

ExceleRate® Illinois Quality Recognition and Improvement System

Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA)

External Program Manual

Fiscal Year 2026



The purpose of this ExceleRate Illinois External Manual is to provide an overview of ExceleRate Illinois, as well as give some additional information related to the most common inquiries around program policies and procedures.

The links provided within the document, as well as the General ExceleRate Illinois Frequently Asked Questions, Preparing for Assessment FAQ, and Credential FAQs all posted on the ExceleRate website also provide many additional QRIS details and program information (links provided in the Table of Content Appendices).

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ExceleRate Illinois Overview

ExceleRate Illinois is the Illinois Quality Recognition and Improvement System (QRIS), administered by INCCRRA on behalf of the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).

ExceleRate Illinois is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate progressive quality in early care and education programs statewide. This is shown across four Circles of Quality- Licensed, Bronze, Silver and Gold. Support, resources, and information are available to programs that choose to participate in higher Circles of Quality. The Illinois QRIS is a system that includes Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFSS) licensed family child care homes and child care centers, ISBE Preschool for All (PFA)/Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) programs, and Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

The goal of ExceleRate Illinois is to ensure that all young children have access to high-quality Early Care and Education Programs. The purpose includes four important cornerstones: 1) to provide a consistent definition of what constitutes high quality early care and education that is applicable across a wide range of programs and settings; 2) to provide useful information to families who are choosing among early care and education programs; 3) to provide pathways and support for continuous program improvement for early care and education programs; and 4) to provide an accountability framework for programs receiving public funding for early care and education. Participating programs address these areas through the following domains: 1) Teaching and Learning, 2) Family and Community Engagement, 3) Leadership and Management, and 4) Qualifications and Continuing Education.

An ExceleRate Circle of Quality signifies achievement and recognition within the domains across all eligible provider types. Evidence required for each provide type varies.

The **Licensed Circle of Quality** reflects compliance with IDCFSS licensing standards.

The **Bronze Circle of Quality** recognizes qualifications and professional development, with completion of a robust series of Gateways to Opportunity trainings. Bronze Circle trainings are aligned with the standards of ExceleRate Illinois and prepare programs for success as they progress through the Circles of Quality.

The **Silver Circle of Quality** recognizes completion of rigorous self-assessment and implementation of a continuous quality improvement process, as verified by a state approved assessor. Silver Circle programs meet or exceed specific quality benchmarks on learning environment and instructional quality, along with selected administrative standards; qualifications; and professional development.

National Accreditation Standards, Head Start Program Performance standards, and the ISBE PFA Standards will also serve as evidence of meeting specified standards within the domains, as noted on the ExceleRate Illinois chart specific to provider type.

The **Gold Circle of Quality** recognizes programs which have demonstrated quality on all standards, as verified by a state approved assessor. Gold Circle programs meet or exceed specific quality benchmarks on learning environment, instructional quality, and all administrative standards; group size and ratios; qualifications; and professional development.

National Accreditation Standards, Head Start Program Performance Standards, and the ISBE PFA Standards will also serve as evidence of meeting specified standards within the domains, as noted on the ExceleRate Illinois chart specific to provider type.



Licensed Center-Based Programs & Licensed Family Child Care Providers

IDCFS License Status

All Illinois early care and education center-based programs and family child care providers, that operate as an Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) licensed facility, participate in ExceleRate Illinois at the Licensed Circle of Quality. *There is no ExceleRate Illinois application required at this Circle.*

Before applying at the Bronze Circle of Quality or higher, an early care and education program must be licensed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) for at least one year. The program's IDCFS license must be current and in good standing. Good standing, for ExceleRate Illinois purposes, means that the licensee has no IDCFS substantiated or pending violations from the previous 12 months of application date.

- Programs should be working with their IDCFS Licensing Representative to clear all pending/substantiated violations prior to ExceleRate application/renewal.
- At application and yearly thereafter, INCCRRA will confirm that violations are resolved/corrected violations shall be confirmed via a current letter from IDCFS to the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) or confirmation through the IDCFS Sunshine website (<https://sunshine.dcf.illinois.gov/>) or IDCFS Information Line (877-746-0829).
- Programs with pending and/or substantiated violation(s) (not involving a child abuse/neglect investigation) may be offered up to a 4-month application extension (from the earliest violation date) to allow time to clear violations.
 - Programs that reach the extension timeframe and remain with pending and/or substantiated violations, verified by the IDCFS Sunshine website or Information Line, will remain at or return to the Licensed Circle of Quality.
- If a program's only violation is a pending/substantiated violation related to a child abuse and neglect investigation, the program will undergo additional review to determine ExceleRate eligibility. The program may be offered up to a 6 month application extension (from the earliest violation date) to allow the IDCFS investigation to conclude.
 - Effective July 1, 2024, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) will review documentation from the IDCFS (CFS 596-09-Confirmation of Completed Corrective Plan, CFS 596-35 Confirmation of Reformation Plan, email from the IDCFS Licensing Supervisor, corrective action documentation completed by the program) to verify the program's current license status. This documentation will remain on file at INCCRRA with the program's ExceleRate application.
 - If the program has met all corrective action measures per IDCFS requirements but will remain with a substantiated finding on a licensing regulation, the program will be awarded the Circle of Quality (or retain their Circle) in which they are applying if all other ExceleRate eligibility requirements have been met.
 - Programs that reach the extension timeframe and will remain with a pending and/or substantiated violation(s), verified by the IDCFS Sunshine website or Information Line, will remain at or return to the Licensed Circle of Quality.

If a program's IDCFS license is expired or shall expire within 30 days from received date of ExceleRate application, the program must submit a letter from the IDCFS licensing representative that the center is in the re-licensing process.

Evidence and Verification by Circle of Quality

Licensed Circle of Quality

All licensed programs are at the QRIS Licensed Circle of Quality. This designation indicates the early care and education program holds a current and valid license issued by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS).

There is no ExceleRate Illinois application required at this Circle of Quality.

Bronze Circle of Quality

This Circle of Quality indicates the early care and education program has held an IDCFS license for at least 12 months and the program has met all training and staff qualifications requirements. This Circle of Quality can be held for up to two, 3-year periods for licensed child care centers and three, 3-year periods for licensed family child care homes. Annual reports are required to maintain this Circle of Quality.

Silver Circle of Quality

This Circle of Quality indicates the early care and education program administrator/family child care provider and applicable teaching staff/FCC assistant have completed trainings as outlined on the applicable Standards Overview chart. The program has also completed self-assessments and developed a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) in coordination with a Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) Quality Specialist or Infant Toddler Specialist. On-site assessment and verification of additional Standards by a state approved assessor will also occur.

Approved Accreditation is also accepted at Silver. *Note: additional documentation may be required based on Accreditation.*

Gold Circle of Quality

This Circle of Quality indicates the early care and education program has received on-site classroom and program assessment and verification of additional Standards by a state approved assessor.

