Unlocking the Potential of QRIS: Trends and Opportunities in the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Applications

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February 2012

The BUILD Initiative helps states create comprehensive early childhood systems – coordinated, effective policies that address children’s health, mental health and nutrition, early care and education, family support, and early intervention. BUILD’s vision is at the center of an emerging and vibrant state-based policy movement in the early childhood development field. We work with those who set policies, provide services and advocate for our youngest children to make sure that they are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school.

The stated purpose of the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) was to improve the quality of early learning and help close the achievement gap for children with high needs. The grant application included one absolute priority: states must integrate and align resources and polices across participating state agencies and design and implement a common, statewide tiered quality rating and improvement system (TQRIS). Applicants could earn points for addressing two competitive priorities – including all early learning and development programs in the TQRIS, and understanding the status of children’s learning and development at kindergarten entry. Applications were also invited to include, although were not awarded points for, strategies that sustain program effects in the elementary grades and encourage private sector support.

Thirty-five states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico applied for the RTT-ELC. Nine (California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island and Washington) were selected to receive funding. This Issue Brief is based on a review of Part B – Developing and Adopting a Common, Statewide Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System (TQRIS) – of all 37 grant applications. By focusing on how states described their plans and intentions to implement the TQRIS absolute priority, we hope to not only identify trends and opportunities but to identify helpful next steps for funders, policy makers and the field as a whole.

A summary of grant applications has clear limitations. The reader must be reminded, therefore, that the information included in this Brief reflects what was written (not necessarily what has, or will be, implemented). To this end, state examples are illustrative. The intention is to provide the reader with a general sense of trends, along with a few concrete examples, rather than a comprehensive list of exactly which states proposed a specific intervention or policy reform.
A Framework for System Reform

Currently, most TQRIS are focused primarily on market-based early learning and development (ELD) programs -- typically licensed child care centers and family child care homes. Since the child care sector is the target market, current TQRIS standards, supports, and financial incentives tend to reflect the culture of, and tools used by, child care providers that receive funding from CCDF/TANF, parent fees, or a combination of the two. ELD programs that receive funding from Head Start, PreK, or early intervention are often able to participate in state TQRIS but the rating and improvement systems are not typically designed to include these funding standards or requirements. A review of RTT-ELC applications suggests a significant shift in approach. The RTT-ELC competition encouraged states to include all early learning and development programs in TQRIS, and many states not only took the challenge seriously but saw it as an opportunity for deep systemic reform. Even states that have been engaged in TQRIS for many years challenged themselves to reform their systems, rather than simply grow the status quo. The Kentucky proposal is a case in point:

[TQRIS] is a crucial element of our approach to improving children’s outcomes. We have more than 10 years of experience and lessons learned...but recognize that our current system is not yet at the level of inclusivity, integration and high standards required to catalyze change... Our plan is not to simply expand STARS but rather to re-conceptualize the approach...We are prepared to roll up our sleeves together—across cabinets, agencies and offices—to create the integrated TQRIS...unified by a set of high Program Standards aligned with what matters most to improve school readiness...

Higher Standards

Overall, applications suggest that states viewed the TQRIS priority as an opportunity to raise the bar on program quality rather than align to the lowest common denominator. Some examples include the following:

- KY proposed adding a BA degree requirement at the highest star level as well as data-driven instruments in instruction and family engagement training.
- NC will deepen TQRIS standards to include new curricular requirements, higher educational credentials at top star levels, and the addition of Head Start family engagement and cultural competence standards.
- NM, which has already incorporated level 1 and 2 standards into minimum licensing, proposed to continue to raise the licensing floor when 70% of providers reach a star level. They also proposed a new approach to TQRIS system standards and measures based on NM PreK.
Since OH’s pilot TQRIS currently includes high standards (e.g. degree requirements, aligned curricula, developmental screening, and so forth) efforts to create a cross-system approach in this state focused on strategic links to the child care licensing system, including aligned monitoring and data collection.

In addition to raising standards, states proposed adding new assessment tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the Program Administration Scale (PAS), the Family Strengthening Checklist, and others. New Mexico describes its intended focus on improving teaching practices this way:

_The new focus of the TQRIS is on children’s learning, with teachers becoming increasingly competent observers and planners of appropriate curriculum. Program assessment tools (e.g. the Environmental Rating Scales) that were previously used as high-stakes “ends” would now be used as a “means” for self-assessment within a continuous quality improvement process that is focused on children being ready for successful entry into kindergarten._

New Mexico is not alone in questioning continued use of assessment instruments like the early childhood environmental rating scales (ERS) as tools for TQRIS monitoring and TA. Noting that these tools were originally designed for research rather than monitoring, NC, DE and KY offered to develop and pilot-test a new program quality assessment tool designed specifically for use in a TQRIS. Additional ideas for strengthening teacher quality included:

- IL proposed intensive professional development for level 4 providers to raise instructional quality.

