



## **Elevating Quality Rating and Improvement System Communications:**

How to Improve Outreach to and Engagement with  
Providers, Parents, Policymakers, and the Public



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you!

# Acknowledgments

Child Trends is grateful to the **Alliance for Early Success** and the **Irving Harris Foundation** for their generous support of this report.

We also extend our appreciation to the following individuals and organizations who participated in interviews for this report:

**California:** **Cecelia Fisher-Dahms**, Education Administrator, California Department of Education; **Lupe Jaime**, Director, Early Care and Education, Fresno County Office of Education; Isela Turner, Project Specialist, Fresno County Office of Education, Early Care and Education Department, Fresno County Early Stars

**Colorado:** **Debra Baca**, former Communications Specialist, Colorado Shines, Department of Health and Human Services; **Karen Enboden**, Manager, Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System, Colorado Office of Early Learning; **Kathryn V. Harris**, CEO and President, Qualistar Colorado

**Delaware:** **Evelyn Keating**, Program Manager, Delaware Office of Early Learning; **Nancy Widdoes**, Deputy Director, Delaware Office of Early Learning

**Georgia:** **Kristin Bernhard**, Deputy Commissioner for System Reform, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; **Pam Stevens**, Quality Rated Manager, Bright from the Start, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; **Reg Griffin**, Chief Communications Officer, Bright from the Start, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

**Minnesota:** **Nara Topp**, Quality Rating and Improvement System Specialist, Child Development Services, Minnesota Department of Human Services; **Maria Moeller**, Communications and Engagement Director, Child Care Aware of Minnesota; Erica Maas, Executive Director, Parent Aware for School Readiness

**New Hampshire:** **Ellen Wheatley**, Former Child Development Bureau Administrator, New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth and Families; **Kristin Booth**, Child Development Bureau Administrator, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services/New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth and Families/Child Development Bureau

**South Carolina:** **Leigh Bolick**, Director and South Carolina State Child Care Administrator, Division of Early Care and Education, South Carolina Department of Social Services

**Washington:** **Juliet Morrison Smith**, former Assistant Director, Quality Practice and Professional Growth Division, Washington Department of Early Learning

**Wisconsin:** **Katherine McGurk**, Director of the Bureau of Early Learning and Policy, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families; **Coral Manning**, Section Chief of Quality Initiatives, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

We are grateful for the valuable input shared by the individuals who reviewed and contributed to this report:

**Carol Emig**, President, Child Trends; **Nicole Forry**, Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends; **Kaylor Garcia**, Senior Research and Communications Analyst, Child Trends; **Terrance Hamm**, Digital Media Specialist, Child Trends; **Debi Mathias**, Director, QRIS National Learning Network; **Kelly Maxwell**, Co-Director for Early Childhood Development and Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends; **Kathryn Tout**, Co-Director for Early Childhood Development and Senior Research Scientist, Child Trends

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hello!

## We want to hear from you!

If you are working on communications in support of early childhood care and education and a state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, please send us your feedback on this report. We welcome all comments! Send emails to: [pr@childtrends.org](mailto:pr@childtrends.org). Thank you!

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Thirty-nine states have implemented quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) in support of early care and learning for children birth through age five. Twenty states have received funding in support of their QRIS from the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants jointly awarded by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. Since 2011, more than \$1 billion has been awarded to support state QRIS through RTT-ELC funding.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, the Child Care Development Fund Block Grant,<sup>2</sup> signed into law in November 2014, provides funding to support state QRIS. The grant stipulates that one of its purposes is “to encourage states to provide consumer education information to help parents make informed choices about child care services and to promote involvement by parents and family members in the development of their children in child care settings.”<sup>3</sup>

The success of state QRIS requires effective outreach and engagement with a range of stakeholders. These include family child care and center-based early care and education providers (including child care, Early Head Start, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten programs) that enroll in the QRIS and must invest time and resources to meet new quality standards. As states are successful in getting providers enrolled and quality rated, they have an interest in sharing this information with parents and families of young children so they can search for high-quality early learning providers discernable by the QRIS rating. Even in QRIS settings such as Head Start and public school pre-K programs, where parents and families may not have choices about where to enroll their children, QRIS communications affords states the opportunity to distribute resources to parents about supporting their children’s development.

## About this report

The purpose of this report is to provide a QRIS communications framework and examples that can be used to support and improve communications with providers, parents, partners, policymakers, and the public. This report is intended for state QRIS program administrators, communications staff, and consultants, funders, partner organizations, and policymakers.

The Child Trends strategic communications team conducted interviews with more than 20 individuals involved in QRIS communication programs in nine states. We also examined communications research, QRIS communications materials, and documentation of state-specific audience research, to inform our findings and recommendations. The states we selected for interviews were California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Minnesota, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin.

We selected these states because they offer a geographic and demographic mix, and are in varying stages of their QRIS implementation. All but New Hampshire and South Carolina received RTT-ELC funding. Combined, the seven states in this study that did receive RTT-ELC grants were awarded more than \$360 million in funding. Among the states we interviewed with RTT-ELC grants were some that have been able to allocate some of these funds to build websites, pay for communication staff and consultants, and/or fund public awareness campaigns. In some states, public-private partnerships have been formed to provide financial and other resources to support early childhood education and QRIS communications.

More than 6 million children birth through age five live in the states selected for this study—or about 25 percent of all children age five and under in the United States.<sup>4</sup> California is unique in that its QRIS is led through a regional consortium consisting of 30 counties, representing 93 percent of the state’s children ages zero through five.<sup>5</sup> For this report, we looked specifically at Fresno County, one of the 16 counties administering QRIS in the state.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care

<sup>3</sup> Child Care and Development Block Grant Act

<sup>4</sup> U. S. Census Bureau, 2014

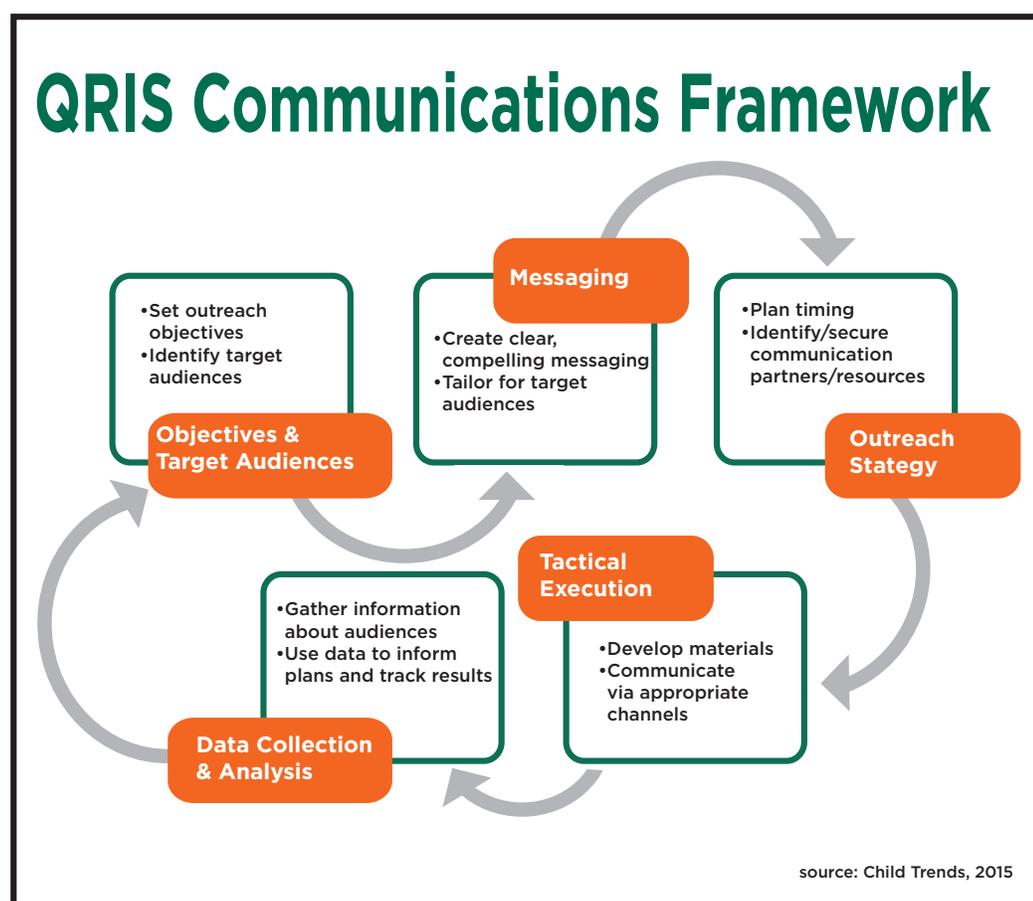
<sup>5</sup> California Department of Education, 2015

## The QRIS communications framework

Most of these states covered in this report have developed written communications plans to direct outreach strategies and tactics in support of their QRIS. We examined how the states we interviewed incorporated fundamental components of a communications framework widely used by communication professionals to guide planning (see Figure 1). These components include setting objectives, identifying target audiences, crafting messages, developing outreach strategies, conducting tactical execution, and collecting and analyzing data to inform all phases of the process.

Similar frameworks can be found throughout many disciplines, for example, in the continuous improvement cycle that has been referred to as the plan, do, study, act cycle.<sup>6</sup> Other strategic communications models refer to components of this same process as the planning phase, translating and packaging phase, strategic distribution phase, and follow-through and evaluation phase.<sup>7</sup> This framework is the basis for numerous strategic communications “how to” publications, including those published by the National Institutes of Health<sup>8</sup> and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation,<sup>9</sup> and the BUILD Initiative’s *A Practical Outreach Guide for a Quality Rating and Improvement System*.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1. QRIS communications framework**



<sup>6</sup> Deming, 1986

<sup>7</sup> Macoubrie & Harrison, 2013

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute, 2004

<sup>9</sup> Macoubrie & Harrison, 2013

<sup>10</sup> Swanson, 2013

# Communication recommendations by audience

QRIS communication programs play a critical role in engaging providers and informing parents, partners, policymakers, and the public about the need for and value of quality early care and education. Based on our communications research, interviews with state QRIS administrators and communication professionals, and review of QRIS communication strategies and materials, we provide a series of recommendations for communications with these audiences.

## 1 Providers

For QRIS, communications with providers is vital. First, it informs them about the quality rating process, how it will work, and what the benefits to them are—all steps in the recruitment process. Second, once providers enroll in a QRIS, ongoing communications keeps them informed about the process and can provide information and materials that can be used by the provider to promote their quality rating to their community and to the families they serve and seek to serve. Based on our interviews and review of communication materials for providers, we found a number of communication practices worth highlighting:

1. Use focus group interviews and/or surveys with providers (segmented by type of provider) to get feedback on target messages and outreach tactics.
2. Equip technical assistance providers, license inspectors, and others who routinely interact with child care and education providers to assist in recruiting and communicating about the state's QRIS.
3. Create a communications toolkit for rated providers with tips on how to promote this achievement, and materials such as sample letter to parents, news release, website, and window decals.
4. Allow providers to add content to their profile on the QRIS website.
5. Inform providers about marketing efforts to promote the QRIS website, and share campaign results with them, such as visits to the website, online searches conducted, and video views.

## 2 Parents and families

The parents and families of young children are the intended audiences for information about providers that have been quality rated. Websites and public awareness efforts targeting parents and families of young children can help them search for quality-rated providers for their young children and promote the benefits of quality early care and education. Among the states we interviewed, all have websites (or a section on a state agency site) promoting their QRIS, with most featuring searchable databases of rated providers.

As states with QRIS look to launch or expand their public awareness outreach to parents and families, we offer the following guidelines:

1. Use research to identify specific targets for these efforts, such as by age, geographic regions, race/ethnicity, income level, and media consumption.
2. Establish clear and measurable objectives, such as percent growth in website visits over a set period.
3. Create messages with easy-to-understand plain language, including defining what is meant by “quality” child care and education.
4. Consider testing campaign materials in focus group interviews with parents, and testing media strategies in one or more markets, before launching statewide.
5. Avoid statewide promotion of the QRIS website if provider participation is low statewide or in many communities, instead promoting the importance of quality early care and education.
6. Identify strategies to promote the QRIS website through word-of-mouth, since it the most common way parents get information to make child care and education decisions.

7. Evaluate return on investment for paid media, especially digital media options such as search and online ads, as this can shape future campaigns.
8. Use Google AdWords and Analytics to understand what parents search for, how many search terms they use, and other behaviors to guide website refinements.
9. Develop materials and outreach strategies to reflect the cultural and language diversity of the target audiences.
10. Take advantage of low-cost, high-traffic social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

### 3 Policymakers

A state's policy audience will typically include the governor and cabinet members, state legislators, city and county officials, and advocacy and non-profit organizations. Each of these audiences should have an interest in ensuring the state's youngest children are well cared for and educated during those important developmental years before kindergarten starts. We found in our interviews that there are varying factors that influence the strategy and extent of communications to policymakers in support of QRIS.

For those QRIS communication programs that are targeting policymakers, we found a number of practices worth sharing:

1. Report regularly to policymakers about QRIS provider participation, and public awareness and engagement activities with parents and families.
2. Arrange for state officials and legislators to visit high-quality providers.
3. Develop fact sheets or other handouts to provide to state officials and legislators, about the state's QRIS and what is meant by quality care and education.
4. Engage the governor and other administration officials in promoting the state's branded QRIS to parents and families.
5. Share provider participation and quality-rating achievements with local legislators.
6. Work closely with early childhood care and education organizations, business groups, and others to promote quality early care and education.

### 4 Partners

Partner organizations play critical roles in aspects of state QRIS that government employees may either be unable or not best equipped to undertake. States rely on these strategic collaborative relationships for multiple purposes. In addition to partners' playing an important role in such areas as technical assistance, fundraising, and research and evaluations, partners also support strategic communications aimed at promoting the program among stakeholders.

Here are some tips for what to consider when looking for communications partners:

1. Seek partners who can secure funding or in-kind support for communications activities and campaigns.
2. Build partnerships with community and state opinion leaders.
3. Consider the benefits of creating an umbrella partner organization to lead QRIS communications.
4. Work with local and/or targeted partners within a state; for example, you may choose to work with health care providers serving parents and families.

### 5 Public

The public is the broadest audience for QRIS communications. This includes other people who have an interest and stake in quality early child care and education in their communities and states. While the k-12 education community, business leaders, community organizations, faith-based groups, nonprofits serving children, youth, and low-income families are some of the more important segments within this broad definition of the public, it also encompasses all adults in that they may share what they learn with other interested adults. The public is reached through mass media, and increasingly, through social media.

Here are some considerations for communicating with the public about QRIS:

1. Determine which messages are most important to convey to the public about the state's QRIS and its role in supporting high-quality care and education for young children.
2. Identify target audiences within the broader public that are most important to reach, such as business leaders, educators, and staff of community organizations.
3. Develop an earned-media strategy to establish ongoing communication with reporters covering education, parenting, and children's issues in the state.
4. Track public opinion survey data on early childhood education policy issues, to gauge public sentiment.

As many states are in the early stages of their QRIS communications, this report can inform future efforts and encourage information sharing and further discussion among all states working on improving the quality of early care and education for their young children.

Beyond this, the QRIS compendium website (<http://qriscompendium.org/>) and the ongoing information sharing facilitated by the QRIS Learning Network and the BUILD Initiative are valuable ways to stay informed.



## Chapter I. Introduction

Thirty-nine states have implemented quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) in support of early care and learning for children birth through age five. Twenty states have received funding in support of their QRIS from the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants jointly awarded by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. Since 2011, more than \$1 billion has been awarded to support state QRIS through RTT-ELC funding.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the Child Care Development Fund Block Grant,<sup>12</sup> signed into law in November 2014, provides funding to support state QRIS. The grant stipulates that one of its purposes is “to encourage states to provide consumer education information to help parents make informed choices about child care services and to promote involvement by parents and family members in the development of their children in child care settings.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 2015

<sup>12</sup> Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care

<sup>13</sup> Child Care and Development Block Grant Act

## Overview of the report

The Child Trends strategic communications team conducted interviews with more than 20 individuals involved in QRIS communication programs in nine states. The states we selected for interviews were California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Minnesota, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin.