Approved Accreditation is also accepted at Gold. *Note: additional documentation may be required based on Accreditation.*

Standards and Evidence for each Circle of Quality for Licensed Child Care Centers is available at:

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

Standards and Evidence for each Circle of Quality for Licensed Family Child Care is available at:

<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/standard-and-evidence-requirements/20-exceleRate-fcc-overview-chart/file>

Accreditation

Approved ExceleRate Illinois Accreditations can be found at: [Accreditation - ExceleRate Illinois \(exceleRateillinois.com\)](#)

The Accreditation path may be chosen by licensed early care and education programs applying for Silver or Gold Circles of Quality. A program must be accredited by one of the approved ExceleRate Illinois Accreditation entities. Accreditation must be in good standing and span across all ages served within the program. A copy of the current valid accreditation certificate must accompany the program's ExceleRate application.

If a program's accreditation expires within 60 days of their application to ExceleRate Illinois, the program must submit proof of being in the process of re-accreditation and in good standing with the accrediting body. Proof may consist of a letter from the accrediting body stating the program is currently in the renewal process. Without current ExceleRate Illinois approved accreditation status, a program will need to complete the assessment application process.

On-Site Assessment

An eligible program may apply for a Silver or Gold Circle of Quality via the Assessment Path. Once INCCRRA has reviewed the program's application, applicable supplement and initial documentation, the program will have on-site assessment and verification visit scheduled.

McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University (NLU) is the independent entity contracted to conduct ExceleRate Illinois assessment visits.

Each licensed site will be assessed on-site using the appropriate Environment Rating Scale (ERS) for each age group. Administration practices will be assessed using the Program Administration Scale (PAS) for centers and Business Administration Scale (BAS) for family child care. Documentation for additional ExceleRate Standards is also reviewed on-site during the assessment visit.

Assessment Tools used in ExceleRate Illinois include:

- Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale – Revised Edition (ITERS-3)
- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale –3rd Edition (ECERS- 3)
- School -Age Care Environment Rating Scale- Updated (SACERS-U)
- Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale- Revised (FCCERS-R)

Note: ExceleRate Illinois ERS assessments do not include scores from Personal Care Routines and Parent and Staff subscales.

- Program Administration Scale- 2nd Edition (PAS) for child care center administrators
- Business Administration Scale- 2nd Edition (BAS) for family child care providers

ExceleRate eligibility, including final assessment reports are shared with the designated program contact within 6 weeks of assessment completion. *Note: Programs may only have one assessment completed yearly.*

Additional detail related to Assessment practices and requirements within ExceleRate Illinois can be found on the Preparing for Assessment FAQ within [Appendix B](#)

Gateways to Opportunity Credentials

Director/Teaching Staff/FCC Provider qualifications are a component of ExceleRate Illinois (Standards 4A and 4B) for Licensed Center-Based Programs, Licensed FCC and Early/Head Start Only Programs. If the Credential requirement is not met, the expectation is that a pending Credential application is on file for the applicable staff as noted on the Circle of Quality Standards and Evidence charts.

If applicable staff are not meeting the specified Credential, the program may write a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) (using the letter received from the Credential Department upon application review), to outline goals and action steps, coursework & training to accomplish towards the applicable Credential. Updated CQIP of accomplishments towards Credential attainment will be required each year and progress must be shown. Yearly, the applicable number of staff per the Overview chart must have a Credential application in progress.

Additional detail related to Gateways Credential requirements within ExceleRate Illinois can be found on the Credential FAQ (by provider type) within [Appendix C](#) & [Appendix D](#).

Program Changes

All program changes that could affect ExceleRate status should be reported to INCCRRA within 30 days. Some of the most common situations are noted below.

CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP

Early care and education programs who hold a Bronze, Silver or Gold Circle and whose ownership is in transition or due for immediate change in ownership have the opportunity to demonstrate continued ExceleRate eligibility. Programs with an awarded Circle of Quality have 30 days to notify INCCRRA of the change. The program will work with an INCCRRA ExceleRate Program Specialist to complete the required paperwork.

The program's documentation will be reviewed in consultation with the ExceleRate designated state agency liaison to determine an action plan for continued eligibility or that the program is ineligible.

PROGRAM MOVE

If a program moves to a new physical location, they would receive a new IDCFS license number. INCCRRA must be notified within 30 days of the move occurring. Due to a new physical environment, classroom set-up etc, ExceleRate assessment and verification will be completed again in the new location, regardless of when assessment was completed last.

If the program that has moved has a Circle of Quality due to Accreditation, INCCRRA will need confirmation from the Accrediting body that Accreditation is still in place at the new location.

ACCREDITATION STATUS

If a program is eligible for ExceleRate Silver or Gold via Accreditation and the site loses Accreditation (or received notice of a deferred Accreditation status) at any point, INCCRRA must be notified within 30 days. Depending on Accreditation, INCCRRA will require additional information be submitted to determine ExceleRate status.

MISCELLANEOUS

If an eligible program receives a new IDCFS license number, has a change in Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) Provider Number, INCCRRA should be notified within 30 days of the change.

Head Start and Early Head Start Center-Based Programs

Illinois Head Start (only) and Early Head Start (only) early care and education programs can participate in ExceleRate Illinois. Illinois Head Start and Early Head Start early care and education programs that pursue a Circle of Quality, above the Licensed Circle of Quality, must meet all domain requirements specific to the Circle of Quality for which they are applying. Any technical assistance &/or training needs should be requested through Head Start.

Head Start programs that have one or more classrooms that are not part of its Head Start or Early Head Start program must apply as a Licensed Center-Based Program.

IDCFS License Status

The program's IDCFS license must be current and in good standing. Good standing, for ExceleRate Illinois purposes, means that the licensee has no IDCFS substantiated or pending violations from the previous 12 months of application date.

- Programs should be working with their IDCFS Licensing Representative to clear all pending/substantiated violations prior to ExceleRate application/renewal.
- At application and yearly thereafter, INCCRRA will confirm that violations are resolved/corrected violations shall be confirmed via a current letter from IDCFS to the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) or confirmation through the IDCFS Sunshine website (<https://sunshine.dcf.illinois.gov/>) or IDCFS Information Line (877-746-0829).
- Programs with pending and/or substantiated violation(s) (not involving a child abuse/neglect investigation) may be offered up to a 4-month application extension (from the earliest violation date) to allow time to clear violations.
 - Programs that reach the extension timeframe and remain with pending and/or substantiated violations, verified by the IDCFS Sunshine website or Information Line, will remain at or return to the Licensed Circle of Quality.
- If a program's only violation is a pending/substantiated violation related to a child abuse and neglect investigation, the program will undergo additional review to determine ExceleRate eligibility. The program may be offered up to a 6 month application extension (from the earliest violation date) to allow the IDCFS investigation to conclude.
 - Effective July 1, 2024, the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) will review documentation from the IDCFS (CFS 596-09-Confirmation of Completed Corrective Plan, CFS 596-35 Confirmation of Reformation Plan, email from the IDCFS Licensing Supervisor, corrective action documentation completed by the program) to verify the program's current license status. This documentation will remain on file at INCCRRA with the program's ExceleRate application.
 - If the program has met all corrective action measures per IDCFS requirements but will remain with a substantiated finding on a licensing regulation, the program will be awarded the Circle of Quality (or retain their Circle) in which they are applying if all other ExceleRate eligibility requirements have been met.
 - Programs that reach the extension timeframe and will remain with a pending and/or substantiated violation(s), verified by the IDCFS Sunshine website or Information Line, will remain at or return to the Licensed Circle of Quality.