- VT proposed work on effective, systemic transition policies that can be applied across all ELD settings—schools, homes, and community-based organizations.

- Many states proposed expanded coaching and professional development opportunities for teachers and caregivers, often linked to CLASS or other assessment instruments.

Emphasizing the need for greater cultural competence and workforce diversity, numerous states (NC, CT, FL, IL, MN, NJ, WA and WI) proposed to develop training, materials and other TQRIS supports in multiple languages.
Child Assessment

Most states acknowledged the need to develop stronger links between TQRIS and child outcomes. To this end, quite a few states noted in their application that they intend to add a child assessment component to TQRIS standards. Some examples include:

- NC’s new curricular requirements will include assessment of children’s skills to guide instruction.
- NM proposed a new approach to TQRIS standards that includes a child observation/assessment curriculum planning process as well as a deeper focus on cultural competence and home visits.
- KY planned a competitive “Early Childhood Program of Excellence” award based on child outcomes, population served and innovative teaching strategies.
- WA revised its TQRIS standards to include a “Focal Child” selected by evaluators for deeper analysis of inputs and child outcomes. Additionally, they plan to align TQRIS with kindergarten assessment, home visiting and developmental screening.
- PA, whose TQRIS currently includes a child assessment component, planned to develop and implement a suite of child outcome reporting tools organized through a single framework used by all ELD programs and teachers—regardless of setting, auspice or funding stream.

Deeper work on child assessment, conducted by BUILD and the Chief State School Officers (CSSO), indicates that an increasing number of states are seeking to improve the cultural and linguistic appropriateness of the assessment instruments they use.

Aligned Monitoring and Technical Assistance

Many states viewed the TQRIS priority as a potential ‘carrot’ to push for aligned monitoring and technical assistance (TA) systems. For example:

- NC and OR, which are currently partnering with the federal government to pilot-test strategies for aligning monitoring across a range of early learning and development programs, made this work a cornerstone of their application.
KY, VT, IL, NM, NJ, RI, among others, proposed a review of the administrative and operational structure of current ‘silos’ or sub-systems (e.g. PreK, Head Start, CCDF subsidy, licensure, early intervention, and so forth) to identify cost-effective ways to administer QRIS so that staff time is used efficiently.

IL, KY, NM were particularly focused on creating a coordinated or integrated process for all funding streams so that programs that receive multiple funding streams are monitored only once.

NJ proposed statewide expansion of its pilot TQRIS (which includes the Preschool Teaching and Learning Standards and New Jersey Preschool Program Implementation Guidelines) and negotiated a Memorandum of Agreement with all State agencies that fund and monitor ELD programs, as well as a streamlined pathway for ELDs that currently meet Head Start, PreK or NAEYC accreditation standards and have high classroom quality using structured observation instruments.

HI and ME are seeking ways to use Head Start coaches and the Head Start T/TA system to help providers succeed in TQRIS.

Many states also noted that they intend to use web-based and/or automated systems to streamline administration and increase access to training as well as technical assistance tools and resources. States that specifically mentioned automated supports for TQRIS include FL, GA, MA, ME, MI, NY, OH.

**Focused TQRIS Funding and Supports**

Many RTT-ELC applications raised concerns that children with high-needs often reside in communities with few high-quality ELD programs. To address this concern, states proposed innovative strategies for targeting dollars to these ‘high need’ communities. Some called them “Intensified Communities” (DE) or “Transformation Zones” (NC); others (AR) did not assign specific names but planned to focus dollars, often using Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping to overlay the availability of 4 and 5 Star programs and the communities where large numbers of high-need children reside (IL and NM). Dollars would be targeted to build systemic capacity in areas where few higher quality programs exist. Additional strategies include the following:

CO and FL planned a Shared Services pilot, focused on ELDs that serve large numbers of high-need families, aimed at building capacity for sustainable, high-quality ELDs in target communities. NY proposed a similar approach, focused on rural, home-based providers.

OR proposed an Early Childhood Special Populations Coordinator for TQRIS to ensure that children with high-needs are able to access high-star ELDs as well as to engage organizations that serve children with high-needs.
• AR planned to require children who receive foster care vouchers to be enrolled in Star 3 or higher, and DE wants to train home visitors and SCHIP staff on the importance of TQRIS.

