



Step Up to  
**Quality**  
**PROGRAM  
GUIDE**





## INTRODUCTION

**High quality early childhood programs can have a lifelong positive impact on young children and their families. Early learning builds the foundation for skills needed in school, work and life.**

Step Up to Quality helps early childhood providers and educators recognize and improve quality. Our goal is to help programs reach their full potential so they can better serve children and families.

Step Up to Quality programs have access to coaching and resources that help them on a path to higher quality. These resources enable any provider or educator – big or small – to take quality to the next level.

The Step Up to Quality program guide will help you understand the program and its benefits. It will help you identify strengths and areas of improvement in your program. The program guide is your step-by-step roadmap on your path to higher quality.

Step Up to Quality is not a typical rating system – it’s a path. No matter where you are on the path – at Step 1 or Step 5 – you are making a statement: that you want your program to be the best it can be so you can best serve children and families.

You can change a child’s path with Step Up to Quality. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to Nebraska’s young children and their families. Together, we can make a difference to set up children and their families for future success.

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**“Step Up to Quality has brought all of us together for a common goal – by pointing out on a regular basis the little things we do and what an impact they have on children, and helping bring back enthusiasm for the work we do every day.”**

Center Director  
Step 2, Omaha

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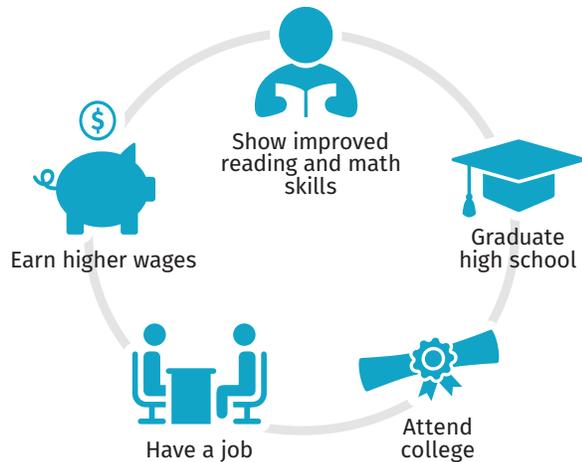
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## QUALITY MATTERS

Early child care and education is crucial to a child's future success, with 90 percent of brain development occurring before age 5. Children who receive quality early care and education are more likely to:



The need for quality early child care and education is clear to Nebraska parents and communities. The majority of Nebraskans believe quality is important, but only 10 percent strongly agree that young children in our state are prepared to succeed when they begin kindergarten.

### You can change a child's path with Step Up to Quality.

The work you are doing today has a lifelong impact on young children and their families.

Step Up to Quality helps early childhood providers and educators recognize and improve quality. Step Up to Quality programs have access to coaching and resources that help them on a path to higher quality. These resources enable any provider – big or small – to take quality to the next level.

Step Up to Quality programs go beyond what is required because they strive to do better for their children's and families' futures.

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“Step Up to Quality has ignited my passion for pursuing a higher level of child care that EVERY child deserves.”

Family child care home provider  
Step 2, Gothenburg

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### Who can participate?

Step Up to Quality supports all child care and early childhood education programs, including:

- Licensed family child care homes and child care centers
- Head Start and Early Head Start programs
- Public school-operated early childhood programs
- Community preschools

Step Up to Quality is voluntary for most child care and early childhood education programs.

Programs who receive more than \$250,000 annually in child care subsidy dollars are required to participate.

### Step Up to Quality: Nebraska's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

The development of QRIS began in the 1990s. States began rewarding accredited providers with higher subsidy reimbursement rates. Due to the large difference between state licensing and national accreditation standards, few providers could achieve accreditation. States saw the need for steps that lead to accreditation to help providers bridge the gap, so they developed the QRIS model.

A QRIS helps states assess, improve and communicate the level of quality in early childhood programs. Programs are awarded quality ratings for meeting a defined set of program standards.

## Every step counts.

Step Up to Quality is not a typical rating system – it’s a path. No matter where you are on the path, you are making a statement: that you want your program to be the best it can be so you can best serve children and their families.

## BENEFITS

Step Up to Quality programs have special access to supports and resources that improve quality.

### Coaching

You won’t be on this journey alone! Step Up to Quality coaches are early childhood experts. They help programs, big or small, create individualized goals and action plans to improve quality. Your coach will help you identify and maximize your strengths and support you along your path to quality improvement.

You are not required to have a coach. However, most participating programs agree that coaching is the most beneficial form of support offered by Step Up to Quality. Coaches provide an extra layer of support and encouragement as you work toward your goals.

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**“Step Up to Quality coaches are an asset for ANY program. Our coach provided resources to help us learn more about what we needed to accomplish to raise quality. She worked one-on-one with staff that needed assistance and together we developed action plans and goals.”**

**Center director**  
Step 4, Lincoln

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### Questions your coach might ask

- What do you want to accomplish?
- What have you tried so far?  
How has it worked?
- What options do you see for moving forward?
- What kind of support do you want from me?
- How do you plan to move up in steps?
- How can I best support you?

## Professional development & training

Access a variety of professional development and networking opportunities. Training opportunities are available at little to no cost.

### Training opportunities

- Safe with You
- Management Training
- Getting Down to Business
- Early Learning Guidelines
- Environment Rating Scales
- Classroom Assessment and Scoring System
- Curriculum Training
- Go NAP SACC

## Child Care Subsidy reimbursement

Participants who receive child care subsidies may receive increases to their subsidy rates once they reach Steps 3-5.