We selected these states because they offer a geographic and demographic mix, and are in varying stages of their QRIS implementation. All but New Hampshire and South Carolina received RTT-ELC funding. Combined, the seven states in this study that did receive RTT-ELC grants were awarded more than \$360 million in funding. Among the states we interviewed with RTT-ELC grants were some that have been able to allocate some of these funds to build websites, pay for communication staff and consultants, and/or fund public awareness campaigns. In some states, public-private partnerships have been formed to provide financial and other resources to support early childhood education and QRIS communications.



More than 6 million children birth through age five live in the states selected for this study—or about 25 percent of all children age five and under in the United States.<sup>14</sup> California is unique in that its QRIS is led through a regional consortium consisting of 30 counties, representing 93 percent of the state's children ages zero through five.<sup>15</sup> For this report, we looked specifically at Fresno County, one of the 16 counties administering QRIS in the state. It is also the first county in California to launch its QRIS website for providers, parents, and the public. See Table 1 at the end of this chapter for an overview of the state QRIS included in this report.

<sup>14</sup> U. S. Census Bureau, 2014

<sup>15</sup> California Department of Education, 2015

We conducted 45- to 60-minute interviews with one or more QRIS program administrators and communicators in each state, examined their publicly-available communications materials, websites, and social media platforms, reviewed marketing plans when made available to us, and reviewed communications research to inform our findings and recommendations. In some states we also talked with representatives from partner organizations. We had follow-up conversations and contact with state QRIS administrators to clarify and verify information gathered from the initial interviews.

We envisioned this report as an opportunity to learn about current practices and trends in QRIS communications and to offer recommendations for best practices based on research and our perspectives as communications professionals. We examined the role of communications in informing, influencing, and interacting with five key stakeholder audiences critical to the success and sustainability of QRIS. These audiences are detailed further in chapter two.

Each chapter consists of an overview of existing practices we learned about during interviews with state QRIS administrators and partner organizations, and from our review of QRIS websites and social media profiles, research literature, and other sources. We also drew on our own collective communications expertise to make further recommendations.

### The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** introduces a QRIS communications framework that can be used to guide states in developing and executing their strategic communications plans, and outlines the resources states are working with when it comes to QRIS communications.
- **Chapter 3** details how the states we included are developing and implementing strategies to better engage with providers. We also share our insights on this process.
- **Chapter 4** examines what we know about how parents of young children search for care, what they look for in choosing care and education providers, developing messages to reach them, and communication strategies to inform them about QRIS and what they can do to support their child's early development.
- **Chapter 5** offers examples of how QRIS communicators have reached out to policymakers to garner support, and how they have asked policymakers to engage in outreach themselves.
- **Chapter 6** includes tips for identifying potential communications partners, and coordinating work with them.
- **Chapter 7** considers how to raise general public awareness and support of early care and education and QRIS.

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## The audience for this report

This report is intended for state and regional QRIS administrators, communications professionals, and public relations, marketing, and digital media firms working to plan, execute, manage, and evaluate their QRIS communications and public awareness programs. We hope this report will:

- offer a snapshot of the state of QRIS communications,
- serve as a communications reference guide for professionals working on state QRIS,
- provide insight on lessons learned about communications, to help shape future efforts, and
- spark new dialogue and collaboration among the states related to using communications to achieve their QRIS goals.

Table 1. Overview of quality rating and improvement systems in interviewed states

State	QRIS brand	Year started	Amount of RTT/ELC funding (in millions) <sup>i</sup>	Provider enrollment (as of May 2015)	Notes
California	None state-wide	2012	\$53.4	2,221 providers serving 69,040 children (1,569 centers and 652 family child homes)	Led at state level by California Department of Education. Voluntary five-tiered rating system administered regionally by organizations in 16 counties that together cover 93% of children being served by providers in the state.
Colorado	Colorado Shines	2014	\$44.8	4,530 providers, of which 827 have reached levels 2-4	Led by Colorado Health and Human Services. Five-level rating system with mandatory participation as part of provider licensing.
Delaware	Delaware Stars	2007	\$49.8	551 programs (including 76% of birth to 5 early childhood education programs; 25% of family child care programs; 43% of large family child care programs; and 49% of school-age programs)	Led by the Delaware Department of Education and the Delaware Office of Early Learning. Voluntary five-level rating system.
Georgia	Quality Rated	2011	\$51.7	2,287 providers enrolled	Led by Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning. Voluntary three-tier system with financial incentives offered to provider participants, funded through outside partner organizations.
New Hampshire	Licensed Plus (level)	2005	None	144 Licensed Plus level providers	Led by New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. Voluntary three-level system.
Minnesota	Parent Aware	2007	\$44.8	As of December 31, 2014, Minnesota had 1,892 rated programs (19% of eligible providers) with 74% of the rated programs at the 3- or 4-star level.	Led by the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Voluntary four-level system with technical assistance financial incentives offered to provider participants.

State	QRIS brand	Year started	Amount of RTT/ELC funding (in millions) <sup>i</sup>	Provider enrollment (as of May 2015)	Notes
South Carolina	ABC Quality Program	2007	None	1,393 providers (46% of regulated providers and about 60% of licensed centers)	Led by South Carolina Department of Social Services, Division of Early Care and Education. Voluntary five-level system. Providers receiving Child Care Development Fund subsidies required to participate.
Washington	Early Achievers	2012	\$60	2,745 rated providers serving 72,737 children (695 are at levels 2-5)	Led by Washington Department of Early Learning. Voluntary system with five levels. Participating providers are offered free training and technical assistance and can qualify for scholarships for additional education.
Wisconsin	YoungStar	2010	\$34	4,300 programs rated (80% of regulated providers, 53% are 3 star or higher)	Led by Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. Voluntary unless provider is receiving subsidies from the Wisconsin Shares program.

<sup>i</sup> QRIS Compendium; U.S. Department of Education, 2015

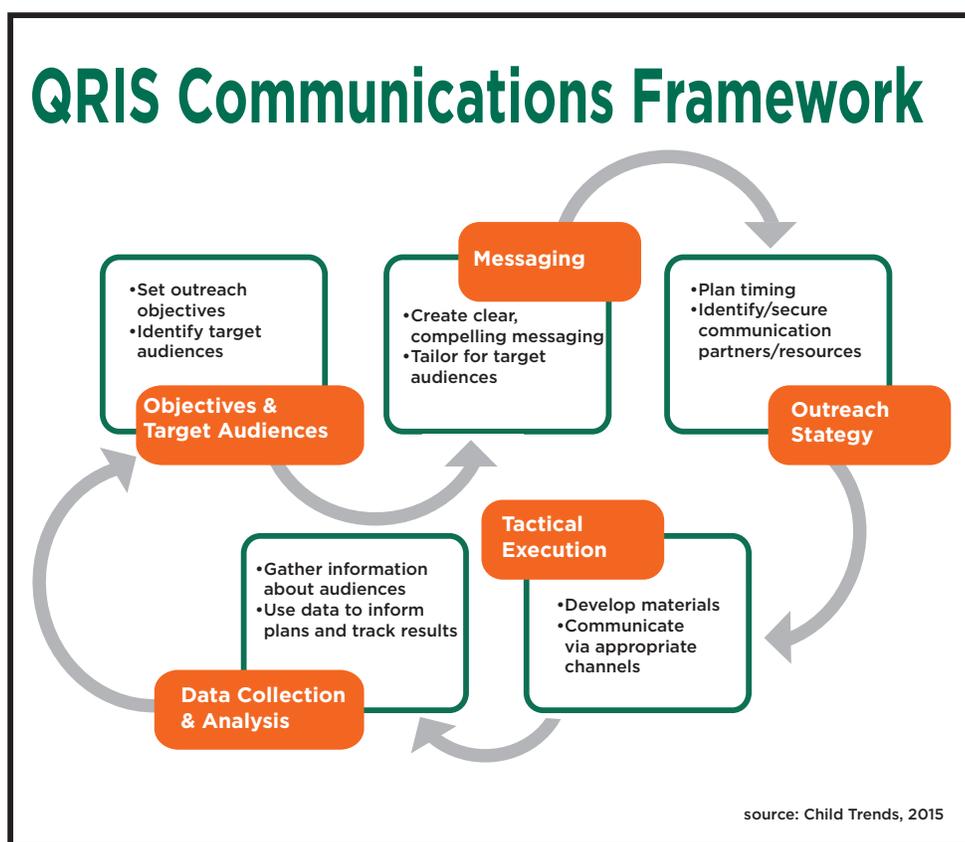
# Chapter 2: Communications Framework and Infrastructure

All the states we interviewed have developed and implemented communications programs in support of their QRIS. How states employ communication strategies and best practices, as well as their level of activity, depends on various factors including the maturity of their QRIS, their current priorities, and funding and other resources allocated for communications.

## The communications framework

Most of these states covered in this report have developed written communications plans to direct outreach strategies and tactics in support of their QRIS. We examined how the states we interviewed incorporated fundamental components of a communications framework widely used by communication professionals to guide planning (see Figure 1). These components include setting objectives, identifying target audiences, crafting messages, developing outreach strategies, conducting tactical execution, and collecting and analyzing data to inform all phases of the process.

**Figure 1. QRIS communications framework**



Similar frameworks can be found throughout many disciplines, for example, in the continuous improvement cycle that has been referred to as the plan, do, study, act cycle.<sup>16</sup> Other strategic communications models refer to components of this same process as the planning phase, translating and packaging phase, strategic

<sup>16</sup> Deming, 1986

distribution phase, and follow-through and evaluation phase.<sup>17</sup> This framework is the basis for numerous strategic communications “how to” publications, including those published by the National Institutes of Health<sup>18</sup> and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’s Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation,<sup>19</sup> and the BUILD Initiative’s *A Practical Outreach Guide for a Quality Rating and Improvement System*.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the chapters that follow, we detail the ways states have employed the strategies of the QRIS communications framework to guide their communications with providers, parents, policymakers, partners, and the public.

### Objectives and target audiences

Any communications strategy should include objectives—both high-level objectives and specific, measurable objectives. Objectives will vary by the intended audience (for example, providers, parents, or policymakers), and should be measurable over a set time frame such as six or 12 months. These communication objectives should support the overall goals of the state’s strategic QRIS plan. Below are examples of a high-level objectives and measurable objectives for communications with parents and providers.

- **High-level objective:** Assist parents and families in their search for quality child care and early education programs.
  - **Measurable objective:** Over a 12-month period, increase by 30 percent the number of people who search the provider database on the QRIS website.
- **High-level objective:** Increase providers’ knowledge about the benefits of participation in QRIS.
  - **Measurable objective:** Produce a three-minute video featuring providers, describing how they have benefitted from participating in QRIS. Show the video at all regional provider meetings in 2016 and feature the video on the QRIS website section for providers.

In the chapters that follow, we provide other examples of objectives, as well as some actually used by the states we interviewed for this report. For setting communication objectives, we recommend a collaborative process that includes QRIS communications staff, marketing consultants, QRIS administrators, and partner organizations involved in QRIS communications efforts.

### The audiences for a QRIS communications effort may include the following:

- **Providers**—These are the child care centers, Head Start, school- or center-based pre-K, and family child care professionals caring for and educating infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For QRIS, communications with providers is important and requires engagement between providers and the QRIS implementation team. First, it informs providers about what the quality-rating process is, how it will work, and what the benefits to them are—all pertaining to the recruitment process. Second, once providers enroll in a QRIS, ongoing communications keeps them informed about the process of continuing to improve their program quality and allows them to share their feedback and successes.
- **Parents**—The parent(s) and families of young children are intended audiences for information about early childhood development and why and how to search for quality child care and education providers. Websites and public awareness campaigns can help inform parents and families about these messages and resources.
- **Policymakers**—QRIS are often, but not always, administered by state agencies. States, through various agencies, also administer federal- and state-funded child care and preschool programs for children from low-income families. A state’s policy audience will typically include the following individuals and organizations: the governor and his or her cabinet members, state legislators, city and county officials, and staff of advocacy and non-profit organizations. Each of these groups should have an interest in ensuring the state’s youngest children are well cared for and educated during the important developmental years before kindergarten starts.

<sup>17</sup> Macoubrie & Harrison, 2013

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute, 2004

<sup>19</sup> Macoubrie & Harrison, 2013

<sup>20</sup> Swanson, 2013

- **Partners**—QRIS administrators partner with child care resource and referral agencies, foundations, business and community organizations, early childhood education advocates, and others to increase QRIS participation levels among providers and build awareness of these rated providers among parents and other audiences. These partners can add valuable resources, input, and feedback on early childhood education and QRIS communication programs.
- **Public**—We consider the broad public audience for QRIS communications to consist of people who may not yet have children or who have young grandchildren, individuals with an interest in early care and education issues for political, economic, and or educational reasons, and informal community leaders. Reaching the general public is important for word-of-mouth communication about QRIS to other potential audiences. We view the news media as an important conduit in reaching the public at large.

### Messaging

Messaging refers to the language developed to communicate with a target audience. Effective messaging is a set of statements that prompt targeted audiences to take a desired action. Rebecca Leet, author of *Message Matters*,<sup>21</sup> writes that strategic messages yield three results:

1. They capture the attention of the targeted audience.
2. They drive conversation with that audience.
3. They result in action that both the organization and the individual want.

To capture the attention of the targeted audience, communicators must first understand this audience. This involves gathering information about the audience, such as who they are, where they are located, and what they know and think about the desired action. This information can be gathered from surveys, through focus group interviews, and by reviewing other research. From this audience analysis, communicators shape the message that will drive conversation and ultimately lead to the desired action. It is important to note that effective messaging is a two-way conversation. Communicators should solicit frequent feedback from audience members through surveys, focus group sessions, and direct contact.

A message consists of language and of the materials used to communicate that language, such as content on a website, a brochure, a conference presentation, or a TV or radio ad. We recommend testing the potential message through either formal or informal focus group discussions with members of the target audience, to ensure the message resonates and is likely to result in the desired action. These focus groups provide valuable input for refining a message before widespread communication outreach.

Throughout each section of this report, we provide examples of messages developed by states to reach various audiences important to the success of their QRIS, as well as how states are using focus groups to test messages.

### Outreach strategy and tactical execution

The outreach strategy and its execution will depend on local demographics of the intended audience and the resources available to QRIS administrators. The outreach strategy should be part of the written QRIS communications plan. It includes the strategies and tactics developed to achieve the objectives set for each target audience in the plan. For example, the outreach strategy and tactics for reaching and engaging with providers will be different than those for parents and families. Providers can be reached more directly, through personal contact, e-newsletters, etc. Reaching parents and families of young children to promote QRIS requires a broader approach that encompasses not only word-of-mouth communications, in-person outreach, and website content and visibility, but also social media, TV or radio promotional messages, and public relations to gain coverage in media outlets. The funding available to state QRIS communications will dictate the extent and duration of many of these activities.

The building of a brand takes time. We believe this will be the case with the QRIS brands states have established for the purpose of promoting their QRIS to parents and families of young children. It is important to note that there is a constant turnover of this target audience as children are born into or age out of the target group. This points to the need for sustained branding and marketing efforts over many years.

<sup>21</sup> 2007

## Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis involves gathering and analyzing information from audience feedback such as through surveys, focus group interviews, website analytics, advertising campaign results, and media coverage. Data collection and analysis should happen throughout all stages of the planning and implementation of a communications plan.

For example, surveys with providers can be used to gauge their opinions on messaging or specific communication materials such as an e-newsletter, video, or website. Focus groups with parents to test planned promotional materials can lead to important refinements before launching an expensive marketing campaign. Often, before embarking on a marketing campaign, the target audience is surveyed to establish a benchmark awareness level. The same target audience is then surveyed at the conclusion of the campaign to measure awareness levels to evaluate the success of the effort. Communication professionals can also track metrics such as website visits, searches conducted, social media engagement, and advertising cost per website click generated. All of this information is collected and analyzed to measure results and to inform future communication efforts.

