconomic factors because people in some areas are not able to get college education and thus the schools are not able to hire credentialed teachers. ITERS/ECERS is quite outdated so ensuring cultural diversity is lacking. Teacher observations can be misinterpreted due to cultural/educational differences.”
- “The process can be equitable, diverse and accessible by involving all irrespective of their race, color, and nationality. The system can be responsive by giving equal opportunity to serve”
- “Make sure that every county, regardless of SES and location, has equal access to funds, training, and grants for their programs.”
- “Go beyond pictures, clothing and statements to coaching and providing deep understanding and support to being culturally responsive”
- “Being culturally sensitive does beyond toys and materials, it has to be more about unconscious bias”
- “Require training on cultural competence and implicit bias (especially in instruction)”
- “More special education knowledge with the early childhood degree. More inclusive education. Early Childhood Exceptional Children’s certificate. Is needed. AAC (autism certification)”
- “Neurodiverse children have specific needs.”
- “Maybe when we talk about culturally responsive, we need to focus on different generations. How can support an older provider sustain higher quality when some may have issues with understanding technology.”
- “Technology will be an issue for the DCDEE. The lack of services is an issue. Some providers have no desire to learn technology but do a great job with the children. Will be hard to get the encouraged to become more familiar with technology.”
- From the Cherokee Nation immersion program: “First is to see if the parents are willing to learn the language, most families just see [program] as a means of schooling for their children. Have them learn the language beside their child not just only hear words when the teachers are stating them.”

Other Topic Areas

**as noted by participants and not already included in above questions*

There was some discrepancy between what providers report about parents as child care consumers, and what parents report about their beliefs.

- Some providers say parents don’t care about stars.

- “Most of the time parents don't ask about our stars. The majority of the time we are asked how long our teachers have been with us and what experience do they have.”
- “Parents don't care about stars and rarely ask about them. They are looking for friendly, steady staff who provide quality care and have experience in the field. It's sad that all of our grants and subsidy money are based on stars when parents aren't too concerned with it. It makes it really hard for non star rated programs to ever advance and have funds to improve quality.”
- However, parents do say they care about stars.
 - “The star ratings give a sense of confidence that the child care programs have been monitored for quality and that they are meeting standards. As a parent I am uncomfortable to learn that we are potentially lowering the standards. I would rather a child care program's rating go down than learn that the standards were lowered because the higher ratings were too hard to reach.”
 - “When I search, I only search for 5 star ratings. I'm not exactly sure what that measure means, but if that is the designation then I have to assume it is the best.”
 - “Even though you see the star rating from one to five stars, most people still don't know exactly what that means. They just know having more stars is probably better than having one.”
 - One parent shared their perception that families often begin their child care search by looking at programs with higher star ratings and may only consider programs with lower star ratings if their family has a personal connection with a program or has heard positive feedback through word of mouth.

Consider how to acknowledge compliance history of a program as part of QRIS beyond the 75% Compliance History Score that is required to apply for a 2-5 Star Rated License.

- Participants asked if numbers of violations, self-reported violations, complaints (unsubstantiated vs. substantiated), and administrative actions could be considered when planning the QRIS system revisions. If a program does not have these types of issues, how could that be reflected when earning a star rating?

Additional Information – Not within the scope of QRIS Modernization

There were numerous responses that indicated the need for lower ratios to promote quality child care practices. There were also opposing responses that noted funding and cost of care as prohibitive to lowering ratios. Minimum ratios/group size are set forth in North Carolina General Statutes which is not within the authority of the Child Care Commission. The data will be maintained for reference as needed by the Child Care Commission and Division of Child Development and Early Education.

Challenges and barriers related to the subsidy program were discussed at all outreach events as a related topic since the star rated license level affects rates of reimbursement. The Division's Subsidy Services Section will receive all subsidy related data to review.

Frequently Asked Questions about the February 2024 NC Child Care Commission Quarterly Meeting and Proposed Recommendations to Modernize the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS)

1. Who is the NC Child Care Commission?

The Commission is made up of [seventeen members](#) appointed by the Governor, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and President Pro Tempore of the Senate. The members include parents, child care providers, a pediatrician, early childhood education specialists and general citizens. The Commission is responsible for adopting rules to implement the child care laws established by the NC General Assembly.

