

# Colorado Shines Validation Study 2015-2017

## Executive Summary

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As a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant recipient, Colorado's Office of Early Childhood (OEC) has been working to promote smarter management, better quality, a deeper understanding of children, a stronger workforce, and increased family/community engagement within a unified and comprehensive early childhood system. A key component of this work includes the development of a "second generation" Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)—a method used to assess, enhance, and communicate the level of quality in early education and care for licensed providers in Colorado. Colorado was one of the first states to create a QRIS and has continuously worked to evaluate, refine, and improve the system. Bolstered by the RTT-ELC grant, Colorado launched its new QRIS, Colorado Shines, in 2015 and immediately engaged in a validation study from 2015–2017 (led by Child Trends) to ensure that the rating structure works for children, families, programs, and providers. The purpose of this study is to (1) support Colorado's efforts to implement a QRIS that measures quality in a meaningful way; (2) utilize clear, valid, and efficient procedures for verifying program quality; and (3) provide initial insights into how the Colorado Shines quality framework can support children's development and readiness for school success. The full report is organized according to the following topics:

1. Outreach and Participation in Colorado Shines
2. Participants' Perceptions of Colorado Shines
3. Quality Improvement: Supports and Perceptions of Changes in Practice
4. Colorado Shines' Structure and Validity

### Outreach and Participation in Colorado Shines

This section of the report provides an overview of Colorado Shines recruitment efforts and participation rates, including providers' perceptions of motivating factors and barriers to participation. Evaluation questions addressed in this section are:

1. What is the level of participation in Colorado Shines?
2. How does Colorado Shines support outreach to increase participation? What recruitment strategies have been more and less successful?
3. What motivates participation in Colorado Shines?
4. What are the barriers to participating in Colorado Shines?

## Key Findings

**Participation has increased steadily over time.** The number of programs receiving Colorado Shines Level 2 through 5 ratings has increased steadily since June 2015, reaching a high of 1,323 centers and 727 family child care homes (FCC) providers in May 2017. As of May 2017, about half (48%) of all licensed programs were participating in Colorado Shines at a Level 2 or higher.

**Relationships are critical for recruitment.** QI Navigators reported that building relationships with providers and using existing knowledge about their program and needs makes recruitment efforts more effective. In-person visits with providers were noted as the most effective mode for recruitment. Less effective strategies included those that were not individualized for providers (e.g., mass emails, distributing flyers).

**Buy-in is the main recruitment challenge.** The biggest recruitment challenge has been obtaining buy-in from providers and correcting negative preconceptions of the QRIS, especially with FCC home providers (i.e., general distrust, hesitancy for their home to be observed). Recruitment has also been more challenging when providers lack access to technology or technology skills.

**Providers often participate in Colorado Shines to access professional development, but they also perceive the rating process as overly cumbersome or the ratings inaccurate.** Providers are motivated to participate in Colorado Shines at higher levels because of the associated professional development opportunities and access to additional funds. Conversely, providers are not motivated to participate in Colorado Shines because they perceive the rating application and process to be difficult, and are concerned that their potential rating would not accurately reflect their program's quality.



**The value of Colorado Shines in making parents and families aware of quality is still a question.** Providers were divided over the potential for Colorado Shines to help them attract families. About half reported it was a primary motivating factor to join Colorado Shines, and half reported that they did not believe their participation in Colorado Shines would help them better attract families to their program.

**Providers and implementers (coaches, Councils, etc.) differ in their perceptions of barriers to participation.** Level 1 providers reported that they are not, or would not be, interested in participating in Colorado Shines at higher levels because they do not need a rating to attract families; that they perceive the rating application and process to be difficult; or that they worry that their potential rating would not accurately reflect their program's quality. Councils reported that providers are typically less willing to participate if their program is geographically isolated from other programs, if they have a long waitlist, and if they have staff with many years of experience providing child care. Key stakeholders perceived that providers are concerned about participating in Colorado Shines because of the technological requirements and questions about the sustainability of the system after the RTT-ELC grant expires.