Throughout this report, we provide examples of how states are using data collection and analysis to shape their QRIS communication efforts and make modifications and enhancements for continual improvement.

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## Infrastructure supporting QRIS communications

Typically, effective communications for a statewide initiative would require at least one full-time communications professional who can develop a communications plan, establish a budget, manage contracts with vendors, create communication materials, organize data collection, and report on results. States with limited staffing might also contract the role of the communications director to an outside vendor. A vendor could be a sole communications practitioner, a small communications or marketing firm, or a larger firm with access to even greater resources. There can be pros and cons to each option based on the experience and capabilities of vendor, and costs associated with the vendor options.

We found about half of the states we interviewed have one or more communications professionals supporting their QRIS either in a full-time role or as part of their responsibilities for the department housing the QRIS. In the other states, communications is coordinated by the QRIS program administrators. A majority of the states we interviewed have enlisted communications consultants, public relations or marketing firms, or other organizations to help plan and execute their communications in support of QRIS.

## Funding

The QRIS Compendium<sup>22</sup> has published a state-by-state table including how much funding is being allocated to public awareness activities in support of QRIS, and the source of the funding, such as from state set-asides, RTT-ELC grants, and/or public-private partnerships. Some of the states included in our report are the ones which have allocated the most for public awareness activities. These include Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, South Carolina, and Washington.

How should a state determine the appropriate level of funding for these activities? We recommend that state QRIS administrators and their communications teams work with outside marketing consultants to establish budgets for public awareness campaigns based on similar statewide efforts. These consultants can determine the costs for various paid and earned media strategies aimed at raising awareness levels and driving traffic to a website.

A prudent approach would be to test the campaign in a set geographic market to evaluate its results before funding a full statewide campaign. This test could be used to evaluate the cost effectiveness of various mediums such as print, radio, TV, outdoor, online ads, etc. In chapter four, we share information from Wisconsin about the results of their spring 2015 marketing campaign.

Below is a table that summarizes the communications planning, staffing, and funding of the states interviewed for this report.

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<sup>22</sup> QRIS Compendium

**Table 2: QRIS communications planning, staffing, and funding, by state**

State	Written communications plan	Full-time communications staff	Use communication consultants/agencies	Communications budget
California—Fresno County	No	No	No	Minimal
Colorado	Yes	Yes. Communications Specialist	Yes	\$700,000 (2 years)
Delaware	Yes	Yes. Director of Communications Office of Early Learning	Yes	\$350,000
Georgia	Yes	Yes. System Reform Communications Specialist, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning	Yes	\$1.2 million (2 years) <sup>ii</sup>
New Hampshire	No	No	No	Minimal
Minnesota	Yes	No <sup>i</sup>	Yes	\$500,000 <sup>ii</sup> (per year through 2016)
South Carolina	Yes	Yes. Outreach Director	Yes	\$600,000 <sup>ii</sup>
Washington	Yes	Yes, Communications Manager	Yes	\$200,000
Wisconsin	Yes	No	Yes	\$400,000 (2 years)

<sup>i</sup> While there are no full-time communications staff working for the state QRIS, the non-profit Parent Aware of School Readiness (PASR) is responsible for communicating with the public on QRIS and they have communications staff.

<sup>ii</sup>Includes funding from foundations and other non-governmental sources.



## Chapter 3: Providers

There are a variety of settings and sectors where young children are cared for and educated. These include home or center-based settings and sectors such as Head Start, child care, school-based pre-K (public and charter), and preschools. Which sectors are included in a QRIS will vary.

Recruiting, enrolling, and engaging early care and education providers are key strategic activities for a state QRIS. Communications plays an important role in supporting these activities.

This section delves deeper in the communication messages, strategies, and tactics being deployed to enroll and engage providers in QRIS. It is organized by the stages of the QRIS communications framework:

- setting objectives and identifying target audiences,
- crafting messages,
- developing outreach strategies,
- conducting tactical execution, and
- collecting and analyzing data.

### Setting objectives for providers

QRIS staff in each state will set their own communication objectives for outreach to providers, based on factors such as the current level of awareness and participation among providers (both family and center-based providers) and specific challenges. Among the states we interviewed, a majority reported that enrollment of family child care providers lagged behind the level of center-based providers. If they are seeking to increase enrollment of family care providers, states may set specific objectives for communications to that audience, such as:

- produce and distribute and distribute a monthly e-newsletter targeted to family providers, generating an average monthly open rate (the percentage of subscribers who open the email) of 25-30 percent;

- recruit six family providers to serve as ambassadors to tell the stories of how their involvement with QRIS has helped them in their work, and publish these as case studies on the QRIS website; and
- hold quarterly Q&A webinars for family care providers to learn more about the QRIS, with a goal of 400 providers participating over the course of 12 months.

In other cases, a state might want to set communication objectives to support efforts to increase the percentage of providers who take steps to move beyond the first level of the QRIS. Of course, there are a number of factors other than communications that would influence this percentage. The point is that communication objectives should be aligned with the overall strategic plan for provider enrollment and participation in the state's QRIS.

## Messaging to providers

A range of messages are used to gain provider interest in enrolling in QRIS and working to achieve the highest ratings. How well a message resonates may depend on the appeal of the incentives, the business conditions of the provider, the competitiveness of the provider market, the level of personal communication and technical assistance (TA) offered to the provider, and the provider's personal situation. For example, if a provider is about to retire or work in a different setting, she is unlikely to invest time in the professional development aspects of the QRIS. Similarly, if a provider already has an established base of enrollment, there may be less incentive to participate in a voluntary QRIS.

**The states we interviewed primarily focused their messaging to providers on one or more of these three areas:**

- **Financial incentives**—Among the states we interviewed, some offered as much as \$5,000 in funding for providers to use for such things as supplies, playground equipment, and professional development courses. How well messages about incentives resonate will depend on the package of incentives and the individual situation of the provider. In New Hampshire, providers who achieve higher levels in their rating system are eligible for higher levels of reimbursement. According to officials in that state, the financial incentive message resonates well and has helped build enrollment.
- **Professional development**—States are offering providers an opportunity to gain new knowledge, skills, and credentials that will make them more successful in their jobs and careers. This message appeals to the individual who wants to improve professional credentials and sees the long-term advantage for career growth. But, this message would not resonate as well with providers who do not see themselves in the field long-term. Here is the language used on Washington's Early Achievers QRIS website:<sup>23</sup>

*"Early Achievers, Washington's voluntary quality rating and improvement system, gives participating child care professionals free access to coaching, professional development and a tangible way to demonstrate their commitment to providing quality care and education for young children."*

- **Higher-quality learning program**—Some states are messaging QRIS as a chance to improve the developmental and education setting for the children in the provider's care. Here is an example from Delaware:<sup>24</sup>

*"Delaware Stars helps early learning programs shine in quality and helps programs that join Stars let families and the communities they serve know about their commitment to high quality early learning for young children. Through Stars, programs prepare young children for success in school and in life!"*

The states included in this study often use a combination of messages in communicating with providers about their QRIS. For example, in Georgia's Quality Rated communication materials<sup>25</sup> for providers, they incorporate all three messages (financial incentives, professional development, and higher-quality learning):

<sup>23</sup> Washington State Department of Early Learning

<sup>24</sup> Delaware Office of Early Learning

<sup>25</sup> Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

*“Programs that participate in Quality Rated demonstrate a commitment to higher early care and education standards than those required. This alone can support a program’s marketing efforts. Participation in Quality Rated also helps a program gain access to free technical assistance, training, enhancement grants, and Quality Rated bonus packages.”*

## Outreach strategies and tactical execution

Just as communications objectives and messaging must be aligned with the state’s strategic plan for provider enrollment and participation, so to must the strategies and tactics chosen to support these efforts.

When it comes to outreach with providers, the states we interviewed place a heavy emphasis on the personal contact their technical assistance (TA) partners have with providers and the role they can play in the communications to recruit and engage providers in the QRIS. We believe this personal contact with providers—whether through TA, presentations at provider events, and webinars with providers—is a sound strategic approach. As a source in California reported, “the Consortia [of QRIS administrators in California] learned, above all, relationships drive recruitment, retention, and commitment to quality improvement.”<sup>26</sup> States may also consider partnering with their family child care associations as one strategy for reaching providers.

Georgia is an interesting case study of how communications supported their successful provider enrollment campaign.

### Case study: How Georgia overcame a slow start to provider enrollment

Between October 2013 and September 2014, only 210 providers enrolled in Georgia’s Quality Rated QRIS. The state, which has a voluntary QRIS, needed to enroll about 420 more providers to meet its recruiting target of 1,775 Quality Rated providers by December 2014 as stated in its RTT-ELC grant application. They decided that they needed to significantly increase awareness of Quality Rated QRIS among providers.

To do this, they developed new communication materials to promote Quality Rated to providers and began to cross-train their child care services consultants on how to “sell” Quality Rated. This training covered helping a provider complete a Quality Rated application, talking about the incentives and rewards available to providers, and equipping them with “leave behind” brochures. They also set up rewards for consultants who assisted in securing a new Quality Rated application 10 business days after a licensing visit. Weekly reports were sent to these consultants to keep them informed of progress with Quality Rated applications.

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning attributes 200 new applications directly to the role of the consultants. Since launching this new initiative in September 2014, the state met its enrollment target and as of June 2015, has nearly 2,300 providers enrolled.



<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 2013

Large states such as California, Colorado, and Washington rely on regional approaches to engage and communicate with providers in one-on-one and group settings about their respective QRIS. In California, there are 16 regional QRIS, each with its own branding and marketing to providers. Fresno County's regional QRIS brand is Early Stars. Marketing and communication is planned and managed by regional administrators and their partner organizations, such as First 5 county commissions (the state-funded early childhood organizations) for each region.

In Colorado, another large state, there are 31 regional districts. In each of these districts, regional leaders support provider recruitment and communications through direct outreach at meetings and trainings, and in personal visits. Washington, another geographically large state, has 10 Early Learning Coalitions across the state. Representatives from these coalitions promote its Early Achievers QRIS at provider events and in its interactions with providers.

### Web content targeted to providers

While most QRIS websites we reviewed have sections clearly marked as relevant to providers, sites have different strengths when it comes to their utility for providers. Having information that is easily accessible and understandable will make the system more transparent and ideally increase support for and participation in it.

#### For website sections targeted to providers, we suggest including these key elements:

- a jargon-free definition of QRIS and a description of its purpose,
- an explanation of how programs are rated,
- an explanation of the benefits of participation for providers, and any potential costs (financial or otherwise),
- an explanation of the steps providers must take to participate, and
- resources for improving a rating.

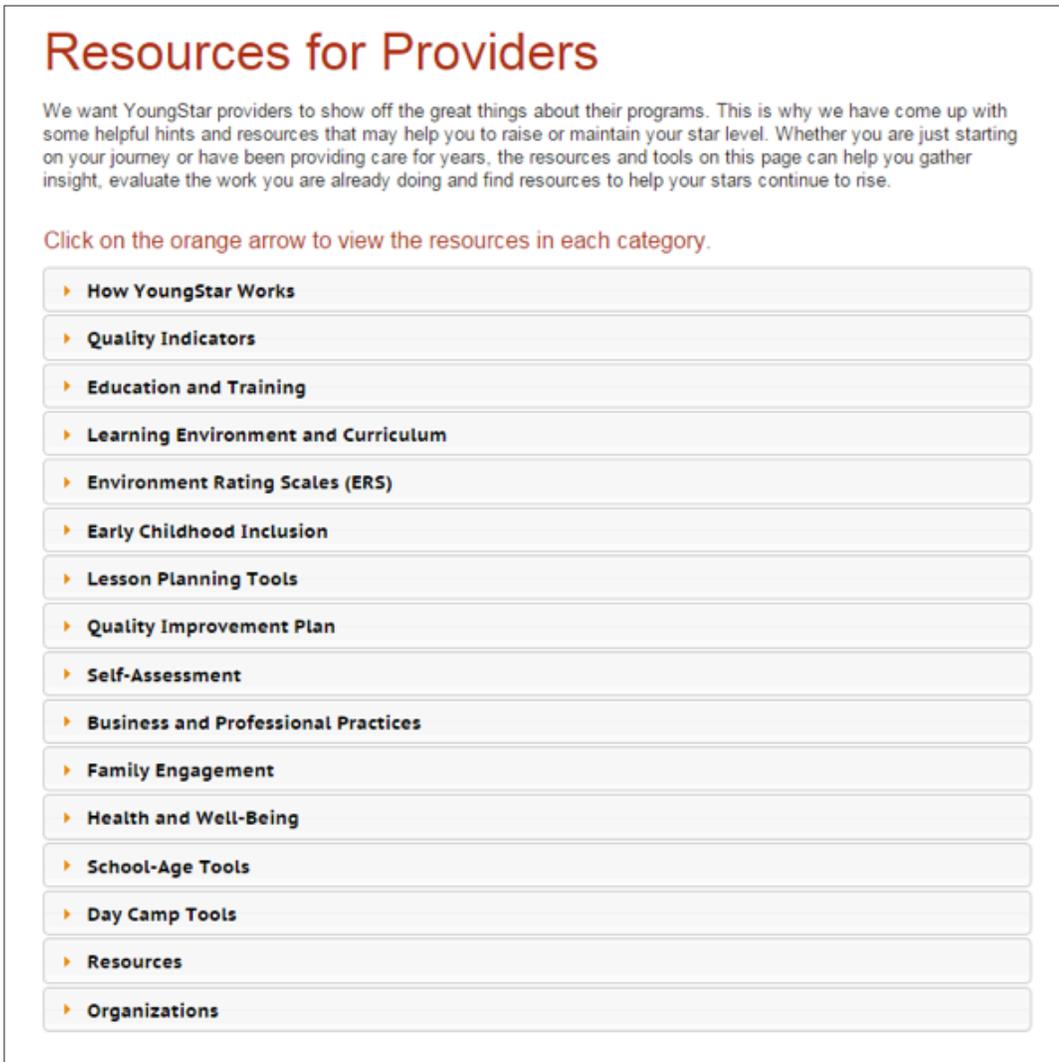
#### Here are some provider sections we consider to be good examples:

- The provider section for **Delaware Stars** includes a quick online application for the program and contact information for providers looking for more information. In other words, providers can apply for inclusion immediately. The printable program guide includes information on QRIS nationally and in Delaware, and guidelines for moving through star levels. The site also includes links to online orientation videos, a free professional development course, a graphic timeline of technical assistance providers receive as they onboard to the program, and other resources.
- **Minnesota's** website includes clear explanations of the benefits of participating in the QRIS program, how to get started, how to promote a rating, and how to increase a rating. The site includes video interviews with providers who participate in the QRIS, about the amount of work involved, what having a coach is like, and more.

QRIS websites also offer states a space to disseminate information about child development and professional development to providers. Conversely, offering these resources on a QRIS site—and updating them frequently—is one way to keep providers active on the site:

- **Colorado's** website features information on licensing, background checks, reporting injuries, and more. This is information that any provider would need to know, and likely draws more users to the site, increasing providers' familiarity with QRIS.
- **Wisconsin's** website includes an entire subsection on inclusion of children with special needs. It also has lists of resources for providers about environment rating, self-assessment, family engagement, lesson planning, and more.

**Figure 2. Resources for providers listed on Wisconsin’s YoungStar site**



In addition to offering providers information about the program, some of these sites, such as Minnesota’s, allow providers to include information about their own center as part of a profile. This is an added marketing benefit for providers who are enrolled.

Below we provide a sampling of some of the other ways states we interviewed are communicating with providers.

### E-newsletters targeted to providers

Many states have monthly or periodic email newsletters or bulletins they send to providers with updates on their program. In some cases, these report on provider enrollment and highlight providers who have moved to higher quality ratings. These regular communication vehicles can be helpful in sharing updates and building interest in and knowledge of the rating system. States can gauge provider engagement by tracking the percentage of those on their e-newsletter list who open the newsletters (“open rates”) over time, and if possible, by noting which type of content gets the most views. Open rates vary by field, audience, and newsletter frequency, but a typical open rate for a newsletter sent once or twice per month is between 22 and 26 percent.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mail Chimp, 2015

## Toolkits

For providers who enroll in QRIS, and especially those who achieve higher ratings, states have created communication toolkits. These kits have instructions on how providers can communicate their rating to parents and families of the children they serve, and how to use this information in their marketing efforts. These kits also include items such as news release templates, sample letters to parents, window decals, and banners. States may also want to offer training workshops on how to use the promotional kits.

