In the second brief in the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems Deconstructed series, the focus is on the support provided to programs and practitioners. One of the five fundamental features of quality rating and improvement systems outlined by the Federal Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care this support is also commonly referred to as technical assistance.¹

In the pages to follow, an examination of the many aspects of technical assistance is offered, including the topics that quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) programs across the country choose to focus on, the strategies and tactics technical assistance providers use when working with programs and practitioners, the titles or types of technical technical assistance providers being used, and the extent to which technical assistance is targeted to specific subsets of early care and education providers.

Following the overview of technical assistance in QRIS programs nationwide, this brief explores how Indiana’s QRIS program, Paths to QUALITY™, provides technical assistance and how it might be modified. The goal of this piece is for stakeholders to gain a better understanding of what the national trends in QRIS programs are, how Paths to QUALITY™ compares to other systems and where Indiana can make improvement.

What is Technical Assistance?

In their jointly authored glossary of training and technical assistance, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and Child Care Aware of America, defined technical assistance as “the provision of targeted and customized supports by a professional(s) with subject matter and adult learning knowledge and skills to develop or strengthen processes, knowledge application, or implementation of services by recipients.”

Technical assistance supports are an essential part of QRIS programs. They assist providers with taking a set of standards or requirements specified by a QRIS and guide implementation within an early care and education program or classroom. Essentially, technical assistance professionals serve as guides to help translate QRIS standards and guidelines into program policies, learning environments and developmentally appropriate teaching practices.

Depending on the particular QRIS program and framework being employed in a state or region, the actual staff providing technical assistance may often focus on improving different aspects or dimensions of quality such as health and safety aspects or understanding and using developmental screenings. Some staff may only concentrate on specific topics, such as improving quality in infant-toddler environments. Others may use targeted strategies, such as providing short-term consulting or extended professional learning communities. Still, others may take on a defined roles or titles, such as coach, consultant or specialist. Some may focus on only working with providers for a certain timeframe, or working only with providers at specific levels on their QRIS. Given all of these variables, it is important to understand the complexity of technical assistance systems before the Paths to QUALITY™ technical assistance system is presented.

Focus of Technical Assistance Support

The QRIS Compendium, which maintains the most comprehensive database of programs in the United States, requests that states specify the areas of focus their technical assistance providers specifically address. Of the 41 QRIS programs represented in the Compendium’s database, 40 offered some detail related to the focus of the technical assistance their program provides (New Mexico indicated that they provide technical assistance but was unable to provide any additional information on the focus of this assistance).

“Curriculum and assessment” and “improving teacher-child interactions” were tied as the topics on which most technical assistance was centered. Secondary issues included “health and safety,” the “use of observational assessment tools, and “QRIS rating assistance.” (See Table 1 for a breakdown of the other areas of technical assistance focus by QRIS programs)

Based on the information in the QRIS Compendium, Indiana’s technical assistance focuses on the following topics/areas: “health and safety, inclusion, infant and toddler care, improving teacher child interactions, using observational assessment tools for program improvement purposes, program administration and

management practices, school-age care, QRIS rating assistance, dual language learners, and curriculum and assessment.3

**Technical Assistance Strategies**

Through their work, technical assistance providers can use a range of methodologies or strategies to assist programs and practitioners with improving their quality and implementing the standards specified by their QRIS. These strategies include mentoring, coaching, providing consultation, professional development advising and peer-to-peer advising. While each of these strategies can differ in terms of the duration, intensity and the type of information exchanged, these strategies are only effective when the technical assistance provider has established a mutually respectful and trusting relationship with the program and practitioner.4

Upon review of the data listed in the QRIS compendium, the three most commonly used technical assistance strategies are: coaching, professional development advising and consultation. It should be noted that these terms refer to the methods used, not the job titles or the types of professionals employed within a QRIS.

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Ninety percent of QRIS technical assistance systems use the strategy of coaching which typically:
- is designed to help improve skills and practices,
- is goal-focused and follows a predictable process of gathering information, observing, questioning, self-reflection, modeling, feedback, etc.; and,
- can be delivered onsite, remotely or through a combination of face-to-face and technology-facilitated communication.

Seventy-seven and a half percent of QRIS technical assistance systems offer professional development advising which typically:
- assists professionals with setting career and educational goals,
- helps professionals access systems and resources designed to assist them with accessing education and developing a professional development plan, and,
- can be face-to-face or virtual advising.

