ELEVATE: a Child Care Quality Support System

Toolkit Chapter One: Program Development

Mississippi Department of Human Services
Division of
Early Childhood Care and Development

MISSISSIPPI lift

MDHS
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

THIS CHAPTER OF THE TOOLKIT SERVES TO:

- Showcase the development of an innovative state-level child care quality improvement system

- Provide information for other states interested in implementing a phased badging system
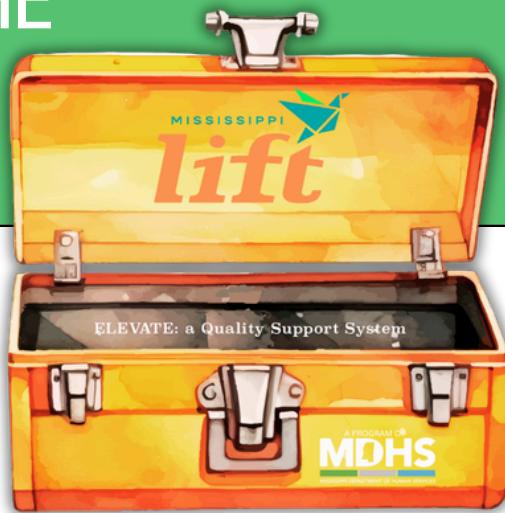
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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Introduction

The Mississippi Department of Human Services' Division of Early Childhood Care and Development (DECCD), in collaboration with national experts, has developed ELEVATE: a Quality Support System aimed at fostering a more equitable and supportive early childhood care environment. Launched in phases beginning in October 2024, ELEVATE prioritizes provider support, the integration of evidence-based practices, and a strengths-based badging system that recognizes and celebrates program achievements. This toolkit serves as a supplemental resource to highlight the development of this innovative, state-level child care quality support system; document efforts to incorporate end-user feedback into its design; and share best practices for other states exploring the implementation of a phased badging approach. The toolkit is structured around the phased rollout of ELEVATE, with Phase 1 officially launched on October 1, 2024; Phase 2 scheduled for release in 2025; and Phase 3 planned for 2026.

Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS)

The Division of Early Childhood Care & Development (DECCD) is one of the seven programmatic divisions of MDHS. The division serves as the policy-making and service-delivery agent for the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) funding allocated to the State of Mississippi. DECCD is an integral component in the overall goal of breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency by providing child care subsidies and home-visiting support for eligible Mississippi families. CCDF funding is used to assist low-income parents with subsidizing the cost of child care tuition and to support the provision of high-quality child care services across the state.

MDHS DECCD oversees all quality improvement programming that is funded by CCDF dollars. This programming includes the Mississippi LIFT Resource & Referral (R&R) Network, professional development and onsite technical assistance to child care providers, early intervention and inclusion training and technical assistance, family engagement events, business and curriculum support to family, friends, and neighbor care providers, and curriculum development for child care providers. By being housed with MDHS, DECCD receives the full support of the agency's budget and accounting division, human resources division, compliance and monitoring division, internal audit division, and legal division. These support divisions provide administrative support for federally and state funded projects such as the PDG-R Grant. MDHS has a strong track record of CCDF implementation and management. MDHS's DECCD works collaboratively across early child care and education programs and services with programs funded through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds, ARP funding and other federal- and state-funded programs.

Why high-quality early childhood education is critical in Mississippi

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, technology, healthcare, retail, and manufacturing were considered among the engines of the U.S. economy. While that is still true today, there is now a greater awareness that these engines run on the fuel of child care. A 2019 Chamber of Commerce study found that limited child care options had consequences for caregivers' educational attainment, workforce advancement, and ability to remain at work. These family challenges translated into sizable economic losses for businesses and states through high employee turnover and lost productivity. As the pandemic brought child care closures, parents and other caregivers found options even more limited. A 2020 study reported a lack of child care to be the number one reason for employees not returning to work (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2020).

Access to high-quality early child care and education programs not only benefits families by increasing parent and caregiver access to employment opportunities, it also benefits families, school systems, and future employers through enhanced opportunities for positive child development. It is well known that early childhood is a time of rapid brain development; high-quality early care and education programs can offer children a chance to learn and socialize in ways that promote positive outcomes (Abbott, 2021), such as increased kindergarten readiness. As a result, high-quality early care and education opportunities promote grade-level achievement, reduce the need for special education, and increase high school graduation (Workman & Ullrich, 2017; McCoy et al., 2017).

Children of families facing economic challenges demonstrate the most benefits from high-quality early child care and education, and there is evidence that these benefits are long-term.

A recent longitudinal study (Bustamante et al., 2021) demonstrated that young children (age five and younger) of low-income backgrounds participating in two years of high-quality early care and education programs had increased odds of graduating from college. They were also likely to be higher earners by age 26 than their peers from low-income households, putting them on par with peers from higher income backgrounds. Additionally, research has demonstrated that high-quality early care and education yields returns of $4 to $13 for every $1 spent, with the largest returns on investment typically seen for children from low-income backgrounds (Karoly, 2017; Bustamante et al., 2021).

Background of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems in Mississippi

In 2008, the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) launched the state's first child care Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) as a pilot. The following year, the program, known as Mississippi Quality Stars, was expanded statewide with $1.5 million in state funds, and by 2010, 31% of the state's 1,685 licensed child care providers had volunteered to participate (Mississippi Quality Step System, 2010).

However, as with other QRIS around the country, concerns grew regarding the resources required for providers to gain stars in the system, as well as the subjectiveness of the ratings. A study was initiated to examine the costs associated with QRIS participation (Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative Step-Up Project, n.d.), and another study was undertaken by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to explore the equity of QRIS ratings (De Marco et al, 2015).

Meanwhile, MDHS undertook efforts to improve Quality Stars. Quality Stars staff attended training sessions focused on increasing program integrity and reducing bias, and in 2012, Quality Stars expanded its technical assistance for child care providers (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2022). Additionally, in 2013, the Early Learning Collaborative Act passed, which required a child care provider from each of the state's four congressional districts to serve on the State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC) (Senate Bill No. 2395).

Based on study findings, in 2016, SECAC announced plans to gather recommendations for revising Quality Stars. It was decided that the state would move to a QRIS with a required foundation of standards, with points available for achieving an additional set of standards. This system had two possible rating scores: standard or comprehensive. However, by the time the funding for this new system expired, the program had failed to fully launch, and it was abandoned (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2016). SECAC was dissolved due to a change in gubernatorial leadership and was revived under a new governor in March 2021 (Mississippi Early Learning Alliance, 2021).

A New Path Forward

As a result of these challenges, new leadership at MDHS's Division of Early Childhood Care and Development (DECCD) partnered with technical assistance providers from the Child Care State Capacity Building Center to design a new quality support system that would avoid past pitfalls. Together they worked to create a new system of quality that is equitable, accessible, affordable, and supportive of all early child care providers.

Model Creation and Development

To ascertain the influences that converged to create ELEVATE: a Quality Support System, we interviewed three of the principal creators. Chad Allgood, Director of DECCD; Lydia Bethay of DECCD; and Stephanie Gehres of the Child Care State Capacity Building Center started discussions on a system that would support early childhood educators long before they were in a position to implement it. Many ideas emerged from the interviews regarding the development of this new model. To establish a cohesive picture, all interviews were analyzed by MAXQDA to find common themes among the interviewees.

Supporting early educators.
The most common theme that emerged from the three conversations about quality rating and improvement or support systems in Mississippi was supporting early educators.

One participant stated, "Something that's really important in the development of this system, hopefully, the way that we have designed it will allow providers, no matter where they are in their journey, whether they're just getting started, whether they've been around for a while..., this will allow them an entry point and a way to succeed regardless of where they are in the development."

Several of the comments about supporting early educators emphasized varied methods of training specifically tailored for each provider's needs as the new system rolls out. One participant stated, "You want providers to provide better quality....And you have to help them get there. I mean, if they're not already there, you need to support them and help them get there versus just going in and saying, 'Oh, well, you're at this level, you're at that level,' you want to build them up, give them the support they need to improve if they need to improve because I know that there are a lot of high quality child care providers out there, but, for those that need some assistance, to really help them..." This participant also stated, "You need to have a system that allows for adaptability. No child care programs are the same. There's differences, there's nuances....Whereas some people might see that as a weakness, to me, that's one of the greatest strengths of our early childhood programs is the diversity." Another noted that the trainers "are partnering with the providers, that they're not...oversight, they're there to support them to...achieve better quality."

