

2014

# Evaluation

## *Step Up to Quality*

To evaluate the development and implementation of Nebraska's Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System

Request for Proposals  
First Five Nebraska  
8/25/2014



## **Background of Step Up to Quality**

In 2013, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB507, establishing the Step Up to Quality Child Care Act - resulting in Nebraska's Early Childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Nebraska is now one of over 40 states that are in some phase of development or implementation of an early childhood QRIS.

The primary goal of Nebraska's *Step Up to Quality* is to improve the quality of early care and education services and, thus, increase positive outcomes for young children. The QRIS will enable parents to evaluate available child care options and make informed decisions in selecting affordable, developmentally positive care environments for their youngest children. A more informed customer base will encourage providers to improve business practices, advance their professional development, and keep their quality of care high to meet the increased market demand.

For providers, the QRIS offers a pathway to improve their level of quality through training, education, and coaching opportunities. Financial incentives are built into the QRIS by providing scholarships for teaching staff to pursue college coursework, and offering quality incentive bonuses for providers who advance up the steps. It also implements a tiered reimbursement scale based on provider's quality rating scores, creating an incentive to strive for affordable, higher quality programs while agreeing to accept the child care subsidy as payment.

We know that providers who serve children on the child care subsidy are serving the children most at risk of failing in school. Many of these providers want to improve their quality but are unable to do so because it means being paid less, thus having fewer resources to invest in offering quality services. The QRIS helps respond to the needs of providers so they can deliver affordable, stimulating, and developmentally positive services to the children and families most in need.

## **Nebraska's System**

In 2013, the Nebraska State Legislature advanced LB507 which put into effect a new quality rating and improvement system to raise the caliber of child care services receiving the greatest amounts of state and federal dollars from the child care subsidy. Since then, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) have worked diligently to develop the *Step Up to Quality* system for the state. Some key activities that have been completed in the past year include:

- Defining roles and responsibilities of each agency related to implementation
- Convening a broad stakeholder group to provide input on the Quality Standards and Indicators
- Working with a cross-agency state team to finalize Quality Standards and Indicators

- Working with federal technical assistant consultants to develop details of the *Step Up to Quality* Standards and Indicators, flow charts depicting supports to programs, and the necessary administrative procedures
- Developing the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System – the database to house both professional and organizational data needed for establishing the ratings for *Step Up to Quality*
- Hiring staff at DHHS and NDE to work directly with *Step Up to Quality*
- Designing forms for programs to complete as they move through the levels in *Step Up to Quality*
- Clarifying budget needs for *Step Up to Quality* during the current and upcoming budget biennium
- Developing the list of providers required to participate in *Step Up to Quality* in Year One. Notifying those programs with a certified letter about the requirement to participate
- Developing print materials for *Step Up to Quality* and distributing the information through many sessions across the state with early childhood care and education professionals and programs
- Coordinating with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Office and the DHHS Public Health Department to develop training and assessment for the Nutrition and Physical Activities Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC) integration into *Step Up to Quality*
- Training the initial set of quality observers in the Environmental Rating Scale Observation Tools and the CLASS Observation Tool to reliability as defined by the authors
- Developing new program orientation to be delivered face to face and online
- Putting accountability practices into place to award the quality incentive bonuses as programs advance up the steps of quality
- Putting accounting practices into place to award the tiered reimbursement for child care subsidy as programs advance up the steps of quality

Nebraska's QRIS is designed around five steps to quality with the necessary criteria outlined at each level <http://www.education.ne.gov/StepUpToQuality/pubs/overview.pdf>. *Step Up to Quality* is a voluntary system; however, approximately 65 programs/providers are required to participate in the first three years.

- *Year 1:* July 1, 2014 - December 31, 2014, programs/providers who receive \$500,000 or more annually from the child care subsidy enroll in the system;
- *Year 2:* July 1, 2015 - December 31, 2015, programs/providers who receive \$250,000 or more annually from the child care subsidy enroll in the system; and
- *Year 3:* July 1, 2016 - December 31, 2016, programs/providers who receive \$250,000 in the preceding fiscal year or six months after receipt of assistance, whichever is later, enroll in the system.

The ratings are slated to go public in 2017.

## **Evaluation – A Critical Component**

With the significant investment made in our state's infrastructure, policymakers wanted assurance on the progress of the QRIS' development and implementation. However, the addition of an evaluation component to the legislation would have increased the cost of the system. We are fortunate in Nebraska to have a private sector that understand the benefits of early childhood investments and are interested in ensuring that high quality is embedded in the development of new programs and systems. With this in mind, the private sector stepped forward to fund an evaluation of *Step Up to Quality*.

The purpose of this evaluation is to determine if the legislative direction for development and early implementation of the QRIS is being met. While the implementation of *Step Up to Quality* is in its infancy, several markers have and are occurring that will provide valuable information for moving forward. At this point, the frequency of evaluating Nebraska's QRIS is still unknown. We do, however, believe there will be future phases of evaluation that measure the effectiveness of the system, identify areas for improvement, and ultimately answer if providers are improving their level of quality, are children having better outcomes, and can we link the two together.

### **Evaluation Questions**

Nebraska's *Step Up to Quality* is in its early implementation phase; the questions below reflect that stage of development. While *Step Up to Quality* is required for certain providers and is voluntary for others, we do not think it is too early to begin gauging overall interest in the QRIS on the part of voluntary provider participation.