Participating providers who receive child care subsidies may receive an increase of 5 percent when they reach Step 3. An additional 5 percent increase may occur for each additional step achieved.

Some programs are eligible to enter at Step 3, such as nationally accredited programs. If a program enters at Step 3, they may receive their first subsidy increase when they reach Step 4.

## Incentive bonuses

You'll receive your first incentive bonus when you move up a step for the first time. Use incentive bonuses to pay for program materials like books or toys or to pay for professional development opportunities.

	Child Care Centers	Family Child Care Homes
Step 2	\$500	\$250
Step 3	\$750	\$400
Step 4	\$1,000	\$500
Step 5	\$1,250	\$600

## Financial support

Your coach can also guide you to resources and information to help you access additional support and funding. Here are a few opportunities made available by Step Up to Quality partners:

- **T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Nebraska scholarships:** A limited number of scholarships are available through the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children. Scholarships assist individuals working toward a certificate or diploma, or an Associate or Bachelor's degree in early childhood education.
- **Child Development Associate (CDA):** Limited funds are available through the Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood to assist early childhood professionals who want to apply for a CDA, a nationally recognized credential. Funds can help pay the fee for initial assessment or renewal.
- **Program accreditation:** Limited funds are available through the Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood to help programs pay part of the costs for recognized national accreditation.
- **Quality grants:** Grants are available through the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to assist child care programs working to improve quality.

## OVERVIEW OF STEPS

### A path to quality early child care and education.

Early childhood programs have many facets that impact the quality of care provided to young children.

Step Up to Quality focuses on the following areas, also known as quality standards:

- Program curriculum, learning environments and interactions
- Child outcomes
- Professional development and ongoing training
- Family engagement and partnerships
- Program administration

### Step 1

- Complete orientation
- Complete program application
- Enter director and staff into professional record system

### Step 2

- Complete training sessions
  - Safe with You Series
  - Early Learning Guidelines Domain Series
  - Management Training or Getting Down to Business
  - Complete Go NAP SACC orientation and Pre Self-Assessment
- Complete coach interest questionnaire

### Steps 3-5

- Complete observation tool training
- Develop action plans
- Complete and submit the Rating Readiness Tool
- Earn points based on quality standards

Prekindergarten programs established by public schools, Head Start programs and nationally accredited programs are eligible to enter at Step 3.

# STEP 1

## 1. Complete orientation

The director or family child care home primary provider must complete a Step Up to Quality orientation session.

The orientation schedule can be found at: [education.ne.gov/StepUpToQuality/get-started/orientation](http://education.ne.gov/StepUpToQuality/get-started/orientation)

## 2. Complete program application

All interested programs must apply to participate. If your program has multiple locations, each location must apply separately.

Apply online on the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System website: [www.education.ne.gov/StepUptoQuality/get-started/apply](http://www.education.ne.gov/StepUptoQuality/get-started/apply)

### Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System

The Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System was developed by the Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood in response to the Step Up to Quality Child Care Act of 2013. The system collects and stores important data about early childhood programs across Nebraska, including:

- Participation in Step Up to Quality, including observation data and other important data
- Participation in required licensing trainings
- Program staff records and qualifications

Access the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System at: [erecords.education.ne.gov](http://erecords.education.ne.gov).

### Program application information includes:

- Program contact information
- Site information
- Benefits provided to staff
- Number of children served
- Rates charged for children of certain ages
- Whether or not the program is serving children with special needs
- Whether or not the program provides transportation to home or to schools
- Whether or not the program serves children eligible for child care subsidy

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“Once you understand that Step Up to Quality is an ongoing process that you will work through at your own pace, it’s not quite as intimidating. The process is not meant to be rushed through – each program will have its own timeline.”

Center director  
Step 4, Lincoln

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## 3. Enter director and staff into the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System

Each director/licensee/owner will create a program profile and a profile for themselves in the record system. Once a program profile has been created, each staff member must also complete a record. Staff members must have individual email addresses – the process takes approximately 10-15 minutes per staff member.

Professional record information includes:

- Contact information
- Education
- Trainings completed
- Credentials
- Wages
- Work experience

## STEP 2

### 1. Complete required training sessions

All Step Up to Quality directors/licensees/owners must complete the following training sessions:

- Child care centers and Preschool programs with a license capacity of 13 or more:
  - Safe with You Series (4 hours)
  - Early Learning Guidelines Domain Series (42 hours)
  - Management Training Program (45 hours)
- Family child care homes and Preschool programs with a license capacity of 12 or fewer:
  - Safe with You Series (4 hours)
  - Early Learning Guidelines Domain Series (42 hours)
  - Getting Down to Business (20 hours)

Directors/licensees/owners who have previously completed the Early Learning Guidelines Domain Series, Management Training Program or Getting Down to Business do not need to retake these courses. Previous training must be verified through the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System.

### 2. Complete Go NAP SACC orientation and pre self-assessment

Go NAP SACC (Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care) walks child care providers and educators through a series of steps to make healthy changes to their programs.

To reach Step 2, Step Up to Quality programs must:

- Complete the Go NAP SACC orientation.
- Submit the pre self-assessment covering all five areas. Areas include nutrition, physical activity, outdoor play, screen time and breastfeeding and infant feeding.

The orientation video and self-assessment can be accessed at [negonapsacc.unl.edu](http://negonapsacc.unl.edu).

You must create an account to log in, watch the video and complete the assessment.

### 3. Complete coach interest questionnaire

As programs near completion of training requirements, the director/licensee/owner should contact Step Up to Quality for a Coach Interest Questionnaire. Step Up to Quality staff will work to assign a coach to each program.