## Recommendations

**Recruitment strategies should focus on relationship building and an ongoing communications campaign to continue building participation in Colorado Shines.** Building trust and rapport with providers, especially those new to Colorado Shines and QRIS, takes time and is best accomplished through in-person interactions. This kind of recruitment method can be resource-intensive, requiring many staff hours and possibly travel, so it should be limited to programs registered with Colorado Shines that have expressed their readiness to participate to Councils. The OEC should continue to support Councils by investing in effective outreach strategies and de-emphasizing, or discontinuing, less effective outreach strategies like mass communication. Promoting awareness

and general information sharing can instead shift toward statewide Colorado Shines marketing and communications campaigns for both parents and providers.

**Continue to invest in the incentives to participate that are most meaningful for providers: quality improvement resources, professional development, and marketing to families.** Colorado should continue to promote the professional development opportunities afforded by participation in Colorado Shines (e.g., coaching, the credentialing process, and the Professional Development Information System)—as this was identified as an important motivator for providers—in addition to quality improvement resources (i.e., funds for materials and coaching) and strategies to promote



awareness of Colorado Shines among families. While access to professional development was frequently noted as a reason to participate by Level 1 providers, it was identified by only one-third of these providers. In other words, Colorado might consider continuing conversations and conducting surveys with Level 1 providers to learn more about which professional development opportunities—including additional opportunities—might best meet their interests and engage them in participating in Colorado Shines at higher levels. To increase parental awareness of Colorado Shines while also increasing demand for rated programs, the OEC might continue to invest in an ongoing marketing and communications campaign. Other states have invested in public service

announcements via public television, radio, and online advertising. Increasing parental knowledge about the importance of high-quality child care, and promoting Colorado Shines as a tool to help them choose higher-quality programs, may be an important driver of program participation after RTT-ELC.

## Participants' Perceptions and Experiences of Colorado Shines

This section of the report summarizes providers' perceptions of Colorado Shines, their experiences with the rating process, and recommendations for future implementation. Evaluation questions addressed in this section are:

1. What are providers' overall perceptions of Colorado Shines?
2. What are providers' perceptions of specific aspects of Colorado Shines?
3. What challenges, if any, did providers encounter with the rating process?
4. What are providers' recommendations for Colorado Shines?

### Key Findings

**Providers generally feel positive about Colorado Shines.** When asked to rank their overall impressions of Colorado Shines, most respondents felt extremely positive, positive, or somewhat positive. Providers were generally positive about the goals, value, and intentions of Colorado Shines; their sense that they would recommend Colorado Shines to other providers; and their experiences with coaching, professional development/trainings, and the supports provided.

**Challenges generally related to the time needed to participate, frustration with the process, confusion about the application process, and technology issues.** While overall perceptions of Colorado Shines were positive, those who responded to questions to gather more information shared concerns that focused primarily on four key themes: (1) the amount of time needed to participate; (2) unfair, inflexible, or frustrating aspects of the rating process; (3) confusing aspects of Colorado Shines, or those for which respondents received inconsistent communication; (4) and challenges with technology or document uploads. A small group of FCC providers also shared a unique concern that Colorado Shines was designed more for centers than for homes.

**Improvements suggested by providers centered around the Colorado Shines rating structure and the rating process.** Family child care providers primarily suggested tailoring Colorado Shines for the unique structure of their care settings, reducing the time/paperwork involved in the rating process, and offering support with technology requirements or addressing challenges related to the online platforms. Center suggestions focused on clarifying the evidence needed to meet specific requirements, considering the unique structures and philosophies of programs across the state, simplifying the rating process and reducing the paperwork, and providing more support during the rating process from a coach or mentor.