Georgia is one of the states that has put together a complete marketing toolkit for providers. Program officials in Georgia report that providers in some of the smaller markets have been successful in generating news coverage about their quality rating achievement.

## Special events

A number of states hold annual recognition events for providers who have achieved their highest ratings. This is the case in Georgia and New Hampshire. These events allow providers to be awarded for their success and to be recognized by state leaders and their peers. For example, New Hampshire hosts a yearly celebration where the names of the participating providers are featured in a number of ways throughout the event. This recognition serves to elevate the visibility of the participating centers among their peers as well as among the other community leaders attending the event.

## Video

Washington has produced a 14-minute video<sup>28</sup> for providers to learn about its Early Achievers QRIS. It features providers talking about their work with young children and goes on to describe the quality levels and how to participate. The video has attracted 2,800 views on YouTube, which we consider to be a good engagement figure for a video targeted specifically to providers in this state.

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## Collecting and analyzing data

At this point, all of the states we interviewed have in place the basic components for communicating with providers to enlist their participation in their QRIS. While some states we interviewed are collecting information about their communication outreach to providers through regular or periodic focus groups, we believe there are opportunities to expand efforts in this area to guide future efforts.

Here are some questions communicators will want to answer as they look to refine their outreach efforts to providers (answers sorted if possible by type of provider, level of enrollment, length of enrollment, and geographic area of the state):

- How satisfied are providers with the frequency of communication?
- Which communication materials have they found most useful, and which least useful?
- How many people visit the provider section of the website, and how often?
- Are rated providers reporting referrals from the QRIS website?
- How many providers are using promotional materials from the toolkits?
- To what extent are providers promoting their quality ratings among parents and families of the children they care for and educate?
- If sending an e-newsletter for providers, what is the open rate? Which content is most viewed?
- What are the top reasons providers enrolled in the QRIS?
- Do providers have opportunities to get their questions answered and to offer ideas and feedback to improve the QRIS?

<sup>28</sup> Washington State Department of Early Learning, 2013

The answers to these questions can be obtained through annual surveys of providers using an online survey tool such as Survey Monkey. Some questions can be explored through discussions with providers at conferences or in focus groups.

As states expand marketing of their QRIS to parents and families, they will want to share information with providers that would reinforce the benefits of the program. For example, they may share how often site visitors search for providers on the website, which search topics are most popular, and how often site users search only for rated or the highest-rated providers.



## Chapter 4. Parents

This section includes information from research literature and from the nine states we interviewed, regarding strategies for targeting and communicating with parents and families about QRIS. State QRIS administrators and their communications staff and consultants can benefit from knowing more about the parents and families of young children, how and what they search for when looking for child care and pre-k providers, and what messages and strategies can be effective in reaching these audiences.

This section is organized following the stages of the QRIS communications framework:

- setting objectives and identifying target audiences,
- crafting messages,
- developing outreach strategies,
- conducting tactical execution, and
- collecting and analyzing data.

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### Setting objectives and identifying audiences

#### Setting Objectives

Setting objectives for outreach to parents and families of young children is an important component of creating a QRIS communications plan. Before establishing these objectives, the communications team must consider the following:

- **Intended action of parents and families.** Is the campaign intended to drive parents and families to the state QRIS website? Is the campaign to build awareness of parenting behaviors that foster child development? If so, how will that be measured?

- **Target audience.** Will this campaign target parents and families in the entire state or only in certain regions? Should there be a focus on low-income parents and families?
- **Timing.** What is the length of time for the campaign? When will it start?
- **Resources.** How much money is supporting this campaign? Is it enough to fund the intended activities to reach the objectives? What internal and outside resources will support this effort?

The answers to these questions take place as part of a collaborative planning process with state QRIS administrators, the communications team, marketing consultants, and outside partners supporting the outreach to parents and families.

Broadly, state QRIS communications with parents and families may center on a number of related high-level objectives, such as:

- informing parents and families about the value of quality child care and education to a child's development, and the components of quality care,
- assisting parents and families in their search for quality child care and preschool programs, and
- providing parents and families with information to help them support their child's early development.

Below is an example of the broad communication objectives that Wisconsin's YoungStar administrators and communication consultants developed for their marketing campaign to parents and families.

### Wisconsin's objectives for its marketing of YoungStar to parents and families<sup>i</sup>

- 1) We want parents to learn about the value of YoungStar in selecting childcare for their children.
- 2) We want parents to recognize the immense importance quality childcare has on the future of their child.
- 3) We want them to understand the rating system and use it in selecting their provider and/or assessing their current provider.
- 4) We want them to supportively encourage their provider to become a better childcare center by accumulating more YoungStar stars.
- 5) We want them to go to the parent page of the DCF YoungStar website to learn more.
- 6) We want to support our target audience in becoming Parent Ambassadors and spreading the word about YoungStar.

<sup>i</sup> Knupp and Watson and Wallman, 2014

In the above example, there are no specific metrics for determining the extent to which these objectives are met. Setting specific measurable objectives can be challenging, especially when first launching a marketing campaign. The best way to approach this challenge is to determine a base level of awareness or activity prior to the start of a campaign and then record changes in awareness or activity at the end. For example, when Georgia launched a marketing campaign for its Quality Rated program in 2013, it hired a marketing research firm to measure public awareness of Quality Rated, which at the time was minimal. Following the campaign, this same firm conducted the same study. In this case, they found that the campaign was not successful in increasing public awareness of Quality Rated.

For illustration purposes, here are some sample objectives that a state QRIS marketing campaign aimed at parents and families might set:

1. In 2016, increase unique visits to the parent/family section of the QRIS website by 40 percent over the previous year.
2. In 2016, increase the page views on the parent/family section of the QRIS website by 50 percent over the previous year.
3. Increase public awareness of the QRIS brand by 20 percent among parents and families of young children, from the start of the campaign to the end.

### Identifying audiences: Understanding parents/families of young children

A good marketing plan to reach parents requires knowing more about the families of young children in the state or region. Having this information will enable QRIS communications teams to better plan and target their outreach strategies. As an example, Child Trends compiled a demographic profile of U.S. families with children under the age of five (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3. Demographic profile of U.S. families with young children (under five) (all numbers are percentages)**

	All	Parents	Guardians	Fathers	Mothers
<b>Age</b>					
Less than 20	1.0	1.0	-	0.3	1.5
20-29	30.2	30.8	7.2	22.1	37.6
30-39	48.4	49.3	13.9	51.5	47.5
40 or more	20.5	19.0	78.3	26.0	13.4
<b>Race/Hispanic origin</b>					
Non-Hispanic white	56.7	56.8	49.8	59.5	54.8
Non-Hispanic black	11.2	11.0	18.9	8.8	12.8
Hispanic	22.6	22.6	22.0	22.2	23.0
Non-Hispanic Asian	6.8	6.9	-	7.2	6.6
Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native	0.9	0.8	4.0	0.5	1.0
Multiple race	1.5	1.5	-	1.4	1.6
Something else	0.3	0.3	-	0.4	0.3
<b>Family structure</b>					
Married	73.9	74.3	56.7	84.1	66.7
Cohabiting or living w/other parent	12.0	12.0	10.6	12.9	11.4
Neither married nor cohabiting	14.1	13.6	32.8	3.1	22.0
<b>Parental type</b>					
Biological or adoptive parent	96.0	98.4		97.4	99.1
Step parent	1.1	1.1		1.7	0.6
Both biological and step-parent	0.6	0.6		0.9	0.3
Not parent	2.4	0.0		0.0	0.0
Foster parent	0.4		13.8		
Relative	2.3		86.2		
<b>Geographic</b>					
Principal city	28.2	28.3	26.3	27.1	29.2
Metropolitan, not principal city	43.5	43.5	41.1	44.8	42.5
Non-metropolitan	14.0	13.8	20.8	13.8	13.8
Not Identified	14.4	14.5	11.8	14.3	14.6
<b>Education</b>					
Less than high school	12.5	12.3	20.9	12.1	12.4
High school or GED	25.5	25.3	34.0	27.2	23.7
Some college, or technical	27.7	27.7	28.5	25.7	29.4
College degree	34.3	34.7	16.7	35.0	34.5
<b>Poverty</b>					
Poor	17.9	17.7	26.7	12.0	22.3
Low-income, not poor	22.2	22.1	22.8	21.9	22.3
Not low-income	59.9	60.2	50.5	66.1	55.5

Source: Child Trends' analysis of the 2014 Current Population Survey, March Supplement.

Note: Guardians are defined as foster parents and those who are the head of household and living with a related child, mostly a grandchild.

**If we were to use this information to promote a national QRIS brand, here are some ways we would use it in developing the target audiences:**

- **By age.** 80 percent of parents of young children are between age 20 and 40. Focus outreach to those mediums that have the highest penetration among this age group, such as social media and publications with high readership among this group.
- **By race/ethnicity.** Target audience is diverse. Take this into account in planning media outreach. For example, nearly one in four young children are being raised in Hispanic households, so when pitching a story to a reporter, target reporters who write for this demographic.
- **By geography.** Almost two thirds live in a metropolitan area with another third in smaller communities. This will require a mix of media strategies.
- **By education.** More than a third of parents have a high school education or less. Language used in materials needs to be accessible to readers at this level.
- **By poverty.** 40 percent of young children are being raised in households that are low income or below the poverty level. Part of targeting this demographic will mean doing outreach in communities with a high concentration of low-income families.

Each state will want to pull data to establish its specific demographic targets for QRIS marketing campaigns aimed at parents. It can be particularly important to target low-income families with young children. For those in non-English-speaking households, a number of states are providing information on their websites in both English and Spanish. Other states have created targeted materials and outreach strategies for parents and families from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

### Parents' perceptions of child care and early education

Gathering demographic information is only one part of learning about parents and families of young children. We also want to know how these families perceive and search for child care and early education. According to the latest National Survey of Early Care and Education, 5 million families searched for child care for their children birth to age five in the preceding two years.<sup>29</sup> QRIS is intended to provide these parents and families with information about choices for quality child care and pre-k in their communities.

The information in the figure below, on parents' perceptions nationally of early care and education, can be useful in planning a marketing campaign. For example, many parents view child care by a relative or friend as a good or excellent option for affordability, safety, flexibility, and nurturing—more so than center-based or family day care. A promotional campaign might appeal to parents by promoting the QRIS website as a good resource to find quality care that is safe, nurturing, and enriching for their children, while providing the educational and social benefits of center-based care.

<sup>29</sup> National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2013.

**Figure 3: Parents' perceptions of the strengths of different types of early care and education**

## How do Parents Perceive Early Care and Education?

Strengths of different types of care, according to parents:

Households perceive center-based care, family day care, and care by a relative or friend as having different strengths. Here's the percentage of households that rate types of care as "good or excellent," by characteristic:

### AFFORDABILITY

**32%** center-based care

**49%** family day care

**85%** care by a relative or friend

### FLEXIBILITY

**55%** center-based care

**59%** family day care

**80%** care by a relative or friend

### EDUCATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

**71%** center-based care

**54%** family day care

**62%** care by a relative or friend

### NURTURING

**63%** center-based care

**65%** family day care

**88%** care by a relative or friend

### SAFETY

**68%** center-based care

**64%** family day care

**86%** care by a relative or friend

### SOCIAL INTERACTION

**74%** center-based care

**69%** family day care

**64%** care by a relative or friend

Source: National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2014

### Why and when parents search for child care

Research about how and when parents make decisions about care and education arrangements for their young children is also useful to planning a marketing campaign for this audience.

For example, we can draw some conclusions and implications for communications from data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education:<sup>30</sup>

- **Potential audience.** Almost half (47 percent) of parents in the 11.4 million U.S. households with children from birth to age five searched for child care during the two-year period covered by the study. If we assume this percent would be consistent across states, we can estimate the number of households that would be our target audience for using the QRIS website each year.
- **Interest in search options.** More than two-thirds of parents who searched for child care options changed care as a result of their search. Thirty-nine percent of parents considering more than one care option searched for care on the internet. This demonstrates the value of providing parents with the ability to search for high-quality, rated providers online.
- **Comparison shopping.** Nearly two-thirds of parents considered more than one provider when they searched for child care. This finding indicates the importance of QRIS websites that make it easy for parents to compare high-quality child care providers based on a range of criteria, such as type of provider, hours of operation, and specific services offered. We would expect this to be true for parents searching for early education options such as preschools and school-based pre-k.

<sup>30</sup> 2013

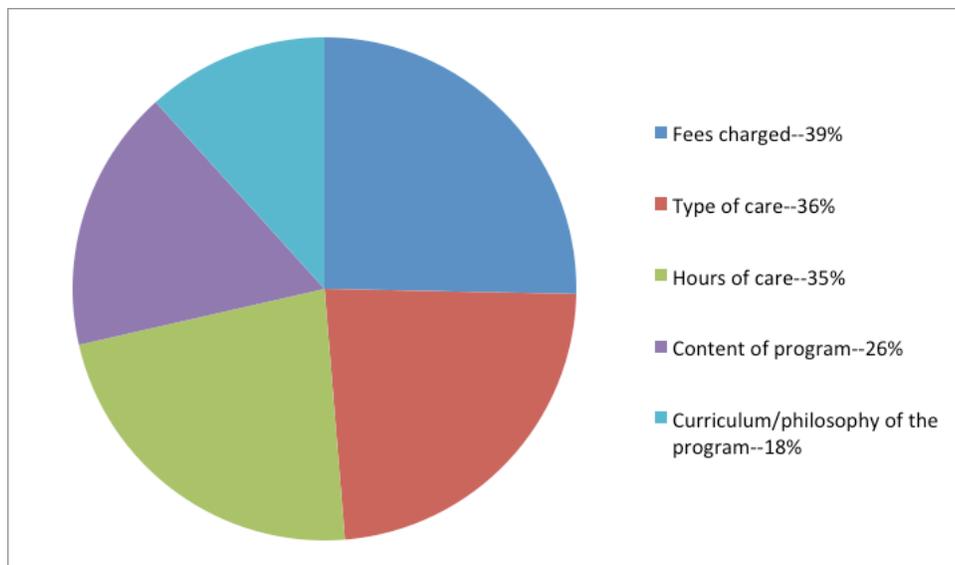
- **Word-of-mouth.** Of those who considered more than one option, most parents searched for care by asking friends and family with children (63 percent). This means that outreach to the general public is a vital part of a QRIS communications campaign.
- **Campaign timing.** More searches occurred in the winter (29 percent in January and February) than in the late spring and early summer. Less than six percent of searches occurred in May and June.<sup>31</sup> This indicates that a campaign would be well timed at the beginning of a calendar year, and poorly timed leading into May and June, when very few parents are searching for child care.

**Type of information parents search for**

The table below provides information on what parents and families are most looking for when searching for child care. This is useful to know when thinking about content and promotion of a QRIS website.

It is interesting to note that “fees charged” is first among information parents are looking for, yet none of the websites we reviewed provide this information in their provider directories. Those state administrators we spoke with expressed reluctance about listing fees on QRIS sites; among their concerns were changing fee structures, complex fee structures (different fees for siblings, part- or full-day options, etc.), and their desire for parents to choose care regardless of cost and supplement higher-cost options with some form of aid. Still, it may be useful for state QRIS websites to examine how they can offer parents more information about this important consideration.

**Figure 4. Information parents want when looking for child care**



National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2013

In some cases, parents and families do not have options for where to enroll their young children. This may be the case when a child is eligible for Head Start or for a public-school pre-k program, for example.

<sup>31</sup> National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2014

## Messaging to parents

The language used to communicate and engage with parents and family members of young children should be conversational, use little to no jargon, and be in plain language. Plain language<sup>32</sup> means that the communication with an audience is direct and at a level that is easily understood by that audience. We recommend that text in a QRIS website section for parents be written at about an eighth-grade reading level. There are a number of excellent resources to help communicators learn about plain language, as well as online sites<sup>33</sup> that allow for testing text to see what reading level it is written at.