Three-quarters of QRIS technical assistance frameworks use consultation which typically:
- is designed to engage an external expert to come into a program to solve a specific problem,
- is focused on resolving an issue and includes the development of strategies to solve the problem and ways to implement those strategies; and,
- are short-term relationships, once the issue is resolved the technical assistance is terminated.\(^5\)

Types of Quality Improvement/Technical Assistance Providers

While technical assistance providers use a variety of strategies to offer resources and guidance related to specific areas of quality, they hold various titles depending on their QRIS programs. Twenty-one (53.8 percent), of QRIS programs utilize technical assistance staff that contain the term “specialist.” Of these programs, eight have quality improvement

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specialists, six have infant and toddler specialists, three have inclusion specialists, three maintain general technical assistance specialists, and eight other types of specialists were listed including, early childhood education specialist, outreach specialist, school-age specialist and others.

The second most common title includes the role of “consultant.” Sixteen of the 39 QRIS programs indicate the use of consultants as technical assistance providers; some program utilize more than one type of consultant. As with the title of specialist, there are many types of consultants within QRIS programs. The two most common are mental health consultants and quality consultants, with four QRIS programs each employing consultants specializing in these areas. The next most common type of consultant listed is the health consultant, used in three programs.

Twelve QRIS programs, including Indiana, utilize coaches to provide technical assistance to early care and education providers. As with specialists and consultants, some states have coaches that focus on specialty areas. Minnesota, for example, uses quality coaches, CLASS (Classroom Assessment and Scoring System) coaches and inclusion coaches as part of their staffing structure for technical assistance.

**Populations Targeted for Technical Assistance**

Given the diversity of QRIS programs, some choose to focus technical assistance supports towards certain provider populations or on providers at different levels of quality. Other programs allow all providers to access technical assistance support. There are also some QRIS programs that provide additional resources or prioritize providing technical assistance to those that meet certain criteria established by their QRIS program.

Thirty-one of the 39 programs that reported information indicate that all programs are able to receive supports. While eight of these programs offer technical assistance to all providers, they prioritize or offer expanded technical assistance to providers who serve specific populations of children or provide care of a certain quality. For example, in Miami-Dade County’s QRIS, Quality Counts, all providers receive technical assistance, but programs that serve 30 percent or more children on child care subsidies, are of lower quality or are located in low-income neighborhoods have the ability to access more technical assistance than programs that do not meet these criteria.

Eleven QRIS programs target providers serving a high percentage of low-income children for technical assistance. Eight QRIS programs have chosen to target technical assistance specifically towards low-quality programs, whereas three QRIS programs center on programs of higher quality. While this seems quite contradictory, Michigan’s Great Start to Quality states that they want their technical assistance professionals to help providers become engaged in the QRIS. Since it takes time to improve quality and become more engaged in the QRIS program, they work to activate the lower quality child care providers. In contrast to Michigan, Virginia’s QRIS program, Virginia Quality, specifically targets higher quality programs for technical assistance because they believe the requirements specified for their higher rated programs are more likely to benefit from onsite support.

Although what constitutes a high-need community is not definitively identified, six QRIS programs indicate that they use this criterion for targeting technical assistance support. Six other QRIS programs indicate that they had other factors that influence how much or who receive technical assistance. Among those factors are availability
of high-quality early care and education to the families in the community, large numbers of children with disabilities or English language learners, and programs that were in danger of losing their rating due to the state’s transition to revised QRIS standards.

**Duration of Technical Assistance**

The vast majority of QRIS programs have not set strict limits on the amount of technical assistance support offered to the early care and education providers on their programs. Sixteen QRIS programs indicate that the amount or duration of the technical assistance offered vary without indicating what factors influence the variation. Eight programs state that the duration of technical assistance changes based on the type of child care program and the results of their initial assessment. Four programs indicate that the duration of technical assistance is based solely on the child care program’s initial assessment. Six other QRIS programs stated that technical assistance lasted for six months or longer and that there was no maximum length.

Only Wisconsin, Maine and Minnesota’s QRIS programs limit technical assistance. Wisconsin’s child care programs are allowed up to 10 hours of general technical assistance (depending on the type of child care program) per year, equating to four to five visits over the course of about 20 weeks. Wisconsin also allows providers to access up to an additional 10 hours of technical assistance on any of the following areas: the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards, the Wisconsin Pyramid Model for Social Emotional Competence, and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire developmental screener.

Maine’s Quality for ME program reports that they typically limit technical assistance to a span of four months, but that timeframe can be expanded if necessary. Maine also utilizes communities of practice and cohort models to deliver group technical assistance and those programs often go on for many months or even span multiple years.
Given that Minnesota’s technical assistance system is quite comprehensive in terms of different types and specializations, they have set limits for the various types of providers. Business consultants work with providers in a cohort model providing group technical assistance support for 12 months. Child care health consultants only work with programs that are in need of their assistance and the length of time is determined by their initial assessment. CLASS coaches work with higher rated programs for a maximum of six months or 30 hours. Inclusion coaches provide up to 30 hours of support. Programs can receive up to 100 hours of technical assistance from mental health consultants over a span of 12 months, and quality coaches provide 20-30 hours of support over approximately six months.

