

Quality Improvement Awards

Incentivizing Advancement in Rising Stars for ME

Performance period 04/2024–12/2025

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) serve as structural infrastructure within early childhood systems. Nationally, QRIS frameworks define tiered standards of program quality, establish clear pathways for advancement, and provide public transparency regarding quality benchmarks. When paired with structured technical assistance and financial incentives, QRIS models are designed to support continuous quality improvement across mixed-delivery settings¹. Incentive strategies, in particular, are often used to reduce financial barriers associated with meeting higher standards and to accelerate movement within tiered quality systems.

Maine launched Rising Stars for ME, its revised Quality Rating and Improvement System, in March 2023. Through the Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), the state committed to advancing this framework by expanding financial incentives tied to quality benchmarks. The **Quality Improvement Awards (QIA)** initiative carried out this commitment by pairing performance-based funding with coordinated technical assistance to support programs in meeting advancement standards. While Rising Stars for ME remains an ongoing state responsibility, PDG-R resources supported a time-limited expansion of structured incentives and implementation supports intended to increase verified advancement during the grant period.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of Maine’s Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) program. Drawing on diverse data, the report examines the Quality Improvement initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes, Star rating changes, and evidence of quality improvement.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration between MRTQ PDN, OCFS, and regional supports.
- **System building**, contributions to workforce development, QRIS engagement, and statewide quality infrastructure.
- **Supports and access**, including translation, self-paced training, dissemination strategies, implementation adaptations, and identified participation barriers.

Data sources for this report include the QIA Final Report submitted by MRTQ PDN (January 2026), monthly implementation logs, interviews with initiative leads, and administrative data.

The Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) initiative was implemented by the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) in partnership with the Maine Office of Child and

¹Maine defines mixed-delivery ECE as the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

Family Services (OCFS). The initiative provided financial incentives to early childhood education (ECE) and out-of-school time (OST) programs seeking advancement within Rising Stars for ME.

The initiative operated as a structured, two-stage incentive model. Programs first completed a Rising Stars for ME application to establish their current Star rating and receive a Recommendations Report identifying unmet standards. Programs then developed a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) with support from MRTQ PDN staff.

Once approved, programs received initial funding to implement planned improvements. Programs that verified Star advancement through reapplication received a final performance-based incentive payment. Initial funding totaled \$917,760. Final performance payments totaled \$499,000, bringing total administered funds to approximately \$1.4 million.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AWARDS FEATURES

Two-stage incentive model pairing initial Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) funding with performance-based payments for verified Star advancement

\$1.4 million in PDG-R funds administered across initial funding (\$917,760) and final performance payments (\$499,000)

178 Quality Improvement Plans submitted: 149 programs funded across all 16 Maine counties

Near-equal participation from center-based programs (75) and family child care homes (74)

Participating programs represented a **combined licensing capacity of 4,466 children** and a **workforce of 1,000 ECE and OST professionals**

Structured QIP process aligned with Rising Stars for ME Recommendations Reports

Embedded regional technical assistance delivered through MRTQ PDN Quality Specialists

Rolling submission structure allowing programs to enter the initiative throughout the implementation period

Table 1. Funding Structure by Star Movement

Star Movement	Initial Funding Limit	Final Incentive
Star 2 to Star 3	\$6,500	\$3,500
Star 3 to Star 4	\$7,000	\$3,000
Star 4 to Star 5 (maintaining) S	\$7,500	\$2,500

Implementation updates indicate that 178 programs submitted Quality Improvement Plans during the implementation period, of which 149 received funding, including 75 center-based and 74 family child care programs across all 16 Maine counties. Most funded participants (126 programs, 85%) entered at Star 2, with smaller numbers entering at Stars 3, 4, and 5. Participating programs represented a combined licensed capacity to serve 4,466 children and a workforce of 1,000 ECE and OST professionals.