• NY and NJ intended to target support to community-based ELDs in poor performing school districts.

Financial Incentives
Although finance is a key component of system reform, only a handful of RTT-ELC proposals included innovative financing strategies. Many states noted that a cross-system, statewide TQRIS would make it possible to redirect existing resources to focus on higher-quality programs and high-needs families and the communities where they live. And most proposals included plans to offer tiered reimbursement and small quality grants linked to TQRIS. Additional strategies included the following:

• MD and OK proposed lower co-payments for subsidized families that select higher-quality ELDs.

• MN and NC will offer matching grants and incentives to public schools or faith-based ELDs that participate in TQRIS.

• MS proposed college savings accounts for income-eligible families who enroll children in higher quality ELDs.

• IL is currently piloting targeted grants to ELDs that enroll ‘hard to reach’ children and will also set-aside funding from Illinois Jobs Now! for ELD facility construction.

Challenges
Reforming long-standing systems is not easy, especially when resources are limited. Only 9 states received RTT-ELC funding and even these ‘winners’ realize that the additional funds are time-limited. A review of Section B underscores several key challenges, which are summarized below.

Raising the bar on quality for the system as a whole is difficult when access to financial resources is so uneven. There is a direct relationship between the financial resources available to an ELD program and its capacity to meet high-quality standards. Not surprisingly, most states indicated that they expected that ELDs with access to stable operating assistance (e.g. programs that receive funding from Head Start and state Prek) would be able to meet the higher standards, and some states (such as Ohio) made these programs the focus of their efforts. While bringing programs with Head Start and Prek funding into a statewide, aligned TQRIS is important, given that most poor children are served in market-based ELDs, it is equally important to focus on efforts that can help ‘level the playing field’ for market-based providers who typically do not have access to stable sources of third party funding. Unfortunately, very few states acknowledged this challenge. While most included plans for tiered child care reimbursement
rates and quality awards, states lacked a clear understanding of how their current or proposed financial awards relate to the actual cost of delivering services at each level of the TQRIS.

Experience suggests, and new cost modeling techniques confirm, that tiered reimbursement and quality awards almost never provide the level of resources needed to attain the highest level of quality. The Illinois proposal focused on this resource gap and proposed to analyze the cost of providing services at each level of their TQRIS. Based on this analysis, a series of funding models would be developed—aimed at incorporating a range of funding streams and revising reimbursement levels to calibrate more closely with operating costs. IL also planned to address a range of policy barriers that make it difficult to tap multiple funding sources and enroll children for a full day and year. The IL approach could serve as a roadmap for future technical assistance on TQRIS finance.

Strengthening access to financial resources also requires strategic capacity building. Large organizations like school districts or the Community Action Agencies that offer Head Start services typically have staffed departments responsible for fiscal management, fund development, human resources, quality improvement, family support and so forth. This internal, institutional capacity makes it possible to successfully compete for dollars and comply with funding standards. Smaller, market-based programs – who are often the primary service providers in communities where high-need children live – typically lack this capacity. The Colorado RTT-ELC proposal addressed this issue head-on, and described its logic model as “ensuring the best opportunities for healthy child development and school readiness by strategically supporting the people, programs and places with the highest needs.” The CO proposal expanded the federally-mandated focus on High-Need Children to include a focus on High-Need Programs and High-Need Communities with interventions aimed at all three.

In addition to targeting continuous program quality incentives to ‘high-need programs’, the CO proposal included plans for a series of culturally responsive community-based networks of center- and home-based providers who share staff to support quality improvement (e.g., a mentor teacher or quality coach might be shared by several small centers) and administrative functions (e.g., a single business office
could provide fiscal management, data collection and reporting for multiple sites). These Shared Service Alliances could be led by an existing entity, such as a strong Head Start agency, child development program, community-based Early Childhood Council or school district, or a group of child care programs could come together to create their own shared services hub.

**Engaging schools in TQRIS in a meaningful way is difficult.** Although states that license school-based ELDs will have an easier time, effectively including schools in TQRIS will be a challenge. The cultural and practice divides between ‘care’ and ‘education’ are deep-seated in many states, and the new cross-system approach to TQRIS directly challenges this dichotomy. About half of the states (AR, CO, DE, FL, GA, IL, KY, MA, MI, MS, MN, MO, NC, NM, OH, RI, VT, WA) proposed phasing in a TQRIS participation requirement for some or all school-based ELDs, most typically those that receive prekindergarten funding. As noted earlier, MN and NC proposed new grant programs or targeted technical assistance for school-based ELDs. And many states included plans for system-level planning teams aimed at engaging staff from State Departments of Education and Human Services in collaborative efforts to deepen public schools’ engagement in TQRIS. It is clear, however, that states will need to think strategically about how to craft TQRIS systems, supports and incentives that can successfully engage ELD programs sponsored by public schools.

