

Summary Report

Evaluation of the Quality Ratings Initiative

Prepared for:
NSW Department of Education



Executive Summary

The NSW Department of Education (the department) engaged ARTD Consultants to undertake an independent evaluation of the Quality Ratings Initiative (QRI) project. This summary report is a shortened version of the full report, which highlights the purpose of evaluation, key questions, research methods, findings and recommendations.

The QRI was developed and delivered from 2019 to 2020 by the department as part of its wider strategy for quality improvement through lifting accountability of early childhood education and school-aged care services. As the NSW Regulatory Authority (RA) for early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, the department is committed to and actively involved in continuing to enhance communication of the National Quality Standard (NQS) ratings and families' awareness of the NQS. Research commissioned by the department in order to develop a deeper understanding of the parental decision-making process about early childhood education and care across NSW found that awareness of the NQS is low among parents and families of young children. This is despite some families prioritising participation in a high-quality educational preschool program.

In response, the **QRI introduced a suite of resources, including a redesigned quality ratings certificate, which aimed to improve the visual representation of the rating.**

The objective was to assist families in understanding the strength of the services they are subscribing to, and ensure services and providers remain accountable for high-quality education and care.

The evaluation of the QRI develops a narrative of how the program functioned and whether it was successful in achieving its desired results. It provides insight into the relationship between project activities, communication and implementation methods, and observed project outcomes.

Key findings from the evaluation

Parents are more aware of the QRI

The QRI appears to be raising awareness around the quality rating system and supporting meaningful conversations between service providers and families.

Parents are engaging more with services to understand quality practice in services

The QRI appears to have generated a positive but modest increase in the extent to which families engage in meaningful conversations about the quality of care experienced by their children.

The way in which families understand and assess 'quality' is complex, and the QRI appears to have provided some assistance to services or providers in communicating ratings to staff and families.

The new certificate is a clear improvement on the old certificate and appears to have 'nudged' families to engage in more meaningful conversations about quality at the services they are considering or accessing. This in turn contributes to the broader strategy for quality uplift in the system.

The QRI has contributed to the broader strategy of raising quality in NSW early childhood services

Our findings suggest that QRI is contributing to the broader strategy around raising quality in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. QRI also appears to be associated with an increase in accountability of service providers for their ratings.

The new certificate itself does not appear to have made a substantial change to the way services think about quality. Other complementary initiatives such as the quality support program and re-rating initiatives are more likely to have these direct effects.

Quality is important to families

The evaluation further suggests that while 'quality' is important to families (as is 'availability' of a place for their child and 'location' convenient to them) the rating itself is not the main source of information on which many families make judgments about quality. Based on responsive regulatory theory for providing support to regulated entities, continued investment in targeted support initiatives that assist 'working towards' services to meet the quality standards and all other services to continue breaking new ground on their continuous improvement journey appear to be warranted.

What is the QRI?

The QRI was developed to raise awareness and inform family choice on quality education and care services, using a new quality rating certificate design. The new certificate provides an easy-to-read graphic that shows the quality ratings of an education and care service in a family-friendly way. A suite of other materials, including a quality ratings brochure for families with star graphics to show the different ratings, an A3 display poster on the rating system, and a discussion and support guide for services and educators, were also developed as part of the initiative. The QRI was launched in early 2020 and full program rollout (with all NSW services receiving new certificates) was completed in December 2020.

By increasing family's awareness of the National Quality Framework (NQF), the intention is that:

- the ratings of the service would be more of a contributing factor for families' decision-making process when choosing a service
- discussions between families and services about the quality of the early childhood education provided would become deeper and more common
- in turn, this would lead to positive behavioral shifts for services and providers, as they respond to queries about levels of quality at the service.

Quality ratings certificates

Previous Quality Rating Certificate

Service Approval Number: [REDACTED]
Assessment and Ratings ID: [REDACTED]

NSW Education

[REDACTED] has achieved the following ratings:

Quality Area 1	Educational program and practice RATING: Working Towards National Quality Standard (W)
Quality Area 2	Children's health and safety RATING: Working Towards National Quality Standard (W)
Quality Area 3	Physical environment RATING: Meeting National Quality Standard (M)
Quality Area 4	Staffing arrangements RATING: Working Towards National Quality Standard (W)
Quality Area 5	Relationships with children RATING: Meeting National Quality Standard (M)
Quality Area 6	Collaborative partnerships with families and communities RATING: Meeting National Quality Standard (M)
Quality Area 7	Governance and Leadership RATING: Working Towards National Quality Standard (W)

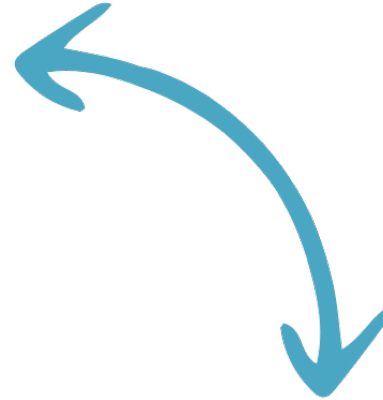
The overall rating for a service is determined by the combination of the Quality Area ratings achieved.

If a service is rated below the National Quality Standard in any Quality Area, the overall rating will reflect the lowest Quality Area rating. To achieve an overall rating of Exceeding National Quality Standard, a service needs to achieve Exceeding National Quality Standard in four or more Quality Areas of which two must be from Quality Area 1, Quality Area 5, Quality Area 6 or Quality Area 7.