Initial funding supported QRIS-aligned quality improvement activities, including training, materials, facility upgrades, and administrative planning time. QIPs were accepted on a rolling basis throughout the implementation period. MRTQ PDN's ECE Program Quality Specialists supported application navigation and documentation requirements.

What was the impact of the Quality Improvement Awards?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes.

Initiative Leads identified the following **intended outcomes** for this work:

- **Increased engagement** with regional technical assistance.
- **Increased the number** of programs advancing within the QRIS.

At this stage, documented impact is reflected primarily in structural and engagement indicators. Findings are organized around these intended outcomes.

Increased Engagement With Regional Technical Assistance

Initiative Leads stated that some providers who had previously expressed hesitation about the prior QRIS model initiated or renewed engagement because of the incentive structure, increasing their interaction with regional supports. Programs became more familiar with Quality Specialists and relied on them for assistance in navigating the Recommendations Report, E-Portfolio system, and documentation requirements.

Self-reported participant survey data collected by MRTQ PDN at the conclusion of the initiative further indicate increased QRIS literacy:

- 94% of respondents reported improved understanding.
- 89% reported greater confidence explaining how their program meets quality standards.
- Quality Specialists reported observing increased use of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plans, family surveys, and self-assessment tools (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, 2026).

One participant reflected:

"I haven't felt this way in 30 years. I'm learning again, and I'm excited by that. . . . It feels like a whole new world of information has opened up to me."

(QIA participant, as reported by a Quality Specialist)

This increased engagement was reflected in how programs directed resources. Programs invested QIA funds primarily in materials and equipment (\$532,831, 58% of initial funding), followed by training (\$224,660, 24%) and administrative stipends (\$135,718, 15%), with smaller allocations for technical assistance and other needs (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, 2026). Materials expenditures included curriculum and assessment tools, technology upgrades, and facility improvements. Training funds supported MELDS training and credential-related coursework and covered staff time or substitute costs associated with professional development participation.

Increased the Number of Programs Advancing within the QRIS

Administrative data indicate that 112 of the 149 funded programs (75%) achieved at least one Star rating increase during the implementation period—78 programs increased by one Star, 33 by two Stars, and one by three Stars—resulting in 147 total Star movements (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026).

Table 2. Star Movement Outcomes Among Participating Programs

Outcome	Number of Programs	Percent of Total (n=149)
Star 2 to Star 3	69	46%
Star 2 to Star 4	33	22%
Star 2 to Star 5	1	0.7%
Star 3 to Star 4	6	4.0%
Star 4 to Star 5	3	2.0%
Maintained Star 5	5	3.4%
No Star increase	37	24%

Source: MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026.

Between April 2024 and November 2025, 244 total Star increases occurred statewide. QIA participants accounted for 147 of these increases (60%).

Table 3. QIA Contribution to Statewide Star Advancement

Measure	Count
Total star increases statewide (April 2024–November 2025)	244
Star increases achieved by QIA participants	147
Percent of statewide increases attributable to QIA	60%
Total programs statewide that increased Star rating	172
QIA participants who increased Star rating	112
Percent of advancing programs that were QIA participants	65%

Source: MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026.

Initiative Leads stated that advancement to higher Star ratings was influenced by **workforce qualification thresholds embedded within the Career Lattice framework** (Interview, November 2025). Progression beyond midlevel Star ratings required meeting credential and experience benchmarks that often extended beyond the project timeframe. While QIA funds supported professional development activity, credential completion frequently required additional time. Material and

infrastructure improvements addressed compliance gaps; however, when workforce qualification thresholds were unmet, these improvements alone were insufficient to generate Star movement.