If a program's IDCFS license is expired or shall expire within 30 days from received date of ExceleRate application, the program must submit a letter from the IDCFS licensing representative that the center is in the re-licensing process.

Evidence and Verification by Circle of Quality

Details related to programs eligible to apply this path: [Head Start Overview - ExceleRate Illinois \(exceleRateillinois.com\)](#)

Licensed Circle of Quality

Licensed Circle of Quality is not applicable to Head Start (only) or Early Head Start (only) programs, unless there is a valid license issued by IDCFS. This path is not applicable to School-based Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

Bronze Circle of Quality

The Bronze Circle of Quality is not applicable to Head Start (only) or Early Head Start (only) programs.

Silver Circle of Quality

The Silver Circle of Quality assessment path is applicable to community based licensed Head Start (only) or Early Head Start (only) programs.

This designation can be assigned to the grantee program(s) through the Presumptive Silver Circle of Quality enrollment process.

The Presumptive Silver enrollment process requires the grantee to list all programs that operate solely with Head Start or Early Head Start funds, as well as documentation showing the grantee's most recent Federal Monitoring Report indicates compliance. Each year, programs are required to submit an ExceleRate annual report, including Federal Head Start Monitoring reports to ensure there are no deficiencies or areas of non-compliance.

Note: Should the grantee's most recent Federal Monitoring Report indicate any area(s) of non-compliance, the grantee may receive up to a 4-month ExceleRate application extension to work with OHS to correct. If not corrected within the 4 months, the program will be ineligible for the Silver Circle of Quality. If the grantee's most recent monitoring indicates a deficiency, the program will be determined ineligible for ExceleRate. The grantee may re-apply once the deficiency and any area(s) of non-compliance have been corrected.

In addition, INCCRRA will verify that the site has no pending or substantiated IDCFS violations in the previous twelve months

Standards and Evidence for the Head Start Silver Circle of Quality Chart is available at:

<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/head-start/resources/standards-and-evidence>

Gold Circle of Quality

This designation indicates the Head Start or Early Head Start program has received on-site assessment by a state approved assessor and is compliant with the Office of Head Start Program Performance Standards Monitoring Protocol items.

Note: Should the grantee's most recent Federal Monitoring Report indicate any area(s) of non-compliance, the grantee may receive up to a 4-month ExceleRate application extension to work with OHS to correct. If not corrected within the 4 months, the program will be ineligible for the Gold Circle of Quality. If the grantee's most recent monitoring indicates a deficiency, the program will be determined ineligible for ExceleRate. The grantee may re-apply once the deficiency and any area(s) of non-compliance have been corrected.

Each year, programs are required to submit an ExceleRate annual report to ensure there are no deficiencies or areas of non-compliance on Head Start Monitoring reports. In addition, INCCRRA will verify that the site has no pending or substantiated IDCFS violations, as well as ensure progress is shown on ExceleRate Standards 4A and 4B.

Standards and Evidence for the Head Start Gold Circle of Quality Chart is available at:

<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/head-start/resources/standards-and-evidence>

Accreditation

Approved ExceleRate Illinois Accreditations can be found at:

[Accreditation - ExceleRate Illinois \(exceleRateillinois.com\)](https://www.exceleRateillinois.com)

The Accreditation path may be chosen by licensed early care and education programs applying for Silver or Gold Circles of Quality. A program must be accredited by one of the approved ExceleRate Illinois Accreditation entities. Accreditation must be in good standing and span across all ages served within the program. A copy of the current valid accreditation certificate must accompany the program's ExceleRate application.

If a program's accreditation expires within 60 days of their application to ExceleRate Illinois, the program must submit proof of being in the process of re-accreditation and in good standing with the accrediting body. Proof may consist of a letter from the accrediting body stating the program is currently in the renewal process. Without a valid current ExceleRate Illinois approved accreditation, a program will need to complete the assessment application process.

On-Site Assessment

An eligible Early/Head Start only program may apply for a Gold Circle of Quality via the Head Start Assessment Path. Once INCCRRA has reviewed the program's application, applicable supplement and initial documentation, the program will have on-site assessment and verification visit scheduled.

McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University (NLU) is the independent entity contracted to conduct on-site ExceleRate Illinois assessment visits.

Each site will be assessed on-site using the appropriate Environment Rating Scale (ERS).

Assessment Tools used in ExceleRate Illinois Head Start Path include:

- Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale – Revised Edition (ITERS-3)
- Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale –3rd Edition (ECERS- 3)

Note: ExceleRate Illinois ERS assessments do not include scores from Personal Care Routines and Parent and Staff subscales.

ExceleRate eligibility, including final assessment reports are shared with the designated program contact within 6 weeks of assessment completion. *Note: Programs may only have one assessment completed yearly.*

Additional detail related to Assessment practices and requirements within ExceleRate Illinois can be found on the Preparing for Assessment FAQ within [Appendix B](#). *The classroom assessment information included in the FAQ for Licensed Child Care Centers is also relevant to Early/Head Start only programs.*

Gateways to Opportunity Credentials

Director/Teaching Staff qualifications are a component of ExceleRate Illinois (Standards 4A and 4B) for Early/Head Start only programs (at the Gold Circle of Quality). If the Credential requirement is not met, the expectation is that a pending Credential application is on file for the applicable staff as noted on the Circle of Quality Standards and Evidence chart.

If applicable staff are not meeting the specified Credential, the program may write a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) (using the letter received from the Credential Department upon application review), to outline goals and action steps, coursework & training to accomplish towards the applicable Credential. Updated CQIP of accomplishments towards Credential attainment will be required each year and progress must be shown. Yearly, the applicable number of staff per the Overview chart must have a Credential application in progress.

Additional detail related to Gateways Credential requirements within ExceleRate Illinois can be found on the Credential FAQ for Licensed Child Care Centers within [Appendix C](#). *The information included in the FAQ for Licensed Child Care Centers is also relevant to Early/Head Start only programs.*

Program Changes

All program changes that could affect ExceleRate status should be reported to INCCRRA within 30 days. Some of the most common situations are noted below.

CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP

Early care and education programs who hold a Silver or Gold Circle and whose ownership is in transition or due for immediate change in ownership have the opportunity to demonstrate continued ExceleRate eligibility. Programs with an awarded Circle of Quality have 30 days to notify INCCRRA of the change. The program will work with an INCCRRA ExceleRate Program Specialist to complete the required paperwork.

