Executive Summary: Evaluation of Rhode Island's BrightStars Child Care Center and Preschool Quality Framework

BrightStars, Rhode Island's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), was launched in 2009 and provides a quality framework for licensed child care centers and preschools, family child care homes, and school-age programs. BrightStars includes 10 standards and uses a block structure to create a program rating that ranges from 1 star to 5 stars, with more stars indicating higher quality. As stated in its mission, BrightStars:

- helps families access quality child care, early learning, and school-age programs;

- helps child care providers learn about best practices in early learning and apply them to the care children receive; and

- recognizes program quality and gives parents information to make choices about their children's care and education.

The purpose of this evaluation was to collect and analyze data regarding the BrightStars framework for child care centers and preschools to help Rhode Island leaders continue to refine and strengthen its QRIS. This evaluation provides important data for determining whether the framework produces rating levels that meaningfully differentiate higher quality programs from lower quality programs. As required in the Early Learning Challenge Grant, this evaluation also examines the extent to which there are relationships between measures of children's growth and BrightStars ratings and standards. We also studied the extent to which the relationship between ratings and children's development differed by family income and gathered information about directors' and teachers' impressions of BrightStars.

Study design and procedures overview

- The evaluation included 71 BrightStars child care and preschool programs (21 one-star, 21 two-star, 15 three-star, 11 four-star, and 3 five-star).

- Independent classroom quality data were collected using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Pre-K in all 71 participating programs; CLASS Toddler data were collected in a subset of 32 programs.

- Fall and spring assessments of early academic, executive function, and social-emotional skills were collected from 332 children in 65 of the participating programs.

- Parents of participating children completed questionnaires about their family and child's demographic characteristics.

- Directors and teachers completed questionnaires about their demographic characteristics, their programs, and their impressions of BrightStars.

Results and conclusions

This study provides evidence of BrightStars' validity in measuring quality. Figures 1 and 2 show the CLASS means by star rating for each CLASS domain.[1] Statistical analysis showed that:

- the quality of preschool classrooms, as measured by all three domains of the CLASS Pre-K (i.e., Instructional Support, Emotional Support, Classroom Organization), was higher in programs with higher star ratings than those with lower star ratings;

- six of the 10 BrightStars standards were also substantively, positively related to all three CLASS Pre-K scores and the remaining four standards were positively related to Instructional Support;

- the quality of toddler classrooms, as measured by the two domains of the CLASS Toddler (i.e., Emotional and Behavioral Support, Engaged Support for Learning), was higher in programs with higher star ratings than those with lower star ratings; and

- eight of the 10 standards also were related to both CLASS Toddler scores; the remaining two standards were positively related to Engaged Support for Learning.

Figure 1. CLASS Pre-K scores by star rating

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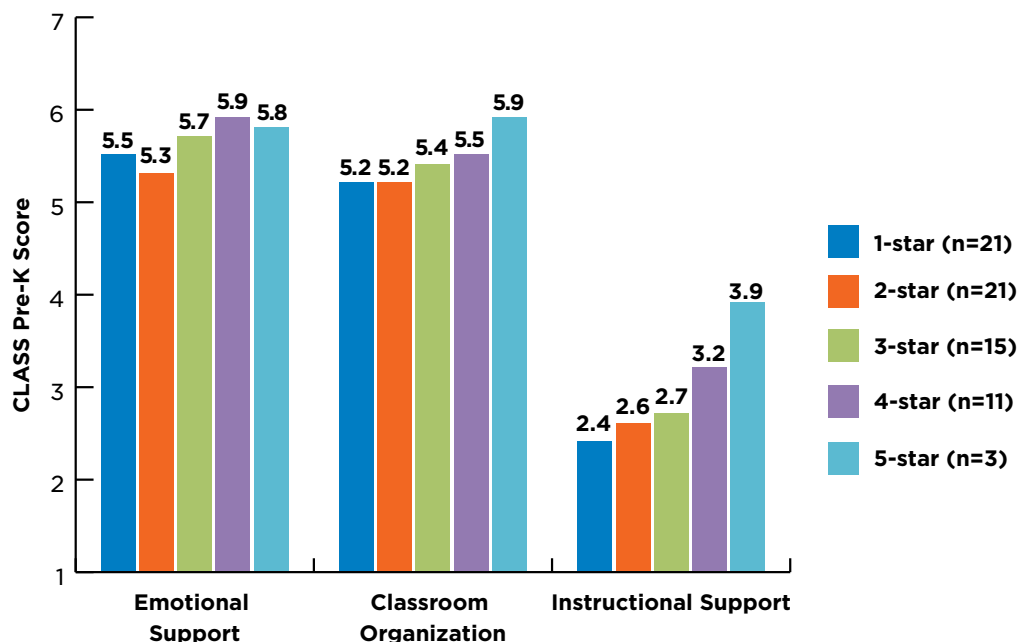
[1] These figures present the mean for each domain by star rating. The sample was not large enough to compare each star rating to the others; however statistical models indicated that higher star ratings were generally associated with higher scores on all domains of the CLASS Pre-K and CLASS Toddler. On both the CLASS Pre-K and CLASS Toddler, 1 or 2 indicates low-range quality; 3, 4, and 5 represent middle-range quality; and 6 and 7 represent high-range quality.

