



Spark Rated Transition Team

Executive Final Report

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Outreach period: October 12 to November 2, 2023

Spark Rated Transition Team Outreach Intro

- **Goals of outreach**
 - Gathering information and feedback from Spark participating programs about their experiences in Spark and their ideas about the transition process from the current QRIS star-rated model to the newly redesigned Spark system.
- **Methods of outreach**
 - Spark Participating Experience survey (15 questions)
 - Transition Team outreach (3 questions)
 - Emails, phone calls, text messages, online/in-person meetings, interview
- **Total number of contacts** **Number of received feedback might not reflect all contacts made.*
 - Survey: 205
 - Phone calls: 133
 - Emails and text messages: 417
 - In-person and online meetings: 14 **individual and group meetings*

Mutual Findings from the Three Groups

- **Strengths to Communicate to Families**
 - Dedication to quality and professionalism
 - Commitment to health and safety
 - Support, connections, relationship building, and trust
 - Connecting families to community resources
 - Diversity and inclusion, using home languages, respecting the family culture, tradition, and beliefs
 - Qualified and highly educated staff, continuing professional development
- **Barriers and Challenges**
 - Lack of understanding of how to start and work through the Spark system
 - Problems with the Spark process, for example, time and effort for the portfolio
 - Lack of resources and skill set in technology
 - Not enough technical support from system partners
 - * this data is not relevant for the Russian-speaking group*
 - Meeting time with QIS isn't flexible

- Frequent rotation of CCR&R staff
 - Not enough financial support due to additional expenses for professional development training and program materials, etc.
 - Struggle to move forward in ORO Steps therefore providers are not able to achieve the desired star rating
 - Parents don't know what the Spark recognition system is
 - Assessment procedure and observation tools do not appear to be aligned to support program types
- **Desired Transition to a New System**
 - Make the transition process accountable, equivalent, and transparent

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Reconsider the star rating system structure
- Make the process more efficient from start to finish
- Reduce repetitiveness in evidence submission
- Provide more flexible training opportunities to all providers, specifically to diverse language groups
- Create alternative professional development recognition for staff qualifications, such as years of experience, letters from parents and program director, reference from QIS or coach
- Increase financial support to compensate for effort in receiving higher education and maintain and increase quality of care to meet Spark requirements
- Ensure that financial support is targeted to providers' needs and provided constantly during the process of participation in Spark
- Individualize the rating criteria based on program type
- ERDC financial incentives should be equally provided to all children regardless of their schedule in care

In summary, the strengths in communicating with families are evident in the dedication to quality and professionalism, a commitment to health and safety, fostering support, connections, and trust, linking families to vital community resources, and embracing diversity and inclusion through respecting cultural values and languages. Also, the qualified staff continuously engaged in professional development adds strength to quality care.

However, these strengths often encounter obstacles. Challenges arise from a lack of familiarity with initiating and navigating the Spark system, complications within the Spark process itself

(such as time and effort for gathering portfolio evidence), insufficient resources and technological expertise, limited support from system partners, and financial constraints that create difficulties in accessing training and materials. Difficulties advancing in ORO Steps cause a struggle in achieving desired star ratings. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of awareness among parents regarding the Spark recognition system.

Despite these challenges, the dedication and commitment of the organization to overcome these barriers and further enhance their communication and service delivery to families remains. Efforts to streamline the Spark system, increase financial and technical support, and enhance awareness among parents about the Spark recognition system could significantly contribute to overcoming these hurdles.

Spark Participation Survey Report

In October 2023, Spark participating programs were asked to respond to a survey about the current system as well as provide their thoughts on what they would want in a new revised system. The survey was translated into both Russian and Spanish and was disseminated through email and SMS texting. Respondents to the survey were from all regions in Oregon except Grant and Harney counties, represented all license types, and included Head Start programs, Relief Nurseries, Oregon Prekindergarten, Preschool Promise, and accredited programs. The following information includes the key takeaways from the survey.

- Three in five (60.8%) stated they pursued a star rating to be recognized for the quality of their program.
 - The opportunity to work with a Quality Improvement Specialist (QIS) was almost as high as the recognition of quality at 59.3%.
 - For Spanish-speaking and Russian-speaking providers, working with a QIS was the most important reason 65% of respondents felt the Spark rating system recognized their program's achievements and demonstrated they were on the path to quality.
- Anecdotally, many respondents expressed frustration that parents are unaware of the Spark system and what it represents.
- Nearly 70% of respondents stated Spark could support them by assisting with access to professional development.
 - This number was higher for the Spanish (73.3%) and Russian (84.4%) speaking respondents.
- 58% of respondents indicated a desire to transfer their current rating to a comparable rating in the new system.

