

Head Start Program Performance Standards 2017: QRIS and Data Systems

(gentle country music)

Colleen: Hi, I'm Colleen Rathgeb.

Beth Meloy: And I'm Beth Meloy. So, Colleen, why don't you tell us what we're gonna to be talking about today?

Colleen: Alright! Today, we're gonna be talking about quality rating and improvement systems, in state educational data systems. You can find both of these requirements in section 1302-53 of the revised performance standards.

Beth: That's so interesting; I've heard a lot about these systems and that Head Start programs should participate in them, so I'm really eager to learn more.

Colleen: Alright, so how about we start with quality rating and improvement systems, or QRIS?

Beth: That sounds good to me.

Colleen: So, under Section 1302.53, we require programs to participate in their state or local QRIS if certain conditions are met. So, there are three criteria. The first, is that the QRIS accept Head Start monitoring data, to document the quality indicators in its state tiered system. The second, is that the participation in the QRIS would not impact a programs ability to meet the Head Start performance standards. And lastly, that the program has not provided a compelling reason not to apply.

One thing it's important to note, is that American Indian and Alaskan Native programs are exempt from this requirement, though of course they may still choose to participate. Before requiring Head Start programs to participate in the QRIS, we thought a lot about the benefits and ways to avoid the duplication. So, that's how we really came to this requirement around participation based on those three conditions.

Beth: So, I thought a lot of programs were already participating in QRIS.

Colleen: That's true. The first state wide QRIS system was implemented in 1998, and since then, many of QRIS systems have really come a long way. So, although QRIS is implemented state wide in most states, we do see a higher participation of Head Start programs, when there is an automatic pathway to participation. Many of some states provide Head Start programs automatically get the mid-tier, or the highest tier, of participation, as long as they are in good standing with the Head Start requirements.

And we do think it's important for programs to participate in these state and local quality improvement efforts. While we know there are challenges. We think the value of participating really outweighs those challenges.

So, we've heard from programs that the support they get through coaching, or other supports to meet these higher levels of standards really have been helpful. And as well it really makes clear that Head Start is part of a larger system of continuous quality improvement and early childhood education going on in those states. And finally, one of the other progresses of QRIS is really to help parents understand early childhood programs in their state, and the quality that they are providing.

Beth: Wow, so there are a lot of benefits to participating in QRIS. It makes sense now that so many programs already do.

Colleen: And I don't think it's really helped that, for a couple of years now, one of the priorities of the state collaboration offices has been helping programs participate in QRIS. One thing I want to say before we move on, is to make sure people know there will be there are and there will be more resources available around QRIS from the National Center on Early Childhood Quality, or NCQA.

Beth: So, one additional question before we move on. I was wondering, what qualifies as a QRIS that accepts monitoring data, as you said, and what might be a compelling reason for a program not to participate?

Colleen: So, those are good questions Beth. But as, really as a lot of various variation in states, there's really not one simple way to answer. QRIS programs are also evolving and changing at the state and local level, so we've kept this intentionally quite broad. We also, this is a requirement, that the effective date, or the when it's going to come into compliance, isn't gonna be until the end of this, towards the end of this year.

So, one thing we do can clearly say is if a program does not, if a state does not accept, doesn't have an automatic pathway like we talked about, or doesn't accept Head Start data as any proof, so there's no reciprocity with Head Start data, clearly it doesn't meet the first condition, that the state has to accept some Head Start data. And in those states, Head Start programs would absolutely not be required to participate.

Beth: Okay, so I think programs will really appreciate all of that information. I don't think I have any more question on QRIS right now, so do we want to switch?

Colleen: Okay! We can start talking more about the state data systems. So, this is also in section 1302.53, and it tells programs that they really should integrate, and share relevant data with state educational data systems. To the extent practicable. And also condition that they can receive similar benefits, and similar support from other early childhood programs.

Beth: Okay.

Colleen: And again, one more thing, that tribal programs also are exempted from this requirement.

Beth: Okay, so, can we back up just a little bit. What is a state education data system?

Colleen: There are multiple types of these systems that a state might have.

Several states have what is known as a Statewide Longitudinal Data System. Which incorporates educational data on children, sometimes from preschool, through high school, and sometimes beyond. You might hear these called SLDS, or P through 20, or P through 20W, (laughing) which is where they go from preschool, through the full educational system, then into the work force.