The program's documentation will be reviewed in consultation with the ExceleRate designated state agency liaison to determine an action plan for continued eligibility or that the program is ineligible.

PROGRAM MOVE

If a program moves to a new physical location, they would receive a new IDCFS license number. INCCRRA must be notified within 30 days of the move occurring. Due to a new physical environment, classroom set-up etc, ExceleRate assessment and verification will be completed again in the new location, regardless of when assessment was completed last.

If the program that has moved has a Circle of Quality due to Accreditation, INCCRRA will need confirmation from the Accrediting body that Accreditation is still in place at the new location.

ACCREDITATION STATUS

If a program is eligible for ExceleRate Silver or Gold via Accreditation and the site loses Accreditation (or received notice of a deferred Accreditation status) at any point, INCCRRA must be notified within 30 days. Depending on Accreditation, INCCRRA will require additional information be submitted to determine ExceleRate status.

MISCELLANEOUS

If an eligible program receives a new IDCFS license number, has a change in Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) Provider Number, INCCRRA should be notified within 30 days of the change.

Annual Reporting

To maintain eligibility in ExceleRate Illinois, early care and education programs must submit an annual report to INCCRRA each year (Note: Preschool For All/Expansion programs are excluded, as they are monitoring by ISBE). Notices to submit an annual report will be shared with the individual identified as the program contact at least 30 days before the Circle of Quality expires.

Renewing programs that received an on-site assessment as part of the initial application will receive an on-site QRIS assessment(s) every three years if they are maintaining the Circle of Quality.

Appeals and Fraud

Appeals

A program that is determined ineligible for the Silver or Gold Circle of Quality based on assessment scores can submit an appeal to INCCRRA as outlined below.

For Silver, BAS/PAS scores are for continuous quality improvement, therefore were not used in determining ExceleRate eligibility and cannot be appealed.

Appeal Process:

1. Program must receive technical assistance from a CCR&R Quality Specialist or Infant Toddler Specialist at the local CCR&R 45 calendar days of the ineligibility determination date from INCCRRA. This technical assistance is the opportunity for the program to get clarification on assessment scores:

INCCRRA will be informed that this initial contact has been completed.

Note: It is up to the program to share their assessment reports with the Quality Specialist and/or Infant Toddler Specialist.

2. If the program still chooses to appeal assessment scores after this technical assistance has been provided, a formal appeal letter may be submitted to INCCRRA. The Quality Specialist and/or Infant Toddler Specialist will not assist programs with writing an appeal. The program has 30 calendar days after the technical assistance date in which to file an appeal to the ExceleRate Illinois Manager in writing.
 - a. Appeal must include:
 - Program Information
 - Program IDCFS license number
 - Program address
 - Program contact information
 - b. The program must list the specific assessment scores they are requesting be reviewed.
 - c. The program must list the Items/indicators for the classroom/s that are being appealed, and an explanation of why the program is appealing these scores.
 - d. Gold: For the Program Administration Scale (PAS) for centers and Business Administration Scale (BAS) for family child care, the program must list the Items/indicators that are being appealed, and an explanation of why the program is appealing these scores.

No photographs or policy documentation will be accepted as part of the appeal. At the end of the verification visit, the administrator and assessor discuss what pieces of documentation are missing and both parties acknowledge and sign off on paperwork. If submitted, this information will not be reviewed or kept on file at INCCRRA.

Appeals should be submitted in writing to:

INCCRRA

Attn: ExceleRate Illinois Program Manager

1226 Towanda Avenue

Bloomington, IL 61701

After consultation with the state approved assessment agency and appropriate state agency liaison, INCCRRA will send an appeal response in writing to the program within 60 calendar days of receipt of the appeal. **The appeal decision is final.** If there is a change in assessment scores or Circle of Quality based on the appeal, an updated set of assessment report(s) along with an updated eligibility letter will be sent to the program. If applicable, any add-on associated with the updated rating would be effective the month following the appeal decision.

Fraud

ExceleRate Illinois programs determined to be using fraudulent documentation during the application or assessment process will be determined ineligible for participation at the Bronze Circle of Quality or higher, as well be ineligible for participation in other IDHS funded programs, at the discretion of IDHS. After up to a three-year period, the program may reapply for ExceleRate after being ineligible for fraud. Reapplication may occur with assurances that previous fraudulent activity has been rectified.

A program that submits fraudulent documentation or personnel misrepresentation may be required to reimburse any incentives and/or add-on received if these payments were made when the fraudulent documentation or personnel misrepresentation was in effect. This determination is at the discretion of IDHS.

Quality Add-Ons

Eligible ExceleRate programs may receive an IDHS Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) quality add-on, dependent on Circle of Quality and availability of funding. Add-ons are effective beginning the service month after eligibility (for example, a program is found eligible for the Silver Circle in June, a 10% add-on takes effective on July services). Current add-on rates available are:

- **Silver:** 10% will be calculated for each CCAP child per day
- **Gold:** 15% will be calculated for each CCAP child per day

Retroactive payments will not be issued to eligible programs, including those programs who have had a Circle re-instated due to a Reformation Plan with the IDCFS. It is imperative that programs review their billing certificates for accuracy each month and report any issue to the local Child Care Resource and Referral CCAP staff and INCCRRA immediately. Please email INCCRRA at info@exceletrateillinois.com

IDHS quality add-ons can only be issued on children receiving IDHS/CCAP funding. For information on any potential add-on opportunities via another State or City entity, please contact that entity. For example, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services or City of Chicago.

Preschool for All/Preschool for All Expansion Programs

All Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Preschool for All (PFA) and Preschool for All Expansion (PFAE) programs participate in ExceleRate Illinois. A state approved assessor conducts on-site classroom assessments and monitoring using the PFA/PFAE Compliance Checklist prescribed by ISBE in accordance with the ISBE monitoring schedule. Assignment of an ExceleRate Circle of Quality occurs by designated ISBE staff for school-based sites.

Any technical assistance &/ or training needs for PFA/PFAE programs should be coordinated with ISBE and their contracted Partners including Early Childhood Professional Learning, STAR NET and Early Choices.

Programs eligible to participate in ExceleRate via the PFA/PFAE Pathway are not subject to the other terms and policies of ExceleRate outlined throughout this manual as they are contracted directly with ISBE.

PFA or PFAE programs that have one or more licensed classrooms must apply via the Licensed Child Care Center Path.

Standards and Evidence for Preschool for All/Prevention Initiative Programs are available at:

<https://www.exceletrateillinois.com/preschool-for-all/resources/standards-and-evidence>

Appendix A

ExceleRate Illinois General FAQ

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. 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.exceleerateillinois.com/appeal-process-for-gold-circle) and is available at <https://www.exceleerateillinois.com/appeal-process-for-gold-circle>.

