

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

General Questions About ExceleRate® Illinois for Licensed Early Learning Programs

What is ExceleRate Illinois?

ExceleRate Illinois is the state's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS) that emphasizes continuous quality improvement for early learning and development programs. It helps you keep your focus on your top priority—quality services for children and families—by offering resources, tools, support and guidance to make quality improvements that you identify.

As part of the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge initiative, key stakeholders in Illinois came together to create ExceleRate Illinois as a QRIS that is inclusive of all early learning and development programs throughout Illinois—including child care, Preschool for All/Prevention Initiative and Head Start/Early Head Start.

What is a Quality Recognition and Improvement System?

A quality recognition and improvement system includes quality standards, a structure for accountability and monitoring, program supports and consumer outreach to increase availability of high quality early care and education. According to the national Build Initiative QRIS Network, a comprehensive QRIS like ExceleRate Illinois:

- Makes program quality comparable across program types.
- Creates and aligns program standards with early learning and practitioner standards.
- Develops and aligns infrastructure to support quality improvement.
- Assesses achievement along a continuum.

Who is ExceleRate Illinois for?

ExceleRate Illinois is designed to include all Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (IDCFS) licensed early learning and development programs, pre-kindergarten programs, Preschool for All and Prevention Initiative programs, Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

What are the ExceleRate Illinois Circles of Quality?

ExceleRate Illinois includes four circles of increasing quality: **Licensing**, **Bronze Circle of Quality**, **Silver Circle of Quality** and **Gold Circle of Quality**. Each circle has a distinct set of standards that must be met.

- **Licensed Circle of Quality** is the foundational circle of quality, and recognizes compliance with the licensing standards of the State of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.
- **Bronze Circle of Quality** recognizes staff qualifications and professional development, with completion of a robust series of trainings for teachers and program administrators. Bronze Circle trainings are aligned with the standards of ExceleRate Illinois, and prepare programs for success as they progress through the Circles of Quality.
- **Silver Circle of Quality** recognizes completion of a rigorous self-assessment and implementation of a continuous quality improvement process, as verified by an independent assessor. Silver Circle programs meet or exceed specific quality benchmarks on learning environment and instructional quality, along with selected program administrative standards; staff qualifications; and professional development.
- **Gold Circle of Quality** recognizes programs which have demonstrated quality on all fifteen standards, as validated by an independent assessor. Gold Circle programs meet or exceed specific quality benchmarks on learning environment, instructional quality, and all program administrative standards; group size and staff/child ratios; staff qualifications; and professional development.

Programs achieving the **Gold Circle of Quality** may earn additional designations known as the “Awards of Excellence.” This designation recognizes programs that have met additional high-quality standards that are distinct from the other four circles and that represent best practice for preparing at-risk children for success in school and include awards for:

- Preschool Teaching and Learning
- Infant and Toddler Services
- Family and Community Engagement
- Inclusion of Children with Special Needs
- Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Practice

Why participate in ExceleRate Illinois?

By participating in ExceleRate Illinois, programs become part of a national movement promoting the importance of quality settings for young children and the overall importance of early learning and development. ExceleRate Illinois includes opportunities to recognize programs that are committed to higher levels of quality. ExceleRate Illinois participation also means that programs are giving families the ability to make more informed decisions about their early learning and development choices.

How will sites be assessed?

The verification process for the **Silver Circle of Quality** is a 2 part process. Upon application to ExceleRate, a state-approved assessor will conduct Part 1 of the verification visit. The program will be assigned a date/time for Part 1 of the verification to occur.

Part 1 of the visit includes on-site review of your classroom self-assessments/CQIP and review of all documentation for ExceleRate standards. A state-approved assessor will also verify three PAS subscales as chosen by the program on the application. All ExceleRate documentation should be gathered in an organized Program Portfolio (see the Steps to Apply document for what must be included) for on-site review during Part 1 of the verification visit.

Another state-approved assessor will then conduct Part 2 of the verification. The program will be given a three week window in which Part 2 of the verification will occur.

Part 2 of the verification includes conducting classroom assessments using ECERS-3, ITERS-R, SACERS-U in 1/3 of your classrooms, including one classroom per age group. For licensed child care centers that have child care classrooms with Preschool for All or Head Start services provided within them (collaboration classrooms), these classrooms will be included in the random selection of classrooms for assessment. For licensed child care centers that have Preschool for All or Head Start stand-alone classrooms (Preschool for All or Head Start services only), these classrooms will not be included in the random selection of classrooms. (Personal Care Routines and Parent & Staff subscales for the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) will not be scored in the ExceleRate assessment process).

At the **Gold Circle of Quality**, each early learning and development program will have an independent assessment completed by a state-approved assessor outside of the program. Again, one-third of classrooms will be randomly selected for an observation with at least one classroom from each age group included in the sample.