> **"** *You want providers to provide better quality....And you have to help them get there.* **"**

> **"** *You need to have a system that allows for adaptability. No child care programs are the same. There's differences, there's nuances....* **"**

Several comments also emphasized the importance of ongoing and clear communication. One participant mentioned that it will be important not only to communicate about what the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) is doing when rolling out the new quality system but also why they are doing it and what the appropriate resources are to help early educators navigate the new system.

System Design for All Providers: The system is designed to provide an entry point and a way to succeed for providers at any stage of their journey.

Tailored Training: Emphasis is placed on varied training methods tailored to each provider's needs as the new system rolls out.

Support for Quality Improvement: The importance of supporting providers to improve quality, rather than just assessing their current level is highlighted.

Adaptability: The system should allow for adaptability to accommodate the diversity and nuances of different child care programs.

Partnership Approach: Trainers are partnering with providers to support them in achieving better quality, rather than acting as overseers.

Ongoing Communication: The importance of clear and ongoing communication about what MDHS is doing, why they are doing it, and the resources available to help early educators navigate the new system is emphasized.

Diversity as a Strength: There is recognition of the diversity in early childhood programs as one of their greatest strengths.

Involving early educators.
Another common theme was the importance of involving early educators in the planning process and listening to what they would like to see in the state's quality system.

One participant discussed the sentiments of early educators around not having many opportunities to provide input for the development of the state's previous quality and improvement system. Regarding the development of the new system, this participant stated, "If our child care partners don't see the system as beneficial to them, they're not going to want to participate. They need to see the system as something that will help them… do better. And so that's why we've been so dedicated to making sure that they have a voice at the table at each of the different steps of

development." They also stated, "We're going to continue to involve everyone at the table that wants to be at the table."

Several comments described the feedback process of MDHS staff as providing an overview of ideas for the system to early educators, collecting their feedback from the educators, and then using ideas from that feedback to fill in details about certain aspects of the system, such as what training and technical assistance options will be provided (i.e., early educators being able to choose from a range of supports that best work for their programs' needs). One participant described a conversation they had with a group of early educators: "I said, 'Whatever you need to reach whichever one of these placements that you want to be in, we have people here that are going to help you get there. You can do one, you can do all of them, but there's going to be somebody there all the time to come and help you get to that point.' And they started asking questions… 'How much is this going to cost?' And I said, 'Nothing.' And they were like, 'What if we don't have a lot of materials?' And I said, 'That's not going to be part of the equation on how we observe and everything,' …and you could feel a relief."

Previous QRIS: Early educators' sentiments about the lack of opportunities to provide input for the state's previous quality and improvement system was highlighted.

New system development: Regarding the new system's development, the importance of child care partners seeing the system as beneficial to encourage participation was emphasized.

Provider voice: Dedication to ensuring early educators have a voice at each step of development.

Inclusion: DECCD is going to continue to involve everyone at the table that wants to be at the table.

Feedback process: Several comments described the feedback process of MDHS staff:
- Providing an overview of ideas for the system to early educators.
- Collecting feedback from early educators.
- Using feedback to detail aspects of the system, such as training and technical assistance options.

Support: Assuring early educators of support to reach desired placements without cost concerns.

Observations: Early educators expressed relief upon learning that observations would not be based on material resources.

System fairness.
Another theme of the discussions was creating a system that is consistent and easy for everyone to understand how quality is measured and what those measures really say about a program.

Regarding the previous system one participant noted, "It put them in competition with each other, and there wasn't really anything documentation-wise that they could really share with parents to say, 'This is why we got this' or 'This is why we got that.' The way that they were scored, it spit out a single score, but there wasn't really any context...because the criteria that went into that score was so complex. There was so much that was being looked at. And...there was documentation that showed...what was being reviewed and everything, but...it really didn't break down the components of the early childhood program very much."

Another stated that within the previous system providers were "saying that...it wasn't equal..., maybe one had a better trainer, one got different information, and that's why some providers did better than others."

Competition Among Participants: The previous system created a competitive environment among participants.

Lack of Documentation for Parents: There was insufficient documentation to explain scores to parents.

Complex Scoring Criteria: The scoring criteria were complex and not well explained.

Limited Breakdown of Program Components: The documentation did not adequately break down the components of the early childhood program.

Perceived Inequality: Providers felt the prior system was unequal, with variations in training and information leading to different outcomes.

Model Development and Feedback Processes

Feedback processes are essential in early childhood education to promote continuous improvement, support professional development, foster collaboration, ensure accountability, and allow for tailored support to meet the unique needs of providers, children, and their families. These processes help create a dynamic and responsive support system that prioritizes quality and ongoing enhancement.

Feedback and Refinement Process

The Division of Early Child Care and Development (DECCD) committed to ongoing communication with early child care providers as they built the system of quality supports. This was accomplished through provider surveys and a series of town hall meetings that allowed DECCD to gather information from providers, synthesize it into actionable data, check back in with providers to verify the information, make changes to the proposed ELEVATE model, and then report those changes. Through this process, the ELEVATE model could be designed and refined in a continuous loop, as depicted below.

GATHER INPUT
Townhalls
Surveys

INTERPRET
Analyze Data
Synthesize

DEVELOP & CHECK-IN
Does this reflect what we heard?

ACT
Problem solve
Decision-making

SHARING
Success-report
Dashboards
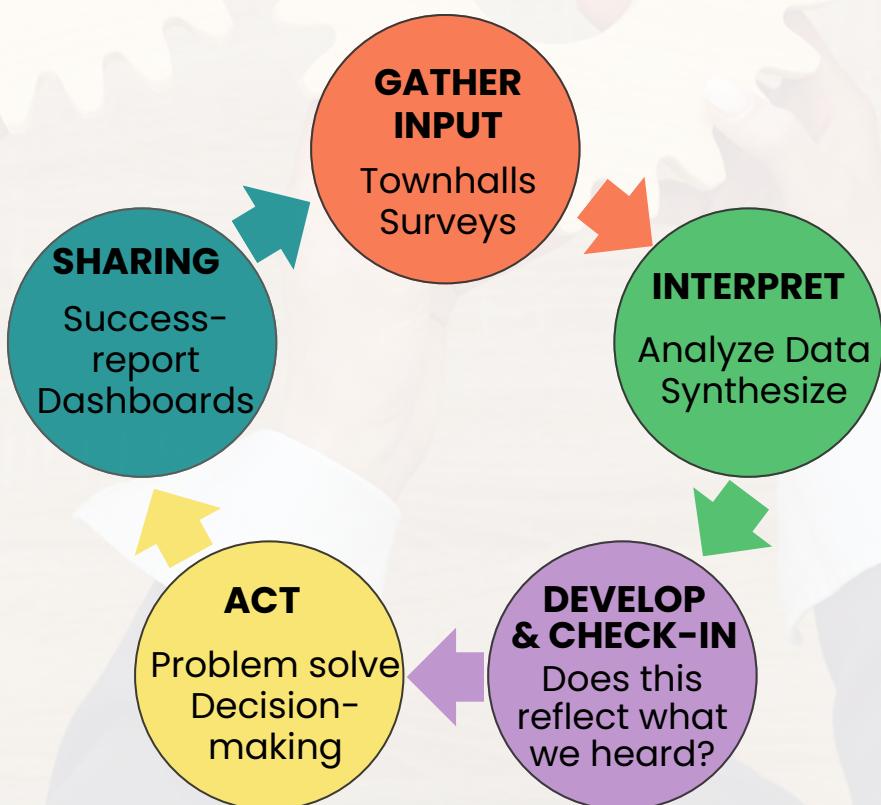
Provider Survey - 2022

An initial statewide provider survey was used to identify what types of quality supports had traditionally been most helpful to providers and which supports needed improvement. The survey was administered to licensed child care providers, and 639 responses were received from all regions of the state. When asked about the quality supports they found most helpful, providers indicated early childhood workshops and training sessions offered by DECCD, as well as the services and information provided through the MS LIFT Resource and Referral centers (R&Rs). Other helpful quality supports included early intervention and onsite technical assistance.

Early childhood workshops and training sessions were also the most cited areas in need of modification. Respondents to the survey felt training needed to be offered through multiple platforms—online and in-person—and that trainings should be made available at times most requested by providers, including after-hours and on weekends.