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

Appendix B

Preparing for On-Site Assessment FAQ

This document is meant to help directors, teachers and family child care providers prepare for their ExceleRate Illinois on-site assessment. Please review this document, as well as applicable Scale tip sheets and other guides available at <https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/licensed-child-care-centers/resources/preparing-for-assessments> so that your program is well prepared for successful on-site assessment.

As you prepare for the assessment visit, all program staff should read the ExceleRate Standards and Evidence Requirements very carefully, as well as use the Getting Ready for Silver or Gold checklist to make sure you have everything needed:

- Quality Standards Overview for Child Care Centers:
<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-child-care-centers/circles-of-quality/1-exceleRate-quality-standards-overview-chart/file>
 - Getting Ready for the Silver Circle of Quality checklist:
<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-child-care-centers/circles-of-quality/6-getting-ready-silver-circle-of-quality-checklist/file>
 - Getting Ready for the Gold Circle of Quality checklist:
<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-child-care-centers/circles-of-quality/8-getting-ready-gold-circle-of-quality-checklist/file>
- Quality Standards Overview for Licensed Family Child Care:
<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/standard-and-evidence-requirements/20-exceleRate-fcc-overview-chart/file>
 - Getting Ready for the Silver Circle of Quality checklist:
<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-family-child-care/80-lfcc-get-ready-silver-assessment/file>
 - Getting Ready for the Gold Circle of Quality checklist:
<https://www.exceleRateillinois.com/docman-default-item/licensed-family-child-care/78-lfcc-get-ready-gold-assessment/file>

1. What are assessors doing during on-site assessment?

Assessors are on-site to look at three pieces for ExceleRate (detail is described in the following questions/answers):

1. Classroom environment (using ITERS-3, ECERS-3, SACERS-U or FCCERS-R for family child care) for the ExceleRate Standards that note a verified score requirement.
2. Administrative practices (using PAS - 2nd Edition for centers and BAS - 2nd Edition for family child care).
3. Verification of other ExceleRate Standards as noted within the Standards Chart (link to Standards provided above).

2. Will I be given a specific date/time that assessment will occur?

Once your program has met the preliminary criteria, INCCRRA will inform National Louis University (NLU) that the program is ready for on-site assessment. The NLU Scheduling coordinator will contact the program with a three-week assessment window within two weeks of receiving application from INCCRRA. The assessment visits will be unannounced; however, the program will be asked for three blackout dates for any atypical days such as field trips, picture day, or vision/hearing screening etc.

3. During the three-week assessment window, will all assessments occur on the same day?

Every effort will be made to have all assessments completed on one day; however, depending on size of the program and assessor availability, the assessment may occur on more than one day within the three-week window.

4. What time will assessor(s) arrive to the program?

The NLU scheduler will ask you what time your program opens and when most of the children arrive. The assessor(s) will arrive between 8:00 and 8:30 AM, unless the program has indicated an earlier or later start time when most children have arrived. In addition, programs may have indicated a later start time for the PAS and a later start time for the SACERS-U.

For family child care providers, the assessors will arrive between 8:00 and 8:30 or as scheduled by the NLU scheduler and provider. While the assessors will arrive on-site early, the assessment will begin promptly at the start time indicated by the Provider.

5. What will happen when the assessor(s) arrive at the program?

The assessor(s) will check in at the office upon arrival and will follow all program-required sign-in and identification procedures. The lead assessor will introduce the team; however, *please keep in mind that the assessors will not engage in casual conversation with*

For family child care, the assessors will arrive at the start time agreed on with the program. Assessors will follow any sign-in and identification procedures. Introductions will be made and assessment will begin. For a Gold program only receiving a BAS assessment, the NLU scheduler will ask the provider for the best time to conduct the assessment to make sure they are free to answer questions and find documentation as needed. Just like in centers, the assessor(s) will not engage in casual conversation with the provider, any assistants or the children.

All environment rating scales are reliable and valid assessment instruments. Scale policies require that assessors do not interfere with program activities or interact with program staff, teachers, or children, but remain neutral observers.

6. How many assessors will come to the program?

The number of assessors will depend on the number of classrooms in your program. For instance, for one toddler classroom, one preschool classroom, and an after-school program, four assessors will observe in your program, including one ITERS-3, one ECERS-3, one SACERS-U, and one PAS assessor. Assessors will arrive to your program at the same time, unless the program has requested a later start time for the PAS and/or if there is an afternoon SACERS-U assessment.

For family child care, two assessors will arrive at the same time on the same day at the program start time, and will not interfere with daily activities.

7. How are classrooms picked for assessment? Will the program know in advance?

After the assessors arrive at the center (typically between 8:00 and 8:30 AM), the classrooms will be randomly drawn in the presence of the program director (or assigned supervisory program staff). 1/3 of classrooms for each environment rating scale (ie. age group) will be selected. 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. The assessor(s) will then immediately proceed to the chosen room(s) for assessment.

While assessor(s) will arrive on-site early, the assessment start time within each classroom will begin as agreed upon during scheduling with the Director.

For example, the assessor(s) arrives at 8:30 and checks in with the Director. Preschool classroom(s) are randomly chosen and the Director escorts the assessor to the selected classroom. The assessor will greet the teacher and inform her that she will quietly sit in an area of the room and begin assessment promptly at 9:00 AM, as the Director indicated.

8. What if my licensed child care center has a Head Start or Preschool For All funded classroom(s)- will these rooms be assessed?

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. Examples of classrooms could include:

- A classroom with Head Start funding between the hours of 7:00 AM-3:00 PM; CCAP/parent tuition funding between the hours of 3:00 PM -6:00 PM.
- A classroom with Preschool For All funding between the hours of 9:00 AM -3:00 PM; CCAP funding between the hours of 7:00 AM-9:00 AM; tuition/CCAP funding between the hours of 3:00 PM-6:00 PM.

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/Preschool For All stand-alone classrooms should reach out to their funding entity for any training &/or technical assistance needed. CCR&R Specialists do not provide technical assistance here as these classrooms are not included in the random selection of classrooms and are monitored by either ISBE or Head Start.*

9. Is there a minimum number of children that must be present (for assessment to occur)?

For family child care, at least 3 children must be present for a minimum of 3 consecutive hours. In addition, at least 2 children that are not the provider's own must be present during that timeframe.

If you will not meet this requirement (and are in your 3 week assessment window), please notify the NLU scheduler immediately.

10. How long will classroom assessment be?

All environment rating scale assessments are three hours in duration each. School-age programs will be observed for up to three hours of the duration of operation or for the time the program is open.

11. Where will assessor(s) work while in the classroom/provider's home?

During the three-hour classroom observation, assessors will do their best to avoid traffic areas and do their work without interrupting the flow of activities. They will not interact with children and will work quietly without making conversation with teachers/provider.

Assessors will observe any areas of the home that children use (i.e., spaces where they have access), along with any area used by the provider for management (i.e., office or work space used for the program).