Request a coach interest questionnaire by contacting:

**Step Up to Quality office**  
[nde.stepuptoquality@nebraska.gov](mailto:nde.stepuptoquality@nebraska.gov)  
**844.807.5712**

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**“It seems like a lot of work, and can be at times, but it is all worth it to know that you are doing what you can to give families and their children the best care possible!”**

Center director  
Step 2, Gering

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## STEPS 3-5

Programs where all classrooms at a specific location meet Rule 11 or Head Start Performance Standards, or are nationally accredited, may enter at Step 3. Documentation of accreditation will be requested upon completion of program application.

### 1. Complete observation tool training

Programs must select either the Environment Rating Scale (ERS) and/or the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™) observation and complete the required training for that tool.

## CLASS & ERS

### Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

CLASS is an observation tool that focuses on the effectiveness of classroom interactions among teachers and children. This includes emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support. These daily interactions promote children's social and cognitive development.

CLASS observation tools have been developed for Infant, Toddler, Pre-K, K-3, Upper Elementary and Secondary age groups. At every age level, CLASS focuses on interactions that support learning.

CLASS is used for center-based programs only. If you choose to select CLASS, the required training is CLASS Introduction.

### Environment Rating Scale (ERS)

The ERS is a widely accepted method of evaluating and improving the quality of home- and center-based programs. The ERS assesses the quality of interactions between adults and children. Classroom schedules, materials and space support these interactions and are included in the ERS.

ERS is broadly defined and currently includes:

- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)
- Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R)
- Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R).

If you choose to select ERS, the required training is Introduction to ERS.

## 2. Develop action plans

Programs are encouraged to develop program improvement or action plans based upon self-assessment results. Go NAP SACC trainers can help you develop and implement action plans for NAP SACC, while Step Up to Quality coaches can do so for ERS and CLASS.

## 3. Complete and submit the Rating Readiness Tool

You can find the Rating Readiness tool on the Step Up to Quality website under Providers + Educators > For Enrolled Providers > Forms. This is your official request for an on-site observation and rating review. Once you have submitted your Rating Readiness Tool, no changes may be made.

Send your completed form to

[nde.stepuptoquality@nebraska.gov](mailto:nde.stepuptoquality@nebraska.gov)

or mail it to:

**Step Up to Quality**  
**301 Centennial Mall South**  
**P.O. Box 94987**  
**Lincoln, NE 68509**

Once your form is received, the Step Up to Quality office will assign a Rating Reviewer and Observer to visit your program.

### Step Up to Quality rating cycle

Your program can request an on-site observation and rating review once per year (based on the date printed on your last certificate) if you are ready to move up a step. Programs will be automatically reviewed as follows:

- Step 3 – every two years
- Step 4 – every two years
- Step 5 – every five years

Step Up to Quality will assess some quality indicators through paperwork, training records, educational records and policies and procedures.

Other indicators will require an on-site observation by an Observer and Rating Reviewer. Observers will assess the environment and teacher-child interactions using the ERS and/or CLASS assessment. The Observer and Rating Reviewer will be someone who is not already associated with your program.

## Rating documentation

Programs will provide documentation to verify whether they are meeting certain requirements. Documentation may include, but is not limited to:

- Child files
- Child portfolios
- Parent handbook
- Program policies
- Staff handbook and policies/procedures
- Documentation of staff orientation
- Staffing plans
- Lesson plans
- Daily schedules
- Curriculum plans/activity matrix
- Copies of completed child developmental screening forms
- Copies of completed child assessments
- Newsletters
- Facility website
- Notes from family conferences or meetings
- Information posted in family resource area, library, classrooms, bulletin boards, resource binders, etc.
- Minutes and agendas from staff meetings
- Minutes and agendas from IEP/IFSP meetings

To determine points for the Professional Development and Ongoing Training standard, Step Up to Quality may review the following based on the indicators you've selected in this standard:

- Training hours
- Credit hours
- Credentials and educational records of program teaching staff, directors, licensees or primary providers through the Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Records System.

Programs are responsible for ensuring all staff data is updated and accurate.

## 4. Earn points based on quality standards

Ratings for Steps 3-5 are determined by the number of points your program earns during an independent observation and by review of quality indicators.

Programs must earn at least one point in each standard area.

	Child Care Centers	Family Child Care Homes
<b>Step 3</b>	30 to 50 points	30 to 43 points
<b>Step 4</b>	51 to 79 points	44 to 58 points
<b>Step 5</b>	80 to 100 points	59 to 82 points

### Earning points

To earn points, programs must complete the Rating Readiness Tool, submit necessary documentation and have an on-site visit.

Programs can choose which points to focus on within each standard area.

Programs should focus on indicators that will earn points immediately and then add additional points as they work on other indicators.

## QUALITY STANDARDS AND INDICATORS

Quality standards are global areas that are important to program quality. These areas are based on researched practices linked to improving children's learning and development.

Step Up to Quality focuses on the following five quality standards:

- Curriculum, learning environments and teacher-child interactions
- Child outcomes
- Professional development and training
- Family engagement and partnerships
- Program administration

Each quality standard is made up of quality indicators, which describe specific expectations and measures of quality. Quality standards and indicators help ensure providers implement high-quality practices across Nebraska.

# QUALITY STANDARDS

## 1. Curriculum, learning environments & teacher-child interactions

**Curriculum:** Providers should use an evidence-based curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, aligned with the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines and incorporates child nutrition and physical activity.