Providers were also asked what strategies would help to strengthen trust, engagement, and collaboration between the provider community and DECCD. Webinars were cited as the most meaningful way to engage dialogue. Updates provided by newsletter and email were also listed as top ways to communicate.

Town Halls - Spring 2023

DECCD held a series of town hall meetings to obtain verification of the survey findings and to get feedback on a draft quality support system model. In response to the draft model, early educators participating in the DECCD town halls expressed that they prefer indicators of quality that take equity into account and focus on staff-child interactions. One participant noted, "I like that the focus is on child/teacher interactions rather than things that we cannot change that in the past would mark us down and lower our score, such as playground surfacing, age of building, classroom square footage, step downs, etc."

Town hall and survey participants conveyed a desire for support and training. While most survey and town hall participants agreed that the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) Observation Tool would be an appropriate way to measure staff-child interaction in their programs, a few providers expressed concerns about how the observation of staff-child interactions would be conducted and how observer bias could affect scores. Additionally, survey and town hall participants expressed a desire to have multiple ways to show progress and achievements toward quality indicators (DECCD, 2023).

When participants were asked about their concerns regarding implementation of a new quality improvement system, common themes were identified, and responses were grouped into four categories:

- Funding and Resources – having access to resources and support for funding opportunities
- Philosophy and Approach - equity and fairness across providers using the new system
- Support - appropriate training for providers
- Children – learning materials that are age-appropriate, engaging, and based on research-based standards

As a result of the feedback, additional supports and processes were added to the model by DECCD, including a Professional Development Team, on-demand and varied days/times for trainings, expanded training topics, and multiple pathways for demonstrating success. Additionally, a Family Engagement Team was created.

Town Halls—Fall 2023

DECCD held another series of town halls to answer questions about ELEVATE that were raised in earlier town hall meetings. The questions fell into themes regarding incentives and support, badging terminology, participation costs, technology requirements and access, and teacher retention impacts on program participation.

Town Halls—Spring 2024

DECCD held another series of town halls to share modifications to the proposed model and to get additional feedback. Providers were also asked open-ended questions about the system. Listed next is a consolidated summary of the responses that were elicited and addressed in this series of town halls.

WHAT DO PROVIDERS LIKE MOST?

- Feel that improving Teacher-Child Interactions is a good indicator of quality
- Receiving technical assistance and training
- The system structure, it seems well thought out and easy to navigate

WHAT PROVIDERS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT?

- Staff won't be prepared
- Few trainings have been offered to date and there isn't sufficient time to prepare
- The impact of staff turnover in this model
- This system could create stress for teachers and teachers may not be comfortable with being observed

PROVIDERS WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION ABOUT...

- How to receive training
- What is the plan for the training, as the schedule is already delayed
- Town hall schedules further in advance
- Addressing children with special needs
- The CLASS Observation
- Badges
- Who the TAs are and how they will interact with the staff and director
- How they will know when to start applying
- More details on Phase 2 and 3 timelines

Provider Survey – 2024

A second provider survey was administered to gauge agreement with Phase 1 core principles after the town hall series. As seen below, most providers agreed or strongly agreed that focusing on teacher-child interaction was a fair approach to improving the quality of early childhood education programs.

I feel that focusing on teacher-child interactions is a fair way to address quality in early childhood education programs.
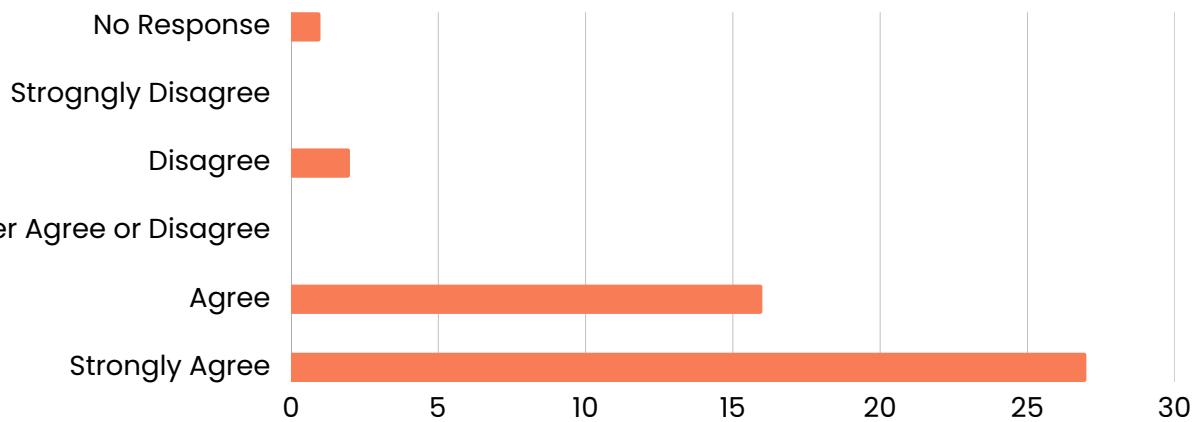
Furthermore, the majority of providers agreed or strongly agreed that the CLASS Observation Tool was an appropriate way to measure teacher-child interaction.

The CLASS Observation Tool is an appropriate way to measure teacher-child interactions in my program.
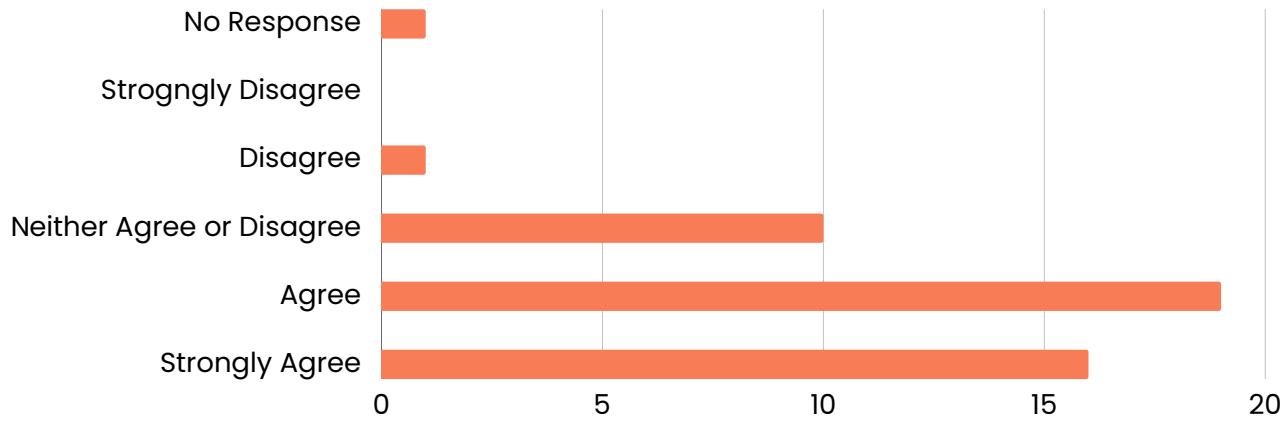
Additional Input

Additionally, in 2022, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation independently funded an effort by Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center and other stakeholders to collect in-depth quality improvement system recommendations directly from early educators. The recommendations from a diverse group of providers indicated they want to be part of a quality improvement system that is equitable, accessible, affordable, and supportive, rather than punitive. Providers stated they want a transparent and consistent quality system that allows for diverse pathways to demonstrate quality and that builds a robust and stable child care workforce. Their envisioned mission for ELEVATE was the provision of consistent, equitable, and individualized resources and support, provided in an asset-based culture that benefits all of Mississippi's children, families, providers, and communities (Recommendations from Child Care Providers for a New Mississippi Child Care Quality Support System, 2022).

This group of providers agreed on six areas of quality for ELEVATE to focus on, listed here in their order of importance:

- Staff-child interactions
- Learning environments
- Curriculum & assessments
- Workforce development & support
- Family communication & engagement
- Program management

ELEVATE: A QUALITY SUPPORT SYSTEM

In response to this input and lessons learned from past iterations of QRIS in Mississippi, DECCD created a model of child care quality improvement that is predicated on adequate supports for providers to achieve quality, thereby called ELEVATE: a Quality Support System. It incorporates a badging system, so providers can advertise their accomplishments and program offerings, rather than being judged for what they do not have. The foundation of the system is evidence-based in early childhood development and prioritizes teacher-child interactions. The principles of ELEVATE include the promotion of play-based educational opportunities for children that are adapted to their unique needs and prepare them for lifelong learning; parent access to information that helps them easily identify care that meets their needs; and an affordable and doable quality system for providers that balances affordability and support with accountability (DECCD, 2023).