So, the idea--states are also building Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems, and these are more about different types of early childhood programs integrating their data. So, Head Start, and Pre-K services for children under IDEA, and so they bring these systems together, so that they can talk to each other.

Beth: That makes sense.

Colleen: So, the primary difference is the scope. The SLDS is about kind of looking across the whole education of a child, and the ECIDS, or the Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems, is just around getting early childhood programs to talk to each other. Currently, many states are using their Race to the Top grants or, other grants funding that has come out of the department of education to build these data systems, and to incorporate early childhood data.

Beth: So, why are these systems so important? What are states using the data for?

Colleen: So, these data systems, particularly those that integrate early childhood data, can provide states with cross program data that really can help inform their early childhood policies and services.

For example, a state would have more accurate information, to be able to determine the number of children that are actually benefiting from early care and education programs in their states, and where there might be gaps in those services. Also, if states can connect their early childhood integrated data systems with the longitudinal data systems, they can examine how children who are participating in different early childhood programs are doing when they reach elementary school and beyond.

Beth: Okay, so that all sounds really important and exciting, but why is it important for Head Start programs to participate and share their data with states? I mean, I thought that the PIR form of already captures some of that data for Head Start.

Colleen: Head Start programs are an integral part of the overall early childhood system in a state. And, participation by Head Start programs provides the Head Start community a voice in the data system including how it's built and which questions are being asked.

Additionally, states need the most accurate and complete picture possible to be able to make informed decisions. In most states, Head Start programs serve a very large portion of the most vulnerable children in the state.

Beth: Okay, that makes sense, I think. Um, I can see how having Head Start programs participate can really help states, and help them know about the early childhood system in their own state and how well it's working, but are there any more direct benefits to a Head Start program at the local level?

Colleen: Sure, so a local program can learn more about how Head Start children are doing in their state once they leave their program if their part of the state longitudinal data system. In some states, programs also can receive information back about the children, that they're serving, such as how many are also receiving other social services, in the community, such as TANIF, or SNAP, or integration with child welfare systems. And some are also helping local programs maintain control of their data,

so they can answer important research questions for their own quality improvements purposes. However, it's important to know that most states are in early stages of their integrated data systems. And so, they may not all fully support Head Start programs being able to get reports back, but it's important for local programs to work with their collaboration office, their states, the entities that are setting up this system so we can understand how they work better and incorporate into their agreements benefits that can come back to the Head Start program.

Beth: Okay so, if programs do work with their states and start to work and integrate their data, how are we sure that that data is protected? I mean, we now that Head Start programs serve really vulnerable children and families, programs might be worried about their families data being available to a lot of other people. They might have concerns related to loss of control over the data. So, how is that addressed?

Colleen: So, state systems are required to follow state and federal laws that address privacy. Such as, the, what's known as FERPA, or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. And these set very strong standards for the protection of personally identifiable information. So, states will use these strong security procedures to protect the data that's on their servers that they collect about individual children and families. They also go through procedures to de-identify the data, in ways that it's used, and report it in aggregate ways. So that we don't violate any of the privacies.

We also make it clear in this section where we're talking about participating in these systems that states have to have, with Head Start programs, have to have written agreements. So that it lays out that what protections are in place and to ensure that the state will maintain that proper oversight and protection of that data. And also, Head Start programs would need to think carefully about what type of data they need to share. So, they certainly don't need to share all of the personally identifiable information that they have, but only, those items that are deemed necessary to support the purpose of this data system.

And so, many states already have these developed data share agreements for early childhood programs, and it's important for Head Start programs to really understand those as well as other aspects of their participation. There are a number of resources available. We'll have links from the ECLKC, but there are a number of groups that are looking at exactly these types of agreements and data sharing that Head Start programs can partic--can benefit from and be able to use.

Beth: Okay, wow that is a lot of information and we know that it's a lot for programs to take in. I know that this really helped me to better understand both the state education data systems and the quality rating improvement systems and sort of the benefits and potential challenges related to programs participating in those.

Colleen: Well that's great. Hopefully this was helpful, and we really want people to keep an eye out, for additional technical assistant resources that will be available from us and our partners to really help support program's efforts in this area.

(twinkling music)

Beth: Thanks for joining us.