Integrating Head Start Elements into Quality Rating Improvement Systems

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There are several different ways in which Head Start elements have been incorporated into states' Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) designs. However the intensity and strategies used to incorporate these elements vary greatly. This brief highlights some of these methods as well as identifies some of the challenges and successes experienced by the Directors of the Head Start State Collaboration Offices (HSSCO) and QRIS administrators as documented through interviews, surveys, and review of individual state's QRIS websites and supporting evidence.

Introduction

The National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center [NCCIC] (2011) has defined a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) as a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education programs. Nationally, several key factors have led to the creation of QRISs. Numerous studies have demonstrated that higher-quality care, defined in various ways, predicts positive developmental outcomes for children, including improved language development, cognitive functioning, social competence, and emotional adjustment (e.g. Barnett, 2008; Forry, Vick, & Halle, 2009; Halle, Forry, Hair, Perper, Wandner, Wessel, & Vick, 2009; Puma, Bell, Cook, Heid, Lopez, Zill, Shapiro, Broene, Mekos, Rohacek, Quinn, Adams, Friedman & Bernstein, 2005; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores et al, 2005). However, there is wide variance in the level of quality across programs. One measure most states use is licensing, which represents a fairly low quality bar as it tends to focus on the adequacy and safety of the physical environment. Accreditation at the other end of the spectrum is often unattainable for a variety of reasons such as high costs, lack of administrative infrastructure support, and the length of time necessary to complete. It was recognized that a rating system with incremental levels of quality was needed for addressing this variation, therefore leading to the development of QRIS.

Programs that receive Federal funding are required to be monitored to identify if the services they are delivering are meeting the goals and objectives stated in their grant applications. Head Start (HS) programs fall within this category and the assessment system as determined by the Head Start Act is the triennial review which requires that HS programs be subject to a comprehensive on-site review every 3 years to ensure the quality of their programs and the degree to which they comply with government standards as identified in the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS). The question becomes: How do these two monitoring systems-QRIS and the HS triennial review-intersect for Head Start-funded programs?

Questions

The purpose of this report is to identify the different ways in which HS elements have been incorporated into states' QRIS designs and develop a national profile of the intensity and strategizes utilized. It explores some of the experiences HS State Collaboration Directors have had in connecting these two systems. The questions that guide the research are the following:

1. What have HS State Collaboration Directors experienced in integrating HS with QRIS designs?

2. What are the different ways QRIS designs have incorporated elements of the Head Start Program Performance Standards or triennial review into their implementation plans?

3. What factors have promoted successful integration of HS elements into QRIS designs as identified by HS State Collaboration Directors and QRIS administrators?

4. What barriers have hindered the successful integration of Head Start elements into states' QRIS designs as identified by HS State Collaboration Directors and QRIS administrators?

Background

In April 2010, a compendium of 26 states' QRIS designs was compiled based on descriptive information collected between July and October 2009 (Tout, Starr, Moodie, Soli, Kirby, Boller, 2010). The indicators that

relate to HS program specific characteristics include: HS eligibility to participate in QRIS; variations in rating process for specific types of programs; links to other standards or monitoring systems; role of self-assessment tools in QRIS; and waivers for participation in QRIS orientations. At this time, only six QRIS systems (out of the 26 that were reviewed) were making HS adaptations or direct connections that benefited HS programs:

- Maine and Pennsylvania were assessing HS programs using slightly different quality standards;
- Minnesota, New Hampshire and Vermont automatically rated HS programs that were in compliance as a result of their triennial review at the highest level of the QRIS; and
- Minnesota and Virginia were using CLASS[1] in their QRIS designs.

Twenty-four out of 26 allowed HS programs to participate in their respective QRIS.

In May and June 2011, BUILD and the National Head Start Association co-hosted two webinars which highlighted some of the strategies for alignment between Head Start and QRIS (see http://www.buildinitiative.org/content/quality-rating-improvement-system). Leaders from state Head Start Associations (HSA) and HSSCO joined state QRIS administrators to discuss areas of opportunity as well as share strategies overcoming challenges with alignment between the two systems, including reduction of duplication in monitoring and assessment, cross-walking of standards, and financing incentives and strategies. We learned about the work four additional states were doing (AK, IL, NC, VT).