ELEVATE infrastructure was developed early in 2024 to support the new ELEVATE portal registry. ELEVATE will be implemented in phases. Phase 1 of ELEVATE officially rolled out on October 1, 2024. Ideally, Phase 2 will be rolled out later in 2025 with Phase 3 introduced in 2026. In a departure from previous versions of child care quality improvement systems in Mississippi, additional subsidy funding will be provided to programs while badges are being obtained rather than afterward. The intent is to offset expenses associated with acquiring the badge.

All licensed providers, Head Start and Early Head Start providers, and family child care home providers may participate in ELEVATE. MDHS requires that any providers accepting child care subsidies must participate.

ELEVATE: The Vision

|	
FOR CHILDREN:	• High quality care and education programs adapted to the unique needs of a child to prepare them for lifelong learning and success. • Learning opportunities that are exciting and fun and capture the essence of early care that is learning through play.
FOR PARENTS:	• Parents can search for a program to meet their needs, but they can also identify other services that might interest them. • The system will inform parents about any specializations that a child care program offers.
FOR PROVIDERS:	• Providers will be able to improve the quality of their programs in a manner that is doable and adaptive, while maintaining accountability to their community and the families that they serve. • The system will balance support with accountability. • The system will have options to meet the needs of providers, there will be multiple pathways towards quality.
FOR THE STATE:	• Mississippi will be a leader in early childhood education. • The system will provide families with choices for high quality care. • The system will be easily understandable to the citizens of Mississippi, they will know what high-quality early childhood education is. (Chad Allgood, Town Hall, Fall 2024)

ELEVATE: Badging

What is the badging system?

"The ELEVATE: a Quality Support System badge is, in essence, a representation of how an early childhood program shows that they have the knowledge, the ability, the capacity, the expertise, and also the passion to meet the developmental needs of children that are enrolled in their programs. It's a visual representation of the evidence that when a family enrolls their child in a program that program is well-suited to care for all of their child's needs across the entire developmental domain spectrum." (Chad Allgood, 2024)

Why a badging system?

The badging system offers a novel yet familiar approach to recognizing quality in early childhood education. Unlike the traditional star ratings used by most states, which often condense various aspects of a program into a single score, this badging system breaks down these elements into meaningful, distinct badges. This method acknowledges the many nuances of early childhood programs, providing a clearer representation of their specific services.

Building Quality from the Foundation

Specialization Badges

Fundamental Badges

Educational Interaction Badge
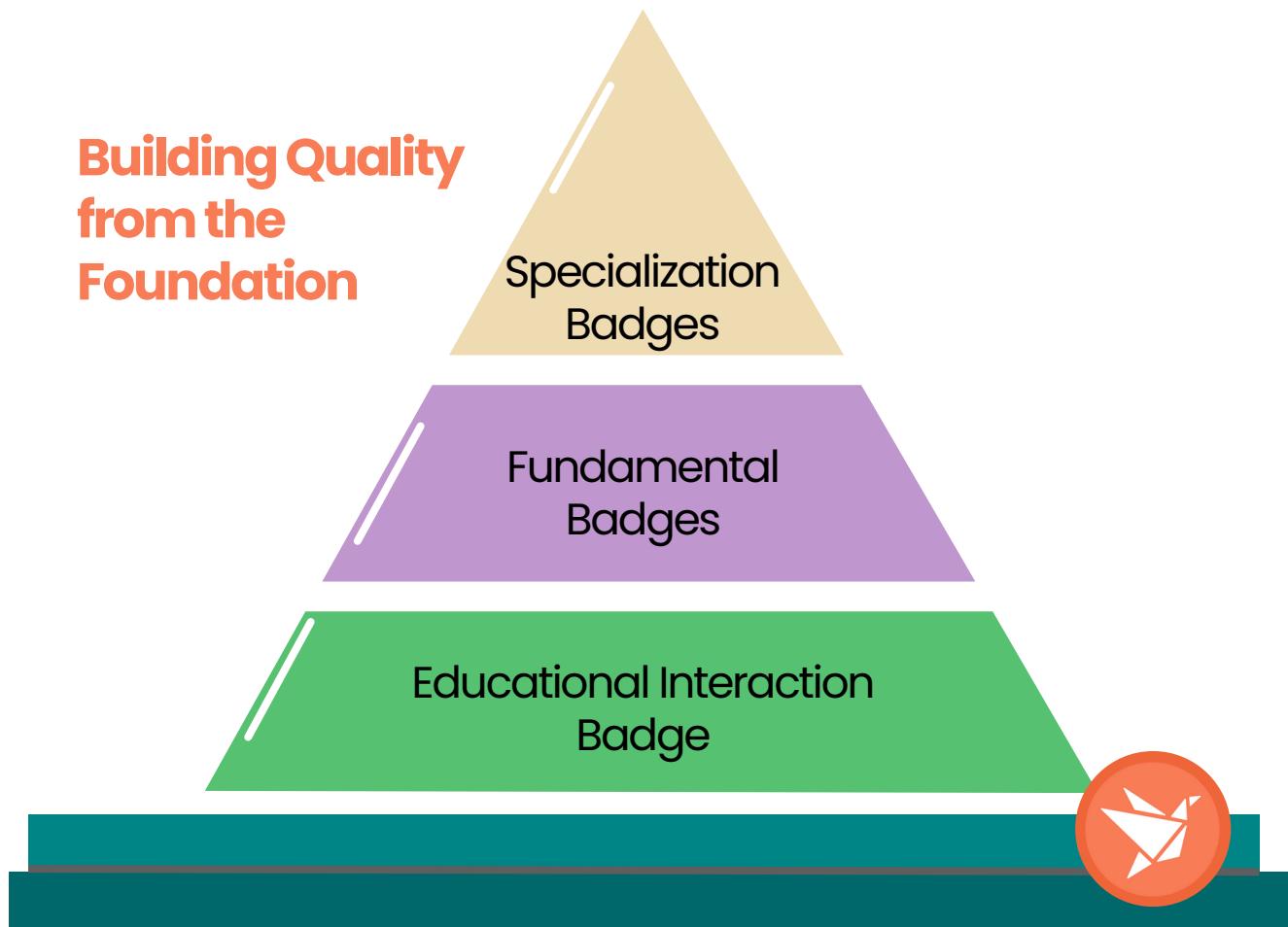
Key Phases of the Badging System:

1. **Phase 1 Educational Interaction Badge:** Represents the essential teacher-child interaction, akin to the foundation of a house.
2. **Phase 2 Fundamental Badges:** Address the developmental needs of children across different age groups, from infants to school-aged children, including those with special needs.
3. **Phase 3 Specialization Badges:** Highlight specialized services that a program may offer to meet specific family needs.

This system not only offers a more detailed and accurate portrayal of a program's strengths but also avoids the pitfalls of star ratings, which can inadvertently create unfair competition among providers. By focusing on proficiency in various areas, the badging system ensures that all programs, regardless of the income levels they serve, are fairly recognized for their unique contributions to early childhood education. Once a badge is obtained, each badge remains active for two years.

ELEVATE: Phase 1

ELEVATE Phase 1 will consist of intensive professional development. Early childhood education (ECE) program directors will receive coaching on the benefits and implementation requirements of ELEVATE. Trainings on CLASS and how it will be used in child care program assessments will also be available. These offerings were made available as of October 1, 2024, ahead of the opening of the ELEVATE portal registry. ELEVATE: a Quality Support System Application Guide and video tutorial are available to help providers navigate their registration on the portal. (https:// mississippithrive.com/elevate-qss/, 2025)

CLASS observation scores will be used to award programs an Educational Interaction Badge (if the score is 3 or higher) and/or identify areas of strengths and areas where extra support is needed. To provide additional support, an improvement plan will be prepared, and online, virtual, and in-person training will be available, as will onsite coaching for each child care program. Badges will be valid for two years in the absence of serious licensing violations.

Phase 1 is a required badge for providers receiving child care subsidies, the Educational Interaction Badge

The Educational Interaction Badge indicates that a child care program provides positive, educational interactions between their teachers and children enrolled in their programs. This badge is earned through an evidence and research-based observation tool that is used nationwide to assess teachers in child care and Pre-K classrooms.

How will programs obtain the first badge (phase 1)?