ERS assessments will not include scores from the Personal Care Routines and Parent and Staff subscales. At both **Silver** and **Gold**, additional ExceleRate Illinois standards will be verified.

For licensed child care centers that have child care classrooms with Preschool for All or Head Start services provided within them (collaboration classrooms), these classrooms will generally be included in the random selection of classrooms for assessment (as described above in, "How will sites be assessed?").

For licensed child care centers that have Preschool for All or Head Start stand alone classrooms (Preschool for All or Head Start services only), these classrooms will not be included in the random selection of classrooms.

What evidence is needed to show a standard has been met?

Specific evidence is required at each circle and varies by program type. Examples of evidence may include copy of a program policy, verification of training and proof of Gateways Registry membership. On-site assessment scores using rating scales (e.g. ERS, CLASS, PAS) are important to this process. Minimum scores must be achieved in order to meet standards at each circle. For specific evidence at each Circle of Quality, please see the ExceleRate charts at <http://exceletrateillinoisproviders.com/resources/standard-and-evidence-requirements>.

How are Circles of Quality determined?

Based upon the circle applied for, an on-site assessment may be required. The Circle of Quality will be determined based on a review of the evidence provided, including documentation, on-site assessment scores and accreditation or compliance criteria, if applicable. All evidence must be met at a particular Circle of Quality before a circle is awarded.

What happens after a Circle of Quality is achieved?

The Silver and Gold Circles of Quality awarded will be valid for three years. Each year the program must submit an ExceleRate Illinois Annual Report verifying that all standards at the awarded Circle of Quality continue to be met. A program may remain at the Bronze Circle of Quality for three years and will need to submit an annual report each year.

What if there is a disagreement about the ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality?

ExceleRate Illinois has an appeal process at the **Gold Circle of Quality** and is available at <http://www.exceletrateillinoisproviders.com/appeal-process>.

What if my program is accredited?

If a program is accredited by an ExceleRate Illinois approved accrediting body the program may use that information as evidence to meet standards as noted. Please see the ExceleRate Illinois charts at <http://exceletrateillinoisproviders.com/resources/standard-and-evidence-requirements> for specific information about state-approved accrediting bodies and what standards they meet.

What type of support will be available for ExceleRate Illinois participation?

Those that choose to pursue higher Circles of Quality within ExceleRate Illinois will have access to technical assistance to help them through the process of achieving higher Circles of Quality. The ExceleRate Illinois Quality Specialists at the local Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies will provide support in terms of technical assistance, on-site visits and training. Gateways Registry-approved trainings (in person and online) will also be available to ExceleRate Illinois participants including training to prepare for on-site assessments. It is the intent that those programs seeking a higher Circle of Quality get the help and support needed to achieve their goals.

Are there incentives for programs participating in ExceleRate Illinois?

Eligible ExceleRate programs will receive many tools and resources to help you promote this higher level of Quality to families and your community. Silver and Gold Eligible ExceleRate programs who care for Care Assistance Program (CCAP) children will also receive a CCAP add-on. For specific add-on amounts please view incentives at <http://www.excelerateillinoisproviders.com/benefits/incentives/licensed-center-incentives>. Programs eligible to receive an add-on are:

- Licensed Child Care Programs
- Head Start Programs
- Part-day private preschools may receive noted add-on if caring for CCAP children

How will families know about ExceleRate Illinois?

Families will be made aware of ExceleRate Illinois through a variety of public means. Press releases, public service announcements, program newsletters, online advertising, posters, flyers and other communications represent a variety of the ways in which families will learn about ExceleRate Illinois. One of the most important ways in which families can learn more is through the ExceleRate Illinois website. Families will learn what a QRIS is, its importance and how to inquire about a Circle of Quality when choosing care for their children. Circle of Quality early learning and development programs will be made public to families as they search for programs.

Will Circles of Quality be made public right away?

The intent of having an ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality is to inform families and consumers regarding levels of quality as they seek early learning and development choices for their family. Circles of Quality are made public on the ExceleRate Illinois website once the program is awarded the Circle of Quality.

What type of information is made public about the ExceleRate Illinois Circles of Quality?

Families and other interested parties will receive the following when seeking information online about programs and their ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality:

- Program name
- Program address
- Circle of Quality (**Licensed**, **Bronze**, **Silver**, **Gold**)
- Meaning of **Licensed**, **Bronze**, **Silver** and **Gold**
- Date on which Circle of Quality was awarded to program
- Other licensing information, including licensing violation information from the IDCFS Sunshine project

How can I learn more, or get further assistance?

Call toll-free (866) 697-8278 and ask to speak with an ExceleRate Illinois Counselor, or for answers to your questions email info@excelerateillinois.com.



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ExceleRate® Illinois is administered through INCCRRA under the joint direction of the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, the Illinois Department of Human Services, and the Illinois State Board of Education.

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