12. Are any adjustments or compensations being given for COVID?

No. All requirements are in place for the environment rating scales, and no compensation will be given for changes due to COVID. It is expected that programs will follow the requirements as stated in the environment rating scales, as well as the ExceleRate Illinois Standards.

13. Will classroom teachers and family child care providers be interviewed?

It depends on each scale as noted below:

- ITERS-3 No interview
- ECERS-3 No interview
- SACERS-U Teacher interview before or after observation, 30-45 minutes
- FCCERS-R Provider interview after observation, 20-30 minutes

14. How long does typical documentation review take? (PAS/BAS review, as well as review of other documentation as required by specific Standards)

Typical timeframe is around five hours for Silver, and between six and seven hours for Gold to review all documentation. For programs well-prepared with available documentation organized, this time may be shorter.

**Please note: The assessor will be verifying documentation for the PAS subscales/BAS items you chose on your ExceleRate application. Your selection was confirmed when scheduling your assessment window. If you wish to change your selection(s), please contact the INCCRRA ExceleRate team prior to your assessment window beginning. Once the assessor arrives on-site, there will be no changes accepted.*

15. What occurs with the PAS/BAS assessment?

Both PAS and BAS assessment involve administrator interview:

- PAS Facility tour and director interview before documentation review, 1-2 hours
- BAS Provider interview before documentation review, 20-30 minutes

The expectation is that the program has all documentation available for review in an organized portfolio. During documentation review, the director or family child care provider may be given up to 30 minutes to provide information not found in the documentation portfolio. The director or provider will be asked to sign the Documentation Verification Form indicating whether documentation for each standard was provided. No documentation is accepted after the assessment is complete.

It would be helpful for the administrator/family child care provider to review: "How to Organize PAS and BAS documentation" prior to assessment and to help organize materials.

16. What happens after all classroom assessments, PAS/BAS assessments, and documentation review are complete?

Once all pieces are complete, reports are reviewed thoroughly by a trained report and certification specialist. All justification notes are checked to substantiate scores and all documentation and feedback notes are reviewed for accuracy. Once the reports are finalized, they are sent to INCCRRA. The program should receive results of the assessment visit and a final ExceleRate Illinois eligibility letter from INCCRRA within 90 business days after the date of the final assessment visit.

Appendix C

ExceleRate Illinois & Credential FAQ for Centers

ExceleRate Illinois has set standards for staff and director qualifications at each Circle of Quality that require staff to have Gateways to Opportunity Credentials. Use the FAQ below to navigate and understand the use of Gateways Credentials throughout ExceleRate.

Director and Staff Qualifications for ExceleRate Illinois

1. How are staff defined by ExceleRate Illinois?

For ExceleRate Illinois Standards and Applications the below staff definitions can be used.

- Program Administrator- Director, Assistant Director, Director/Teacher (when spending 50% or more time in administration role)
- Teaching Staff- Teacher, Assistant Teacher, School-Age Worker or School-Age Assistant
- Infant Toddler Teaching Staff- Teacher or Assistant Teacher who works in a birth up to 23 months classroom

2. Do program staff have to attain a Gateways Credential for ExceleRate eligibility (Standard 4A and 4B)?

Staff should continue to apply for and work towards applicable Gateways Credentials. Once his/her application & documentation is reviewed, he/she will receive an eligibility letter from the Credential Department. *Please note: if staff do not have a valid CDA or college coursework, see #4 below.* If not meeting the Gateways Credential requirement for Standard 4A and 4B, the program must submit a detailed Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP), including achievable goals and action steps the staff are making towards meeting the Gateways Credential requirements. This includes actual coursework or applicable training for the Gateways Credential required that the staff person will complete over the next 12 months (prior to next ExceleRate renewal).

Staff should use the eligibility letter they receive from the Gateways Credential Team Member to select coursework from their chosen college/university. Coursework should be selected based on the content areas still needed towards the Gateways Credential, as listed in their eligibility letter. If staff have already chosen a college/university, a Gateways Credential Team Member may be able to offer suggestions of coursework that will progress them forward to Gateways Credential attainment. If specific training is needed, the eligibility letter will list the training needed.

As additional training/coursework is completed, staff should notify and submit documentation to the Credential program to update their individual Credential file. This will generate an updated eligibility letter from the Gateways Credential program or the award of a Credential. Either the updated eligibility letter or the earned Credential may be used to show evidence of progress as required for ExceleRate eligibility (see #7 below). Individuals can contact the Gateways Credential Program directly to check on their progress toward a Gateways Credential by emailing credentials@ilgateways.com.

3. What does not meet requirement of ExceleRate Standard 4A or 4B?

- A CQIP stating “we will apply for credentials”.
- Application to/completing ECE Level 1. While this is good training to have, it is not a relevant Gateways Credential to the requirements of Standard 4A and 4B. Program staff needs to apply for the applicable Gateways Credential(s) listed in 4A/4B.
- Attaining Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (IDCFS) training hours is not relevant to ExceleRate requirements of 4A and 4B.

4. What if staff have no college coursework (or minimal) - should they apply for applicable Credentials?

If staff have a valid CDA or any college coursework, they can apply for a Gateways Credential.

If staff do not have a valid CDA or any college coursework (as verified on an official transcript), they should not submit a Gateways Credential application. Instead, staff should review the list of entitled colleges/universities at Higher Education Programs - <https://www.ilgateways.com/docman-docs/professional-development/higher-education-programs/entitlement/259-entitled-institutions-list/file>. From there, select a college/university, and an early childhood or child development class. The program would complete their CQIP with the name of the college course and estimated completion date.

If staff have a valid CDA or any 100 level or higher college coursework (as verified on an official transcript), they can apply for Gateways Credentials. This coursework would count towards earned semester hours, general college education, and/or early childhood specific education requirements for Gateways Credentials. Once the staff person receives feedback from the Gateways Credential Department, they can follow instruction in #2 to create CQIP.

5. What funding is available to help staff complete college coursework and/or training?

The Gateways Scholarship Program is available for child care professionals interested in advancing their education. Gateways Scholarship Program will pay a portion of tuition for eligible professionals working in early care and education or school-age programs who want to earn college credit, Gateways Credentials, or degrees. The courses you take need to be in early childhood education (ECE) or child development (CD). You can be enrolled in an associate, bachelor's, or master's degree program or taking classes toward a certificate, endorsement, or Gateways Credential. Explore <https://www.ilgateways.com/financial-opportunities/scholarship> to find eligibility requirements, how to apply, and what your responsibilities are if you are awarded a Gateways Scholarship.

Other funding opportunities for early care and education individuals and programs are available at: <https://www.ilgateways.com/index.php/financial-opportunities/additional-funding-programs>

6. Are new staff members required to have attained a Gateways Credential?

New staff members (counting towards the percentage of Gateways Credentials needed), those hired within 90 days of the program's application to ExceleRate Illinois, are required to have a Gateways Credential application, for the applicable credential in process with Gateways Credential Department. No CQIP is required for these staff members to meet the requirement.