To earn the first badge, known as the Educational Interaction Badge, programs must undergo a comprehensive assessment of teacher-child interactions in the classroom. This badge emphasizes the importance of these interactions in early childhood education, particularly for children from birth to five years old.

The assessment utilizes the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), chosen for its research-based approach to evaluating the quality of teacher-child interactions. CLASS examines various aspects, including:

- The quality of conversations between teachers and children.
- Teachers' responsiveness to children's ideas.
- The tone and intonation used by teachers.
- The presence of any negative interactions and strategies to address them.

CLASS also offers pathways for professional development, helping teachers improve their skills by building on their strengths.

To earn the badge, programs must achieve a baseline composite score of three on the CLASS assessment. This assessment is conducted for all age groups served by the program, including infants, toddlers, and pre-K. The Educational Interaction Badge is the only badge that can be earned in the first year, and CLASS scores are the sole criterion for earning it.

CLASS as an observation and training tool

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a research-based tool designed to assess and enhance the quality of interactions between teachers and students in early childhood education settings. Developed by Teachstone, CLASS focuses on the interactions that matter most for children's learning and development. (Teachstone, 2024)

CLASS observation scores will be used to award programs an Educational Interaction Badge if the score is 3 or higher and to help identify areas of strength and areas where extra support is needed. To obtain other badges, a CLASS score of 5 is required.

Key Features of CLASS

Domains and Dimensions:

CLASS evaluates teacher-student interactions across various domains and dimensions, varying by age group. For example, in pre-K, the domains include Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support.

7-Point Scale:

Observers use a 7-point scale to rate the quality of interactions in each dimension, providing a consistent and objective measure.

Professional Development:

CLASS is not just an assessment tool; it also offers professional development resources to help educators improve their interactions and teaching practices.

Data-Driven Improvement:

By focusing on high-quality interactions, CLASS helps create a shared understanding of effective teaching and supports continuous improvement through data-driven decisions.

Benefits of CLASS

Improved Child Outcomes:

Research shows that children in classrooms with higher CLASS scores demonstrate better social-emotional, cognitive, and academic outcomes.

Flexibility:

CLASS can be used across different age groups and classroom settings, making it a versatile tool for various educational environments.

Comprehensive Support:

CLASS provides insights, skills, and strategies for teachers to enhance their interactions, which are critical components of effective teaching.

Coaches/Trainers

Early Childhood Education (ECE) program directors will undergo intensive professional development to enhance their understanding and implementation of ELEVATE: a Quality Support System. This includes training on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and its application in child care program assessments. Approximately 30 coaches are available through DECCD to assist providers.

Key Components

Training and Coaching:

- Coaching on ELEVATE: Program directors will receive coaching on the benefits and implementation requirements of ELEVATE.
- CLASS Training: Directors will be trained on CLASS and how it will be used in program assessments.
- Educational Interaction Badge: Programs scoring 3 or higher on CLASS observations will be awarded this badge. Scores will also help identify strengths and areas needing support.

Support and Improvement Plans:

- Improvement Plans: Tailored plans will be developed to address areas needing improvement.
- Training Modalities: Online, virtual, in-person training, and onsite coaching will be available.

Role of Coaches:

- Dual Roles: Coaches will provide both training (offered by the Division of Early Childhood Care & Development - DECCD) and one-on-one technical assistance onsite to program staff.
- Training Sessions: Coaching will be conducted in classrooms with approximately 15-17 providers.
- First Contact: Coaches will meet programs on a first-come, first-served basis, prioritizing those accepting CCDF subsidies.

Coaching Process:

- Welcome Meeting: Coaches will conduct a welcome meeting to review the welcome packet and contract and discuss options for observation or training/coaching.
- Technical Assistance (TA): If TA is chosen first, the coach will begin the coaching process, with up to 90 hours per facility, tailored based on center sizes.

Continuous Support:

- Linking Theory to Practice: Coaches will connect child development information with best practices in the classroom to enhance children's learning experiences.
- Primary Liaison: Coaches will be the main point of contact, working closely with directors and teachers, providing ongoing technical assistance based on CLASS assessments.

Certification and Reliability:

- Training for Coaches and Observers: Both must be trained, certified, and reliable in all three areas: infant, toddler, and pre-K.

A structured approach ensures that ECE program directors receive comprehensive support to improve the quality of early childhood education through effective training and coaching.

Observers

Observers do not fill the same roles as coaches or trainers. The 12 MDHS observers administer CLASS scores and input that information into the ELEVATE portal registry.

DECCD Observation Protocol

Training and Preparation:

- DECCD observers must attend a two-day CLASS Observation Training and pass a reliability test.
- Observations will be conducted randomly on 50% of classrooms in each age group.
- Providers will be contacted six to eight weeks prior to the observation to identify a two-week window and may request up to three blackout dates.

Role of Observers:

- Observers are not coaches or trainers; they administer CLASS scores.
- Programs applying to participate in the ELEVATE: a Quality Support System have two options:
  - Be observed and scored on CLASS first.
  - Receive technical assistance (TA) first.
- TA will be provided regardless, but programs can choose to receive it before and after CLASS observations.

Logistics and Scheduling:

- There are 12 observers. If an observer has no programs in their assigned counties, they may travel to assist others within a reasonable distance.
- Observers will provide a two-week timeframe for CLASS observations and ask directors to choose three blackout dates.
- During the meet and greet, observers will introduce themselves to staff and explain the observation process, using a talking tips sheet and feedback from town halls to build rapport.

Observation Process:

- Observers will sit in the corner with a tablet, minimizing disruption to the daily flow, and will enter and exit classrooms multiple times.
- Observations will consist of 3-4 cycles, each lasting 15-20 minutes, with 10 minutes between cycles for scoring.
  - Infant rooms: 15-minute cycles.
  - Toddler and pre-K rooms: 20-minute cycles.
- Observers will document specific instances and provide clear notes for coaches.

Post-Observation:

- Scores will be input into ELEVATE, and scoring sheets will be uploaded.
- Observers will complete a physical copy of the scoring sheet and enter it into ELEVATE after leaving the program.
- Once the scoring sheet is approved, the observer will schedule a meeting with the facility's coach to review results and discuss the quality improvement plan.
- Improvement plans will be developed if the program scores lower than a 3 on the CLASS.
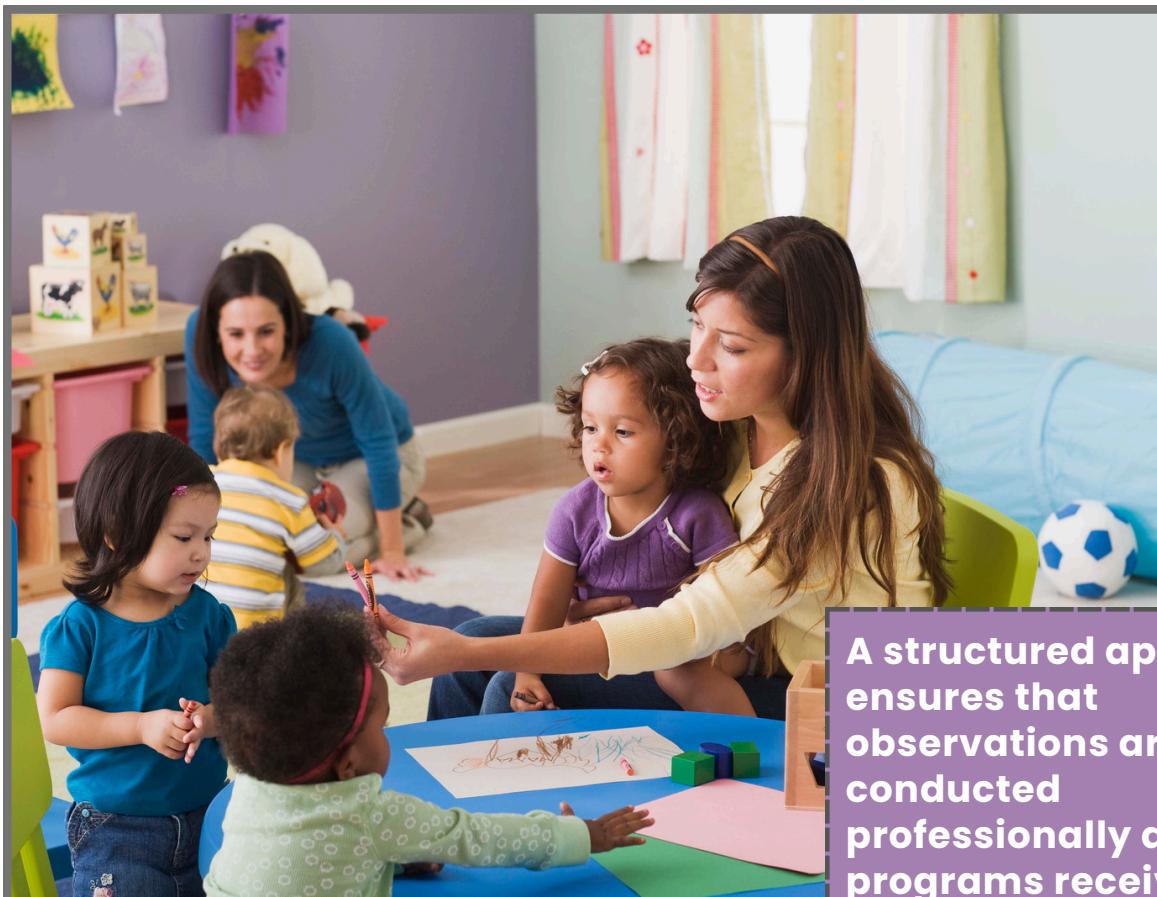
A structured approach ensures that observations are conducted professionally and that programs receive the support they need to improve quality.