## Recommendations

**Continue supporting strategies to reduce the time needed from providers to complete a rating application, reduce confusion related to the application process, and reduce frustration related to technology.** Develop a process to streamline the documentation requirements when there is an opportunity to revise the evidence guide. For example, commission a group of stakeholders to review the evidence guide, in conjunction with notes kept by quality rating specialists, to identify where clarification may be needed around evidence requirements, and where documentation could be streamlined or pared down. Participants might include quality rating specialists, a coach, an Early Childhood Council member, a QI Navigator, and a few representatives from the provider community. This recommendation also supports the state's ongoing efforts to provide support and tutorials around the use of the Colorado Shines web-based platform and PDIS to address technology glitches inherent with any online system, and to continue supporting users who are less tech-savvy.



**Engage providers who feel that Colorado Shines may not align with their program structure or philosophy, to better understand and consider their perspectives when there is an opportunity to revise Colorado Shines.** Talk with FCC providers to address perceptions that Colorado Shines is designed for centers, rather than FCC homes. Similarly, Montessori programs and programs in rural or isolated areas identified challenges related to alignment of their program philosophies and structures with the Colorado Shines rating criteria. Given opportunities to revise aspects of Colorado Shines, engaging these providers during the process will help to ensure that the rating structure works for their programs.

## Quality Improvement: Supports and Perceptions of Changes in Practice

This section describes the implementation and perceptions of quality improvement supports offered through Colorado Shines, and whether these supports result in perceived changes in provider practices. Evaluation questions addressed are:

1. How are Colorado Shines' quality improvement supports implemented?
2. How are coaches and QI Navigators trained and supported to engage in quality improvement activities with Colorado Shines participants?
3. What are the perceptions of the effectiveness of Colorado Shines' quality improvement supports?
4. What are providers' perceptions of changes in practice that have resulted from Colorado Shines?

### Key Findings

**Coaching and QI roles focused on classroom environment and application support.** Coaches reported spending much of their time observing and providing feedback to providers, and helping them with their classroom/program environment. QI Navigators reported spending their time with providers to help them navigate the Colorado Shines website and application, and the QRIS and PDIS; and orienting them to Colorado Shines.

**Coaches noted that program observations, providing feedback, and relationship building were the most effective QI strategies.** The most effective coaching strategies (mentioned by several respondents) are observing and providing feedback, helping providers with their environments, and building relationships with providers. Issues that hinder the effectiveness of coaching are the lack of sufficient hours to work with providers and the inability to provide consistent support over time.

**In-person visits are effective for recruitment.** According to QI Navigators, the most effective strategy to provide technical assistance is in-person visits with providers. Their biggest challenges are related to technology—providers who lack experience and/or access to technology, and issues they have encountered with data systems.

**Demand for coaching is high.** Almost half of the Councils did not think they have enough coaches to provide services for Colorado Shines in their communities. Further, most Councils described the limited capacity of coaches—due to lack of funding, hours, and training—as a challenge.

**Colorado Shines providers reported making programmatic changes.** Providers are making several changes as a direct result of participating in Colorado Shines. Roughly one-third reported making programmatic changes like adopting a child assessment tool and/or curriculum.

### Recommendations

**Consider the most efficient and effective way to maximize resources to support programs.** Councils, coaches, and providers agreed that one of the biggest challenges they faced was insufficient time to work together. Many providers felt they lacked enough access to coaches or coaching hours. This finding may be due, in part, to the timing of this study and participation goals articulated in Colorado's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant. From 2015 to 2017, participation in Colorado Shines grew rapidly; it simply may not have been possible to provide extensive coaching to all providers who pursued a rating under the new system. Even if the pace of new ratings and the request for more coaching slow in the coming years, developing a strategy to maximize existing coaching resources will be an important strategy for OEC. This may involve

developing coaching assessments and program self-assessments to understand programs' self-identified needs and readiness for coaching, so that Councils can strategize about how and when to deploy coaches to work with programs. In addition, some coaches should consider specializing in certain areas of support (e.g., curriculum implementation, CLASS assessment, family engagement) so that they can be utilized in a focused way across programs. QI Navigators can also continue to develop efficient ways to work with providers while offering to meet in-person to provide face-to-face supports. For example, QI Navigators can offer open houses where they can address providers' questions about Colorado Shines, clarify application requirements, and offer support to providers who are not as comfortable with technology.