The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) application released in August 2011 (see: http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/applicant.html) identified different publicly funded early childhood programs including HS and required states in their applications to "build on the strengths of these programs, acknowledge and appreciate their differences, reduce inefficiency, improve quality, and ultimately deliver a coordinated set of services and experiences that support young children's success in school and beyond." (p.6)

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[1] The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a program evaluation tool used as part of the HS triennial review.

A summary of the applications was compiled (Stoney, 2012) and for this report a search of the inclusion of Head Start elements into QRIS designs of the 37 applications occurred. In addition, Mitchell and Cobb (2011) developed a paper in response to issues which were raised during the RTT-ELC application process and outlined some of the benefits, challenges, and strategies states have incorporated in their alignment efforts. This information was useful to this report and provided a foundation in which to interview state administrators about their progress and goals following their RTT-ELC applications.

Methodology

Building upon what states were doing during 2010 and reviewing the RTT-ELC applications and subsequent analyses, a survey was developed to better understand the HSSCO Directors' perceptions of some of the barriers and challenges they have experienced in integrating HS principles into their states' QRIS designs. Since 1990, ACF has awarded HS Collaboration grants with the intent to "*assist in building early childhood systems…; encourage widespread collaboration between Head Start and other appropriate programs, services, and initiatives…; and facilitate the involvement of Head Start in State policies, plans processes, and decisions…*" (ACF, 2009) In 2007, each state received grants to hire a State Director of Head Start Collaboration.

This group of 51 (each state and Washington, DC) was sent a survey in April 2012 asking about their current experiences as a HS State Collaboration Director and their perception and role in the integration of HS into their Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS).

Following an analysis of the surveys, RTT-ELC applications and analyses, and state's OPRE profiles (Tout et al, 2010) an interview protocol was developed for the HS State Collaboration Directors as well as the QRIS administrators. Twenty-two HS State Collaboration Directors representing 20 states and DC and 31 QRIS administrators representing 31 states were interviewed via phone or email exchange in April, May, and June 2012. Attempts were made to contact QRIS administrators or HS State Collaboration Directors from the states that were currently operating a QRIS program.

After the interviews were conducted and the surveys were collected, a list of the most common ways in which HS programs were involved in QRIS developed.

From this list, states were separated into three groups: *Emerging; Refining;* or *Perfecting* HS and QRIS integration/collaboration. To verify information gathered in the interviews and surveys, each of the states' QRIS websites (if available) was reviewed during May and June 2012. Eleven states that were not currently operating a QRIS for various reasons were not categorized. The remaining 39 states (Florida was listed three times: Duval, Palm Beach, and Miami-Dade Counties) and DC were then separated into these three categories.

States were categorized as *Emerging* or *Refining* by the number of the following elements they had achieved in their QRIS design[2]:

- *HS allowed to participate in QRIS*
- *Crosswalk of QRIS standards with HSPPS was conducted*
- *Use of CLASS (however scores did not transfer between systems)*
- *HS representation participated in QRIS meetings (i.e. planning, review panels, advisory councils)*
- *Streamlined application for HS programs*

If a state had done one of the following two items; they were moved into the *Perfecting* category:

- *Points/level awarded based on satisfactory triennial review*
- *Completion of specific HS requirements counted for meeting QRIS standards*

Finally, a content analysis occurred from the interviews and surveys to identify common themes as to the successes for the *Perfecting* group and challenges for the *Emerging* and *Refining* groups.

Findings

Twenty-six HS State Collaboration Directors responded to a survey emailed to them in April 2012. In addition to serving as a HS State Collaboration Director, this group of respondents had worked as HS/EHS Directors (11.5%) and had been HS T&T/A Providers (15.4%). In addition, one was a former HS parent, another served as a State Child Care Administrator, and one had been a HS National Fellow. Over half of the group has been involved with HS for longer than 10 years, see Figure 1. Almost three-fourths have worked in their current state in some HS capacity for over 6 years, see Figure 2.

