

# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

## General Questions About ExceleRate® Illinois for Licensed Child Care Programs

### 1. 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.

ExceleRate Illinois is inclusive of all early learning and development programs in Illinois – including Child Care, Preschool For All/Preschool For All Expansion, Head Start/Early Head Start, and licensed family child care programs.

### 2. 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 continuous quality improvement.
- Assesses achievement along a continuum.

### 3. 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, in coordination with a CCR&R Specialist, along with independent verification by an 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.

### 4. Who is ExceleRate Illinois for?

ExceleRate Illinois is designed to include all Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (IDCFS) licensed child care center and family child care homes, Preschool For All/Preschool For All Expansion, and Head Start/Early Head Start programs.

### 5. What if my program is accredited?

ExceleRate Illinois accepts many National Accreditations for programs to participate in QRIS. 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 <https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-child-care-centers/circles-of-quality/1-exceleRate-quality-standards-overview-chart/file> for specific information about state- approved accrediting bodies and what standards they meet. If a program is not accredited, they can choose the assessment path of ExceleRate.

### 6. What assessment tools are used in ExceleRate Illinois?

The four Environment Rating Scales (ERS) used for ExceleRate classroom assessment address areas of program quality, such as space and furnishings, learning activities, interactions, program structure, parents and staff, and supervision practices.

The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale Revised (FCCERS-R), designed to assess family child care homes serving children from infancy through school-age;

The Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-3), designed to assess classrooms with children from birth to 36 months of age;

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3), designed to assess classrooms with children 36 months to 5 years of age; and

The School Age Environment Rating Scale- Updated (SACERS-U), designed to measure the quality of learning environments and teaching practices in classrooms for children ages 5 to 12.

The Program Administration Scale (PAS)- 2nd Edition is used to measure early childhood leadership and management practices in center-based programs, including several items in each of the following subscales: human resources development, personnel cost and allocation,

center operations, child assessment, fiscal management, program planning and evaluation, family partnerships, marketing, and public relations, and technology.

The Business Administration Scale (BAS)- 2nd Edition is used to measure and improve the overall business and professional practices in family child care settings, including income and benefits, work environment, fiscal management, record keeping, risk management, provider-family communication, family support and engagement, and marketing and community relations.

## 7. How will sites be assessed?

At the Silver and Gold Circles of Quality, a state-approved assessor will conduct assessments using ITERS-3, ECERS-3, and SACERS-U in 1/3 of classrooms for each environment rating scale (ie. age group). For 1-3 classrooms in an age group, one classroom is randomly selected. For 4-6 classrooms in an age group, two classrooms are randomly selected. For 7-9 classrooms in an age group, three classrooms are randomly selected. *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 be included in the random selection of classrooms for assessment (as described above).

For licensed child care centers that have Preschool for All or Head Start stand-alone classrooms (Preschool for All or Head Start services only, for the full day), these classrooms will not be included in the random selection of classrooms. \*Head Start &/or Preschool For All stand-alone classrooms should reach out to their funding entity for any technical assistance needed.

At the Silver and Gold Circles of Quality, programs will also receive assessment using the Program Administration Scale (PAS for centers) or Business Administration Scale (for family child care). At Silver, this assessment is for continuous quality improvement purposes.

## 8. How will assessments be scheduled?

Once NLU receives the program information from INCCRRA, programs will be contacted directly via e-mail and phone to schedule a timeframe for the assessment visit.

## 9. 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, PAS, BAS) are important to this process. Minimum scores must be achieved in order to meet standards at each circle.

Child care centers: <https://www.excelerateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-child-care-centers/circles-of-quality/1-excelerate-quality-standards-overview-chart/file>

Family child care providers: <https://www.excelerateillinois.com/docman-default-item/standard-and-evidence-requirements/20-excelerate-fcc-overview-chart/file>

## 10. How are Circles of Quality determined?

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. An on-site assessment may be required based upon the circle applied for.

## 11. What happens after a Circle of Quality is achieved?

The Bronze, 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 program information remains accurate, including program contact, IDHS provider number, accreditation status (if applicable), etc. Progress towards Gateways Credential requirements of Standards 4A and 4B are also required yearly by submission of CQIP.

IDCFS violations are also checked at application and annually. Pending and substantiated violations from the previous 12 months must be corrected for continued ExceleRate eligibility.

## 12. Once a program is awarded a Circle of Quality, what happens if the program has a status change?

If a program has a status change, it is important that you contact an ExceleRate Counselor immediately at (866) 697-8278 or [info@excelerateillinois.com](mailto:info@excelerateillinois.com). Some examples of a status change include:

- A move to a new location
- New Ownership
- New CCAP provider number
- IDCFS license number change
- Expanding from a licensed family child care home to a licensed group home (or vice versa)

Depending on the change, it could impact ExceleRate eligibility &/or QRIS quality add-ons. An ExceleRate Counselor will be able to direct you on next steps.

### 13. What if I want to appeal the ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality achieved?

ExceleRate Illinois has an appeal process at the [Gold Circle of Quality](https://www.excelerateillinois.com/appeal-process-for-gold-circle) and is available at <https://www.excelerateillinois.com/appeal-process-for-gold-circle>.

ExceleRate Illinois has an appeal process at the [Silver Circle of Quality](https://www.excelerateillinois.com/appeal-process-for-silver-circle) and is available at <https://www.excelerateillinois.com/appeal-process-for-silver-circle>.

### 14. What type of support is available for programs working towards a Circle of Quality?

Child care centers and home providers that choose to pursue higher Circles of Quality within ExceleRate have access to technical assistance to help them through the process of achieving higher Circles of Quality. The ExceleRate Illinois Quality and Infant Toddler Specialists at the local Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies will provide support in terms of technical assistance, on-site visits and training. At the Silver Circle of Quality, technical assistance/consultation and working with a Specialist is required (Standard 3C) prior to application/renewal. Gateways Registry-approved trainings (in person and online) are also 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.

### 15. 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.

### 16. 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 <https://www.excelerateillinois.com/licensed-child-care-centers/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

### 17. How do families know about ExceleRate Illinois?

Families are made aware of ExceleRate Illinois through a variety of public means. Public service announcements, program newsletters, online advertising, posters, flyers and other communications represent a variety of the ways in which families may learn about ExceleRate Illinois. One of the most important ways in which families can learn more is through the Illinois Cares for Kids website (<https://www.illinoiscaresforkids.org/>). The Circle of Quality for early learning and development programs is public to families as they search for programs.

### 18. What type of information is 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

### 19. 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](mailto:info@excelerateillinois.com).



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ExceleRate® Illinois is administered through INCCRRA under the joint direction of the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Illinois State Board of Education.

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