- Overall, 60.9% of respondents stated that some sort of tiered system is important or very important, with 95% of Spanish and Russian-speaking respondents indicating this was important to them.

Appendix

I. English Speaking Group

During the month of October, we made outreach to Spark participating programs that are predominantly speaking English. Among the 1,216 programs, our group sent out emails to all programs, including the three interview questions. Programs are invited to respond via email or a conversation with the group member. The three main questions are:

1. Which strengths would you like families to know about your program?
2. What barriers/challenges did you have while completing your portfolio (participated in the Spark process)?
3. How would you like to see your current Spark-rating transition into the new system?

Group Members:

Chelise Bates (CF, Malhuer) Crystal Morrison (CF, Lane), Rhonda Schock (CC, Jackson), Kelly Heichel (CF, Douglas), Sabrina Erslund (HS, Multnomah)

Strengths to Communicate to Families

- Emphasis on relationships and a positive social and emotional atmosphere
- Dedication to quality and professionalism
- Commitment to health and safety
- Community support and connections
- Diverse and inclusive programs
- Parent education and support
- Qualified and highly educated staff, continuing professional development
- Extensive years of experience (Recommendation letter from parents and program director)

Barriers and Challenges

- Lack of communication and support from Spark and CCR&R
- Staffing shortages and high turnover rates at CCR&R
- Overwhelming paperwork and binder requirements
- Inadequate training and education on Spark
- Perceived lack of recognition for individual strengths

- Difficulties in reaching desired star ratings
- Ties to the ORO step system for teacher qualifications
- Time and financial limitations
- Complexity in the annual renewal process
- The all-or-nothing nature of the Spark system

Desired Transition to a New System

- Make the transition process accountable and equivalent
- Using reliable assessment tools (quality, clarity, equity, equality)
- Focus on relationships and social-emotional development
- Tailoring the system to different program needs
- Reducing duplication with other requirements
- A partnership approach with collaboration among system partners
- Reconsidering the star rating system structure

II. Spanish Speaking Group

Group members

- Leticia Barcenas (RF Provider) - Washington County
- Maria Del Carmen Perez Guzman (CF Provider) - Marion County
- Claudia Morales (CF Provider) - Washington County
- Roxana Hoyle (CF Provider) - Washington County
- Delaney Norris (License Exempt) - Lane County

Participants

Currently, operating Spark participating programs (C2Q, 3-, 4-, and 5-star). 214 program providers identified Spanish as their primary form of communication.

Summary

The assessment conducted on the Spark system revealed several critical findings impacting providers and families involved in childcare services. These findings highlight significant challenges, particularly regarding a lack of understanding of the Spark system, problems within the Spark process, and insufficient financial support for providers.

Findings:

Finding 1: Lack of Understanding of the Spark System

Providers and families exhibit a general lack of understanding about Spark and how it can support the overall goal of providing and recognizing quality care for children and their families.

In-home programs especially struggle to align with the application and portfolio process, which seems tailored more for traditional or center-based programs.

Finding 2: Problems with the Spark Process

The Spark portfolio process is perceived as lengthy and complex by many providers, lacking adequate guidance and support, particularly in other languages. Frustration arises due to the challenge of meeting requirements for star ratings, insufficient support to progress, and limited assistance available, especially for rural providers and providers who speak other languages than English.

Finding 3: Lack of Financial Support

Providers face financial barriers concerning professional development, affecting staff's ability to progress in the ratings system. Inadequate support and flexibility in meeting training requirements, especially a lack of quality training in Spanish that impacts professional development.

Recommendations:

Support

- Offer comprehensive individual/group support with knowledgeable individuals familiar with the process.
- Schedule regular follow-ups and flexible check-ins to assist providers based on their responsibilities and availability.
- Provide support in providers' native or preferred languages, ensuring equity across program types and locations.
- Offer examples of completed portfolios and required work for guidance.

Publicity

- Increase recognition and publicity for participating in the Spark program among providers and families.
- Promote Spark within communities, emphasizing the significance of star ratings.
- Utilize multilingual advertising in relevant spaces such as schools, healthcare facilities, community centers, online directories, and social media.

Financial

- Provide financial incentives throughout the process to aid program growth and expansion to serve more families.
- Offer financial support for professional development, specifically catering to diverse language needs.

- Introduce more incentives for providers to commit to the application and portfolio process.
- Implement ongoing financial incentives to maintain program quality post-star rating.