Technical Assistance (TA)

Coaches collaborate with the director to identify the director's perceived needs. Additionally, coaches conduct their own assessment using a brief checklist developed by CLASS to guide the technical assistance (TA). This is not a formal CLASS observation. Once the TA is completed, DECCD then assigns an observer for the area. The observer contacts the director to schedule a meet and greet with the director and their staff, and to arrange the CLASS observations.

Center Team

Each participating child care education program will be assigned a coach based on the county of the providers. The support team for each program, referred to as the "center team," will include the assigned coach/trainer, an observer, the licensing official from the Office of Child Care Licensure, and a representative from the Mississippi Early Childhood Inclusion Center (MECIC). This team will collaborate to discuss the center and provide support to the providers in the area.

When a program applies to participate in ELEVATE: a Quality Support System, they will be presented with a contract outlining the expectations for both the providers and the support team. This contract must be signed three times by both the directors and owners. The first signature is completed in the portal during the application process. The second signature is obtained when the coach meets with them and reviews a printed copy of the contract. The third signature is collected during a meet and greet with the observer, where the contract content is reviewed once more. DECCD is currently finalizing the contract, which has undergone multiple reviews, including a legal review. This process ensures accountability for all parties involved and clearly defines the expectations and support that will be provided.

ELEVATE: Phase 2

While Phase 1 is a required badge, other Phases will offer optional opportunities for child care programs to focus on their specific needs and the children and families they serve. Phase 2 will focus on Fundamental Badges that indicate the type of care offered by a provider. These badges can be obtained by meeting a threshold score of 5 in the CLASS observation for serving children of a specific population, such as infants and toddlers, preschool, or children with special needs. A second option for demonstrating quality for one of these types of care is to show evidence of quality in developmentally appropriate a) professional development; b) learning environments; c) best practices in health, safety, and wellness; d) and social-emotional support for a particular age group. School-age and Inclusion Badge requirements and options for demonstrating quality will also be further developed.

Year Two: Fundamental Badges

Infant Program	Toddler Program	Preschool Program
After School Program	Summer Program	Inclusion Program

How will programs obtain fundamental badges (phase 2)?

Phase 2 will focus on Fundamental Badges that indicate the type of care offered by a provider for serving children of a specific population, such as infants and toddlers, preschool, school-age, or children with special needs.

Fundamental badges will be rolled out in year two, starting in October of 2025.

Programs aiming to earn badges for infant, toddler, pre-K, school age, or special needs categories must meet additional requirements. Three options are offered to achieve this:

1. CLASS Score Option: Programs can earn the badge by achieving a CLASS score of five or higher for the respective age group. The highest possible CLASS score is seven.
2. Evidence of Quality Option: Programs can demonstrate quality in four key areas:
   - Professional Development: Develop a professional development plan for staff in the classroom based on input from their coach and initial CLASS score.
   - Learning Environment: Creating conducive spaces for education
   - Best Practice Health & Safety and Wellness: Implementing safety protocols and promoting wellness.
   - Social Emotional Support: Providing emotional and social assistance

The social-emotional component utilizes the Pyramid Model which supports both children's and teachers' social-emotional well-being. Feedback will be sought during town halls on additional ways to recognize proficiency in these areas.

Programs will need to provide evidence of meeting indicators in these areas through a portfolio, which includes feedback from the coach, photos, videos, and testimonials. This portfolio will not only demonstrate compliance but also serve as a marketing tool for their program to families.

3. Hybrid Model: This combines the CLASS score and evidence of quality routes. Programs can choose to improve their CLASS composite scores or opt to develop a portfolio for specific dimensions where they scored lower.

The fundamental badge categories have been aligned with CLASS dimensions and feedback obtained from Touchstone experts. Programs scoring four in specific CLASS dimensions may focus on improving their composite scores to five. For lower scores, they can opt for the portfolio route or may also work towards improving their composite scores to five. All necessary dimension materials are provided to child care providers at no cost to ensure transparency in expectations.

Infant

Program

Example of Hybrid Pathway for Infant Badge

Professional Development

Complete requirements in Professional Development Plan.

Learning Environment

Earn a score of 5 in Infant classrooms in Facilitated Exploration OR complete requirements in the Learning Environment Evidence of Quality.

Best Practice Health & Safety/Wellness

Earn a score of 5 in infant classrooms in Relational Climate OR complete requirements in the Best Practice Health & Safety Evidence of Quality.

Social/Emotional Support

Earn a score of 5 in infant classrooms in Teacher Sensitivity OR complete requirements in the Social Emotional Support Evidence of Quality.

Two of the fundamental badges do not have corresponding CLASS pathways to obtain the badge. The school age badge and the Early Childhood Inclusion badge require providers to meet other detailed criteria in order to earn the badge.

Earning the school age badge requires providers to do more than check homework.

School-Age Fundamental Badge

- ☑ Environment that complements the school day, doesn't repeat it.

- ☑ Curriculum includes opportunities to develop competence.

- ☑ Interactions with Others

- ☑ Programming and Activities

- ☑ Staffing and Professional Development

- ☑ Incorporates needs of all age groups (five - 12 year olds)

The school-aged observation tool is being developed as part of the badging process for before and after school care programs, as well as summer camp programs. It is being created in alignment with existing class observation materials, intending to be a natural extension of what is already in place. The tool draws from information and best practices from existing organizations that provide before and after school care programs. It will be used internally by observers and coaches to assess the quality of these programs. The school-aged fundamental badge will be earned based on the criteria outlined in the observation tool, though the specific requirements for this badge are still being finalized. The observation tool focuses on assessing the quality of adult-child interactions and the environment in these programs, with an emphasis on supporting social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Professional development and coaching will be available to support providers in understanding and implementing the observation tool. Currently, the tool is in the early stages of development, and feedback from providers and parents will be incorporated before it is finalized.

School Age Observation Tool

- The tool is being developed for before and after school care programs and summer camps
- Currently in draft form for internal use only (for observers and coaches)
- Created as a natural extension of existing class observation materials
- Designed based on best practices from existing organizations for before/after school care
- Focuses on the adult's role in guiding and supporting child development
- Different from Teachstone's classroom guide, which is more academic-focused

Badging Process Structure

- The school age observation tool will be used for earning Fundamental badges
- School age programs will start earning Fundamental badges in October 2025
- School age programs may skip the initial Educational Interactions badge that other age groups complete first

Curriculum Approach

- Focuses on complementing the school day without repeating academic content
- Emphasizes social-emotional and physical development rather than academics
- Supports development of competence across all developmental domains
- Based on data-driven sources showing best practices for teacher-child interactions

Observable Quality Criteria

- Supportive environment with positive teacher-student relationships
- Positive regard shown through tone, eye contact, respectful language
- Classroom guidance with focus on rechanneling behavior positively
- Emphasis on developing pro-social behaviors between children
- Teacher's ability to redirect behavior effectively

Implementation Process

- Coaches are available to facilities for professional development
- Coaching support will continue seamlessly between first and second year
- The next round of town halls will incorporate provider and parent input

The Early Childhood Inclusion badge requires providers to complete the steps listed below:

HOW TO EARN THE

EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSION BADGE

by creating an environment of acceptance, support, & engagment.

