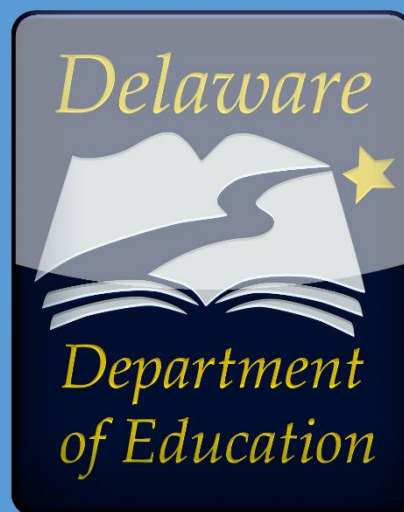


DELAWARE STARS FOR EARLY SUCCESS: REVISION REPORT 1



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Executive Summary

Delaware Stars for Early Success (Stars) is Delaware's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) administered by the Delaware Department of Education. A QRIS is a method to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education and school-age settings. The goal of Delaware Stars is to invest in participating programs to increase access to high-quality care for all of Delaware's children, especially those from low-income families.

Beginning December 2017, the Delaware Department of Education's Office of Early Learning (OEL) and a Stars revision committee solicited feedback from stakeholders on ways to improve Stars implementation. OEL and the committee gathered data from providers and field staff regarding Stars implementation. These results indicate the need for the following:

- Further alignment among Stars and the Office of Child Care Licensing
- More training, interaction with Stars staff
- A QRIS that embraces differences between in-home care and center-based care
- Increased flexibility in the standards
- Increased family engagement in Stars
- Additionally, stakeholders provided negative qualitative feedback on the use of Environmental Rating Scales as well as the use of tiered reimbursement as a tool for compliance.

Background

OEL is the state entity that manages Stars. The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) at the University of Delaware implements the program and handles day-to-day activities, including providing technical assistance, assessment and verification of Star levels. Stars has been in existence for more than 10 years, during which time the system has seen periods of rapid change and growth. Like other systems across the country, Stars has been shown to improve children's executive functioning and moderately increase growth in other domains. However, room for improvement is evident based on research, anecdotal data and the *Evaluation of Delaware Stars for Early Success* report.

The *Evaluation of Delaware Stars for Early Success* report was completed by the RAND Corporation in 2016. The purpose of this evaluation was to support Delaware in its efforts to design and implement an effective, robust system for measuring and reporting on the quality of early learning and care programs in home and center settings. The evaluation further aimed to inform efforts to improve the quality of programs in ways that are beneficial for participating children and their families. The evaluation of Stars provided independent, objective, and rigorous empirical evidence of the extent to which rating tiers reflect relevant differences in the quality of home- and center-based providers and documented providers' experience with technical assistance, financial supports, and other QRIS features.

OEL contracted with the RAND Corporation to conduct this independent evaluation of Stars from June 2013 until the report's release in 2016.

Final recommendations based on the RAND evaluation include:

- OEL should look beyond the findings of any one study for any particular QRIS and discern the broader findings with relevance for QRIS design and implementation.
- OEL should consider a streamlined rating system based on carefully selected measures of the dimensions of quality that matter most to Stars' ultimate goals.
- Providers are generally supportive of technical assistance, but there is room for improvement.
- There is opportunity for further marketing of Delaware Stars to families with young children.
- Improved data management is warranted (Karoly, Schwartz, Setodji, & Hass, 2016).

The Stars revision process began in December 2017 with the formation of a committee to guide it. The committee members were:

- Heidi Beck – executive director, New Directions Early Head Start
- Cindy Brown – education associate (Part B 619 coordinator), OEL
- Martha Buell – director, DIEEC
- Veronica Commodore – director of professional development, DIEEC
- Carmen Gallagher – education associate, OEL
- Caitlin Gleason – education associate, OEL
- Shebra Hall – training/education administrator, Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
- Rena Hallam – principal investigator, Stars
- Belvie Herbert – social service senior administrator, DHSS
- Kimberly Krzanowski – executive director, OEL
- Michelle Shaivitz – executive director, Delaware Association for the Education of Young Children

- Kristy Sheffler – director, Stars
- Elizabeth G. Timm – social services administrator, Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families (DSCYF)

Data Review

In order to garner feedback from multiple stakeholders across the state, OEL and the committee launched a process of gathering data from providers and field staff regarding Stars implementation. Data collection focused on topic areas including general feedback, standards, assessment and verification, financial incentives and family engagement. Data collection methods/resources include:

- Listening sessions/focus groups, conducted by the Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center;
- Community conversations, conducted by OEL and partners; and
- Survey of providers and stakeholders, conducted by the University of Delaware.