The timeframe for collection of data spans from January 2, 2015 - December 1, 2015 and includes two phases. This timeframe will capture programs/providers enrolling on July 1, 2014 and July 1, 2015, respectively. Please design your proposal around the following two phases - making sure information regarding mandatory and voluntary participation is kept separate.

#### **1. Phase #1 Questions:**

- a. How many programs/providers (required and voluntary) are enrolled in the system and at what Step did they enter? Are all required programs/providers enrolled?
- b. How many children, birth to kindergarten-entrance age, does each program/provider serve and, of those children, how many are on the child care subsidy?
- c. What type of program/provider are they? (i.e.: Center-Based, Family Home I or II, Head Start, etc.)
- d. How long have they been in operation?
- e. What is their geographic location?
- f. How many programs/providers are in the Early Childhood Professional Record System?

- g. How many emails, phone calls, and web hits have been received regarding *Step Up to Quality*?
- h. Of all the programs/providers enrolled, did they attend one of the orientation sessions held across the state?
- i. How many other programs/providers attended one of the orientation sessions but are not enrolled in the system?

## 2. Phase #2 Questions:

- a. Continue Phase #1 and add programs/providers enrolling as of July 1, 2015.
- b. How did enrollees view the ease of the enrollment process? Did they think the five rating levels were fair?
- c. How many enrollees have utilized incentives and what incentives did they access? (i.e.: additional training, scholarships, coaching)
- d. What type of program/provider accessed which incentives?
- e. If a program/provider received incentive bonuses or higher rates of subsidy, how did they utilize those funds?
- f. How many programs/providers have moved up a level since enrollment? 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5?
- g. Which Step requirements are the biggest barriers to upward movement?
- h. What are those barriers?
- i. How many parents have heard of *Step Up to Quality* and what have they heard?

## Application Timeline

Release – Request for Proposals (RFP)	August 25, 2014
<b>Webinar/Conference Call – 10:00-11:30 a.m. CT</b>	<b>September 10, 2014</b>
Proposals Due Outlining Phase #1 & #2	November 24, 2014
Notification of Award	December 15, 2014
Contract Begins	January 2, 2015
Preliminary Findings Due - Phase #1	April 30, 2015
Preliminary Findings Due - Phase #1 & #2	December 1, 2015
Final Report Due	February 1, 2016

## Proposal Requirements

To clarify questions regarding the RFP, interested applicants are encouraged to participate in the **webinar/conference call on September 10, 2014 from 10:00-11:30 a.m. CT. To receive the call information and URL address, send your name and email to [mbuse@firstfivebraska.org](mailto:mbuse@firstfivebraska.org) no later than September 8<sup>th</sup>**. Answers provided to questions asked during the webinar will be posted on the [www.firstfivebraska.org](http://www.firstfivebraska.org) website following the webinar.

The body of the proposal, including the budget, should be no more than ten pages and must be received electronically no later than 5:00 p.m. on Monday, November 24<sup>th</sup>. Any supporting documents should be listed as appendices. Send to Becky Veak at First Five Nebraska [bveak@firstfivebraska.org](mailto:bveak@firstfivebraska.org).

The funding available for this project is \$150,000. Along with your proposal, please submit a detailed budget outlining staff expenses and costs associated with proposed activities for Phase #1 and #2. Expenses for indirect costs must be no more than 10% of the requested amount. Funds will be distributed using the following timeline:

- One-third upon contract signatures (January 2015)
- One-third upon submission of Preliminary Findings (May 2015)
- One-third upon submission of Final Report (February 2016)

### **Scoring Criteria and Review Process**

Proposals will be reviewed and scored in early December by an external national panel of experts in Early Childhood Quality Rating Systems. Recommendations from the external panel will be provided to First Five Nebraska and the *Step Up to Quality* Director for approval and ultimate selection.

The criteria for scoring will be based on the extent to which the applicant most clearly describes how the approach chosen will most effectively answer the questions identified in Phase #1 and #2 and any subsequent questions identified by the applicant. There will be a total of 100 points plus the opportunity for 10 extra points. Scoring will contain the following elements:

1. Approach and design of the evaluation (40 points)
2. Evaluation team qualifications and experience (30 points)
3. Budget proposal (30 points)
4. Conceptualize and suggest questions for a Phase #3 evaluation (extra 10 points)

*Approach and Design of the Evaluation* – the extent to which the applicant clearly describes the following:

- method(s) proposed to collect the data;
- how closely the design meets the requirements of the RFP;
- how well the proposed timeline aligns with the timeframe of the RFP;
- allows for feedback into program improvement;
- data collection minimizes the burden on the system and providers

*Evaluation Team Qualifications and Experience* – the extent to which the applicant clearly describes the following:

- past experience in similar projects;
- capacity and organizational support for completing the work on time;
- capacity to conduct interviews in multiple languages as needed;
- ability to present information concisely and understandable;
- familiarity and understanding of child care environments

*Budget Proposal* – the extent to which the applicant demonstrates the funds requested are necessary and sufficient to carry out the proposed design:

- budget relates directly to the activities and staff time necessary;
- proposed services represent a good value