This service is rated overall at
Working Towards National Quality Standard (W)

NSW Department of Education
Date of issue: 23 December 2019

This service has been assessed against the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care and these ratings have been awarded in accordance with the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 and the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011.



The new Quality Ratings

Education and Care Quality Ratings

Service Name: [REDACTED]
goes beyond the requirements of the National Quality Standard in at least four of the seven quality areas.

Significant Improvement Required	Working Towards National Quality Standard	Meeting National Quality Standard	Exceeding National Quality Standard
----------------------------------	---	-----------------------------------	-------------------------------------

The National Quality Standard is made up of seven quality areas

1 Educational program and practice				
2 Children's health and safety				
3 Physical environment				
4 Staffing arrangements				
5 Relationships with children				
6 Collaborative partnerships with families and communities				
7 Governance and leadership				

Significant Improvement Required Working Towards National Quality Standard Meeting National Quality Standard Exceeding National Quality Standard

This service was [last assessed in July 2019] against the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care and these ratings have been awarded in accordance with the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 and the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011.

Date of issue: 29 April 2020 ASR ID: 00003054 SE: 5001370

NSW
education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-quality

The new Quality Ratings Certificate was widely considered easier to understand. This was as a result of the following changes:

- Using the 'star rating' at the top of the certificate to indicate the overall rating
- Using a bar chart to indicate the rating of each quality area

New Quality Ratings Certificate



Delivery and timeframes

The QRI was delivered across three project stages from November 2019 to December 2020: design and development, early adopters and transition to business as usual. The QRI resources were designed in accordance with the agreed objectives, refined through feedback to ensure a clear message was delivered to families. Services were made aware via the advisory group which included peak bodies, field officers or through working with the Quality Support Team about the QRI. The Department targeted large providers and certain geographies as part of the early adopter approach. In total, 5,595 services participated in the QRI.

QRI is part of a broader strategy to uplift quality

Alongside the QRI, a number of other initiatives have been implemented to support services to improve quality such as the Quality Support Program, the Quality Support Team and Self-Assessment and the re-rating for those with a 'Working Towards' rating. However, these are outside the scope of this evaluation.

Evaluation Methodology

In consultation with the RA, ARTD Consultants developed a mixed-methods process and outcome evaluation effort for the QRI. The evaluation methodology included desk research, interviews and surveys that investigated the breadth and depth of programmatic impacts of the QRI on families and services. It focused on the following two overarching questions:

1. How well did the department deliver the QRI?
2. What were the outcomes of the QRI?

Evaluation approach

The evaluation methodology was agile and responsive to externalities, including COVID-19 pandemic-related disruptions.

ARTD conducted a process and outcome evaluation that used the following data sources:

- A desktop review of program documentation and reporting
- Interviews with the NSW RA and business units
- Interviews and consultations with providers and services across service types and Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) (n=23)
- Interviews with families and careers (n=44)
- Administrative data analysis of National Quality Agenda Information Technology System (NQA ITS) data
- Analysing Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) family and provider surveys.

The below questions guided evaluative data collection and analysis.

Process evaluation: How well did the department deliver the QRI?

- How well was QRI delivered across the three project stages
- Design and development
- Early adopters
- Transition to BAU
- How well did the NSW RA engage and consult with identified stakeholders?
- Were there other activities that could have better supported the process?

Outcome evaluation: What were the outcomes of the QRI?

- To what extent did the QRI impact on families' understanding of quality ratings?
- Were families more likely to make informed decisions about education and care services as a result of the QRI?
- To what extent did the QRI impact the accountability of education and care services and approved providers in relation to their quality ratings?
- Did the quality standards of education and care services, across different levels, improve as a result of the quality ratings initiative?
- Were there any unintended impacts of the initiative (positive and negative)?

Future Opportunities

The evaluation concludes that the QRI offered important positive, yet modest, contributions to the RA's sector-wide programs for quality improvement in ECEC services. It offers lessons for improved communication, deliberate engagement with families and services, and furthering the RA's understanding of how families make childcare decisions.

- A focus on genuine sector engagement (the sector being 'involved') rather than one-way communication (the sector being 'informed') is a valuable lesson about effective change management aimed through similar initiatives.
- Leading with an opt-in or 'early adopter' strategy, rather than starting with mandatory compliance, is another useful insight to acceptance and uptake of reform.
- Quality is important to families (as is 'availability' of a place for their child and 'location' convenient to them), but the rating itself is not the main source of information on which many families make judgments about quality. The importance families place on the ratings will improve by convincing them of their 'reliability' and 'validity'.
- Continued investment in targeted support initiatives that assist 'working towards' services to meet the quality standards and all other services to continue breaking new ground on their continuous improvement journey appear to be warranted.

NOTE

ARTD presented and tabled the full report of the evaluation with the NSW RA's executive. The key findings were found to be insightful and informative by the NSW RA. The RA took keen interest on the future opportunities, particularly around increasing families' understanding about the quality improvement journey. This work aligns with the RA's commitment to maintain high levels of trust and confidence of families in the delivery of its regulatory functions. A key focus for the RA is to assure parents, families and communities of the high levels of service safety and quality so that every child can thrive and have the best experience through their early childhood learning journey.



EORA | NARRM | MEANJIN
SYDNEY | MELBOURNE | BRISBANE

www.artd.com.au