**Technical Assistance in Indiana**

With a better understanding of the type of technical assistance provided and how QRIS programs across the country use various providers with specialized or generalized knowledge, we now turn our focus to the framework that supports Indiana’s quality rating and improvement system, Paths to QUALITY™. The provision of technical assistance has evolved since Paths to QUALITY™ was implemented statewide in 2008. Currently there are approximately 60 coaches and 28 specialists within the system.

The 28 specialists, all employed within local child care resource and referral agencies, include 10 infant toddler specialists, nine inclusion specialists and nine school-age specialists. Specialists typically assist programs with a specific issue and work providers on a time limited basis to help them develop and implement specific strategies to address their issue or problem.

According to the QRIS Compendium, Indiana has chosen to provide technical assistance in the following areas: Health and safety, Inclusion, Infant and toddler care, Improving teacher child interactions, the use of observational assessment tools for program improvement purposes, Program administration and management practices, School-age care, QRIS rating assistance, Dual language learners, and Curriculum and assessment. This approach ensures that Paths to QUALITY™ participants can receive assistance in many crucial areas, but it also requires coaches to have a wide breadth of knowledge to address the areas of need that are not covered by topic area specialists.

**Paths to QUALITY™ Coaching**

As mentioned earlier, Indiana has approximately 60 coaches providing technical assistance within the Paths to QUALITY™ system currently. These coaches are employed within two different types of agencies in Indiana. The local child care resource and referral agencies employ the majority of coaches. Coaches employed by the resource and referral agencies typically work with Paths to QUALITY™ participants on Levels 1-3. The second group of coaches are employed by the Indiana Association for the Education for Young Children (IAEYC) and they work with Paths to QUALITY™ participants interested in pursuing accreditation, typically some Level 3 and Level 4 programs.

Despite working for different agencies, all coaches are trained in the same LEARN 360 model. This model focuses on setting goals and working collaboratively towards achieving them over the course of a series of visits.

Currently, Indiana has no limit on the number of hours of technical assistance or the number of months a program can work with a coach. It does not target a certain subset of providers for coaching assistance either. Participants can choose to participate in Paths to QUALITY™ with or without the assistance of a coach, and all participants who
request a coach will be assigned one who will work with them as much or as little as requested. This was not always the case. Prior to 2014, participating child care programs that chose to work with a coach were allotted up to 20 hours of technical assistance to advance their level. If the program was unable to achieve the level advancement with those hours, their coach could request an extension, which was typically granted. Still, all time was closely monitored.

Indiana currently has approximately 60 coaches within the Paths to QUALITY™ system (44 within the child care resource and referral network agencies and 16 with Indiana Association for the Education for Young Children) and a total of 2,701 participating programs⁶ for a ratio of about 1.45 coaches per provider. Note: not all providers on Paths to QUALITY™ work with a coach. Some providers choose to pursue a self-guided approach to level advancement.

Requirements to be a Technical Assistance Provider in Indiana

While individual organizations that employ technical assistance providers may have different minimum educational requirements for these positions, the State of Indiana does mandate they have a bachelor’s degree. However, it does not stipulate that technical assistance providers have a graduate degree or a specialized credential. While not required, a coaching credential was developed in 2017 in collaboration with Ball State University, and currently there are approximately 26 individuals enrolled in this pilot program across the state.

Technical Assistance and the Future of Paths to QUALITY™

Given that technical assistance is a key component of Paths to QUALITY™, it seems likely that, as Indiana looks to the future, the technical assistance system will be thoroughly examined. The current system of approximately 88 onsite technical assistance providers should be studied for its effectiveness, efficiency and utilization, to ensure the best use of limited financial resources.

This brief provides an overview of the different dimensions of technical assistance systems that QRIS programs have chosen. As Indiana begins the process of reviewing its own system, this brief can provide decision makers with examples of how other states have chosen to focus their technical assistance efforts, the strategies they use, who provides support, if and which specific child care provider populations they target, and how long technical assistance support is offered to QRIS participants. Perhaps the biggest conclusion that can be drawn from this brief is that there is no definitive “right” way to structure a technical assistance system. Rather, for systems to be effective, they need to take into consideration the specific goals and mission of the individual QRIS programs and also meet the expectations of the local communities. In the past Indiana has been open to making modifications to its technical assistance system to meet the needs of the early care and education industry across the state.

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