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[2] Emerging had up to three of these items and Refining had 4 or 5 of the elements.

All of those who were able to answer the question (n=25) said they were active members of the ECE leadership team in their state and most (84%) felt that HS capacity to be a partner in initiatives on behalf of children and families is valued.

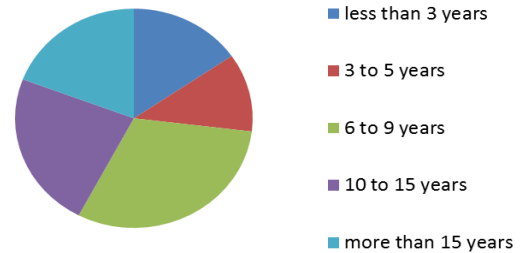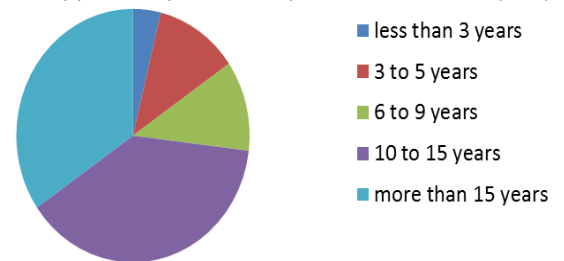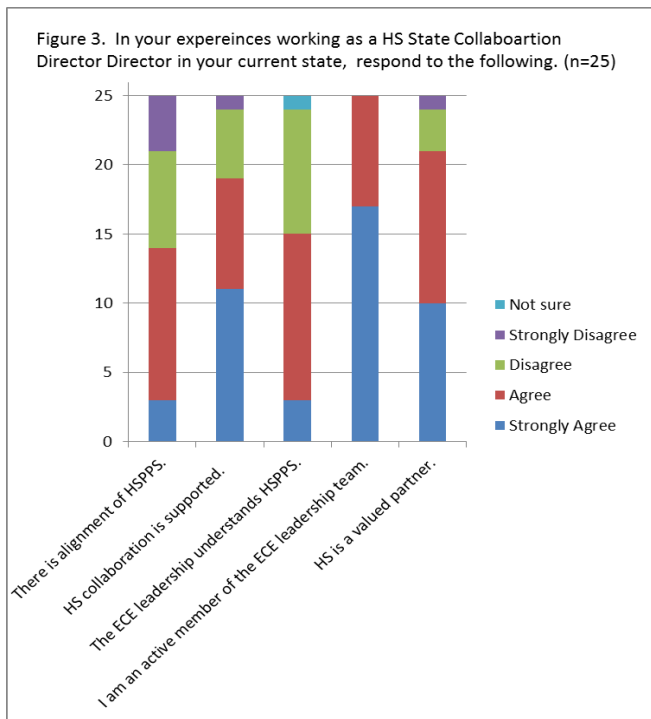Figure 1. How many years have you been involved in HS? (n=26)

- less than 3 years
- 3 to 5 years
- 6 to 9 years
- 10 to 15 years
- more than 15 years

Figure 2. How many years hare you worked in your current state in HS? (n=26)

- less than 3 years
- 3 to 5 years
- 6 to 9 years
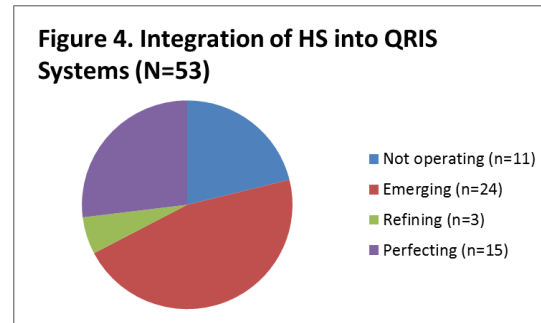- 10 to 15 years
- more than 15 years

Two-thirds of those who answered the question (n=25) felt that the early childhood leadership in their state promotes the successful collaboration of HS with other funded early childhood programs or services. There was a split between whether or not policies in the state support the alignment of HSPPS with child care regulations (56% agree) or if there is an overall strong understanding of the HSPPS (62% agree), see Figure 3.