**Learning environments:** Whether in a family child care home, a child care center or a preschool, providers should adapt learning activities to meet the needs of individual children.

**Teacher-child interactions:** Teachers should actively engage children in everyday learning with effective teaching approaches that enhance each child's learning and development.

## 2. Child outcomes

Early child care providers and educators should be knowledgeable of developmental milestones, complete regular assessments and communicate about children's skills, strengths and needs.

## 3. Professional development and training

Programs should be staffed with knowledgeable, effective and professional staff who pursue lifelong learning.

## 4. Family engagement and partnerships

Providers and educators should maintain collaborative relationships with families to help support each child's learning and development.

## 5. Program administration

Quality early child care providers carefully select and guide staff and substitutes, and have sound business practices for managing income, expenses, and facility maintenance.

## Quality Standards + Points

Quality Standard	Child Care Centers	Family Child Care Homes
<b>Curriculum, learning environments &amp; interactions</b>		
• Training, action plans & observation	56 points	38 points
• Curriculum	10 points	10 points
<b>Child outcomes</b>	9 points	9 points
<b>Professional development &amp; ongoing training</b>	11 points	11 points
<b>Family engagement &amp; partnerships</b>	6 points	6 points
<b>Program administration</b>	8 points	8 points
<b>Total possible points</b>	<b>100 points</b>	<b>82 points</b>

# 1. CURRICULUM, LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS + INTERACTIONS

Programs must select an observation tool (CLASS and/or ERS) and complete the required training for that tool. Only center-based programs can select CLASS.

If you select ERS, the required training is Introduction to ERS.

If you select CLASS, the required training is CLASS Introduction.

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<b>1A. Training</b>		
1. The program lead designee attends the Introduction to the Environment Rating Scale training.	To understand the ERS observation scale, subscales and how the scale is scored.	1
2. The program lead designee attends the Practice Using the Environment Rating Scale training.	To understand detailed information on the areas ERS measures and how the measures are scored.	1
3. The program lead designee attends the Introduction to the CLASS training.	To understand the CLASS, the domains and dimensions, and how they are scored.	1
4. The program lead designee attends the CLASS Observation training.	To help programs understand how this observation scale is scored in more detail.	1
5. The program lead designee completes Go NAP SACC training.	To help early childhood programs understand child nutrition and physical activity best practices and how they can be implemented.	1
<b>1A. Quality Action Plan (based on self-assessment)</b>		
6. The program lead designee completes a Quality Action Plan based upon the ERS self-assessment.*	To help programs focus on the changes they plan to make regarding findings from the self-assessment.	2
7. The program lead designee completes a Quality Action Plan based upon CLASS self-assessment.*	To help programs focus on the changes they plan to make regarding findings from the self-assessment.	2
8. The program lead designee completes an Action Planning Document based upon the Go NAP SACC Pre Self-Assessment.	To help programs focus on the changes they plan to make regarding key focus areas found on the pre self-assessment.	2

*\*Note: If indicators 6 and/or 7 are selected, the program must submit the Self-Assessment(s) and Action Plan(s) to the Step Up to Quality office before submitting the Rating Readiness Tool.*

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<b>1A. Observations</b>		
<p><b>9. Environment Rating Scale (ERS) Observation</b></p> <p>Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R)</p> <p>Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)</p> <p>Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS-R)</p> <p>ERS items are scored on a 1-7 continuum, with 7 considered as excellent and 1 considered inadequate.</p> <p>For center-based programs, at least 30 percent of groups/classrooms of children</p>	<p>To ensure care that allows children to experience quality of life and encourages them to develop their abilities. Quality programs must provide for three basic needs all children have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protection of health and safety</li> <li>• Chances to build positive relationships</li> <li>• Opportunities for stimulation and learning from experience</li> </ul> <p>ERS observations monitor these components in a program's environment, curriculum, schedule and interactions.</p>	
	<b>Average Score</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>Program Overall</b>	Average Score 3.5-4.49	3
	Average Score 4.5-5.49	6
	Average Score 5.5 and higher	9
<b>Subscale Name</b>	<b>Average Subscale Score</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>Personal Care Routines</b>	Average Subscale Score 3.0-3.9	1
	Average Subscale Score 4.0-4.9	2
	Average Subscale Score 5.0 & higher	3
<b>Learning Activities (ECERS-3) Activities (ITERS-R and FCCERS-R)</b>	Average Subscale Score 4.0-4.9	1
	Average Subscale Score 5.0-5.9	2
	Average Subscale Score 6.0 & higher	3
<b>Language and Literacy (ECERS-3) Listening and Talking (ITERS-R and FCCERS-R)</b>	Average Subscale Score 4.0-4.9	1
	Average Subscale Score 5.0-5.9	2
	Average Subscale Score 6.0 & higher	3