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**Measuring and monitoring quality is complex and potentially very expensive.** As noted earlier, states are keenly aware that implementing a cross-system TQRIS can be expensive. As states seek to engage ELDs from multiple sectors in TQRIS there is a tendency to add complexity by increasing the number of indicators or tools used to measure compliance. Indeed, this review of RTT-ELC applications suggests that TQRIS are becoming more complex. In addition to higher educational credentials and curricular requirements, most states proposed adding more assessment instruments – such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Program Administrator Scale (PAS) – to their TQRIS, and quite a few also included the Family Strengthening Checklist and new cultural competence measures. While a case can be made for the value of each measure, there is a point at
which requirements and checklists become so onerous that they lose value and become simply another bureaucratic hurdle to leap. In addition to adding cost, multiple, detailed standards can sometimes result in over-prescribing the ‘right way’ to do something when there is legitimate room for variation. And, they can serve as a deterrent to participation in TQRIS, as providers shy away from what looks to them like a system that is too burdensome.

The challenge is to identify a few, meaningful measures that can apply to all ELD sectors. Focusing on a few measures will keep administrative costs to a minimum and also allow ELD program directors and staff time to focus on children and the freedom to try new ideas and approaches that deepen early learning. Additional strategies to keep TQRIS monitoring costs in check include: limiting on-site classroom assessment to higher quality levels (which is current practice in many states), maximizing automation so that compliance can be verified using data from existing sources (such as a professional development registry, child care licensing data base, and so forth), and coordinating monitoring so that ELDs funded by multiple entities are monitored only once. Further research on the efficacy of each approach, as well as technical assistance and peer-to-peer support on effective implementation, will be helpful.

**Information on effective TQRIS technical assistance and coaching is limited.** Most states support TA and/or coaching designed to help ELDs, and the practitioners they employ, improve program quality. While research to date has suggested that coaching is associated with quality improvements, there is not a body of knowledge regarding which types of TA or coaching strategies are most effective or how coaching features relate to specific outcomes in various programs. Meanwhile, some states are spending significant sums on TQRIS technical assistance and coaching, and as they move toward statewide, cross-sector implementation these costs could easily skyrocket. In short, strategic thinking regarding the scope, approach and targeting of TA is essential.

Review of RTT-ELC applications suggests that states are keenly aware of the need to carefully target supports such as training, technical assistance and coaching so that programs that either fail to comply with standards or are more likely to need support received priority attention. Strategies include making TA available ‘on demand’ and focusing individualized TA plans on ELDs most likely to benefit (rather than assuming every provider applying for TQRIS must be assigned a coach). The Oregon application used data from its Quality Indicators Project to target TQRIS supports and TA based on a “building blocks” approach. OH and GA proposed web-based TA modules. RI and DE intend to structure TA around centers or networks focused on specific types of providers. Similarly, DC planned to analyze data from monitoring visits and self-assessments to identify and focus on the top two technical assistance priorities each year. These approaches merit further inquiry.

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Evaluation must go deeper, to pinpoint effective quality improvement strategies and most receptive providers, rather than just validating the effectiveness of TQRIS. While every state described plans to evaluate their TQRIS, some mentioned the need to use research and evaluation to guide decision-making on a range of issues. For example, most states proposed adding new tools such as the PAS or CLASS to their TQRIS. Concerned about cost-effectiveness, CO proposed studying the pros and cons of adding these measures. Similarly, NE and OR planned to evaluate the impact of, and need for, TQRIS coaching. AR and WA proposed to evaluate the impact of TQRIS provider incentives and rewards. These efforts, taken collectively, are extremely valuable. Knowledge of what makes T/TA effective in different contexts, or which ELDs are most likely to benefit from which kinds of support, can help guide future policy and finance.

Applicants were also required to describe the extent to which changes in quality ratings were related to child outcomes—that is progress in children’s learning, development and school readiness. While all of the proposals included this goal in their evaluation plans, so many factors impact child outcomes—parental income and stability, community safety, health and nutrition, to name a few—that isolating the impact of a TQRIS will be challenging. Careful thought is needed into how to best measure these results and to account for the fact that high-needs children often attend multiple ELD programs at the same time or in a single year. Guidance from experts in evaluation and research, as well as a coordinated multi-state approach to measuring results, will benefit the field as a whole.

