



# *Lookin' for Star Quality?*

Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region  
and Whole Child Leon Launch New Quality Rating Improvement  
System for Early Care and Education Programs

*A*s consumers, we are very familiar with rating systems for restaurants, hotels, and cars, but did you know that communities across the United States have implemented Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) for child-care programs? The first statewide QRIS was created in Oklahoma in 1998. Since then, there has been growing momentum at local and state levels to use this systematic approach to measure quality, identify quality early childhood programs, and reward those providing high quality services. According to National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC), there currently are 18 state-wide quality-rating improvement systems in place across the nation, and an additional 28 states that are in varying phases of development of a system.



# QUALITY EDUCATION

..... by Kathy Douglas, M.S.



In Florida, QRI systems have been designed and developed in several counties, some have even begun to pilot or implement their own systems. Many of these efforts are collaborations between Children's Services Councils and Early Learning Coalitions. Although local systems vary in standards and quality levels, all include group size, staff-to-child ratios, family engagement, staff qualifications, curriculum, and child assessments. Also, all systems use the Environment Rating Scales, an industry standard for assessment. During the past two years, eight counties (Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach, Pinellas, Leon) have been collaborating to design and develop a standard QRIS.

Locally, The Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region (ELC), in collaboration with Whole Child Leon

and other community organizations, launched a pilot Five Star Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) in September 2007. All providers within the ELC area providers were invited to voluntarily participate in the QRIS pilot project; of which 76 accepted the invitation. During the pilot project (which lasted 18 months), participating programs were rated in multiple aspects, including learning environment, staff qualifications, administrative practice, curriculum, family engagement, and group size ratios. The end result provided "Star ratings" from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest quality rating) that are meant to inform families about the quality of each program that participated in the pilot project. At the end of the 18 month project, 34 programs representing Gadsden, Leon, Taylor, and Madison counties received star ratings. Thirty programs received a 3 Star or above. Out of the thirty pro-

grams, four received the highest quality rating of Five Stars, 13 programs received a Four Star rating.

In response to the overall need to support and increase the quality child care options available to children and families, ELC (along with community leaders, stakeholders, providers, and advocates) invited all early care and education programs serving young children in our seven-county region the opportunity to join the "Voluntary Quality Rating Improvement System" in July 2009. Today, more than 150 programs have partnered with the ELC and are engaged in the QRIS process. By early 2010, the ELC will be able to provide a QRIS guide to keep parents and consumers the ability to understand, assess and choose quality programs that best meet their needs.

## Frequently Asked Questions about the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS):

### Consumer Reports for Kids?

Nothing will replace the need for parents to visit a prospective center to get a feel of the place, and make personal decisions as to whether it is a good match for their family, but a QRIS gives parents a guide as to what aspects to look for in a provider, and how that provider compare to others in the industry. This system is not meant to punish or discredit businesses, a QRIS is simply a systematic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early childhood programs. These systems provide an opportunity for local communities to increase the quality of care for young children, increase parents' understanding of quality care, and achieve higher quality standards. A QRIS can also be a strategy for aligning components of the early childhood system with increased accountability in improving quality of care.

### How do QRISs help families?

Parents want to know their children are safe, healthy and learning through play while in child care. QRISs offer information about child care providers to help parents find the right child care for their families. Children who are in high-quality child care are more likely to start school ready to succeed.

### How do QRISs help child-care providers?

Providers who choose to be a part of the Early Learning Coalition's QRIS receive technical assistance, professional development, and program improvement plans to improve the quality of care they offer to children. In addition, by being part of a QRIS, providers demonstrate to parents that they are committed to continuous program improvement and offering high-quality child care.

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With the launch of the new Quality Rating Improvement System in July 2009, the Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region & Whole Child Leon joined the growing numbers of local and state organizations across the nation implementing quality rating improvement systems.

## Lookin' for Star Quality?

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### **What counties are included in the ELC of the Big Bend Regions QRIS?**

Madison, Jefferson, Gadsden, Liberty, Leon, Taylor, and Wakulla.

### **How was our QRIS model built?**

The tools that were used to determine the Five Star ratings were created by a group of community members representing the key players in

the child-care community, along with support from the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center (NCCIC). Additionally, "The Environment Rating Scales" tool created by Thelma Harms, Debby Cryer, and Richard Clifford (2008) was also used to assess the learning environment of each program. The ELC also used national research and "lessons learned" from other states with quality rating improvement systems.

### **Learning Environment**

- ✓ The program has sufficient child-sized furniture that is sturdy and in good repair,
- ✓ Greeting and departure are pleasant for parent and child.
- ✓ Most of the children's display of work is done by the children and displayed at the child's eye level.
- ✓ Pleasant social atmosphere.
- ✓ Staff anticipates and takes action to prevent safety problems.
- ✓ Staff read books to children informally, and there is a wide variety of books.