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<b>1A. Observations</b>		
<p><b>10. Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)</b></p> <p>CLASS Infant CLASS Toddler CLASS Prekindergarten (Pre-K)</p> <p>CLASS items are scored on a 1-7 continuum with 6-7 considered high, 3-5 medium, and 1-2 low.</p> <p>For center-based programs, at least 30 percent of groups/classrooms of children will be randomly selected for observation. This will include at least one group/classroom per age group.</p>	<p>To measure the quality of interactions between teachers and children.</p> <p>Effective teacher-child interactions may be associated with higher scores in vocabulary and math. These are key skills for children about to enter kindergarten.</p> <p>Effective interactions may also be associated with gains in social competence and less behavior problems.</p>	
	<b>Average Score</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>Program Overall Average Score</b>	Average Score 3.5 - 4.9	3
	Average Score 5.0 - 5.9	6
	Average Score and 6.0 and higher	9
<b>Class Domains</b>	<b>Average Domain Score</b>	<b>Points</b>
<b>Engaged Support for Learning (Toddler)</b> <b>Instructional Support (Pre-K)</b>	Average Domain Score 2.0-3.4	1
	Average Domain Score 3.5-4.9	2
	Average Domain Score 5.0 and higher	3
<b>Responsive Caregiving (Infant)</b> <b>Emotional and Behavioral Support (Toddler)</b> <b>Emotional Support (Pre-K)</b>	Average Subscale Score 4.0-4.9	1
	Average Subscale Score 5.0-5.9	2
	Average Subscale Score 6.0 & higher	3
<b>Classroom Organization (Pre-K)</b>	Average Subscale Score 4.0-4.9	1
	Average Subscale Score 5.0-5.9	2
	Average Subscale Score 6.0 & higher	3

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<b>1A. Observations</b>		
<b>11. Go NAP SACC Post Self-Assessment Results</b> The program lead attends GO NAP SACC Training and completes an action planning document before completing the Post Self-Assessment	Go NAP SACC helps early care and education programs develop quality practices to prevent childhood obesity. Self-assessment helps promote health and learning in young children through nutrition and physical activity.	
<b>Post Self-Assessment Results</b>		<b>Points</b>
<b>Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding Policy and Practices</b>	30-49.9% of Total Best Practices	1
	50-69.9% of Total Best Practices	2
	70-100% of Total Best Practices	3
<b>Nutrition Policy and Practices</b>	30-49.9% of Total Best Practices	1
	50-69.9% of Total Best Practices	2
	70-100% of Total Best Practices	3
<b>Outdoor Play and Learning, Physical Activity, and Screen Time Policy and Practices</b>	30-49.9% of Total Best Practices	1
	50-69.9% of Total Best Practices	2
	70-100% of Total Best Practices	3

*Please refer to the Step Up to Quality Feedback Report that is provided on your account on the Go NAP SACC website. This will inform you of how many points your program earned on the post self-assessment for each section area listed above.*

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<b>1B: Curriculum, learning and staff supports</b>		
<p><b>1. The program utilizes an evidence-based/developmentally appropriate curriculum.</b></p>	<p>A curriculum includes goals for children and families, the experiences and materials provided by the program to help children achieve those goals, and how early childhood professionals work together to support children.</p>	<p>2</p>
<p><b>2. The program curriculum aligns with the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines.</b></p> <p>A list of approved curriculum is available on the Step Up to Quality website.</p> <p>If your curriculum is not on the approved list, you may complete the Curriculum Alignment Tool for review and approval.</p> <p>If you submit the Alignment Tool, you must receive approval before submitting the Rating Readiness Tool.</p> <p>Contact the Step Up to Quality Office for questions regarding curriculum.</p>	<p>Alignment of the curriculum with the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines helps ensure that all children receive developmentally appropriate instruction.</p>	<p>2</p>
<p><b>3. Lead teaching staff or Family Child Care Home owner is trained on the program curriculum.</b></p>	<p>Training to implement the established curriculum helps teaching staff put the learning activities into practice.</p>	<p>2</p>
<p><b>4. Lead teaching staff or Family Child Care Home owner completes the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines Domain Training Series.</b></p>	<p>Training on the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines helps staff provide developmentally appropriate experiences for children.</p>	<p>2</p>
<p><b>5. The program provides a curriculum that incorporates nutrition and/or physical activity for children.</b></p>	<p>Children are healthier when they have opportunities for physical activity and the development of gross motor skills, and are provided appropriate nutrition.</p>	<p>2</p>

## 2. CHILD OUTCOMES

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<p><b>1. Developmental screening is conducted within 90 days of a child's enrollment and results are shared with families.</b></p> <p>Your Step Up to Quality coach can help you identify appropriate developmental screening instruments.</p>	<p>Early identification of potential developmental delays is critical to support each child's development.</p> <p>Staff who are knowledgeable about developmental milestones can share information and help connect families with appropriate services and evaluation.</p> <p>Some questions to ask yourself about your developmental screening practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is screening conducted for <b>every</b> child within 90 days of enrollment to identify developmental concerns and determine if a child needs a more formal evaluation?</li> <li>• Is the screening tool reliable and valid?</li> <li>• Are screening results provided to each family?</li> <li>• Does the program share information with families about how to find developmental services when needed?</li> </ul>	1
<p><b>2. Ongoing assessment of children's strengths and needs aligns with the Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines. Assessment results are used to develop education plans, track progress and inform instruction.</b></p> <p>Your Step Up to Quality coach can help you identify appropriate assessment instruments.</p>	<p>Ongoing assessment helps programs learn about each child's progress and needs. This allows programs to provide individualized instruction that best supports each child's growth and development.</p> <p>Some questions to ask yourself about your assessment practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are both formal and informal assessments used?</li> <li>• Is information collected and analyzed at least three times per year?</li> <li>• How is data used to inform curriculum and planning and to track progress?</li> </ul>	2
<p><b>3. The program conducts a periodic review and uses child assessment data for continuous program improvement.</b></p>	<p>Looking at trends or patterns is a valuable planning tool to support groups of children. This quality indicator examines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are the individual needs of every child in a group considered when making plans to improve programming?</li> <li>• Are specific action plans in place to address program enhancements?</li> </ul>	2
<p><b>4. The program shares individualized child data from ongoing assessments with families.</b></p>	<p>Informing and involving families in their child's progress and growth supports the child's development both in the program and at home.</p>	1
<p><b>5. The program provides evidence of family involvement in the development of transition plans for individual children.</b></p>	<p>Engaging and involving families in their child's progress, growth and transitions supports the child's development.</p>	1