### Common elements of plain language<sup>i</sup>

Plain language is characterized by:

Common, everyday words—exception is where technical terms are necessary (these should be clearly defined)

- Personal pronouns (“we” and “you”)
- Active voice
- Logical organization
- An easy-to-read format, including bullets, tables, and free use of white space (blank spaces around text and images)

<sup>i</sup> Goldstein 2014

On the next page are three good examples of plain language text used on QRIS websites to describe quality care and education. We like these because they offer examples that parents can relate to.

<sup>32</sup> Plain Language Action and Information Network

<sup>33</sup> Instructions for the FRY and SMOG readability formulas: <https://www.cms.gov/Outreach-and-Education/Outreach/WrittenMaterialsToolkit/downloads/ToolkitPart07.pdf>

**Table 4. Website examples of plain language defining quality in early child care and education**

State/QRIS	Web text
<p>Colorado, Colorado Shines</p>	<p><b>Child health</b>— Children have healthy snacks and meals. Higher quality programs will also track children’s development to make sure they are growing and learning. The tracking helps guide activities geared to benefit children the most.</p> <p><b>Workforce qualifications and professional development</b>—Well-trained, responsive and effective teachers are essential to a high-quality early education program.</p> <p><b>Learning environment</b> —Children have toys and activities to teach them new skills. The setting is clean.</p> <p><b>Family engagement and relationships</b>—Parents and providers are partners in the child’s early learning and care.</p>
<p>California, Fresno County Early Stars</p>	<p><b>Ratios and group size</b>—More teachers and smaller group sizes help staff spend more quality, engaged time with individual children.</p> <p><b>Learning activities</b>—Daily learning activities support each child’s interests, growth and development, as well as culture and home language.</p> <p><b>Environment</b>—The setting allows children to learn and develop to their fullest potential. This includes high interest activities, safety, and staff interactions with children in a safe and healthy environment.</p> <p><b>Health and child development</b>—A child’s overall wellbeing is supported. This includes his or her physical growth, as well as ability to learn and get along with others.</p> <p><b>Staff training and education</b>—Directors and teachers are trained in child development and early learning. Some have college units or college degrees.</p>
<p>Minnesota Parent Aware</p>	<p><b>Caring</b>—A close, positive relationship exists between children and their provider/early educator. A caring relationship is the foundation of good care. The adult should be consistent, kind, and patient. Look for someone who spends a lot of time talking with and listening to each child.</p> <p><b>Training</b>—The provider understands child development and has been trained to care for children. When adults truly understand children – the how, when and why certain skills, behaviors, and common feelings develop – they are better prepared to meet a child’s needs.</p> <p><b>Group size</b>—Children are cared for in small groups and receive the attention they need from adults. Studies show the quality of care improves when children are in smaller groups and get more individualized attention.</p> <p><b>Environment</b>—The program space is clean and safe. Toys and equipment must be in good condition, safe, and sanitary. Inspect the eating, diapering/bathroom, sleeping, and indoor/outdoor play spaces. Well-thought-out plans for supervision and emergencies should be in place.</p> <p><b>Planned activity</b>—A variety of activities are planned throughout the day that are interesting and involve each child. Children need a variety of activities such as story time, singing, games, dress-up play, building toys, and outdoor time. A daily routine is also important for creating a stable and secure environment.</p> <p><b>Track development</b>—Children are regularly observed and their learning and development is tracked. This information informs how activities and interactions are tailored for your child and is shared with you.</p> <p><b>Respectful</b>—The provider is respectful of each child’s unique background and encourages children to celebrate their individuality. Activities that teach about similarities and differences in realistic, positive ways help children learn to value and respect themselves and others.</p> <p><b>Communication</b>—Parents and providers/early educators communicate daily about the children’s well-being. You and your provider educator will be partners, both invested in your child’s development. Children are constantly growing and changing so information sharing is essential. Bulletin boards, notes, or a daily conversation at the end of the day are all ways a program can keep you updated.</p>

## Outreach strategies and execution

Outreach strategies are developed and executed to reach parents and families of young children with an intended message to achieve a desired action, such as visiting the QRIS website. From the states we interviewed, Delaware, Georgia, Minnesota, South Carolina, Washington, and Wisconsin have launched marketing campaigns to reach parents and families of young children to promote their quality rating websites. Colorado and Georgia are developing plans for new marketing campaigns later this year and into 2016. Most of the regions of California are also in the planning stages, with Fresno County as one region that has begun to promote its provider ratings with a new website and PSAs. Below are some examples of strategies and tactics being used to reach parents and families in those states with active marketing efforts.

### Direct outreach

Given the importance of one-to-one conversations with parents and families, many states, such as California (Fresno County), Delaware, Georgia, New Hampshire, Washington, and Wisconsin, are investing in ways to engage these audiences directly. For example, Wisconsin has set up small “street teams” to go to places where parents of young children might be found, such as beauty or nail shops, street festivals, or community events. These teams can provide parents or other caregivers with information about their YoungStar program and answer questions they may have about it.

Like Wisconsin, Delaware has trained ambassadors to speak about the Delaware Stars QRIS at locations such as pediatric offices, health clinics, festivals, and other community events. They have also targeted outreach activities to neighborhoods with low-performing elementary schools.

### Promotional partnerships

Many states have close relationships with their resource and referral agencies. These agencies provide parents with information about child care and early education options and costs. Child Care Aware and other organizations are important promotional partners for states in reaching parents. For example, Washington’s Early Achievers QRIS has partnered with the state’s MomsRising organization to share information through their network of mothers.<sup>34</sup>

### TV and radio PSAs

A number of states have incorporated TV and radio public service announcements (PSAs) or paid ads into their marketing campaigns. South Carolina is devoting most of its paid media budget to TV ads, as it has found this medium most effective for reaching parents. Wisconsin is relying on radio, along with some print and digital media, for its state campaign. Each state will want to track the performance of these media campaigns to determine whether they led to greater awareness and generated visits to the QRIS website and use of the provider search tool.

### Digital media marketing

Given the high use of digital media by younger parents, states are targeting some of these platforms for their marketing campaigns. For example, Wisconsin has purchased banner ads or promotional messages on Pandora, YouTube, and websites frequented by younger parents. One of the advantages of including digital media is the ability to micro target audiences. Often, ads can be targeted based on geography (down to zip code level), gender, and age. In addition, the effectiveness of digital media can be carefully tracked by analyzing how many clicks to an advertiser’s website came from the advertising. As more states include digital media platforms in their marketing efforts, it will be worthwhile to share results with other states to help guide similar promotional campaigns.

### Social media

Establishing and maintaining social media profiles is a cost-effective way to distribute information about and raise awareness of QRIS and quality early child care and education, and to help parents feel personally engaged through direct interactions online. Over 80 percent of U.S. adults between 18 and 49 use social media.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to general internet use, social media use is higher for those in the lowest income

<sup>34</sup> MomsRising

<sup>35</sup> Pew Research Center, 2013

bracket.<sup>36</sup> We found that among the states interviewed, social media is generally underused in QRIS promotion. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, and Twitter can offer a relatively inexpensive way to reach parents with content related to quality early care and education. For example, content might relate to:

- helping young children learn at home,
- what makes for a safe child care and learning setting,
- what makes for a good learning environment,
- how young brains develop,
- how to choose an early learning provider, or
- what children should learn before they get to kindergarten.

Having an active presence on social media would enable QRIS communications efforts to reach adults they might not reach through their websites alone, and reach them more often. For QRIS, some states are using the established social media profiles of various state agencies to promote QRIS. Others have a dedicated profile for QRIS. We recommend the latter approach where possible, but promoting the QRIS social media profiles from the other agency profiles in order to drive initial traffic.

### Facebook

Facebook is the most common platform used (58 percent of U.S. adults used it in 2014), and Facebook users are more active on that site than users of other social media platforms are on those platforms.<sup>37</sup> Among the nine states we interviewed, few had established or maintained a Facebook presence for their QRIS. Georgia provides one example of a strong QRIS Facebook profile;<sup>38</sup> theirs had nearly 1,000 followers as of our review, and they post regularly. Content is a mix of others' posts and their own, including use of infographics related to early childhood quality.

Gaining visibility on Facebook has become increasingly difficult without purchasing paid posts for an organization's status updates. In 2014, Facebook began restricting organic (unpaid) news feeds from companies, government, and nonprofit Facebook sites.<sup>39</sup> Despite this change, communicators should look at creating compelling posts with information that is helpful to parents making early care and education decisions, and consider allocating funding to promote these posts. These paid posts can be tracked to determine how many views they generate and whether they lead to traffic on the state QRIS website. Communicators should keep in mind, however, that increased engagement on a paid ad will not necessarily lead to sustained engagement.

### Other platforms

Beyond Facebook, other social media platforms provide opportunities to target and engage with parents of young children, of varying demographics. Among the platforms are Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and LinkedIn. While just under 20 percent of adults use Twitter, it is more popular among Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks, and those with higher incomes.<sup>40</sup> Not many states are using Twitter to promote their QRIS with a dedicated feed. Among the states we interviewed, only Wisconsin and California (Fresno County) had set up dedicated Twitter profiles, and both were very new and without many followers.

Some states have produced and promoted video content about their QRIS on YouTube. This is the case with Washington, where the state's Department of Early Learning has a YouTube channel featuring a section on QRIS, with a link to the QRIS website.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/QualityRated>

<sup>39</sup> Zara, 2015

<sup>40</sup> Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015

## Websites

A QRIS website is one of the most important components for reaching parents and family members of young children. These sites offer parents information about quality child care and education and how to search for providers in their neighborhoods. Internet use is widespread—87 percent of U.S. adults use the internet. For women in their childbearing years, rates are even higher (97 percent of all 18- to 29-year-olds, 93 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds); usage declines in older groups but is still high. Among those with a high school degree or lower, or who have low family incomes, over three-quarters use the internet.<sup>41</sup>

In a 2011 survey of parents nationwide, 39 percent of those considering more than one provider searched for child care online. The percentage was higher for households with higher incomes, and among those in the lowest bracket—below the federal poverty threshold—31 percent searched online.<sup>42</sup>

The state and regional QRIS we included in this study are in various stages in terms of their websites. Some have no one site dedicated to QRIS, instead using a section or page on a state agency website. Information about New Hampshire's QRIS, for example, is on a page of the state's Department of Health and Human Services website, and is limited to the capacities of that site. Wisconsin's QRIS website is part of the state Department of Children and Families site, but that site is updated, has more graphic capabilities, and has a search function for parents.

Other states have new websites or are in the process of switching from one site to another. South Carolina launched a new site this spring ([abcquality.org](http://abcquality.org)) whose aim is to make their QRIS more understandable to parents, corresponding with a series of PSAs that refer to the new site. Providers are linked back to the original QRIS site housed by the state's Division of Early Care and Education at the Department of Social Services.

### Components of QRIS webpages for parents and families

**For website sections targeted to parents and families, we suggest including these key elements:**

- a jargon-free definition of QRIS and an explanation of how programs are rated,
- a description of what quality care means and why it matters for children,
- an explanation of how to search for care and any associated cost for using the service,
- contact information for parents who need help or wish to provide feedback,
- a clearly visible provider search, and
- a resource section for parents and family members to learn about early childhood development.

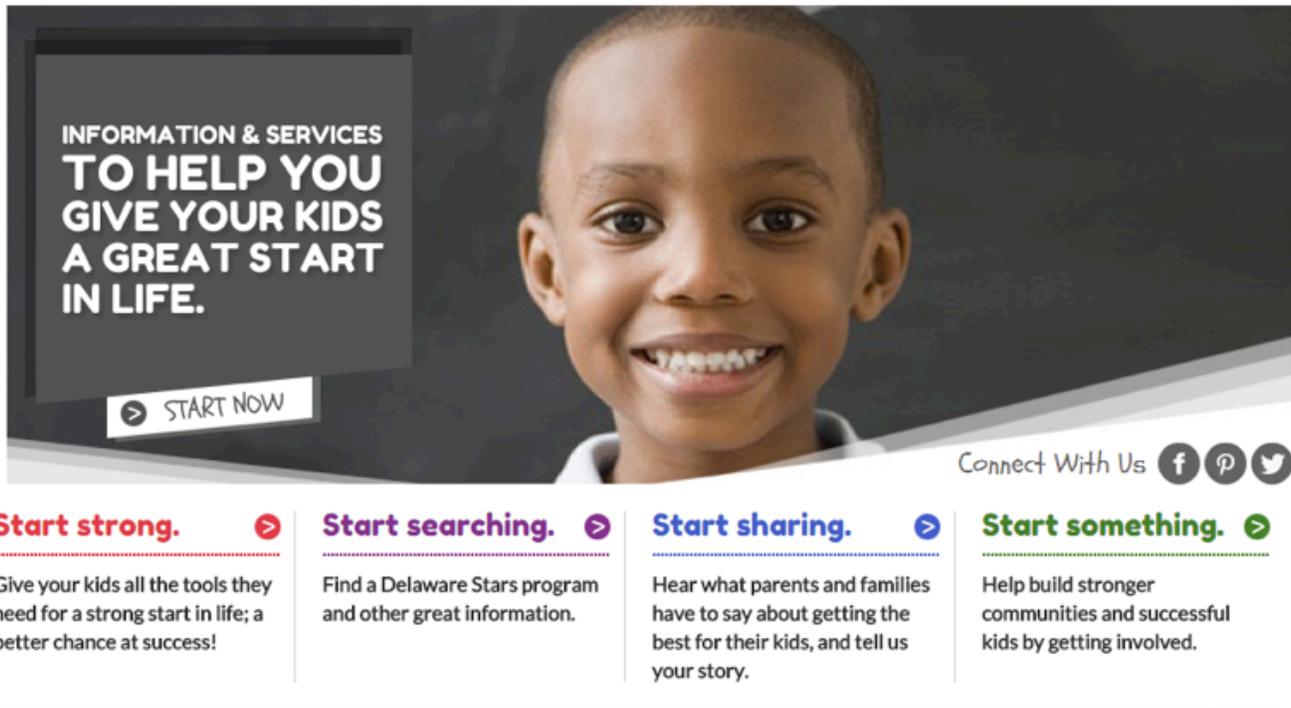
It is vital that parents understand *what a QRIS is, what the ratings mean, and how it pertains to them*, without their having to dig.

- **Minnesota's** site included a video at the top of the homepage explaining the basics of ratings, and why quality care matters for kids.
- **South Carolina's** site includes videos on the homepage, and its "About" page has a clear explanation of what each level of quality represents, in terms of what parents can expect from providers with that level of quality.
- **Delaware's** homepage has a short list of subheaders, each with a clear, conversational description of what parents will find in that section. For example: "Start sharing. Hear what parents and families have to say about getting the best for their kids, and tell us your story."

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Center, 2014, *Internet user demographics*

<sup>42</sup> National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2014

Figure 5. Image from Delaware’s QRIS homepage



One essential component of any QRIS site for parents is an *easily-visible search* that will turn up a solid number of results. Fields should not include jargon that parents might not understand, or if jargon is necessary, they should include definitions. Here is how some states are allowing parents to search:

- In addition to *basic filters* such as location or name, hours, ages, ratings, and languages spoken, **Minnesota** includes filters like environment (e.g., pet free, smoke free, wheelchair accessible), yearly schedule (e.g., summer), and whether the provider accepts subsidies (they include a definition of the subsidy). Parents can compare up to three results, save favorites, and view results in a list or on a map.
- **Wisconsin** allows site visitors to search by specific QRIS rating, by program type (they include a definition of program types, which include day camps), and for multiple children.

Some states are taking advantage of the provider profiles their QRIS websites house (that searches for providers lead to) to *highlight other aspects of care and education* that parents are concerned with:

- **Georgia's** provider profiles include capacity; days, months, and hours of operation; ages served; and other features, such as whether the provider transports children to/from home, offers night care or drop-in care, accepts subsidies, or has summer camps. The profiles also include inspection reports that are viewable as PDFs.