**Figure 2.** CLASS Toddler scores by star rating
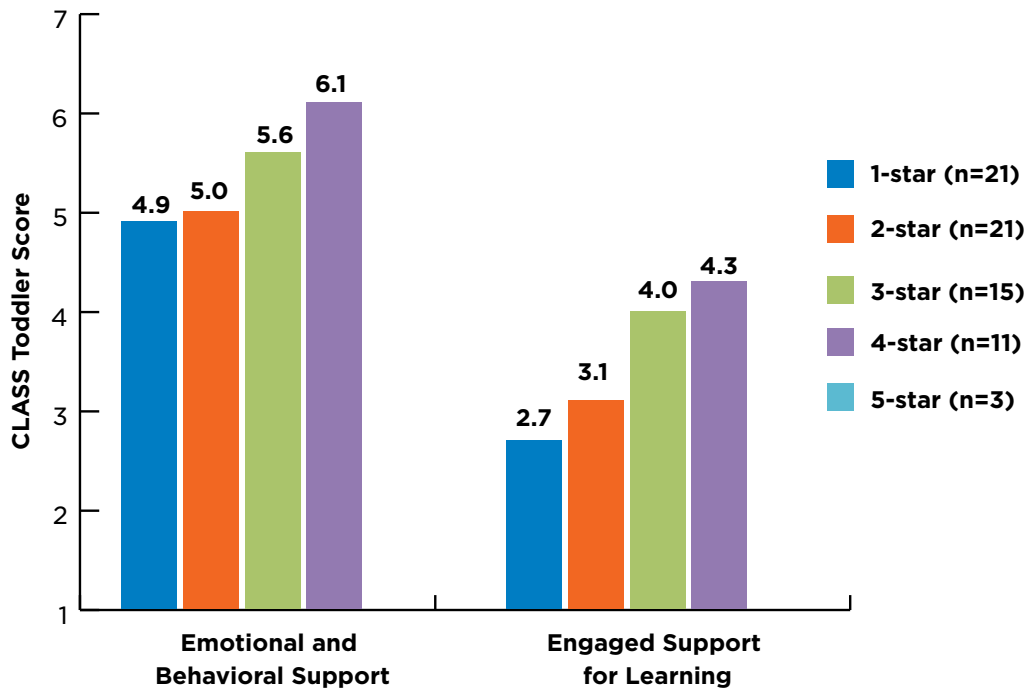
This study provides evidence of a positive, meaningful relationship between several BrightStars standards and preschoolers' social competence. The curriculum standard was also related to children's math skills. Although there were no substantive relationships between the overall BrightStars rating and measures of children's school readiness skills (i.e., math, language, executive function, and social-emotional skills), 5 of the 10 BrightStars standards were substantively, positively related to children's social competence. The curriculum standard also was related to math skills. None of the standards were substantively related to language skills.

Although these findings provide evidence of the validity of BrightStars, we recognize that some stakeholders may have expected stronger or more consistent findings. There are several possible reasons why we did not find more consistent relationships between ratings and measures of children's development, including that the BrightStars framework does not contain criteria regarding instructional practices designed to support a specific domain of development (e.g., language); quality in these programs may not be high enough to support children's development and learning; and ratings such as these condense a lot of information into a single scale with limited variability, diminishing the chances of finding significant results.

The BrightStars rating was more strongly related to some children's math skills and social-emotional skills than others. Consistent with some past research (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Chase-Lansdale, 2004), for children from lower income families, there was a substantive, positive association between star rating and social competence and learning behaviors, but not for children from higher income families. Surprisingly, we also found that for children from higher income families, math skills were substantively, positively associated with star rating; whereas the same was not true for children from lower income families. Additional research is needed to better understand how the relationship between quality and children's development might be influenced by family income.