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
6. The program has a procedure in place to meet with community service providers for IFSP and/or IEP planning for children with special needs.	Programs need to support children and work with other early childhood professionals when caring for children with special needs.	1
7. The program staff participates in IFSP and/or IEP planning for children with special needs.	Programs need to support children and work with other early childhood professionals when caring for children with special needs.	1

### 3. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT + ONGOING TRAINING

Early childhood is a dynamic and ever-changing field. Research is constantly providing new information about young children’s brain development. It is essential that early childhood providers participate in ongoing training and education that supports high-quality interactions with children.

The most successful early childhood professionals make a commitment to lifelong learning. They actively pursue new knowledge as it becomes available.

**Note: Family Child Care Home II’s will be scored as center-based programs for this section because they have more than one staff member.**

Quality Indicator		Points
1. CDA or one-year certificate/diploma related to ECE* from community college or higher.	Level Three of Nebraska’s Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	1
2. Has at least 20 semester credit hours in early childhood education.		1
3. AA/AAS in ECE or related field*.	Level Four of Nebraska’s Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	2
4. BA in ECE or related field*.	Level Five of Nebraska’s Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	3
5. MA in ECE or related field*.	Level Six of Nebraska Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	4

<b>Center: Designated Lead Teaching Staff (at least one staff person per classroom must be designated as lead)</b>		<b>Points</b>
6. 25% have CDA or one-year certificate/diploma related to ECE* from community college or higher.	Level Three of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	1
7. 25% have at least 20 semester credit hours in early childhood education.		1
8. 25% have AA/AAS or higher in ECE or related field*.	Level Four of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	2
9. 25% have BA or higher in ECE or related field*.	Level Five of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	3

<b>Center: All Other Teaching Staff (assistants and aides)</b>		<b>Points</b>
10. 25% have CDA or one-year certificate/diploma related to ECE* from community college or higher.	Level Three of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	1
11. 25% have at least 20 semester credit hours in early childhood education.		1
12. 50% have CDA or one-year certificate/diploma related to ECE* from community college or higher.		2
13. 25% have AA/AAS or higher in ECE or related field*.	Level Four of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	3

<b>Family Child Care Provider</b>		<b>Points</b>
14. CDA or one-year certificate/diploma related to ECE* from community college or higher.	Level Three of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	2
15. FCCH provider has at least 20 semester credits hours in early childhood education.		2
16. AA /AAS in ECE or related field*.	Level Four of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	6
17. BA in ECE or related field*.	Level Five of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	8
18. MA in ECE or related field*.	Level Six of Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Education Professionals	10

Ongoing Professional Development (center-based AND family child care homes)		Points
<p>19. All full-time administrative/teaching staff have at least 24 clock hours of in-service training per calendar year</p> <p>OR</p> <p>3 semester credit hours of college coursework per calendar year</p>	<p>A minimum of 4 clock hours of the 24 clock hours should be in health and safety.</p> <p>Three semester college credit hours must be related to the employee's current role in the early childhood program, or required for the completion of a degree program in ECE or a related field.</p>	1

*\*Note: Related fields include Social Work, Nursing, Psychology, Human Development & the Family, Family & Consumer Science, Youth Development, Mental Health/Counseling.*

## 4. FAMILY ENGAGEMENT + PARTNERSHIPS

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<p>1. The program honors the child's home language and encourages home language development by greeting children who are English Language Learners (ELL) and their families in the home language or using simple phrases from a child's home language in daily communication with the child.</p>	<p>All children need to see themselves represented in the classroom on a daily basis. This includes each child's cultural identity and traditions.</p> <p>Early childhood professionals do not need to be proficient in each child's home language. But providers should know a few terms and phrases and use them with children and families to help everyone feel welcome.</p>	1
<p>2. The program provides materials and resources in a way that is accessible to all families, including ELL families.</p>	<p>Connecting families to community resources results in greater sharing and maximizing of resources.</p> <p>Family resources are most meaningful and effective when they are relevant and understood by families in the program.</p>	1
<p>3. The program informs families when there will be a change in teacher or a substitute teacher, when a field trip is planned, and when a child will change classrooms.</p>	<p>Families need consistency and stability in the early care and education of their children. Families can help children in making the transition if they are informed.</p>	1
<p>4. The program has communication strategies for informing families about their children's learning and development.</p>	<p>Early childhood programs need to regularly communicate with families about learning activities.</p>	2
<p>5. There is a defined procedure for the family to provide feedback to the program.</p>	<p>High-quality programs continuously look for ways to better serve children and families. Programs should have a formal procedure for gathering parent feedback.</p>	1