Most people thought HS was involved in the QRIS planning stages (96%), piloting stages (90%), and implementing (93%), if applicable. For those HS State Collaboration Directors who were personally involved, only 4 wanted to be more involved, however 2 out of these 4 were new to working in the state. One person did mention that "*HS/EHS has only recently been asked to be at the table when policies are being reviewed.*"

Figure 3. In your expereinces working as a HS State Collaboartion Director Director in your current state, respond to the following. (n=25)

Legend:
- Not sure
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Categories:
- There is alignment of HSPPS.
- HS collaboration is supported.
- The ECE leadership understands HSPPS.
- I am an active member of the ECE leadership team.
- HS is a valued partner.

incorporated into QRIS designs: Emerging (24); Refining (4), or Perfecting (14), see Figure 4.

Figure 4. Integration of HS into QRIS Systems (N=53)

- Not operating (n=11)
- Emerging (n=24)
- Refining (n=3)
- Perfecting (n=15)

The most common way in which HS was incorporated into QRIS designs for the *Emerging* or *Refining* categories was that HS was allowed to participate. This was an important feature, since HS programs are not always required to be licensed by the state in which they operate, and most QRIS systems mandate that programs must be licensed to be in the QRIS. For a breakdown of the remaining categories, see Figure 5.

Overall, the HS State Collaboration Directors who responded to the survey felt they or HS were involved in QRIS planning and implementing, however several mentioned that there were some larger tensions that existed between these two systems which cause "*conflicts*" in working together. On respondent explained *"Head Start is not included in the visioning for state ECE policy and is more of an aside, seriously jeopardizing alignment opportunities and making collaboration slow, very labor intensive, and prone to set backs… Folks often question the quality of Head Start because of those few programs that are "persistently troubled"."* In addition, there were several comments about HS being treated differently due to being exempt from licensing or not having the same teacher requirements which results in *"districts do not view HS teachers as their peers."*
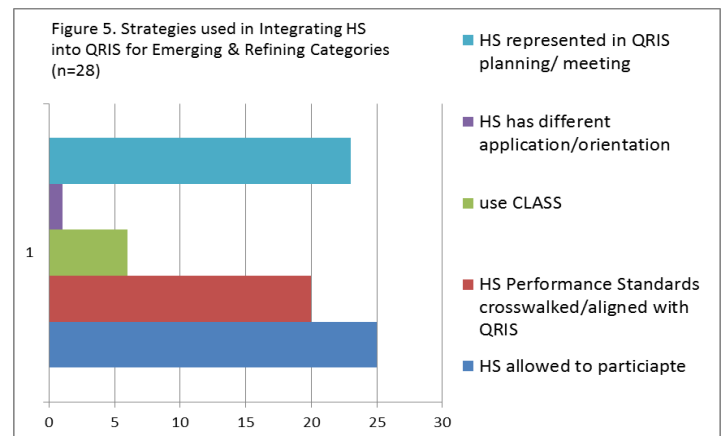
Out of the 53 QRIS systems reviewed, 11 states were excluded from the analysis due to not currently operating a QRIS system. The reasons for not currently operating one ranged from being illegal (MO); complete revamping of the original QRIS designs (CA); or simply not having one established due to lack of political support, funding or initial pilot ending (AL, AK, CT, NE, SC, SD, TX, WV, WY). The remaining 39 QRIS systems (Florida was listed three times: Duval, Palm Beach, and Miami-Dade Counties) were then separated into three categories related to the degree to which HS was

Figure 5. Strategies used in Integrating HS into QRIS for Emerging & Refining Categories (n=28)

Legend:
- HS represented in QRIS planning/ meeting
- HS has different application/orientation
- use CLASS
- HS Performance Standards crosswalked/aligned with QRIS
- HS allowed to particiapte

A common challenge for these states was focusing solely on the aligning of QRIS standards and not moving onto "the next step" of measuring the degree to which the standards have been implemented. This challenge of measuring standards was addressed by several states in which only CLASS is being used by HS and the QRIS is utilizing ECERS or PAS as a program assessment tool.