Please Note: It would be good practice for programs to include application to Gateways Credentials as part of a new staff Orientation. In the event that turnover within the program occurs, the director/staff will already know where other staff stand in terms of meeting the applicable Gateways Credential.

7. How is progress toward a Gateways Credential determined?

Standard 4A evidence at Silver and Gold:

- Administrator must hold the applicable Gateways Illinois Director Credential (IDC) or have a pending IDC application on file. If the applicable Gateways Credential has not been earned, the program must write a CQIP, using the eligibility letter received from the Gateways Credential Program, to outline goals and action steps needed to earn the applicable Gateways Credential. Updated CQIP of detailed accomplishments towards the needed Gateways Credential will be required yearly and progress must be shown. Evidence of progress will include either an updated letter from the Gateways Credential Program outlining what items still need to be met or an earned Credential.

Standard 4B evidence at Bronze, Silver and Gold:

- The percentage of teaching staff (as noted on the Standards Overview chart) must hold the applicable Gateways ECE Credential or Infant Toddler Credential (ITC) or have a pending Credential application on file. If the applicable Credential has not been earned, the program administrator must write a CQIP to outline goals and action steps, including specific coursework/training, the individual can accomplish over the year to work towards the applicable Gateways Credential. The program administrator/staff should use the individualized eligibility letter(s) received from the Gateways Credential Program to guide CQIP development in what coursework/training must be completed. Updated CQIP detailing accomplishments towards Gateways Credential attainment will be required yearly and progress must be shown. Evidence of progress will include either an updated letter from the Gateways Credential Team outlining what items still need to be met or an earned Gateways Credential.

8. What are the qualifications for staff and directors at each ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality?

Bronze Circle of Quality

Staff Qualifications

At least 30% of teaching staff have a minimum of Gateways ECE Credential Level 2 (the ECE Credential at Level 2 does not require an Associate's degree). Again, if staff do not hold the applicable Credentials, the expectation is that the noted percentage of teaching staff have a pending Credential application with Gateways and are working towards the applicable Credential.

For example:

- If the center has 10 teaching staff, at least 3 teachers would need to have a minimum ECE Credential Level 2;
- If the center has 30 teaching staff, at least 9 teachers would need to have a minimum ECE Credential Level 2;
- If the center has 50 teaching staff, at least 15 teachers would need to have a minimum ECE Credential Level 2.

Silver Circle of Quality

Staff Qualifications

At least 30% of teaching staff have a minimum of a Gateways ECE Credential Level 3 AND, 30% of teaching staff in infant-toddler classrooms (Birth up to 23 months) have a Gateways Infant Toddler Credential Level 2. Again, if staff do not hold the applicable Credentials, the expectation is that the noted percentage of teaching staff have a pending Credential application with Gateways and are working towards the applicable Credential.

For example:

- If the Center has 10 teaching staff, at least 3 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 3.
 - If the center has 3 infant-toddler teaching staff, at least 1 teacher would need to have a minimum of the Infant Toddler Credential Level 2.
- If the Center has 30 teaching staff, at least 9 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 3
 - If the center has 10 infant-toddler teaching staff, at least 3 teachers would need to have a minimum of the Infant Toddler Credential Level 2.
- If the center has 50 teaching staff, at least 15 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 3.
 - If the center has 15 infant-toddler teaching staff, at least 4 teachers would need to have a minimum of the Infant Toddler Credential Level 2.

Directors Qualifications

Directors will need a Gateways Illinois Director Credential Level I or higher.

Gold Circle of Quality

Staff Qualifications

At least 20% of teaching staff have a minimum of Gateways ECE Credential Level 5 and an additional 20% of teaching staff have a minimum of a Gateways ECE Credential Level 4. 40% of teaching staff in infant-toddler classrooms (Birth up to 23 months) must have a Gateways Infant Toddler Credential Level 3. Again, if staff do not hold the applicable Credentials, the expectation is that the noted percentage of teaching staff have a pending Credential application with Gateways and are working towards the applicable Credential.

For example:

- If the center has 10 teaching staff, at least 2 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 5 AND 2 additional teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 4.
 - If the center has 5 infant-toddler teaching staff, at least 2 teachers would need to have a minimum of the Infant Toddler Credential Level 3.
- If the center has 30 teaching staff, at least 6 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 5 AND 6 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 4.
 - If the center has 10 infant-toddler teaching staff, at least 4 teachers would need to have a minimum of the Infant Toddler Credential Level 3
- If the center has 50 teaching staff, at least 10 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 5 AND 10 teachers would need to have a minimum of the ECE Credential Level 4.
 - If the center has 15 infant-toddler teaching staff, at least 6 teachers would need to have a minimum of the Infant Toddler Credential Level 3.

Director Qualifications

Directors will need a Gateways Illinois Director Credential Level II or higher.

9. How can I learn more, or get further assistance related to Gateways Credentials?

If a director/teacher has a general question about a Gateways Credential, they can email credentials@ilgateways.com or call 866-697-8278.

Once an application is submitted and reviewed by the Gateways Credential Team, an email will be sent to the applicant that includes the contact information for their Gateways Credential Team member. If there are questions about whether a specific training/coursework will count towards the Gateways Credential needed, contact can be made with that specific Gateways Credential Team member.

Gateways Credential Team members respond to inquiries in order received. An immediate response to email/call may be slightly delayed, but a timely response will occur. We want to emphasize the need for staff to apply for the applicable Gateways Credentials well in advance of the program's ExceleRate renewal month.

**CCR&R Quality and Infant Toddler Specialists cannot provide technical assistance related to Gateways Credentials. They are available to assist with other ExceleRate items- ERS, PAS, self-assessment, policy review, etc.*

If a program has a question specific to Credential requirements as it pertains to ExceleRate eligibility, please call (866) 697-8278 and ask to speak with an ExceleRate Specialist, or email your questions to info@excelerateillinois.com.



Appendix D

ExceleRate Illinois & Credential FAQ for Licensed Family Child Care

ExceleRate Illinois has set standards for Licensed Family Child Care (FCC) Provider, FCC Assistant, and Substitute qualifications at each Circle of Quality that require staff to have Gateways to Opportunity Credentials. Use the FAQ below to navigate and understand the use of Gateways Credentials throughout ExceleRate.

FCC provider, Assistant & Substitute Qualifications for ExceleRate Illinois

1. How are staff defined by ExceleRate Illinois?

For ExceleRate Illinois Standards and Applications the below staff definitions can be used.

- FCC Provider- Family Child Care provider listed on the DCFS license
- FCC Assistant- Family Child Care assistant required for licensing ratio
- Substitute – An individual meeting DCFS licensing requirements who is serving as a replacement for the actual FCC Provider for more than 30 days within a calendar year.

2. Does the family child care provider and staff have to attain a Gateways Credential for ExceleRate eligibility (Standard 4A and 4B)?