For providers, being able to control some of the specifics that appear about their programs—a description of their philosophy, for example—might be an incentive to enroll in a voluntary QRIS.

QRIS websites also represent an opportunity to provide parents with *other resources* that can help them in their search for child care and early education providers, and in their supporting their children’s development (part of the goal of the Child Care and Development Fund block grant):

- **Washington** state’s QRIS site includes links from its homepage to resources about what to look for when visiting a child care facility, on early development and kindergarten readiness, and more.
- The “For Parents” section of **Wisconsin’s** site includes a resources page with videos about child development. Resources are organized by topic, as pertaining to developmental milestones, early literacy, talking to providers, early brain development, and more.

- Minnesota’s** homepage includes large graphics linking to resources to help parents assess program quality and determine the type of care best suited for their needs. It also links to a quiz parents can take to assess their child’s progress toward kindergarten readiness. At the end of the quiz are explanations of where the child stands related to developmental milestones, linking to further information. Minnesota’s site includes a large, bold banner across the bottom with contact information, hours, and languages spoken for parents who need help.

**Figure 6. Image from Minnesota’s Parent Aware homepage**



## Gathering and analyzing data

Four of the nine states we interviewed have conducted research with parents and families, either through focus group interviews or surveys. Information from this research can be helpful in message development and identifying outreach strategies for a campaign. Research after a public awareness campaign is useful for determining overall success in meeting the set objectives and understanding which outreach strategies were most effective. Below we provide examples of Wisconsin’s focus group research findings and its media campaign results, as well as Minnesota’s report on its website visits.

## Case study: Wisconsin YoungStar takes analytical approach to marketing to parents and families<sup>i</sup>

### Focus group research<sup>ii</sup>

Prior to launching its marketing campaign in Spring 2015, Wisconsin commissioned a series of focus groups with parents of young children, by the research firm Jump at the Sun Consultants, LLC. Here are some of the key findings from this research:

- Parents in most parts of the state expressed that there are not realistic child care options in their communities.
- They felt lack of affordability, transportation barriers, hours of services, long wait lists, and the level of trained providers significantly reduced the number of child care options.
- Participants viewed word-of-mouth, combined with supplemental materials, as the most effective strategy to market YoungStar to parents.
- With the exception of parents whose children have special needs, most expressed cost and safety as primary factors in selecting child care providers.
- Parents recommended a variety of approaches to communicating information to them, including social media, community events, printed materials, billboards, YouTube, personal testimony, and word-of-mouth.

### Objectives and target audiences

This input helped inform the state's \$100,000 three-month marketing campaign launched in March 2015. The objectives of campaign were two-fold: to increase awareness of YoungStar among parents, especially those who are homeless, teens, urban, migrant and seasonal, tribal, and have special needs; and to communicate that quality of child care is important and that to find quality child care, parents should use the search application on the YoungStar website.

### Strategic outreach and tactics

The campaign included producing three new videos, which are featured on the YoungStar website and on YouTube, as well as palm cards and brochures to be given to parents at community events. It also included paid advertising for online search, print publications, and radio stations to reach YoungStar's target audiences for this campaign.

### Results

There were 6,000 new users of the YoungStar website during the duration of the campaign, representing a near doubling of website traffic over the three months prior to the start of the campaign. More than 80 percent of the new users who came to the website were tracked to the ads purchased by YoungStar. The videos recorded more than 40 hours of viewing time on YouTube. The state was able to track the campaign's effectiveness (measured by clicks from digital media advertising to the YoungStar website or YouTube channel) based on the cost spent on these ads. It found that the YouTube ads produced a campaign effectiveness of 22 percent, followed by Google AdWords at 1.35 percent. Online banners, Pandora radio, and Twitter ads all registered less than 1 percent. From print and radio ads, the campaign generated a combined 1.7 million impressions (the number of people who were exposed to print or radio ads).



<sup>i</sup> Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2015

<sup>ii</sup> Lathen, 2014

### What Minnesota is learning about how parents and others search its website



Minnesota’s QRIS website, [www.parentaware.org](http://www.parentaware.org), was launched in August 2014. To better understand how visitors were using the site, Child Trends used Google Analytics. It provided detailed information about Parent Aware’s website visitors and their behaviors from August 10, 2015 to February 10, 2015. Overall, 80,000 people visited the site, with 67,000 from Minnesota. More detailed information has allowed the state to better understand who is using their site. Here are some of the key findings:

- **Visits by regions of the state:** Minneapolis, 23 percent; Saint Paul, 10 percent; Rochester, 5 percent; Duluth and Saint Cloud, 3 percent each
- **Gender and age:** 79 percent women, 21 percent men; 50 percent ages 25-34; 24 percent ages 35-44; 9 percent ages 55-64; 8 percent ages 45-54
- **Search preferences:** The search filter was used on average about four times per visit. Most frequent filters used: distance, 90 percent; star ratings, 70 percent; ages served, 48 percent; schedule, 45 percent; hours of care, environment, yearly schedule, language spoken, and accepts state child care subsidies, all 40 percent.
- **Technology used for search:** Windows computer, 54 percent; Apple mobile device, 22 percent; Android mobile device, 13 percent, Apple computer, 11 percent

### Search terms

Depending on the search engine, search terms, and location of the person conducting the search, online search results can range from information on an individual provider’s website, to child care and preschool directories such as those now being managed in state QRIS. Some parents look for child care center ratings on Yelp, a site that allows individuals to rate services, or on new social sharing sites such as Nextdoor.com, which is designed to help people interact with other people in their neighborhood, or on local parenting or neighborhood discussion boards.

Communicators planning state QRIS outreach can use a Google Adwords tool to see how often certain terms are searched for in their state. This will provide information that can help shape messaging as well as target search listing ads. While “early care and education” is a term often used among QRIS and policy audiences, it is not typically a term that families use when talking about care and education for their young children. A Google Adwords search conducted by Child Trends in May 2015 revealed some popular search terms:

**Table 5: Frequency of words used in Google searches**

Search words	Average monthly searches
Preschool	135,000
Child care	90,500
Daycare	74,000
Early care and education	4,000

Gathering data at all phases of planning and executing outreach to parents and families is valuable to informing decisions, tracking results, and planning future efforts.



## Chapter 5: Policymakers

Preparing young children for success in school and life is an important issue in all states. States receive federal funding for some child care and early education programs serving young children. States also may provide direct funding. We believe QRIS communication programs should actively target policymakers as a crucial audience. This chapter is organized by the stages of the QRIS communications framework:

- setting objectives and identifying target audiences,
- crafting messages,
- developing outreach strategies,
- conducting tactical execution, and
- collecting and analyzing data.

### Setting objectives and identifying audiences

#### Setting objectives

Communications objectives related to informing and engaging with policymakers varied across the states interviewed for this report, because the needs of QRIS programs in specific states varied. In some states, communications with policymakers is part of the role of the QRIS communications director or administrator. In other states, the QRIS team has a minimal role in communications to this audience, with early childhood advocacy organizations supporting engagement with policymakers on early childhood care and education issues. In Delaware, the Commission for Early Education in the Economy supports QRIS communications with policymakers through direct meetings with state legislators. While the objectives for every state will depend on the environment in that state, we offer a few examples of specific objectives that a state QRIS might set for outreach to policymakers:

- Produce and distribute annual reporting of the results of the QRIS to the governor and all state legislators.
- Arrange for education committee members to visit quality-rated early education centers in their district during 2016.

- Provide monthly online updates of QRIS enrollment and share this information with state policymakers.

In Washington and Minnesota, QRIS communications with policymakers has been important to early childhood care and education legislation. In Minnesota, legislation has been introduced to fund the Minnesota QRIS program. The objective of PASR’s recent communication with policymakers has been to communicate support for this bill.

### Target policy audiences

A state’s policy audience will typically include the following individuals and organizations: the governor, his or her cabinet members, state legislators, city and county officials, and advocacy and non-profit organizations.

Targets within these policy audiences will depend on the political environment of each state. Typically, communicators will want to target the legislators who oversee committees or appropriations for funding for early childhood care and education.

## Crafting messages for policymakers

Since messaging to policymakers will vary so much from state to state, depending on their objectives, for this chapter we provide examples of the type of messages and strategies being used to engage with policymakers among some of the states we interviewed.

### Case study: Minnesota legislation for QRIS funding

#### Overview

In Minnesota, Parent Aware of School Readiness (PASR), a partner non-profit organization, serves as the primary lead in communicating with the public about their QRIS program. This organization promotes the rating system among parents and leads advocacy work and outreach to policymakers. In our interview with PASR, we were informed about how the policy debate in the state legislature has shifted from whether to invest to how to invest in quality early care and education, and learned about PASR’s communications strategies aimed at raising the visibility of the issue among policymakers and the general public through targeted messaging. PASR plays an active role in this policy debate, which at the time of the writing of this report, centered on communication advocacy strategies aimed at securing adequate funding of their QRIS system, about \$10 million, in preparation for when RTT-ELC grant funding expires.

#### Messaging and outreach strategies

PASR works to inform policymakers about the state’s QRIS and its successes. This includes developing materials such as an annual “early education reform report card,” in which they score what has happened in the previous year against their objectives. They also create one-page handouts or short brochures to leave behind when they meet with individual legislators. Additionally, they provide experts to testify at hearings and to meet with legislators.

## Outreach and engagement strategies involving policymakers

In a number of states we interviewed, top government officials were actively involved in promoting their QRIS and early childhood care and education. Here are some examples:

### Georgia

- Governor Nathan Deal has been involved in the launch of the quality rated program and recently held

an event at the Governor's Mansion to launch its fundraising campaign, which will fund communications outreach efforts and incentive packages for rated programs. • First Lady Sandra Deal has participated in Read Across Georgia events, where she reads books at some of the state's highest-rated early care and education centers. She also recently held a press event to announce 500 providers rated in the state.

- The Department of Early Care and Learning presented at a briefing for all Georgia legislators planned by the University of Georgia every two years.
- During the Georgia Pre-K week every October, legislators are invited to read in pre-k classrooms. Media and community leaders are invited to these events as well.

### Colorado

- Lt. Governor Joe Garcia, who sits on the state's early childhood leadership committee, is featured in a video about quality early childhood care and education that is promoted on the Colorado Shines website.

### Washington

- Governor Jay Inslee is very supportive of early learning in the state and has convened meetings on the topic and often visits early learning centers.
- The governor and the head of early learning held a roundtable in support of quality early care and education.
- On July 1, 2015, Governor Inslee signed into law the Early Start Act, which provides \$158 million in funding to increase the supply of quality child care, increase access to preschool for the state's lowest income families, and provide support to Washington's QRIS.<sup>43</sup>

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## Gathering and analyzing data to guide communications

Public opinion data on early care and education policies can help shape messaging and communication aimed at policymakers. Several of the states interviewed for this report attempt to monitor the pulse of the public on issues related to QRIS and early care and education through surveys, focus groups, and other methods as described in this report. For example, recognizing the need to establish ongoing funding post the RTT-ELC grant, Delaware's QRIS program administrators are conducting local focus groups and a statewide online survey to receive feedback from the parents and providers about the early care and education progress made in the state over the past four years. This information will help set communications priorities aimed at shaping their QRIS, and will then be communicated to policymakers.

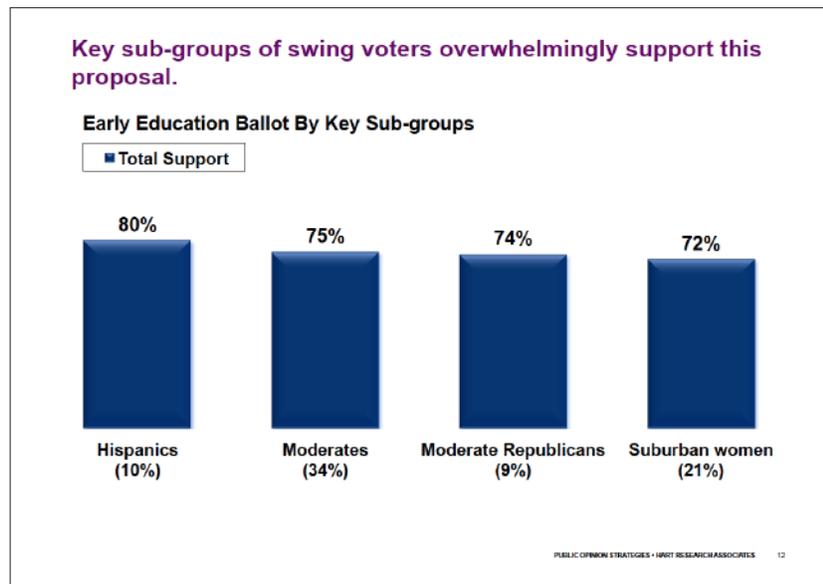
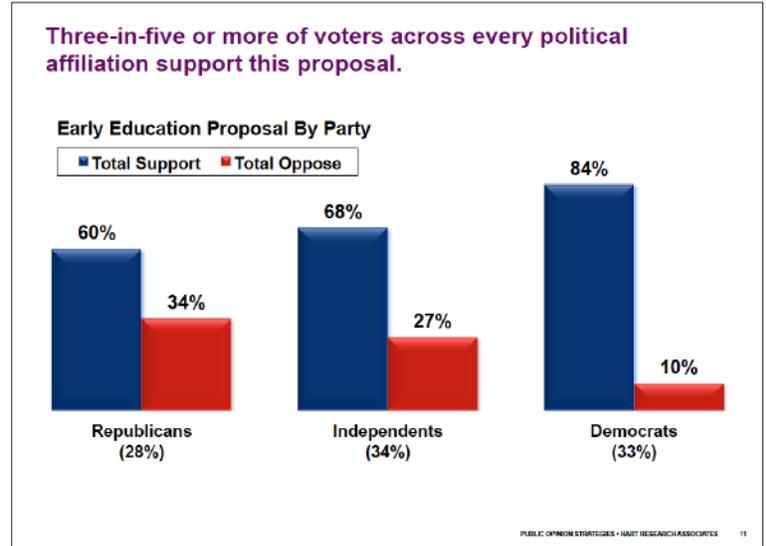
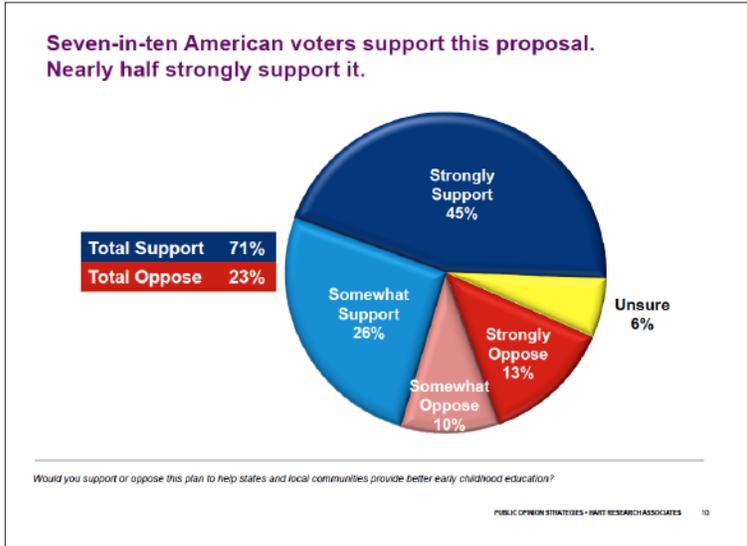
States can also rely on other resources, such as national and state organizations that track public opinion. A number of national and state surveys have been conducted and released on these issues by the advocacy organization First Five Years Fund. Figure 8 contains a summary of the national data from their most recent public opinion surveys. QRIS administrators can use the results of research about public opinion to shape messaging to policymakers about investing in early childhood education.

A recent study by First Five Years Fund, for example, found that most U.S. voters would support legislation that would help fund state and local communities' efforts to provide better early childhood education programs. The national survey of over 800 registered voters explored their support for a funding proposal that would allocate \$10 billion per year for 10 years in grants to states "to provide all low and moderate income four-year-olds with voluntary access to high-quality preschool programs." The study found the majority of support across political affiliation as well as among key subgroups of swing voters.