### **Curriculum, Screening & Assessment**

- ✓ Provider can demonstrate child individualized planning for preschool, infant, and toddler classrooms
- ✓ Provider can demonstrate character development activities through daily written activities
- ✓ A minimum of four instructors can report all curriculums utilized in instructional planning
- ✓ Provider ensures all required activities are available and accessible for school-age, preschool, infant, and toddler classrooms
- ✓ Provider can demonstrate that applicable Learning Standards are utilized to inform instructional planning.

### **Family Engagement**

- ✓ Updated parent handbook provided annually to parents
- ✓ Proof of updated parent handbooks annually signed by parents

- ✓ Information about curriculum included
- ✓ Bi-annual parent meetings conducted
- ✓ Quarterly newsletters produced
- ✓ Community event calendar posted on parent bulletin board
- ✓ Information about community resources posted on parent bulletin board

### **Program Administration**

- ✓ Detailed emergency evacuation plan is posted in a conspicuous location
- ✓ First Aid kit is transported with children inside and outside the building and on field trips
- ✓ Emergency contact numbers for children are evacuated with the children per emergency evacuation plan
- ✓ Transportation safety procedures shared with teachers and parents
- ✓ Program maintains a Program Policy/Procedure Manual

### **Staff Qualifications**

- ✓ 50% of child care center staff have a valid First Aid and CPR certificate
- ✓ All staff members have a minimum of 12 hours of in service training
- ✓ All staff members have three hours of training on the developmentally appropriate curriculum chosen by the program
- ✓ 50% of child care center lead teachers have a verified staff credential

**Who can participate in the ELC QRIS?**

Child care center programs, private schools, and registered or licensed family child care homes within the Early Learning Coalition’s seven-county region.

**Is the model the same for both family child-care home providers and child-care centers?**

Yes. The Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region designed one system that was easy to navigate for all child-care providers, whether they offer care in their homes or in a center.

**When will ratings for child-care providers be available?**

Ratings are expected to be released in early 2010.

**How will parents be able to identify programs that have been rated?**

The Early Learning Coalition will post the star ratings on the ELC website.

Each participating program in the ELC/QRIS displays its Star rating to indicate to parents and families the program’s commitment to quality. Parents should look at specific category scores in addition to the programs overall score, to determine which program meets the needs they care about most. Providers will post the QRIS star rating card in a visible area for parents to see how each area was rated. It will be similar to the example at left.

For more information about the Early Learning Coalition’s Five Star Quality Rating Improvement System visit our website at [www.elcbigbend.org](http://www.elcbigbend.org) or contact [info@elcbigbend.org](mailto:info@elcbigbend.org).

**Kathy Douglas, M.S.**, Director Distance Education and Research, Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region. Kathy has over 27 years of experience working with young children and their families. For the past 7 years she has worked providing professional education courses for early care and education professionals. She has published articles in professional early childhood journals, as well as authored books for teachers of young children.

**What’s the difference in the number of stars a provider receives?**

One-★ programs need additional work in the areas of health and safety, program administration, curriculum, and professional development.

Two-★ programs may have made some progress beyond licensing, working towards improvements in curriculum, staff qualifications, family engagement, learning environment and program administration.

Three-★ programs are solid and working to reach specific goals. They are working on quality improvements to enhance the quality of care in their programs.

Four-★ programs are strong and have documented quality in all five areas. Many four-star programs are also nationally accredited.

Five-★ programs are outstanding in all five areas (learning environment, staff qualifications, family engagement, and curriculum and program administration). Many five-star programs are also nationally accredited.

**What is measured in the QRIS in each program standard?**

The QRIS standards are built on the foundation of child care licensing requirements and add multiple steps between licensing and higher quality standards, such as those associated with accreditation. The standards follow a continuum in each category moving from basic health and safety requirements to higher levels of quality. In order to move from one level to the next, child care programs and family child care home programs must complete all requirements within that level.

The following is a sample of common Four Star standards used by the Early Learning Coalition to assign quality levels to participating programs. Included within the categories are examples of criteria for meeting these standards.

**Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend Region**  
**Quality Rating Improvement System**

Program Name \_\_\_\_\_ Star Rating ★★★★★

| Program Standards             | Criteria   | Star Ratings |
|-------------------------------|--|--------------|
| Learning Environment          | Environmental Rating Scales                                      | 5 ★★★★★      |
| Ratio-group Size              | Child to teacher ratio   | 3 ★★★        |
| Staff Qualifications          | Professional credentials and certifications                      | 3 ★★★        |
| Curriculum                    | Curriculum, screening, assessment                                | 4 ★★★★★      |
| Family Engagement             | Parent Handbook and family opportunities                         | 4 ★★★★★      |
| Program Administration        | Operations policies, emergency preparedness                      | 5 ★★★★★      |
| Nationally Accredited Program | Programs who are currently nationally accredited receive a plus. | plus         |