Thirty-seven programs did not achieve verified Star advancement during the initiative timeframe (Table 3). Administrative data indicate that all 37 of these programs received initial funding and engaged in Quality Improvement Plan activities—including training, meeting requirements across several Rising Stars standard areas, and facility improvements. Non-advancement was more concentrated among programs at higher starting Star ratings; while 82% of Star 2 programs achieved advancement, the rate was lower among programs starting at Stars 3, 4, and 5 (maintained), where Career Lattice credential and experience thresholds are more demanding. Initiative Leads stated that progression beyond mid-level Star ratings required meeting workforce qualification benchmarks that often extended beyond the project timeframe. Another challenge to meeting or maintaining these higher standards included that the departure of a single qualified staff member could cause a program to fall below the proportion of credentialed staff required for its Star rating (Interview, November 2025). Technology barriers and administrative complexity also contributed to non-advancement among some programs.

How did the QIA initiative strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

Implementation of the Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) initiative required coordination between the Maine Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), in particular the MRTQ PDN Quality Specialists (regional staff who provide direct technical assistance to ECE programs and providers).

Aligned messaging between OCFS and MRTQ PDN was important during early rollout. Because the revised QRIS was new to the field and some providers were still adjusting to the transition from the prior system, Initiative Leads described deliberate efforts to clarify that Rising Stars for ME and the QIA were intended to be strengths-based and supportive.

Initiative Leads further stated that early participants served as informal ambassadors, sharing their experiences at statewide summits and through peer networks. This organic advocacy contributed to a gradual shift in provider attitudes and supported subsequent recruitment through word of mouth.

OCFS provided policy oversight and alignment with statewide quality priorities, while MRTQ PDN managed operational implementation and funding administration. Quality Specialists served as intermediaries between state-level administration and participating programs, supporting application navigation, documentation assembly, and interpretation of Recommendations Reports.

These coordination mechanisms were intended to support consistent implementation across counties and program types during the grant period.

How has the QIA initiative contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

The QIA initiative operated within Maine's existing QRIS and workforce infrastructure and reinforced several structural components of the state's early childhood education system.

Table 4. System-Level Infrastructure Strengthened Through QIA

System Area	Pre-QIA Context	PDG-Enabled Structural Action
QRIS Engagement	Participation is often aligned with license renewal cycles	Financial incentives for programs to seek Star advancement before their next license renewal cycle
Workforce Alignment	Career Lattice benchmarks embedded in QRIS standards	Funds supported credential-related activity aligned with Career Lattice qualification thresholds
Regional Technical Assistance Infrastructure	Quality Specialists provided general consultation	Incentive structure increased QRIS-specific engagement with regional supports
Incentive Structure	Limited direct financial linkage to advancement	The two-stage funding model tied financial incentives to verified Star movement

The initiative functioned within existing state systems rather than as a standalone funding mechanism. Its workforce alignment component also intersects with the Workforce Salary Supplement initiative, which addresses staff retention through compensation support. Participation was nearly evenly distributed between center-based programs (75) and family child care homes (74), indicating that the incentive model was accessible across settings within Maine's mixed-delivery system. Together, these initiatives target complementary dimensions of the workforce barriers identified as the primary challenges to sustain Star advancement.

The initiative's integration within existing infrastructure was facilitated by MRTQ PDN's institutional positioning. As an holistic workforce development and technical assistance system with statewide reach, MRTQ PDN houses the state workforce registry, provides professional development aligned with the Career Lattice, and maintains established relationships with providers across regions. These assets positioned MRTQ PDN to deliver initiative components within trusted, pre-existing systems rather than requiring new operational structures.

In what ways did the QIA initiative support accessibility and participation for early childhood education programs?

The initiative incorporated several design features intended to facilitate broad participation. Programs were permitted flexible documentation submission methods for their quality improvement plans, including handwritten plans, screenshots, and email-based submissions. Administrative stipends offset

planning time, and regionally distributed technical assistance from Quality Specialists provided hands-on support with application navigation, documentation, and use.

Initiative Leads and implementation updates indicate that technology barriers and administrative complexity nonetheless remained challenges for some programs. Smaller providers without dedicated office space or computers reported difficulty managing documentation requirements. Programs simultaneously pursuing Rising Stars advancement and national accreditation reported administrative fatigue from managing multiple documentation systems. The transition to revised QRIS standards and a new online platform also created an initial learning curve during early implementation.