🌟 Next Steps

Funders and policy makers that work with states that did not ‘win’ the RTT-ELCC can take some important steps to keep up the momentum. Specific recommendations include the following:

- **Challenge thinking and keep the focus on system reform** – Writing the RTT-ELC application was an important planning process in itself and either led to a new focus or encouraged an existing focus on cross-sector early childhood system-building. This focus is key to success and state leaders should be encouraged to keep up the momentum in whatever ways they can. In some cases, cross-agency agreements (MOUs) can be forged that will not require new funding but could result in important changes in policy or practice. Or multiple government agencies could collaborate on funding solicitation (RFPs) or revisions to regulation, policy, rate-setting or accountability. An ‘idea book’ or web-page that lists ways states can keep the ball rolling without significant new dollars could be a helpful resource.

- **Promote cross-state collaborative thinking via small group discussions and information sharing** – State leaders and policy-makers rarely have the time and space to reflect on what they have done, explore new ideas, and learn from one another. Small, communities of practice aimed at making time and space for thoughtful
reflection could be helpful—especially with regard to some of the more vexing issues related to TQRIS such as:

- What makes TA or financial incentives effective?
- Do states need to monitor every program and every standard or are there a few effective proxies?
- What are the best ways to tap existing resources, such as the TA and monitoring dollars currently linked to funding streams such as Head Start, Pre-k or early intervention?
- How can we most effectively increase high-quality programs in very poor neighborhoods?
- How can we craft TQRIS standards that focus on reflective practice so that they encourage and support culturally diverse approaches to early learning, including dual language programs?

- **Support innovation** – The RTT-ELC challenged states to think outside the box and many stepped up to the plate and proposed innovative, new ideas. Through strategic leadership and grant-making, funders and policy makers can help to fuel this focus on innovation.

- **Acknowledge that exploring challenging questions is just as important as highlighting promising practice** – Sometimes the most valuable lessons come from initiatives or policies that go wrong, or that take many years to accomplish. And sometimes a really good idea cannot be replicated, although it may indeed be possible to tease out key principles that could be applied elsewhere. Yet conferences, webinars and publications tend to encourage a focus on ‘best practice’ and replication and are often limited to one-way presentations rather than engaged dialogue. To encourage deeper thinking, funders and policymakers could sponsor small meetings and discussions aimed at wrestling with persistent problems or unique interventions and research.

- **Challenge state leaders to think strategically about systems that can work for both market-based and government-sponsored early childhood programs** – A unique challenge for early care and education policy is that most services are market-based and parent tuition is, overall, still the largest source of revenue. While many ELDs that serve high-needs children receive significant revenue from public dollars in the form of CCDF or TANF vouchers, these programs still operate in the context of a tuition-based ‘parent choice’ market. TQRIS is a unique intervention that has the capacity to effectively impact both market-based and government-sponsored ELDs if it is structured to do so effectively. Effective TQRIS policy requires a deep understanding of ELD characteristics, customers and costs. Funders and policymakers
can help state leaders learn more about these factors as well as how to use this information to craft successful systems. A key first step is clarifying the cost of providing services at each level of the state’s TQRIS. Targeted technical assistance, aimed at helping states engage in this type of cost modeling, could be a helpful starting point.

• **Challenge state leaders to think critically about how race, ethnicity, culture, language and class limit participation in TQRIS** and what steps might be taken to promote equity and inclusion. Effectively reaching and serving all children, particularly those with high-needs, is a complex and multi-faceted problem. Careful attention must be paid to issues of race, ethnicity, culture, language and class — in TQRIS outreach, ELD institutional capacity, access to TQRIS resources, employment of TQRIS staff, professional development and reflective practice. Review of ELCC-RTT applications suggests that this is an area where additional work is needed.

• **Explore opportunities to share costs across states** — Unfortunately the US does not have national early care and education policy and finance; we have 50 state-based approaches. While each state may create its own system and structure, there are many elements in common. Thinking strategically about these common elements, and how they might inform national tools, resources, quality measures, support systems, and even monitoring structures, could be a helpful way to not only find efficiencies but move toward national norms. One example is the QRIS Cost Estimation Model (CEM), a web-based tool that was developed several years ago to help estimate the state cost of administering a TQRIS. States across the US have used this tool to guide policymaking. Crafting similar tools — such as one to model provider costs at each QRIS level—and developing protocols and/or guidance on aligning standards (especially as they relate to national efforts such as Head Start), data collection, rate-setting and monitoring could be helpful as well.

In summary, the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) applications submitted by all 37 states offer an opportunity to think more strategically about future policy, finance and technical assistance related to TQRIS. Even in tight fiscal times, this opportunity should not be missed.