Provider and staff as defined in #1 above should continue to apply for and work towards applicable Gateways Credentials. Once his/her application & documentation is reviewed, he/she will receive an eligibility letter from the Credential Department. *Please note: if staff do not have a valid CDA or college coursework, see #4 below.* If not meeting the Gateways Credential requirement for Standard 4A and 4B, the program must submit a detailed Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP), including achievable goals and action steps the staff are making towards meeting the Gateways Credential requirements. This includes actual coursework or applicable training for the Gateways Credential required that the staff person will complete over the next 12 months (prior to next ExceleRate renewal).

Provider and staff should use the eligibility letter they receive from the Gateways Credential Team Member to select coursework from their chosen college/university. Coursework should be selected based on the content areas still needed, as listed in their eligibility letter. If a college/university is already chosen, a Gateways Credential Team Member may be able to suggest coursework to assist with the Gateways Credential attainment. The eligibility letter will list specific training, if applicable.

As additional training/coursework is completed, the individual should notify and submit documentation to the Gateways Credential program to update their individual Credential file. This will generate an updated eligibility letter or the award of a Credential. Either the updated Gateways Credential program eligibility letter or the earned Credential may be used to show evidence of progress as required for ExceleRate eligibility (see #8 below). Individuals can contact the Gateways Credential program directly to check on their progress toward a Gateways Credential by emailing credentials@ilgateways.com.

3. What does not meet requirement of ExceleRate Standard 4A or 4B?

- A CQIP stating “we will apply for credentials” .
- Application to/completing ECE Level 1. While this is good training to have, it is not a relevant Gateways Credential to the requirements of Standard 4A and 4B. Program staff needs to apply for the applicable Gateways Credential(s) listed in 4A/4B.
- Attaining Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (IDCFS) training hours is not relevant to ExceleRate Gateways Credential requirements of 4A and 4B.

4. What if provider and/or staff have no college coursework (or minimal) - should they apply for applicable Credentials?

If provider and/or staff have a valid CDA or any college coursework, they can apply for a Gateways Credential.

If provider and/or staff do not have a valid CDA or any college coursework (as verified on an official transcript), they should not submit a Gateways Credential application. Instead, staff should review the list of entitled colleges/universities at Higher Education Programs - <https://www.ilgateways.com/docman-docs/professional-development/higher-education-programs/entitlement/259-entitled-institutions-list/file>. From there, select a college/university, and an early childhood or child development class. The program would complete their CQIP with the name of the college course and estimated completion date.

If provider and/or staff have a valid CDA or any 100 level or higher college coursework (as verified on an official transcript), they can apply for Gateways Credentials. This coursework would count towards earned semester hours, general college education, and/or early childhood specific education requirements for Gateways Credentials. Once the staff person receives feedback from the Gateways Credential Department, they can follow instruction in #2 to create CQIP.

5. What funding is available to help staff complete college coursework and/or training?

The Gateways Scholarship Program is available for child care professionals interested in advancing their education. Gateways Scholarship Program will pay a portion of tuition for eligible professionals working in early care and education or school-age programs who want to earn college credit, Gateways Credentials, or degrees. The courses you take need to be in early childhood education (ECE) or child development (CD). You can be enrolled in an associate, bachelor's, or master's degree program or taking classes toward a certificate, endorsement, or Gateways Credential. Explore <https://www.ilgateways.com/financial-opportunities/scholarship> to find eligibility requirements, how to apply, and what your responsibilities are if you are awarded a Gateways Scholarship.

Other funding opportunities for early care and education individuals and programs are available at: <https://www.ilgateways.com/index.php/financial-opportunities/additional-funding-programs>

6. Are new staff members (as define in #1) required to have attained a Gateways Credential?

New staff members (meeting the ExceleRate definition of Assistant & Substitute) hired within 90 days of the provider's application to ExceleRate Illinois, are required to have a Gateways Credential application, for the applicable credential in process with Gateways Credential Department. No CQIP is required for these staff members to meet the requirement.

Please Note: It would be good practice for programs to include application to Gateways Credentials as part of a new staff orientation. In the event that turnover within the program occurs, the provider/staff will already know where other staff stand in terms of meeting the applicable Gateways Credential

7. What are the qualifications for family child care provider and staff at each ExceleRate Illinois Circle of Quality?

Silver Circle of Quality

FCC Provider Qualifications

- FCC Provider must have Gateways Family Child Care Credential Level 4 or higher.

FCC Assistants and Substitutes Qualifications

- Any assistant required for licensing ratios must have a Gateways ECE Credential Level 1 or higher OR a Gateways Family Child Care (FCC) Credential Level 2 or higher, OR Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential.
- Any substitute must have either a valid Gateways ECE Credential Level 2 or higher OR valid Gateways FCC Credential Level 2 or higher OR valid CDA.

Gold Circle of Quality

FCC Provider Qualifications

- FCC Provider must hold a BA/BS degree or higher and a Gateways Family Child Care Credential Level 5.

FCC Assistants and Substitutes Qualifications

- Any assistant required for licensing ratios must have a Gateways ECE Credential Level 2 or higher OR Gateways FCC Credential Level 2 or higher.
- Any substitute must have a Gateways ECE Credential Level 3 or higher OR Gateways FCC Credential Level 3 or higher.

8. How is progress toward a Gateways Credential determined?

Standard 4A & 4B evidence at Silver and Gold:

- Family Child Care (FCC) Provider (and Assistant/Substitute if applicable) must hold the applicable Credential listed in #7 above or have a pending FCC Credential application on file. If the applicable Gateways Credential has not been earned, the Provider must write a CQIP, using the eligibility letter received from the Gateways Credential program, to outline goals and action steps needed to earn the applicable Gateways Credential. Updated CQIP of detailed accomplishments towards the needed Gateways Credential will be required yearly and progress must be shown. Evidence of progress will include either an updated letter from the Gateways Credential Team program outlining what items still need to be met or an earned Gateways Credential.
- CQIP is not accepted in lieu of a BA/BS degree required at Gold for 4A.

9. How can I learn more, or get further assistance related to Gateways Credentials?

If a fcc provider has a general question about a Gateways Credential, they can email credentials@ilgateways.com or call 866-697-8278.

Once an application is submitted and reviewed by the Gateways Credential Team, an email will be sent to the applicant that includes the contact information for their Gateways Credential Team member. If there are questions about whether a specific training/coursework will count towards the Gateways Credential needed, contact can be made with that specific Gateways Credential Team member.

Gateways Credential Team members respond to inquiries in order received. An immediate response to email/call may be slightly delayed, but a timely response will occur. We want to emphasize the need for provider and/or staff to apply for the applicable Gateways Credentials well in advance of the program's ExceleRate renewal month.

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If a program has a question specific to Credential requirements as it pertains to ExceleRate eligibility, please call (866) 697-8278 and ask to speak with an ExceleRate Specialist, or email your questions to info@exceleRateillinois.com.