## 5. PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<p><b>1. Center-based programs:</b> The program has procedures for orienting new staff and assistant(s) to the program. The program has a written staff handbook.</p> <p><b>Family Child Care programs:</b> The program has procedures for orienting assistants and/or substitutes to the program including meeting children and families before assuming responsibilities.</p>	<p>High-quality programs ensure new staff and substitutes are familiar with policies, procedures and classroom curriculum.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p><b>2. There are self-assessments or appraisals of teaching staff competencies and professional development plans for improving skills.</b></p>	<p>High-quality programs ensure staff continue to grow and develop in their knowledge and skills.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p><b>3. Center-based programs:</b> A written salary scale or a plan for compensation of all teaching staff, substitutes, and assistants in the program is defined and implemented taking into account staff education and years of experience.</p> <p><b>Family Child Care programs:</b> A plan for compensation of owners, substitutes and assistants working in the family child care home is defined and implemented taking into account staff education and years of experience.</p>	<p>High-quality programs have stable and consistent teaching staff. Programs can help ensure stability if they provide pay and benefits based upon education and experience.</p> <p>Family Child Care Homes should continuously evaluate whether they are compensating themselves and their substitutes appropriately.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p><b>4. The program has a budget that projects annual income and expenses.</b></p>	<p>Early childhood programs must understand their income and expenses to ensure operation costs are covered and that programs can sustain themselves financially. By having your program's finances in order, you can continue to be a dependable part of your children's lives.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p><b>5. The program reports income to the IRS and claims expenses related to the program.</b></p>	<p>High-quality programs operate according to the Internal Revenue Service requirements. By following IRS requirements, programs stay in good standing with federal and state taxes.</p>	<p>1</p>

Quality Indicator	Why is this indicator important?	Points
<p><b>6. The program has records to keep track of income and expenses.</b></p>	<p>High-quality programs have record-keeping practices to ensure that all income has been received and details of how and when expenses have been paid.</p>	<p>1</p>
<p><b>7. The program has a written agreement with the families for hours of operation, days the program is closed, fees, and a fee payment schedule, including late fees.</b></p>	<p>High-quality programs provide families with written information about the program's operations, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fees</li> <li>• Hours of operation</li> <li>• Holidays and other closings</li> <li>• Payment schedule and policies</li> </ul>	<p>1</p>
<p><b>8. The program participates in the Child and Adult Care Food Program.</b></p>	<p>When programs participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program, children have their daily nutritional needs met.</p>	<p>1</p>

# RATINGS GRIEVANCE PROCESS

## Purpose of the rating grievance process

Programs may pursue a rating grievance after the receipt of a Step Up to Quality Rating Report for the following reasons:

- The program suspects errors in calculation of points or other technical errors; or
- The program claims that their practice at the time of an on-site evaluation should have earned at least one level higher.

The Step Up to Quality Rating Grievance process does **not** address the following reasons:

- Additional information/documentation gathered by the program after on-site review;
- Indicators the program did not select on the completed Rating Readiness Tool;
- The program's self-assessment scores were higher than the official observation score(s);
- The program's ERS and CLASS scores from previous observations were higher than the Step Up to Quality observation scores;
- The date/time of the on-site review (if the review occurred during the timeframe selected by the program on their Request for On-Site Evaluation Form);
- The selection of classrooms for observations;
- The variability of time spent in classrooms;
- The primary assigned teacher was not present during visit;
- The classroom or family child care home had new children, sick children, or an otherwise "non-typical" day, including disruptions to regular schedule;
- Information was not ready for review by Rating Reviewers/Observers at the time of the on-site visit(s);
- Staff education verification; or
- Programs with licenses that are on probation, suspended or revoked may not file a rating grievance.

## Eligibility

Programs may pursue one rating grievance per Step Up to Quality rating cycle:

- **Step 3:** Every two years
- **Step 4:** Every two years
- **Step 5:** Every five years

## Initiating a rating grievance

The program must complete the following steps **within 30 days** of receipt of the Step Up to Quality Rating Report:

1. The program director of record must communicate concerns with the Nebraska Step Up to Quality Director. The Nebraska Step Up to Quality Director will review the Step Up to Quality standards and indicators with the program to address misunderstandings or questions about the rating calculations. This initial step is intended to clarify for programs how the ratings are calculated, which may prevent the need for a rating grievance to proceed.
2. If the program still has concerns after this communication, the program director of record shall complete and submit the Step Up to Quality Rating Grievance Form to the Nebraska Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood Step Up to Quality program, and attach detailed written information including:
  - The date(s) of communication with the Step Up to Quality Director;
  - Documentation and evidence of the program's practice specific to each disputed Quality standard and indicator; and
  - A description of why the program practice, at the time of observation or review, should have earned at least one step level higher based on the Step Up to Quality standards and indicators.

## Grievance review and resolution process

While a program is in the process of a rating grievance, all Step Up to Quality services, including coaching and distribution of incentive bonuses, will be put on hold until the final rating decision.

The Step Up to Quality Director will forward the completed Step Up to Quality Rating Grievance Form to the Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, Child Care Development Fund Manager **within 5 business days** of receipt.

The Step Up to Quality Steering Committee will review the program's Step Up to Quality Rating Grievance Form and may request additional documentation from the program and/or the Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood Step Up to Quality Program. The Steering Committee will make a decision **within 10 business days** of receiving all necessary documents and information. Written notification of the decision will be sent to the program.

If the rating grievance is **granted**:

- The scores will be adjusted and the program will be issued an updated Rating Report, if it is determined that an error was made in calculation;
- The program's participation status on the Step Up to Quality database will be updated, if applicable; and
- The Steering Committee will direct the Step Up to Quality program to initiate an on-site review for a re-rating, if required by the rating grievance outcome.

*Note: In the case of re-rating, no new documentation or evidence that was not available during the original on-site review will be considered.*

If the rating grievance is **denied**:

- The program will be notified in writing of the decision, including information about why the grievance was denied. The program's rating will remain valid for two years (if the program is at Step 3 or 4) from the date the rating was issued.