2. What is QRIS?

North Carolina's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) is commonly known as the Star Rated License. It is a set of standards that promote quality in early childhood programs, and it helps families understand the quality of programs. QRIS is part of North Carolina's child care licensing process. All programs that receive a child care license automatically have at least one star. Programs can then choose to meet additional standards to achieve a higher star rating. The highest rating is 5 star. (Religious-sponsored child care programs operate with a Notice of Compliance and do not receive a star rating unless they choose to apply.)

3. Why is the QRIS being updated?

North Carolina led the nation when it launched its Quality Rating Improvement System in 1999. It is now time to apply the research and learnings from the past 24 years to best meet family, community, and child care programs' needs. Therefore, in February 2023, the NC Child Care Commission initiated a project to review and modernize North Carolina's QRIS. In June 2023, The NC General Assembly (NCGA) passed legislation ([Session Law 2023-40](#)) requiring the Commission to develop recommendations to reform QRIS, including use of national early childhood accreditations as an alternative pathway within QRIS, to be completed and submitted to the NCGA's Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services by March 31, 2024.

4. How were the QRIS Modernization Recommendations developed?

The Child Care Commission established a QRIS Sub-Committee, made of 9 Commission members, to review the current system and make recommendations for change. Members of the Sub-Committee include Commissioners that are Parent, For-Profit Provider, Non-Profit Provider, Early Childhood Education Specialist, and Pediatrician representatives. They led a 11-month process to gather input reaching more than 1800 people, including families, teachers, administrators, owners, partners, and community members.

- 189 participants attended 8 in-person listening sessions in all regions of the state (Asheville, Charlotte, Greensboro, Fayetteville, Jacksonville, Morganton, Raleigh, and Williamston).
- 1000 people participated in 2 online listening sessions.
- Over 300 people responded to a survey.
- 125 people and organizations submitted input via a specially designated email account.
- 186 people participated in focus groups representing child care centers, family child care homes, Head Start, child care providers and families.

All feedback gathered from public outreach sessions was reviewed by the Sub-Committee and considered in the development of QRIS recommendations. In addition, the Sub-Committee reviewed national research, trends and outcomes regarding QRIS standards to inform their decision-making.

5. What do the QRIS Sub-Committee's recommendations for QRIS Modernization include?

The recommendations are guided by common themes that emerged from the input gathered across the state, including:

1. Programs want choices for measuring and demonstrating quality.

2. QRIS should recognize that learning happens in many ways, including through work experience, mentorship and apprentice programs, and higher education.
3. A focus on continuous quality improvement perspective is needed.
4. The process for earning higher level star ratings must be simplified to ensure equitable and achievable outcomes that support quality practices.

With these principles as the guide, the recommendations:

- Give programs a choice of three Pathways to demonstrate quality in a manner that best fits their philosophy and goals, the early childhood professionals they employ and the families they serve.
- The current point-based system is recommended to become a simpler system that will include a list of requirements for each star level within a pathway. A child care facility will determine what licensure pathway is best for their program and meet the requirements for the star rated license level they desire.
- Update education standards for early childhood professionals to include additional options such as the Child Development Associate (CDA), Continuing Education Units (CEU) and experience-based knowledge.
- Additional standards that focus on continuous quality improvement for educators and child care facilities and family/community engagement practices that promote communication and collaboration within the community.

6. What will happen at the Child Care Commission Meeting on February 12, 2024?

The QRIS Sub-Committee will present its recommendations to the Commission and the Commission will review and discuss. The meeting is scheduled for 6.5 hours, including a break for lunch. If additional discussion is needed, the Commission will reconvene virtually on Tuesday, February 13 at 10 a.m. The Commission may vote to send recommendations—with or without revisions—to the NC Department of Health and Human Services who will report the recommendations to the General Assembly on or by March 31, 2024.

7. Will there be an opportunity for public comment at the February 12 Child Care Commission Meeting?

No. The purpose of the February 12 meeting is for the Commission Members to consider the proposed recommendations and work together to finalize them. Their discussion may include asking questions of sub-committee members or Division of Child Development and Education staff.

8. How can I provide comments about the QRIS Recommendations?

The QRIS sub-committee collected feedback from February 2023 through December 2023 to develop the recommendations. The next opportunity to provide feedback will occur during rulemaking. The public is notified of agency rulemaking through a notice published in the North Carolina Register and posting of required information on the agency's website including instructions for providing public comment.

9. What happens with QRIS after the February Child Care Commission Meeting?

The Commission is required to send their final recommendations to the North Carolina General Assembly by March 31, 2024. In the Spring of 2024, the NC Commission can begin the rulemaking process to adopt QRIS Modernization.