OEL gleaned guiding principles for the revision from the data collection process. They are:

1. The existing structure of Stars shows improvement in children's executive functioning;
2. Child outcomes are not the only indicator of quality;
3. Continuous quality improvement (CQI) must be reflected in all levels of Stars; and
4. Equity must be woven throughout the revised Stars.

Listening Sessions/Focus Groups

The Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center conducted focus groups throughout Delaware in June 2018. OEL staff conducted additional focus groups simultaneously. In all, more than 60 teachers, administrators, owners, and stakeholders participated. Topic areas included general perceptions of Stars, standards, assessment and verification practices, financial incentives, and family engagement.

According to Miskell, Nadiv, & Zabala, participants expressed a range of opinions about Stars (2018). Many described positive experiences, while some shared their specific frustrations. Participants noted that Stars helped focus the efforts of program staff and maintain a push for quality. Other participants mentioned that measures (specifically the Environmental Rating Scale) are disconnected from program attributes that drive quality, and that the timeline associated with the Stars assessment is too long and should be shortened and aligned with other programs. Additionally, providers report that Stars ratings do not take into consideration factors beyond their control, such as physical space. Finally, a theme emerged around the desire of participants to connect programs participating in Stars with one another, to provide these programs with support, clarity, and professional development, and to improve the overall quality of the Stars program. Final recommendations based on focus groups include:

- Increase opportunities for OEL to communicate with families regarding program quality;
- Increase opportunities for providers to communicate with one another;
- Increase support for providers to communicate with families; and
- Differentiate standards and evaluation for family child care from center-based child care.

Community Conversations

Early in 2018, OEL convened with teams at DHSS (specifically representatives of the state's child care subsidy program), DSCYF (specifically representatives of the state's Office of Child Care Licensing), and the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (specifically representatives of Stars and the professional development system) for a series of community conversations. The goal of community conversations was to engage around common issues in the pursuit of high quality early education. More than 100 participants participated.

While community conversations provided a forum for learning about multiple programs and agencies, information garnered about Stars is key to this report. Feedback about Stars was positive and focused primarily on financial incentives. Participants highlighted the importance of tiered reimbursement and its impact on providers' ability to serve low-income children (Shockley, 2018).

Survey of Providers and Stakeholders

Surveys were distributed to more than 11,000 individuals around the state to elicit perspectives of providers and stakeholders. Surveys included both Likert-type questions (ranging from one to five) and open-ended questions pertaining to experiences with the components of a QRIS (Standards, Accountability Measures, Provider Support, Financial Incentives, Parent Education). Surveys were available in English and Spanish.

Online surveys regarding perceptions of Delaware's QRIS were completed by 334 providers and 40 stakeholders and provide valuable information on perceptions of the five components of Delaware's QRIS. Results were similar for providers and stakeholders. Overall, respondents had high levels of regard for the QRIS, though there was variation across the five different components. The results, summarized, include:

- Providers and stakeholders find standards useful for guiding improvement efforts. They see value in requiring programs to meet certain standards to move to higher star levels but find it useful to allow programs flexibility in selecting additional standards to meet.
- Providers find value in the assessment and verification process and find it useful for the quality improvement of their programs.
- Providers and stakeholders overall find the training and technical assistance provided as part of Delaware's QRIS to be useful.
- Providers find the various types of financial incentives useful for improving and maintaining program quality.
- Respondents believe that families are not very familiar with Stars, have generally not asked about programs' ratings in Stars, and do not tend to enroll in programs because of participation in Stars (Sheffler, 2018).

Conclusions

The early childhood workforce and other stakeholder embrace the concept of a state-sponsored, cross-sector framework. They look for further alignment among Stars and the Office of Child Care Licensing. Additionally, they desire more interaction with both Stars staff and peers. While participation in data collection methods by family child care providers was limited, they overwhelmingly support a system that embraces and supports the differences between in-home care and center-based care.

The standards associated with Stars are useful for guiding the improvement efforts of providers. Furthermore, stakeholders value the coupling of flexibility with some required standards. It is important to note the positive relationship between Management and Administration and Qualifications and Professional Development standards and children's cognitive skills (Karoly, Schwartz, Setodji, & Hass, 2016).

While the assessment and verification processes are viewed as useful for improving quality, some measures are not supported widely by stakeholders. Specifically, the use of Environmental Rating Scales received significant negative qualitative feedback.

Providers highly value the training and technical assistance provided by Stars. In fact, they would like more frequent interaction with staff.

Stakeholders believe the financial incentives associated with Stars are useful for improving and maintaining program quality. However, they view the use of tiered reimbursement as a tool for compliance as counter-intuitive.

Finally, stakeholders indicate more effort is needed to engage families with Stars. Families are unfamiliar with the program and Star rating is not a major factor in their choice of child care program.

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