## ISSUES THAT MIGHT IMPACT A PROGRAM RATING

### Child care licensing

#### Change of director

Programs that experience a Director change at or after Step 2 will need to choose a new program lead. The program lead must have completed all license-required trainings in order to maintain a Step 2 rating.

If the new program lead has not completed the required trainings, the program will be given one year to complete them. Failure to complete all required trainings within the allotted time may result in a program being moved back to Step 1.

#### Licensing corrective actions and disciplines

Licensed child care or education programs operating under a provisional license are not eligible to move beyond Step 1 until they have an operating license.

If a participating child care or education program's license is placed on corrective action status, disciplinary limitation, probation, or suspension, the program shall have its quality rating reduced to Step 1.

If a participating child care or education program's license is **revoked**, the program will not be eligible to participate in Step Up to Quality or receive a quality rating until the program has been issued an operating license which is in full force and effect.

If a disciplinary action has been initiated, and the program has appealed the action, the license remains in effect and the program may continue to operate until the hearing outcome/decision. The program's step level will also remain in effect until the hearing outcome/decision.

If a program has fulfilled the terms of their corrective action status or their discipline, the program's step level shall be reinstated to its previous step rating.

If an Emergency Order has been issued, the program must immediately comply with that Order. If the program appeals this action, and the action is overturned, the program's step level is reinstated at its previous rating.

## Child Care Subsidy

If the Department of Health and Human Services terminates a child care subsidy agreement, the program rating will be re-evaluated.

## Prekindergarten programs established by a school board or Educational Service Unit per Rule 11

An early childhood education program found in noncompliance with the requirements of Rule 11 may be subject to loss of program approval or loss of grant funding. The Department of Education Commissioner may make recommendations to the State Board of Education to end or deny the program's approval or grant funding. Recommendations from the Commissioner to the Board to either end or deny program approval may be appealed.

When the Commissioner makes a recommendation to the State Board to end or deny program approval or end grant funding, notice of the recommendation and of the right to request a hearing shall be given by certified mail sent at least **30 calendar days prior** to the date of the Board meeting at which the recommendation is to be considered. The early childhood education program's Step Up to Quality level will be reduced to Step 1, effective the date of this notice.

If the program appeals this action with the Nebraska Department of Education, the program's step level rating will remain at Step 1, pending the outcome of the hearing and State Board decision.

Upon review of the Commissioner's recommendation and following any hearing, the State Board shall make a determination regarding the program's approval or grant funding, and shall inform the head administrator of the school district or Educational Service Unit, and the presiding officer of the governing body, if known, of the Board's decision.

Notice shall be given in writing by certified mail.

- If the results of the hearing and State Board decision are to **terminate** the program's approval or grant funding, the program's participation in Step Up to Quality will also be terminated, effective the date of notification.
- If the results of the hearing and State Board decision are to **retain/continue** the program's approval or grant funding, the program's step level will be **reinstated** at the step level held prior to the action, effective the date of notification.

## Head Start and Early Head Start

A federally-funded Head Start and Early Head Start grantee must be in good standing with federal and other state or local monitoring systems to participate in Step Up to Quality. Grantees will provide evidence of this good standing to the Step Up to Quality office **within 30 days** of receipt of federal monitoring letter.

Noncompliances or deficiencies that may impact the quality rating status will be reported to the Step Up to Quality office **no later than 10 business days** upon receipt of such notice. The grantee's ongoing participation in Step Up to Quality will be re-evaluated by the Steering Committee and response to the grantee will occur **within 10 business days** of the Steering Committee's decision.

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**“While we are already doing many of the things necessary for Step Up to Quality, the program has given us important recognition for doing these things. It has validated our teachers in what they are doing and has encouraged them to take it to the next level.”**

Center director  
Step 2, Omaha

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## Accredited programs

Accredited programs are eligible to enter Step Up to Quality at a Step 3 rating. These programs must complete all Step 1 requirements. This includes programs accredited by:

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)
- National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA)

Accredited programs entering Step Up to Quality at a Step 3 rating are not eligible to receive quality incentive bonuses or a higher subsidy reimbursement rate until they move up at least one step.

All accredited programs need to submit documentation regarding their accreditation status. The Step Up to Quality office shall be notified **within 30 calendar days** should the program lose or voluntarily discontinue or relinquish their active accreditation status.

## WITHDRAWING FROM STEP UP TO QUALITY

### Required programs

Withdrawal by any program required to participate in Step Up to Quality risks loss of the child care subsidy agreement and subsequent reimbursement from the Department of Health and Human Services. Withdrawal may also impact the program's child care license.

### Voluntary programs

Any early childhood program not required to participate in Step Up to Quality may withdraw at any time by notifying the Step Up to Quality Director in writing. Once withdrawn, programs:

- May not advertise their participation or rating
- Are not eligible for incentive bonuses or for tiered reimbursement for child care subsidy from DHHS
- Must remove all Step Up to Quality promotion materials.

If the program chooses to reapply to Step Up to Quality, they must re-enter as a new program and complete all initial participation requirements. A program may not reapply for at least one year after they've withdrawn.



## HAVE QUESTIONS?

### Contact

[nde.stepuptoquality@nebraska.gov](mailto:nde.stepuptoquality@nebraska.gov)  
844.807.5712  
[education.ne.gov/StepUptoQuality](http://education.ne.gov/StepUptoQuality)

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“Step Up to Quality is an ongoing process – while we are getting closer to moving to the next step, we know that won’t be the end. It will merely be another starting point to continue to improving what we have.”

Center director  
Step 2, Omaha

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