Directors and teachers expressed generally positive views about BrightStars, with a few offering ideas for changes. When asked to rate their overall impressions of BrightStars, about 70 percent of the directors rated BrightStars positively or extremely positively. (See Figure 3.) Directors and teachers appreciated the supports and focus on quality. Directors and teachers also expressed some concerns about the classroom quality observations used to determine the star rating, the standards, and the block rating structure.

Figure 3. Director, preschool teacher, and toddler teacher impressions of BrightStars
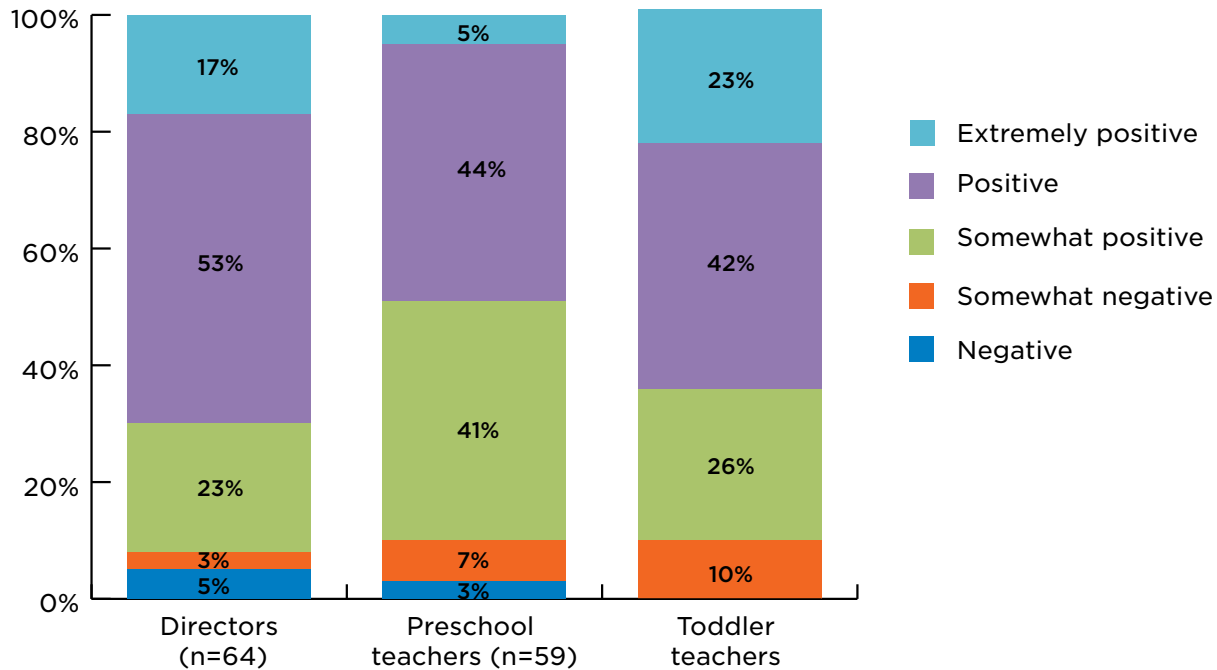
Considerations for the future

This report ends with some suggestions for Rhode Island early childhood leaders to consider as they continue to implement and strengthen BrightStars.

- We encourage Rhode Island leaders to use findings from multiple state QRIS evaluations to inform future revisions to BrightStars.

- Gathering more program-level data on the BrightStars standards would help leaders better understand the extent to which the framework is working as intended.

- This study included centers and preschool programs only. Rhode Island leaders would benefit from data to ensure that the BrightStars framework is working as intended for family child care homes and school-age programs.

- BrightStars administrative data may be useful in answering questions of interest to Rhode Island leaders on an on-going basis, such as: What is the distribution of ratings for preschool programs, family child care, and school-age programs? What percentage of programs applying for a re-rating earns the same, higher, or lower rating? What percentage of children receiving a child care subsidy is enrolled in a 4- or 5-star program?

- We encourage Rhode Island leaders to continue to support improvements in the quality of early care and education for all children.

For the full report, see:

Maxwell, K.L., Blasberg, A., Early, D.M., Li, W., & Orfali, N. (2016). *Evaluation of Rhode Island's BrightStars Child Care Center and Preschool Quality Framework*. Chapel Hill, NC: Child Trends.