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<sup>43</sup> Mongeau, 2015

**Figure 7. First Five Fund survey results**



With the 2016 election cycle approaching, it is likely there will be more public opinion polling conducted by research and media organizations that will include information on issues related to early childhood education and care.

Figure 8 below is an example of two states' communications outreach to policymakers, in the form of flyers.

Figure 8. Flyers for policymakers, about QRIS in Georgia and Fresno County, California

**QUALITY RATED**  [qualityrated.org](http://qualityrated.org)

**A child's brain is growing fast**

Up to **90%** of the brain develops by age five, making the early years a critical time in a child's life.

**right place bright future**

One of Governor Nathan Deal's earliest directives after taking office was to authorize the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) to develop and implement a tiered quality rating and improvement system (TQRIS) for child care programs in Georgia.

A TQRIS, similar to rating systems used by other service entities like restaurants and hotels, is a way to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality of early education programs to families and the community they serve. Currently, 38 states have a TQRIS.

In October 2011 DECAL officially announced the launch of Quality Rated, Georgia's TQRIS. Through a simple but comprehensive process, Quality Rated assigns a one star, two star, or three star rating that enables Georgia's families to easily identify early care and education programs that use research-based best practices to prepare children for kindergarten.

Parents (families), child care providers, policy makers, and the general public realize more than ever that a child's early years are the most critical for establishing a foundation for learning. With hundreds of thousands of Georgia's children in out-of-home child care every day, the quality of that care is vitally important and impacts a child's readiness for school. For this reason one of the most important decisions a family will ever make is choosing the right child care.

By calling for a TQRIS, Governor Deal wanted to give Georgia's families the tools and information to find the best quality child care and early education for their children. He also wanted to encourage and support early care and education programs in improving the quality of the services they provide.

A child care program participating in Quality Rated is demonstrating its commitment to go above and beyond Georgia's minimal licensing requirements.

**Programs that are participating in Quality Rated** are child care providers in the process of documenting use of practices that exceed state health and safety requirements. They have not yet achieved a Quality Rated star designation.

- ★☆☆ **One Star Quality Rated** child care programs have demonstrated a commitment to meeting standards that exceed state health and safety requirements, meet several quality thresholds, and **score sufficiently** on an independent observation.
- ★★☆ **Two Star Quality Rated** child care programs have demonstrated a commitment to meeting standards that exceed state health and safety requirements, meet many quality thresholds, and **score well** on an independent observation.
- ★★★ **Three Star Quality Rated** child care programs have demonstrated a commitment to meeting standards that exceed state health and safety requirements, meet numerous quality thresholds, and **score high** on an independent observation.

**Bright from the Start:** Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) is responsible for meeting the child care and early education needs of Georgia's children and their families. It administers Georgia's Pre-K program, licenses child care centers and home-based child care, administers Georgia's Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) program and federal nutrition programs, and manages voluntary quality enhancement programs.

[www.decal.ga.gov](http://www.decal.ga.gov) ★ [www.qualityrated.org](http://www.qualityrated.org)



## High-Quality Early Learning Evens the Playing Field

### Building a Strong Future

As policymakers, you understand that it's important for all children to have the best possible start in their education and their lives. Today's young children will someday become the workforce, leaders, and community members of tomorrow. That's why we must make early learning a priority – investing in high-quality early learning is investing in our nation's future.

Although all children benefit from high-quality early learning, disadvantaged children have the most to gain because they start off school behind their more advantaged peers. High-quality early learning, such as preschool, improves kindergarten readiness and raises performance on academic achievement tests in the early grades.

Other long-term benefits of high-quality early learning are significant, including:

- Reduced crime rates over time;
- Increased employment, income and tax contribution levels;
- Decreased public health care, welfare and child care expenses;
- Reduced special education costs;
- Increased high school graduation rates.

Economists have found that high-quality early learning offers one of the highest returns of any public investment – more than \$7 for every dollar spent.

### The Need for High Quality Early Learning in Fresno County & The Central Valley

Fresno County has the highest poverty rate across all of California and childhood poverty is a consistent predictor for school success. According to Fresno County's 2013 Kindergarten Student Entrance Profile (KSEP), only 37% of students are ready for kindergarten when they walk through the school doors. Many of these students continue to struggle - only 46% of students are reading proficiently by the end of the 3rd grade, and over 15% of students drop out of high school.

The good news is that the Fresno County Office of Education is changing these statistics. Through the improvement and accessibility of high-quality early learning programs, the children of Fresno County are being set on trajectories for success in school and beyond.



fresno county  
office of education  
*Jim A. Yovino, Superintendent*

1111 Van Ness Avenue, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor Towers, Fresno, CA 93721  
(559) 443-4832 | [earlystars.org](http://earlystars.org) | [estrellasjovenes.org](http://estrellasjovenes.org)



## Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC)

The goals of the Federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant are to increase the quality of early learning programs and enroll more disadvantaged children into quality programs. In response to this effort, 38 states have implemented Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). A QRIS rates programs based upon elements research has shown are linked to positive childhood outcomes, such as the quality of teacher-child interactions and teacher education level. In 2011, California was awarded a 4-year \$75 million RTT-ELC grant to develop a regional approach to QRIS.

## Early Stars

Fresno County received funding through the Early Learning Challenge grant to develop a regional QRIS, called Early Stars. Early Stars is a first-of-its-kind program in Fresno County for licensed childcare centers, family care providers and preschools serving children from birth to age five. By supporting early learning providers in their efforts for continuous quality improvement and connecting families with high-quality providers, Early Stars increases the quality and accessibility of early learning programs in Fresno County. The Early Stars QRIS is an easy-to-follow 5-star system that rates the quality of early learning programs. The more stars, the higher the quality.

## Become a Champion for Children

Early Stars requires an investment of time, resources, and support from policymakers.

You can become a champion for children by:

- Advocating for high-quality early learning initiatives, including Early Stars;
- Initiating policy changes that make quality an essential requirement for early learning programs and address the systems barriers;
- Enacting legislation for a high-quality, expanded early education system in California;
- Supporting the key components of a successful QRIS, including training, professional development and community awareness strategies.



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## Chapter 6: Partners

Partners play critical roles in central aspects of state QRIS that government employees may be either unable to undertake, or not best equipped. States rely on these strategic collaborative relationships for multiple purposes. In addition to partners' playing an important role in such areas as technical assistance, fundraising, and research and evaluations, partners also support strategic communications aimed at promoting the program among stakeholders.

Every state interviewed for this research project relied on key partners to advance their QRIS —at all stages of the strategic communications framework. The partner audience is unique from the others. In some cases, states participate in public-private partnerships in support of early childhood education and/or their QRIS. This chapter is not organized by the communications framework, but rather offers some tips for what to consider when looking for communications partners, based on our interviews.

Choosing the right partners to engage in communication activities can be instrumental in seeking and securing buy-in for QRIS among strategic groups, such as the business sector, parents, providers, and policymakers. As states seek to build support for their QRIS and sustained funding for expanding quality early care and education, many have established important allies with business organizations, media companies, early education advocates, foundations, and community-based organizations. What follows are some recommendations on partnership strategies and examples from the states we interviewed for this report:

- **Seek partners who can secure funding or in-kind support for communications activities and campaigns.** Georgia is raising \$18 million from foundations and private donations to support incentives for providers enrolled in their QRIS, and for communications outreach. In part, they hope to fund a \$1 million public awareness communications campaign targeted to parents of young children in 2015-2016. The Robert W. Woodruff Foundation has provided \$5 million toward the overall goal, and other Georgia foundations are also contributing. Georgia has set up media partnerships with Cox Enterprises, Turner Broadcasting, and the Atlanta Journal Constitution for pro-bono TV, radio, and newspaper ads. This work is being done through a separate non-profit 5013c organization that raises private funds.
- **Build partnerships with community and state opinion leaders.** Washington has secured support from The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its QRIS, Early Achievers. The state's QRIS administrators also

work closely with leading early education and child advocacy organizations such as Child Care Aware, Thrive by Five, Children's Alliance in Washington State, League of Education Voters, and MomsRising in employing their communication strategies aimed at informing and engaging providers, parents and families of young children, policymakers, and the general public. These organizations are opinion leaders on issues of early care and education and have standing to speak about the issue.

- **Create an umbrella partner organization to lead QRIS communications. Minnesota's non-profit Parent Aware of School Readiness (PASR) was established to support the state's QRIS.** They helped raise funds for the launch of the program, and for an ongoing multi-year evaluation of the program and scholarships for rated programs. In addition, they are responsible for communications with the public, including parents and policymakers, and are playing a key role implementing strategic communication strategies advocating for state legislation that will fund the transition to the post-RTT funding period.
- **Work with local partners.** Wisconsin works with Milwaukee Succeeds, a group of large corporations and organizations in Milwaukee that have six unique focuses around improving the lives of local children. One of their focuses is quality early child care and education; they measure their success by examining the number of children in three-, four-, and five-star programs in Milwaukee. This partnership helps communicate with the business community and brings businesses to the table. These strategic communications efforts have helped raise funding for efforts such as a mentoring program to help programs move from a two-star to a three-star rating.
- **Develop partnerships with organizations that can reach specific audiences.** Minnesota's Parent Aware of School Readiness (PASR) is in the process of establishing a new partnership with a local major health provider in an effort to ensure that every provider conducting a well-child visit communicates with the parents about QRIS.

## Strategies for working with partners

Partners bring many strengths to a state QRIS, but they also require planning time to coordinate outreach strategies and activities. Several states we interviewed offered advice on how best to engage partners in communications. Here are a few of their tips:

- **Establish a communications coordinating group.** Consider forming a communications coordinating group to develop and promote consistency in messaging and to coordinate communications campaigns and initiatives, and/or outreach efforts. This should include representatives of the various partners as well as the state QRIS program.
- **Identify clear roles.** Ensure all partners have a role and that they are each clear as to what role they are expected to play. Several of those we interviewed pointed out how unproductive it is to invite busy influential people to participate in a communications outreach effort and have them sit quietly throughout a meeting because they are unclear as what the purpose of their engagement should be.
- **Designate spokespersons for the media and/or other audiences.** To avoid overlap, designate spokespersons for a range of topics, rather than have all partners speaking to a particular issue. This could include spokespersons on issues related to providers, parents, or evaluation research.
- **Respect partners' opinions.** It is important to ensure an environment where the input and opinions of all partners is valued and respected, in order to maintain an inclusive, collaborative environment.

QRIS administrators and communicators should identify partnership opportunities to advance their communication objectives. We are encouraged by many of the partnerships that are taking place in support of QRIS. States have a good opportunity to examine the successes of these partnerships and seek to establish similar ones in their state if merited.



## Chapter 7: Public

For this report, we consider the public to be the broadest audience. This includes people other than those who have an interest and stake in quality early child care and education in their communities and states. While the k-12 education community, business leaders, community organizations, faith-based groups, nonprofits serving children, youth, and low-income families are some of the more important segments within this broad definition of the public, it also encompasses all adults. We include all adults because they are likely to know families with young children, pay taxes (some of which support investments in quality early care and education), and vote on candidates and policies that shape this issue.

This section is organized as follows, following the stages of the QRIS communications framework:

- setting objectives and identifying target audiences,
- crafting messages,
- developing outreach strategies,
- conducting tactical execution, and
- collecting and analyzing data.

### Setting objectives and identifying target audiences

#### Setting objectives

Broad objectives for communicating with the public might include:

- raise the awareness and understanding of the value of early childhood care and education in improving education and creating long term economic benefits,
- educate audiences about the investments being made in the state to raise the quality of child care (through the QRIS initiatives), or

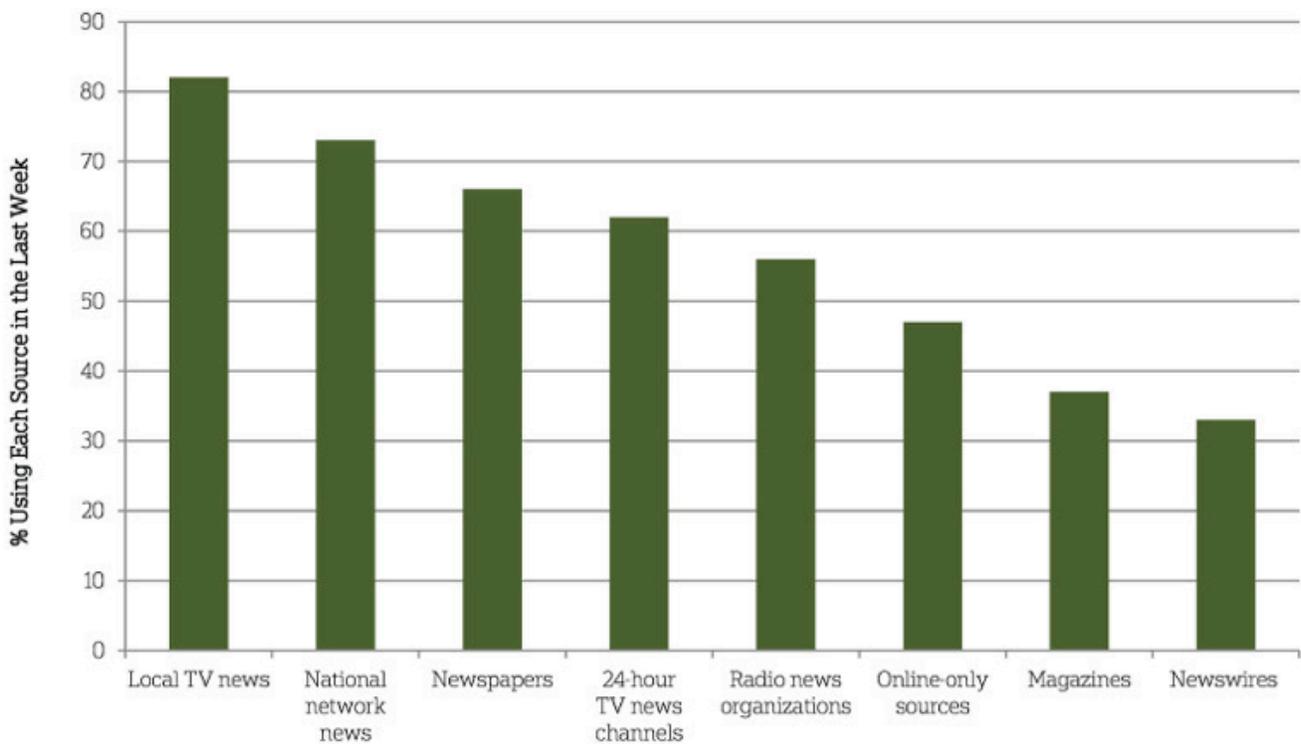
- report on the progress of the QRIS in increasing the number of children attending higher quality child care and early learning programs.

### Targeting the public

The public is a broad audience. So, communications targeting the public rely on mass media and to a newer extent, social media to reach this audience. The way people access and consume information continues to evolve. Media consumption can vary by age, race/ethnicity, educational level, and even political orientation. For states communicating with the public, it is helpful to review relevant media trends.