Administrative records indicate that participation was concentrated among programs beginning at Star 2, with fewer programs at higher Star ratings (Stars 3–5) electing to participate (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026). Initiative Leads stated they would have welcomed greater engagement among Star 4 and 5 programs. While the awards were available to both advance and sustain higher Star ratings, participation at upper tiers was limited during the implementation period.

Sustainability

Initiative Leads stated that Quality Specialists are funded through MRTQ PDN's core grant and will continue to support Rising Stars for ME beyond the PDG-R period. Because the initiative operated within MRTQ PDN's existing professional development and workforce registry infrastructure, these operational components are not dependent solely on grant funding.

Several design elements position the initiative for partial continuation. The Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) framework developed for the QIA provides a structured approach to translating Recommendations Reports into actionable plans. The QIA Final Report (January 2026) recommends adapting this framework for broader QRIS use, thereby extending its application beyond funded cohorts.

While OCFS has expressed intent to continue quality improvement incentives, funding levels and structure beyond the grant period have not been confirmed.

Initiative Leads noted that dedicated cross-sector leadership—with named staff at both OCFS and MRTQ PDN responsible for coordinating the initiative—was instrumental during implementation. Maintaining this shared leadership structure would support continuity if the initiative is scaled or replicated. The dedicated initiative lead position at MRTQ PDN was eliminated at the conclusion of the grant period.

Lessons Learned

Several lessons emerged during implementation of the QIA initiative:

- **Timing matters.** Launching the QIA shortly after the rollout of the revised QRIS created simultaneous learning curves for providers and regional staff. Early implementation required additional support as programs adapted to new standards and a new application platform.

- **Staff turnover affects advancement.** The departure of a single qualified staff member could affect a program's eligibility for higher Star ratings. The advancement pace was therefore influenced not only by program effort, but also by workforce stability.
- **Incremental progress is not fully captured within Star movement.** Some programs completed substantial quality improvement activities but did not achieve verified Star advancement within the initiative timeframe. Current QRIS structures do not formally recognize progress occurring within a rating level. Introducing sub-steps or a point system within Star ratings could provide a mechanism for recognizing incremental progress and sustaining program motivation between rating changes.
- **Technology capacity influences participation.** Variation in technology access and administrative capacity across providers influenced participation during the implementation period (see Supports and Access).
- **Strengths-based messaging supports engagement. Initiative** Leads stated that clear, non-punitive communication helped address skepticism from the transition to the revised QRIS. Consistent messaging contributed to provider participation and sustained engagement.
- **Administrative workload was higher than anticipated.** Both regional staff and participating programs experienced significant documentation, and coordination demands during early rollout. Implementation intensity was influenced by the concurrent transition to revised QRIS standards.

Summary

The Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) initiative supported 149 programs across all 16 Maine counties in engaging with Rising Stars for ME. Of these, 112 programs (75.2%) achieved at least one Star rating increase, resulting in 147 total Star movements. QIA participants accounted for a majority of verified Star advancement statewide during the implementation period. Survey findings and interviews indicate increased engagement with regional technical assistance and improved understanding of QRIS standards among participating programs.

The initiative operated within Maine's existing QRIS and workforce infrastructure, reinforcing linkages between Star advancement and Career Lattice qualification benchmarks. While funding supported improvements in curriculum, facilities, and professional development, the pace of advancement was influenced by workforce qualification timelines and staff stability. Core implementation components—including regional technical assistance and the Quality Improvement Plan framework—are embedded within existing systems, while continuation of performance-based incentive funding remains dependent on future resource decisions. Alternative incentive structures, including linking tiered subsidy rates to Star-rating attainment, have been identified as options for sustaining quality improvement momentum beyond the grant period.