1

Training
50% of center staff earn the MECIC endorsement and/or credential by attending comprehensive training.

2

Inclusive Community
Create a community that fosters friendships, a sense of belonging, and promotes learning and development for children with disabilities, and their peers.

3

Mentoring
Onsite mentoring for teachers serving children with disabilities is provided by MECIC.

4

Quality Indicators
Center will adopt a Benchmark of Quality Practices that highlights the classroom environment, family practices, instructional practices, and interactions that support children with disabilities and children with delays.

5

Badge
Earn the Early Childhood Inclusion Badge. Be recognized as a High-Quality Early Learning Center, supporting learning & development for all children.

Mississippi
EARLY CHILDHOOD INCLUSION CENTER   lift

Training

Training to ensure that the director and 50% of staff meet the professional development requirement to become endorsed or credentialed.

Inclusive Community

The Inclusive Classroom Profile, Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool, or the Teaching Pyramid Infant Toddler Scale will be used to create classroom environments that support early childhood inclusion. Results from observation tools support providers and MECIC staff in action planning to increase inclusive practices that creates a community that fosters friendships and a sense of belonging for children with disabilities and their peers.

Onsite mentoring

Mentoring will be provided to providers who are serving children with disabilities. Mentors will help providers implement the Pivotal Practices for Early Childhood Inclusion and meet the Quality Indicators for Early Learning Environments.

Benchmark of Quality Practices

MECIC staff will support directors in their leadership of ensuring inclusive practices that address classroom environment, family practices, instructional practices, and interactions that support children with disabilities and children with delays.

Completing all four steps results in the Early Childhood Inclusion Badge.

ELEVATE: Phase 3

Phase 3 will enable providers to earn Specialization Badges. Specialization Badges will allow providers to demonstrate quality care in a particular area, such as overnight care, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics), learning, outdoor learning, family engagement, multi-lingual instruction, etc.

How will programs obtain the specialization badges (phase 3)?

Phase 3 will enable providers to earn Specialization Badges. Specialization Badges will allow providers to demonstrate quality care in a particular area, such as overnight care, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics), learning, outdoor learning, family engagement, multi-lingual instruction, etc.

"Further details regarding phase 3 will be announced at a later time. One key aspect to emphasize is the importance of adaptability and flexibility as we progress. Circumstances are subject to change, and some of our plans may not work as intended. Therefore, it is crucial for us to remain responsive. This is why we have developed various options, recognizing that no two child care programs are identical. Each program has its unique needs, and our system must be adaptable to these requirements, much like how we expect child care providers and early childhood educators to be responsive to the needs of their children." (Chad Allgood, 2024)

Currently, DECCD is working on descriptions for each badge in Phase 3. When users hover over a badge, a brief description will appear, providing more information about that badge.

ELEVATE COLLECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Mississippi Department of Education (MDE)

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) provides resources and technical support to Mississippi's public school system. The department also functions as a resource for federal education requirements and funding. The MDE seeks to create a world-class educational system that gives students the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and in the workforce, and to flourish as parents and citizens. To make this vision a reality, all students must be given multiple pathways to success, and teachers and administrators must continue to meet the challenges of this ever-changing landscape of public education. MDE is dedicated to improving the educational opportunities for all students and ensuring a bright future for every child through the Board's strategic goals that are centered on achievement on every level of Mississippi's public education system, including districts, schools, classrooms and individual students. (MDE, 2024)

Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH)

The Mississippi State Department of Health's mission is to protect and advance the health, well-being and safety of everyone in Mississippi. The Mississippi State Department of Health establishes standards, recommendations and regulations for health and care facilities, and licenses facilities and practitioners of health-related professions that affect public health.

Role in ELEVATE – Licensure of all early childhood education programs.

- Licensing officials will be part of the TA teams supporting providers.
- Licensing officials will receive training on CLASS and ELEVATE.
- Licensing agreed to forego two additional inspections and will be offering TA throughout this process within the TA team.
- Violations will not be cited during TA visits, other than Class 1 violations, other violations will be corrected onsite.

Mississippi Early Childhood Inclusion Center (MECIC)

The Mississippi Early Childhood Inclusion Center (MECIC) is dedicated to supporting early childhood educators, families, and young children with disabilities. MECIC offers a variety of services, including:

- Professional Development: Training programs for educators on best practices for teaching young children with disabilities.
- Resource and Referral: Providing resources and referrals to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings.
- Technical Assistance: Onsite assistance to help educators implement inclusive practices effectively

MECIC aims to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to high-quality early childhood education.

ADDITIONAL QUALITY INITIATIVES

As a compliment to ELEVATE: A Quality Support System, other quality initiatives include the Mississippi Learning Investment for Tomorrow (LIFT) Child Care Portal Registry, which has been launched using WELS software to collect data on early educator professional development and to serve as a portal for parents to find ECE that fits their needs in their area. Additionally, the Mississippi LIFT Resource and Referral Network is being expanded across the state to provide information and resources on developmentally appropriate practices to providers and families.

LIFT Registry Development/Launch

Mississippi Learning Investment for Tomorrow (LIFT) Child Care Portal Registry has been launched using WELS software to collect data on early educator professional development and to serve as a portal for parents to find ECE that fits their needs in their area.

This new professional development system was designed by the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) to support early childhood educators. This site is an integral part of the robust ELEVATE: a Quality Support System that is being introduced across the state.
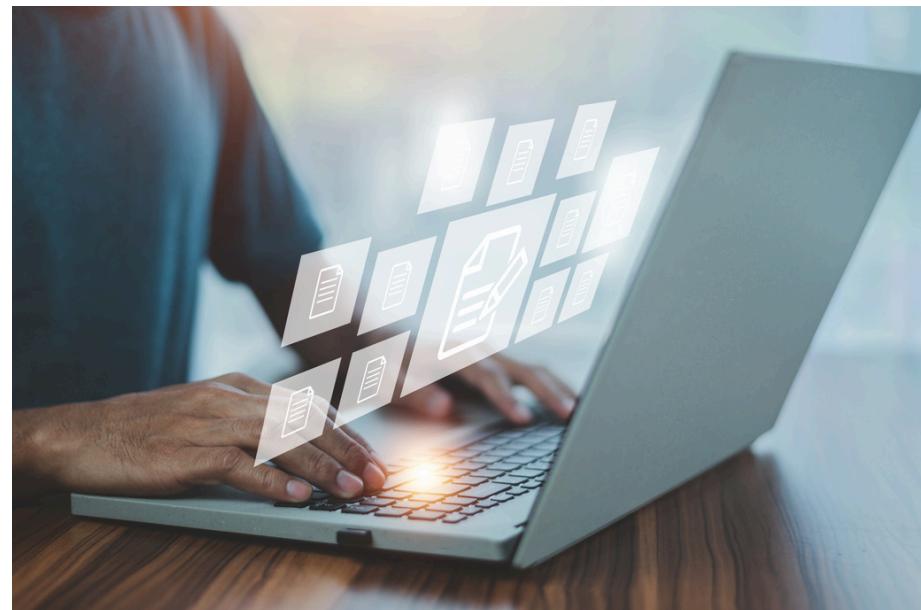
lift-ED provides a single registration point for all MDHS-funded professional development opportunities. Additionally, lift-ED will generate transcripts for completed training and professional resumes for all individuals using the system. For administrators, lift-ED provides a way to monitor all the training hours earned by all staff to ensure annual training requirements are met.

Introduction to lift-ED Portal

- **Purpose:** The lift-ED portal is designed to support educators and providers by consolidating their training and professional development records. It aims to elevate the quality of education and professional development. It integrates various training programs from multiple partners, except for the Department of Education, which uses a separate system.
- **Naming:** The name "lift-ED" combines "lift" and "ED" (education), symbolizing the goal of elevating providers in terms of quality and self-perception.

Features of lift-ED Portal

- **Calendar View:** Providers can view upcoming training sessions in a calendar format. They can register for these sessions directly through the portal.
- **Transcript Management:** Once a training session is completed, trainers update the portal, and the training is recorded on the provider's transcript. This transcript is used by inspectors to verify compliance with the required 15 hours of professional development annually.
- **Auto-Population:** The portal auto-populates information from the MSDH LARS account, which saves time for users by reducing the need to manually enter data.