The use of television, radio, and print newspapers has declined over past years, as accessing news through the internet has increased.<sup>44</sup> However, 82 percent of adults report that local news is their number one source for news. Given this information, communicators are wise to target local news for earned and paid media placements about their state's early care and education quality initiatives.<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 9. News sources used by U.S. adults in a week in early 2014**



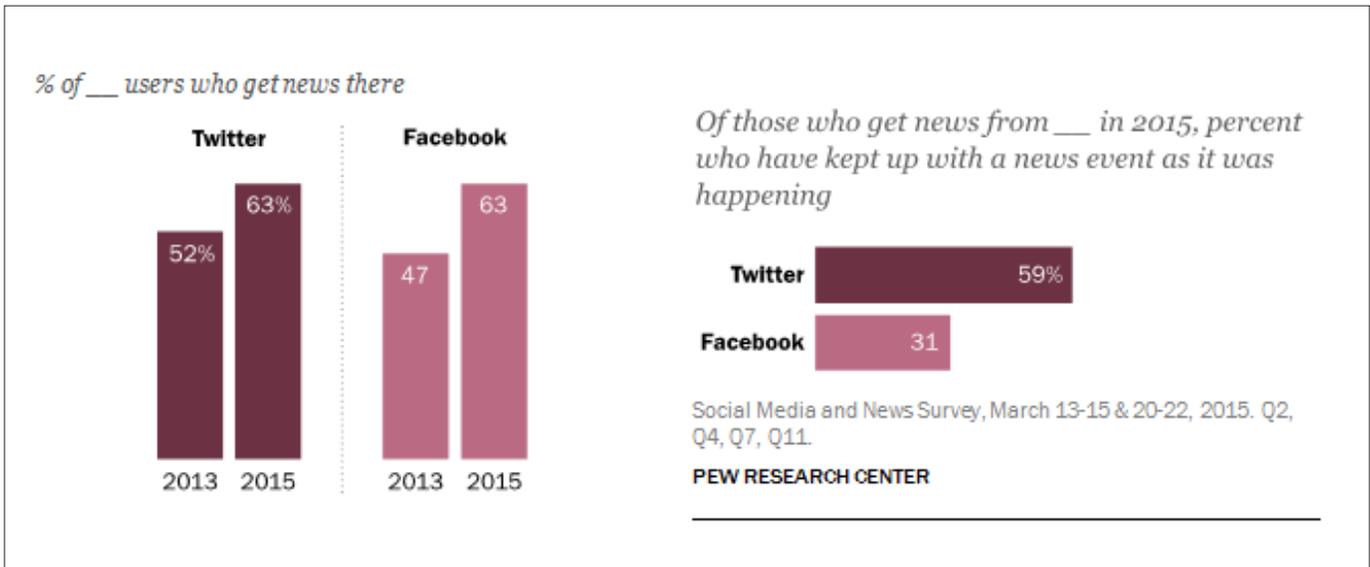
Source: Media Insight Project, 2014

A majority of U.S. adults use social media for information, and to a lesser extent get news from these sites, as reported in the figure below from the Pew Research Center. About half of social media users engage with others by sharing or reposting news and information, or by discussing the information with others. Younger adults spend more time on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube than older women and men do. This presents opportunities for communications programs to develop content about their QRIS that can be shared with audiences via these sites.

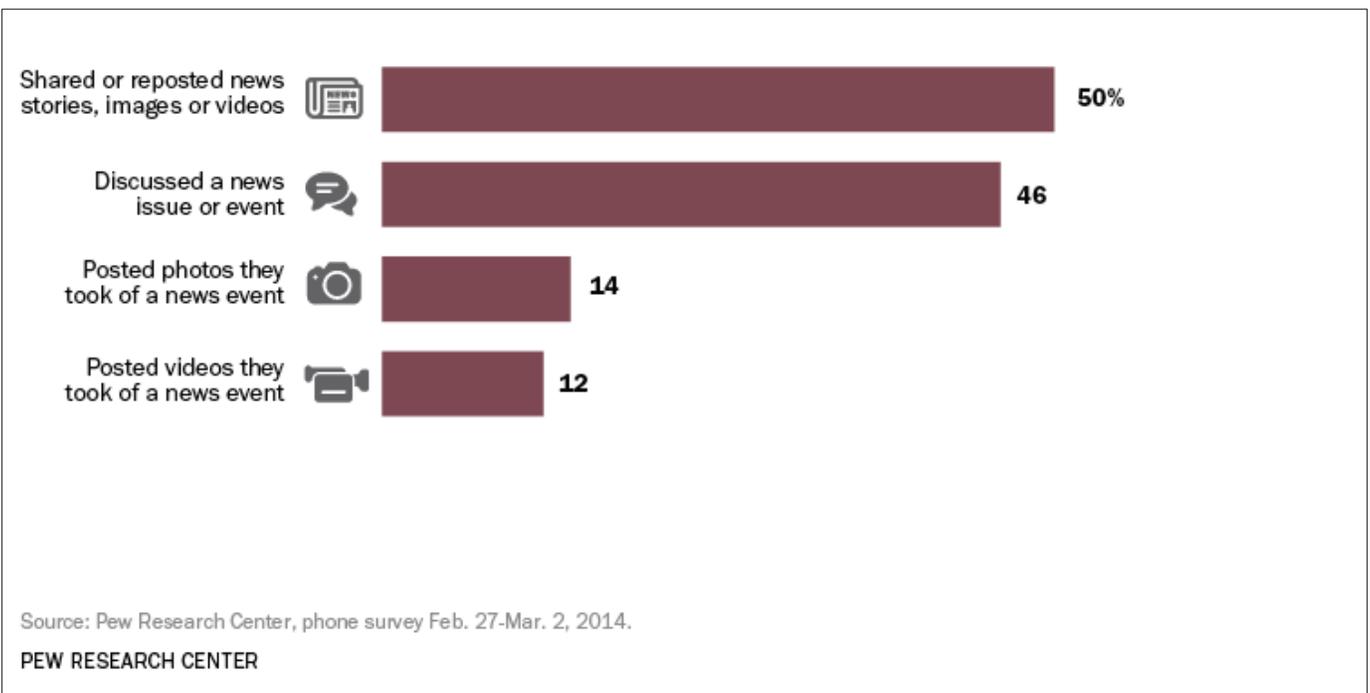
<sup>44</sup> Hugo Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013

<sup>45</sup> Media Insight Project, 2014

**Figure 10. Facebook and Twitter news use is on the rise**

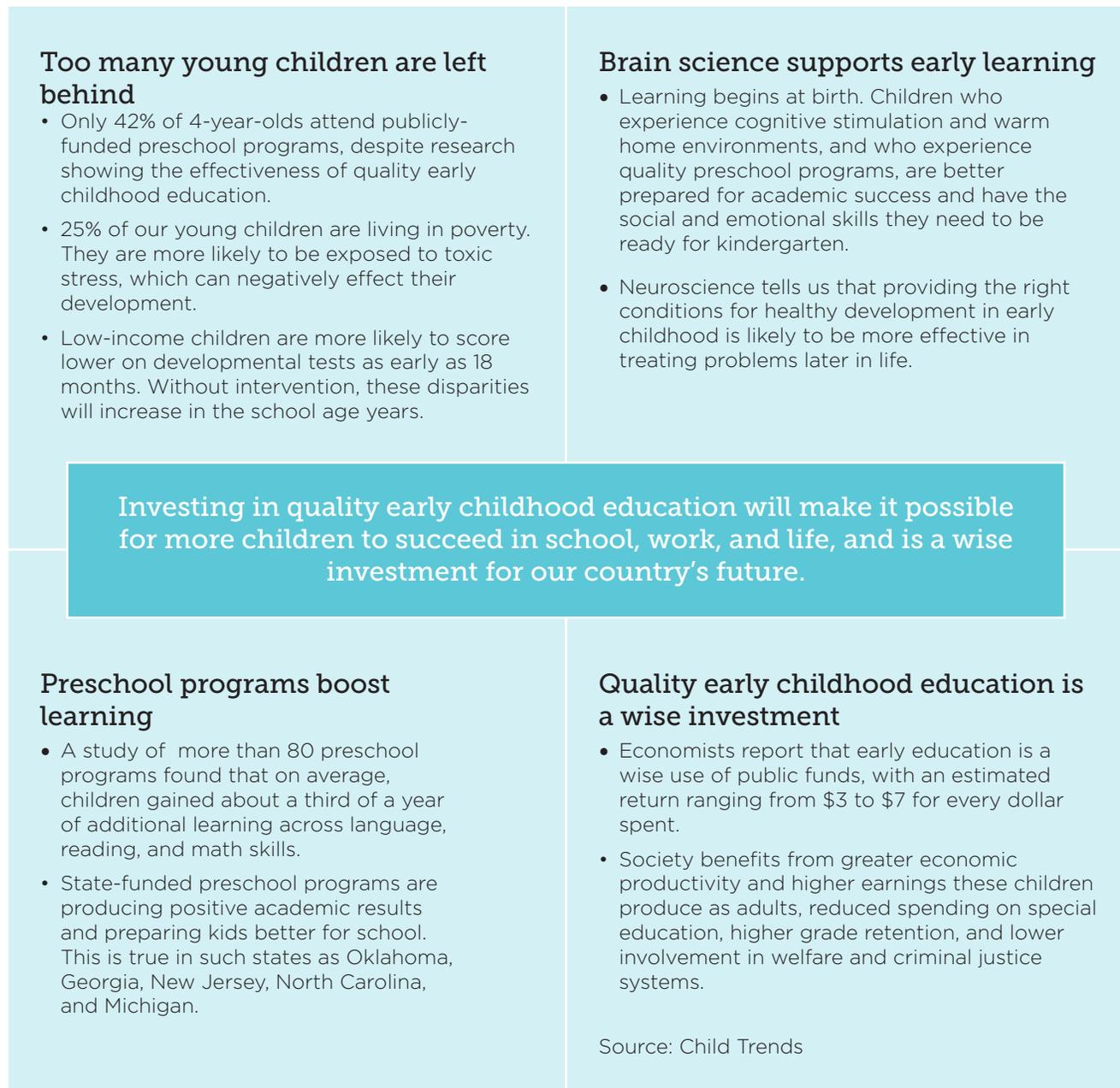


**Figure 11. Percentage of social networking site users who have..**



## Crafting messages

For communicating with the public, it is valuable to develop general messages to shape conversation and engagement. As an example, Child Trends created an overall message statement for the value of investing in quality early child care and education nationally, supported by four key points to anchor the message. This is depicted below, in what we call a message box.

**Figure 12: Sample early childhood education message box**

Sources: Barnett, 2013; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007; FrameWorks Institute, 2009; Murphey, Cooper, & Forry, 2013; Yoshikawa, et al., 2013

Another example of messaging comes from recent work by ZERO TO THREE and the Center on the Developing Child, making the case for greater investment in infants and toddlers through six major points:

1. Early experiences, coupled with the influence of genes, literally shape the architecture of the brain.
2. Early experiences take place in relationships.
3. All domains of development are interdependent.
4. Development is cumulative, so early experiences lay the foundation for all that follows.

5. Because early experiences matter, we must intervene with young children who are at risk.
6. Early experiences are a proven investment in our future.

ZERO TO THREE has published a reference document to help inform infant and toddler messaging ([http://www.zerotothree.org/policy/docs/248\\_infant-toddler-messaging-guide\\_v4.pdf](http://www.zerotothree.org/policy/docs/248_infant-toddler-messaging-guide_v4.pdf)).

State QRIS communication professionals can craft a similar message box for their state with some state-specific messages.

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## Outreach strategies and execution

Just as the substance of the message is important, so too are the visibility and credibility of the people and organizations who deliver the message. Deciding who will deliver a message is part of creating an outreach strategy.

In a state environment, the governor and his or her cabinet members are highly visible messengers. Among the states we interviewed, Washington Governor Jay Inslee, Georgia Governor Nathan Deal, and Delaware Governor Jack Markel were some of the governors who had participated in events promoting early childhood education and the state's QRIS. See the chapter on policymakers for detail.

*State legislators* can be effective champions, particularly in attracting local media coverage. A number of states arrange for state legislators to visit QRIS-rated early education centers and/or participate in reading events. As these legislators learn more about what makes for a quality early childhood education center, they can become effective spokespeople in support of this issue.

*Business leaders and educators* are also credible messengers. Business leaders can tout the economic benefits of early education, including the role it plays in having a well-educated workforce and the return on investment that economists have described for investing in quality early education. Educators can stress how important it is for children to enter kindergarten ready to learn and how quality early education projects success through the school years.

*Faith leaders* can also be valuable supporters of early education. Many communities have faith-based early learning centers. Faith leaders also have the opportunity to reach parents and families with positive messages about the role they each can play in the development and education of their young children.

In our interviews with states, we found a range of communications outreach strategies and tactics used to reach public audiences. These strategies included directly engagement through presentations at civic, business, and faith-based meetings, and exhibits at festivals and country fairs meetings. All of the states interviewed have developed earned media outreach strategies targeting print, online, radio, and TV coverage of their QRIS.

We found some good examples of communications with the public through targeted activities and media relations. Here are some highlights:

**Table 6: Public outreach activities in support of QRIS**

State	Targeted outreach	Media outreach
California (Fresno County)	Present at community events	Generated local media coverage when Fresno hosted state QRIS leaders, have media partnership with Univision, and do weekly promotion on local TV station's education segment
Colorado	Led by the 30 Early Childhood Leadership Councils in the state	Planned for later in 2015
Georgia	Presentations at Rotary Clubs and at Junior League meetings	Arranged for an Atlanta TV station to produce a 30-minute special on early childhood education in Georgia
Delaware	Attend local fairs, town meetings, farmers markets, school district events, and events on military bases	Media coverage of their Delaware Stars Annual Celebration recognizing providers who achieve higher star ratings
Minnesota	Sponsored TV spots during the local PBS kids programs to communicate with parents and caregivers regarding critical brain development in early childhood, and the fact that 50 percent of children in the state are not fully prepared for kindergarten	Targeted Latinos and African American populations through ads on radio stations that serve these populations—Spanish language radio and other stations chosen through audience research
New Hampshire	Delivered PowerPoint presentations throughout the state through local community organizations, to build awareness about QRIS	Recent media stories about research findings on brain development among young children on local TV stations
South Carolina	TV campaign to help parents learn about early childhood development and QRIS—building knowledge and support	Series of PSAs for local TV stations running for three months in Spring 2015
Washington	Governor held a roundtable for business and education leaders on the importance of the state's early childhood education investments; session featured on YouTube	Media coverage about the Early Start Act, which would increase funding for early childhood in the state
Wisconsin	Local YoungStar representatives present at community events	Booking spokespeople on morning TV and radio programs to talk about their YoungStar program

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## Gathering and analyzing data to inform communications

In previous chapters, we have discussed the ways states are using data to inform communications planning. This includes audience research from focus groups, surveys, and direct feedback, as well as information on website metrics, and marketing campaign results.

States can also track media coverage to report quantitative and qualitative information such as the number of media placements in a given time, the reach or impressions (how many people potentially could have been exposed to the story based on the circulation or audience of the outlet), the positive, negative, or neutral tone of the placement, and whether the website was mentioned or displayed in the placement. Communicators can often track whether a media placement leads to additional website visits, particularly when an online outlet provides a link to the QRIS website.

# Conclusion

Significant investments are being made by the states and the federal government to support the care and education of the nation's youngest children, and particularly those living in poor or low-income households. These investments fund increased access to subsidized child care and early learning and preschool programs, as well as QRIS aimed at expanding and supporting high-quality care and education for young children. Many states, along with education, business, and philanthropic organizations, are also providing families of young children with information and resources about the important role they play in fostering their children's development during the first years of life. The obvious goal of all these efforts is to ensure that young children are well prepared for success as they enter kindergarten and move through school and life.

Effective communications is central to a QRIS's success. The communications framework we propose using includes setting objectives, identifying target audiences, crafting messages, developing outreach strategies, conducting tactical execution, and gathering and analyzing data to inform all steps of the planning process. While each state has its own communication objectives, the target audiences are likely to include these five groups—providers, parents, policymakers, partners, and the public. Developing specific objectives, messages, strategies, and tactics for each of the audiences and collecting information about them through focus groups, surveys, and direct conversations is the foundation for planning and implementing a successful communications program.

State QRIS administrators and their communication teams should carefully evaluate their communication efforts on an ongoing basis to determine what is working, what is not, and what can be done better. QRIS communications is a process that works best when there is an interactive flow of information and engagement between the target audiences, all working toward the mutual goal of preparing young children for success in school and life.

Throughout this report, we have identified a number of recommendations and examples from the states we interviewed for communicating effectively with the strategic audiences for a state QRIS. We hope the readers of this report will share their own lessons learned about QRIS communications through the QRIS Learning Network, by visiting the QRIS Compendium ([www.qriscompendium.org](http://www.qriscompendium.org)), and/or by writing the authors of this report at [PR@childtrends.org](mailto:PR@childtrends.org).

wise  
words

**"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." - Benjamin Franklin**

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