## Colorado Shines' Structure and Validity

This section of the report examines the extent to which the Colorado Shines rating structure, quality standards, and measurement strategies result in accurate and meaningful ratings of program quality. Evaluation questions addressed in this section are:

1. To what extent are the key constructs included in the Colorado Shines Framework supported by empirical literature on quality practices that are linked to child outcomes?
2. To what extent is the Colorado Shines rating process clearly articulated?
3. To what extent do the inter-rater reliability procedures for conducting classroom observations and assigning program ratings align with best practice?
4. To what extent do Level 3-5 programs have higher observed program quality than Level 2 programs, as measured by the ECERS-3, ITERS-R, and FCCERS-R?
5. To what extent do programs that earn their rating through an alternative pathway demonstrate levels of quality comparable to fully rated Level 3-5 programs?

### Key Findings

**The Colorado Shines quality categories are grounded in research.** The evidence review demonstrates an empirical basis for the Colorado Shines quality categories and criteria. In some instances, the research demonstrates mixed findings or limited empirical evidence. These are topics (e.g., workforce qualifications, ratios, the most effective family engagement practices) in which the ECE field continues to investigate the relationships between standards of quality and children's development and learning.



**The rating process is clearly articulated for program verifiers and includes an inter-rater reliability process that will help ensure consistency across staff.** The policies and procedures that guide the Colorado Shines rating process are clearly articulated and aligned with best practice, which can help to ensure consistency across rating specialists and assessors and the accuracy of rating determinations.

**The Colorado Shines rating structure accurately assesses differences in program quality.** The results of the analysis included in this chapter provide evidence for the validity of the Colorado Shines rating structure in supporting meaningful differences in observed quality. There were significant and meaningful differences in observed quality between Level 3-5 and Level 2 programs on the ECERS-3, ITERS-R, and FCCERS-R.

**Initial evidence suggests the alternative pathways process assigns accurate ratings of program quality.** While the alternative pathways process assigns ratings as intended, further evaluation can provide more detailed insight into whether these programs would rate similarly if they underwent a full Colorado Shines rating process.

## Recommendations

**Pursue periodic updates to the Colorado Shines quality categories and indicator review.** The full Colorado Shines Evidence Review report notes that, as the ECE field continues to expand and refine the evidence base for quality practices, Colorado Shines leaders can integrate new findings into ongoing discussions and, periodically, QRIS quality indicator revisions.

**Continue to incorporate validation analyses as part of the Colorado Shines ongoing evaluation plan.** The findings suggest that the Colorado Shines rating process can distinguish quality among child care programs. However, it may be important to monitor whether the rating process continues to differentiate quality over time. Ongoing monitoring will be important for many reasons. First, as the overall Level 2-5 participation rate increases, the mix of programs at Level 2 may continue to change. For example, there may be more distinct variations in quality between Level 2 programs that decide not to apply for a higher rating and those that tried to advance but received a Level 2 rating. As was true in this study, the characteristics of Level 2 programs will continue to have important implications for understanding the extent to which the Colorado Shines rating structure can determine meaningful differences in program quality.

Second, as more programs participate in Colorado Shines at higher levels, additional types of analyses will be possible to provide further understanding of how well the rating structure functions. For example, when more programs participate at Levels 3 through 5, it may be possible to determine if Level 5 programs are of higher quality than Level 3 programs. It may also be possible to collect data from more alternative pathways programs, and to examine the extent to which Head Start programs are comparable to Level 4 programs and accredited programs are comparable to Level 3 programs. Analyzing data on these programs over time will continue to inform an understanding of the overall performance of the Colorado Shines rating structure.



## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Colorado Shines rating structure is a valid approach for identifying meaningful differences in observed quality. By conducting a validation study in the first years of implementation, Colorado is equipped with data to inform minor adjustments to the system in the coming years to support its own continuous quality improvement efforts.