Professional and Program Portals

- **Professional Portal:**
  - **Career Journey:** Helps build an early childhood career journey, including a resume builder that integrates professional development records.
  - **Dashboard:** Users can see their credentials, applications, and professional development sessions.
  - **Resume Builder:** Automatically creates a resume based on the user's professional development and credentials.
- **Program Portal:**
  - **Staff Management**: Directors and owners can manage staff rosters and classroom information.
  - **Elevate Application:** Directors can apply for quality support programs and track the progress of their applications.

Elevate Application

- **Quality Support System:** Elevate is a part of the lift-ED system that supports quality improvement in educational settings.
- **Application Process:** The application process involves auto-populated information from the program portal and requires regular updates from directors.
- **Pathways**: There are different pathways (e.g., Pathway One and Pathway Two) that providers can choose based on their readiness for observation and technical assistance.

User Experience and Feedback

- **Ease of Use:** The system is designed to be user-friendly with support tools like help desks and manuals.
- **Positive Feedback:** Users have generally found the system easy to use once they become familiar with it. Initial resistance was mainly due to unfamiliarity with the technology.

Future Plans and Enhancements

- **Mobile App:** Plans to develop a mobile app to make the portal more accessible.
- **Integration with Brightwell:** Potential collaboration with Brightwell to provide real-time updates on enrollment and vacancies.
- **Parent Portal:** Development of a parent portal to provide resources and support for families.
- **Continuous Improvement:** The system will continue to evolve based on user feedback to meet the needs of educators, providers, and families.

Challenges and Solutions

- **Time Constraints:** Ensuring the system meets everyone's needs within a limited timeframe was a major challenge.
- **Collaboration:** Bringing together various stakeholders and iteratively developing the system helped overcome these challenges.
- **User-Friendly Design:** Making the system easy to use for all users, including those who are less familiar with technology, was crucial.

Vision for the Future

- **One-Stop Hub:** The goal is to make lift-ED a comprehensive hub for all professional development and quality support needs.
- **Expansion:** Plans to expand the functionality to include a parent portal and other features to support educators and families.

Additional Insights

- **Collaboration History:** The collaboration with Wells dates back to 2012, starting with the Allies for Quality Care program.
- **Feedback and Iteration:** Continuous feedback from users has been essential in refining the system and adding enhancements.
- **Positive Impact:** The system aims to positively impact the perception and quality of early childhood education by providing comprehensive support and resources.

R&R Network Expansion

The Mississippi LIFT Resource and Referral Network is being expanded across the state to provide information and resources on developmentally appropriate practices to providers and families.

Overall Mission

- **Mission:** The overarching mission of the R&R sites is to provide valuable resources to families, teachers, and community members. This supports education and community development in Mississippi by offering free access to essential materials and activities.

Operational Status and Popular Resources

- **Number of Operational Sites:** There are currently 46 fully operational R&R sites. This is a significant increase from the previous count of 10 sites.
- **Popular Resources:** The most popular resources at these sites include reading materials, books, activities, butcher paper, and dye cuts. These resources are highly valued by teachers because they are free and easily accessible, reducing the need for teachers to purchase them out-of-pocket.

Visitor Demographics

- **Primary Visitors:** The primary visitors to the R&R sites are teachers, particularly those working with children from birth through age five. These teachers benefit greatly from the resources provided, which support their classroom activities and educational goals.
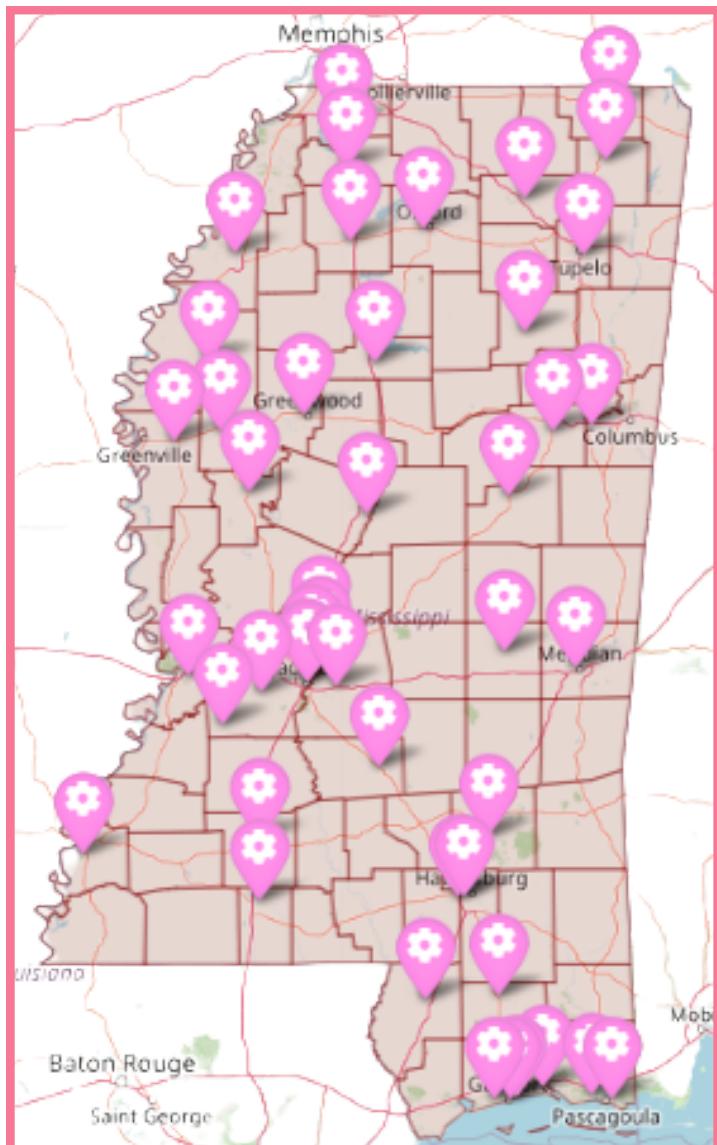
Expansion and Accessibility

- **Expansion:** The number of operational sites has increased significantly, with a goal to make R&R sites accessible across the state. This expansion aims to provide valuable resources to more communities.

- **Accessibility:** R&R sites offer a stress-free environment where children can play and parents can access resources without any pressure to purchase anything. This accessibility is crucial for families who may not have other local options like libraries or bookstores.

Challenges and Partnerships

- **Challenges:** One of the main challenges mentioned is hiring staff in certain areas, such as the Delta region. This challenge has been mitigated through partnerships.

- **Partnerships:** Collaboration with organizations like Delta Health Alliance, Mississippi State, and others has been essential in expanding and operating the R&R sites. These partnerships help bridge gaps and provide necessary support.

Success Stories

- **Special Needs Support:** The Mississippi Early Childhood Inclusion Center provides a nurturing environment for special needs families. This center has its own dedicated R&R site tailored to these families.

- **Calming Room:** A special calming room at the Hattiesburg site helps children with special needs by providing a soothing environment with changing colors and interactive features.

Community Engagement

- **Communication:** Efforts to engage with providers and families include flyers, billboards, word of mouth, and events like Super Saturdays. These methods help spread awareness about the resources available at R&R sites.
- **Mobile Units:** Mobile R&R units are being used to reach areas without brick-and-mortar sites. These units will provide similar resources and services as the stationary sites.

Feedback and Improvements

- **Positive Feedback:** The community appreciates the accessibility and free resources provided by the R&R sites. Families and providers find these resources invaluable for their educational needs.
- **Improvements**: Ensuring that resources are returned in good condition is important to avoid unnecessary replacements. Respecting the items helps maintain the quality and availability of resources.

Screening Process

- **Special Needs Screenings:** Screenings for special needs are conducted at R&R sites. The process involves meeting with workers, determining needs through screening procedures, and discussing results with parents.

Promotion and Awareness

- **Promotion:** Efforts to promote the mobile units and R&R sites include collaboration with communication teams and hosting events. These efforts aim to increase awareness and utilization of the available resources.

The R&R sites have seen significant growth and are highly valued by the community, particularly teachers and special needs families. The expansion aims to make these resources accessible statewide, with a focus on providing a supportive and resource-rich environment. Partnerships and community engagement are key to the success of these sites. Mobile units will further extend the reach of R&R services. Maintaining the condition of resources and ensuring their availability is a priority.

CONTACT US

To learn more about ELEVATE and get up to date information please visit:

mdhs.ms.gov

To understand the toolkit process and for questions please visit:

scl.ssrc.msstate.edu

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