Even though HS was often at the planning and implementing of QRIS plans, several HS State Collaboration Directors described this role as being *informal* or *unofficial*. Finally, both HS State Collaboration Directors and QRIS administrators said that it is difficult to get HS programs to participate in QRIS. The reasons cited included: HS programs already are being monitored to high standards during the

triennial review; HS programs are already well funded and don't see the benefits; and HS are ineligible to receive child care subsidies or quality awards.

Fourteen states were assigned to the Perfecting HS/QRIS integration category. There were five states that were identified in Tout et al (2009) that met the criteria for this category (ME, MN, NH, PA, and VT)[3]. In Maine and Pennsylvania HS programs enrolled in QRIS use different program standards than non-HS programs. In Delaware, Head Start programs may enroll using *Alternative Pathways* which gives these programs up to 2 years to identify which standards they are already meeting in the area of professional development before they receive their star rating (Kirby, Boller & Tout, 2010). Similarly in Maryland, programs that meet HSSPS meet QRIS standards (Mitchell & Cobb, 2012). In Iowa and Washington, points are awarded for HS programs that are in "good standing" after their triennial review.[4] In Arkansas, there is a reciprocity agreement that HS can compete for waivers in some of the QRIS requirements by submitting CLASS scores, triennial review results, and corrective action improvement plans, if applicable,[5] and in Massachusetts there is a documentation verification option for HS (Mitchell & Cobb, 2012). In Indiana, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Vermont and Wisconsin, licensed HS programs come in at the highest QRIS level, as do HS programs in Michigan's QRIS pilot.[6]

The overall attitude for several of these states was to obtain 100% participation of all HS grantees, which was something the smaller states cited as being an advantage to ensuring that would occur. Finally, many of these programs had QRIS administrators who were knowledgeable about HS. QRIS administrators were

able to discuss: the triennial reviews and how they requested to see corrective action and improvement plans; ways they stayed current in updated HS policies; what specific elements in their QRIS designs mirrored HSPPS; how HS representatives served in decision-making roles, such as a QRIS over-site committee.

Further study

As more programs move out of their QRIS piloting stages, what lessons will we learn about duplication of efforts and funding ramifications, participation rate of different types of funded programs, and the sharing of improvement services such as coaching? As the RTT-ELC winners begin to implement their ambitious yet achievable designs, what lessons in the integration of these two monitoring systems will emerge?

We are just beginning to understand how QRISs work and how early childhood systems are integrated within them. The creation of QRIS is a policy trend that is not only growing but will expand across the entire United States. The Federal Office of Child Care (OCC) which administers the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) has established a Department-level high priority goal to expand QRIS (ACF, 2011). With more states moving into re-designing and piloting (and re-piloting) phases in the next few years, an understanding of the challenges of integrating HS into these models needs to be clearly understood.

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[3] All of the websites for these states were reviewed for verification in June 2012.

[4] For IA: Information was gathered during interviews and verified in review of QRIS website in June 2012: http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/iqrs/faqs/index.html; for WA: both HS State Collaboration Director and QRIS administrators during interviews in May 2012 verified the changes made in the Early Achievers' new point system

[5] See: http://www.arbetterbeginnings.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Better-Beginnings-Head-Start-Reciprocation.pdf)

[6] For Information was gathered during interviews and verified in review of QRIS website in June 2012; for IN: http://www.childcareindiana.org/childcareindiana/ptq.cfm; for WI: http://dcf.wi.gov/youngstar/ ; for MI: http://greatstartforkids.org/content/great-start-quality-rating-and-improvement-system; for MN, NH, and VT see note 3.

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