Addressing these findings and implementing the outlined recommendations will help bridge the gaps in understanding, streamline the process, and provide the necessary support and incentives for providers to enhance childcare quality through the Spark system.

Provider Quote

“Spark is a recognition of my program achievement, a guide for parents and families to select quality childcare, and knowledge that I am on the right path to providing quality care and service to young children and families.”

III. Russian Speaking Group

Group members

- Valentina Brichuk (Director of Slavic CC)
- Irina Drobysheva (RF Provider)
- Nadezhda A Dudko (RF Provider)
- Olga Luchik (RF Provider)
- Anastasiia Sukhotierina (RF Provider)

Participants

Spark participating programs (C2Q, 3-, 4-star). 55 programs which identified Russian as their one of languages used for communication

Summary

The most answers on interview questions indicate a high level of satisfaction for participation on Spark and some positive reasons were highlighted (such as collaboration with colleagues and quality improvement specialists, opportunities for professional development, etc). However, a variety of barriers and challenges were emphasized as well. Several general critical issues negatively impacting providers were revealed (such as lack of opportunities to take trainings in preferred language, struggles to proceed in ORO system, insufficient financial support, difficulties with technology). Nevertheless, all respondents would recommend other providers participate in Spark.

Interview questions & general findings

1) Question # 1

Share your overall impression and experience of participating in Spark (was it positive, difficult, overwhelming, easy, helpful, etc.):

- o What difficulties/obstacles/problems did you encounter while participating in Spark?
- o What positive aspects could you highlight?
- o Would you recommend other providers to participate in Spark? Why?

- **General impression:** most participants note overall positive experience but also determined struggles to understand requirements and gather evidence for the portfolio.
- **Difficulties/obstacles/problems:**
 - o Language barrier (members of the Slavic community speak multiple languages and sometimes can speak/understand Russian but not being able to write/read)
 - o Technical issues (no computer, no printer, lack of skills to use the Internet and technologies)
 - o Time: it took a lot of time to work on the portfolio, take training, and participate in meetings (especially because this activity is an additional amount of work after an 8-10 hour working day as a provider. In addition, this time is taken away from family, household chores and church)
 - o Huge amount of work (the portfolio itself, the need to create a Parent Guide, philosophy, other forms, and documents, plus additional time to complete training)
 - o The financial support received was completely disproportionate to the amount of work completed
 - o Additional financial expenses (for new materials, toys, equipment)
 - o Struggle to understand Portfolio's standards and indicators, what was needed to be done (due to educational level, literacy skills and not being familiar with terminology, and not enough experience for such type of work (when you need to look for evidence, describe, analyze, summarize your practices, think critically and objectively))
 - o Inaccessibility and insufficient resources (due to language barrier and obstacles in online navigation)
 - o Struggles to move forward in ORO steps (get enough training, translate existing diplomas, financial expenses for getting an education)
 - o Increased competencies and received higher education do not correspond with wage / financial profit increases.
 - o Receiving a star rating did not affect in any way the financial income (salary/profit remained unchanged). Parents are not willing to pay more because they do not understand the meaning of the star rating and they are not interested in it.
- **What positive aspects could you highlight?**
 - o Huge amount of support from the CCR&R staff: always friendly, knowledgeable, and ready to help.

- o Participation in a Network group: friendly atmosphere, positive communication, exchange of experience, cooperation. The friendly relationships established in the group continue to this day.
 - o Professional growth: the opportunity to raise the level of qualifications in ORO;
 - o Accountability for your work: understanding the requirements for the profession itself, responsibilities, quality criteria, and ways to achieve them.
 - o A huge amount of knowledge is critical for working with children and parents.
 - o Skills incompetent business management, working with documentation, using computers and technology (the first participants wrote portfolios by hand). Development of necessary documents and forms.
 - o Financial support and incentive payments (the first opportunity to receive significant financial resources for investing in a business).
 - o Growing mindset: awareness of own status as a provider of early learning education (and not just a nanny to look after children), awareness of the importance of the profession of early-learning educator for the well-being of children and the prosperity of society in general.
 - o Personal growth: self-confidence, communication skills and ability to interact with other people, positive self-esteem, the ability to formulate and express your own thoughts and opinions.
 - o The opportunity to confirm the status and quality of your work for yourself, the families of students, colleagues, and even for your family members. A portfolio is an achievement to be proud of.
- **Would you recommend other providers to participate in Spark? Why?**
 - o **General answers:** all participants would suggest participating in Spark (but not necessarily to complete the whole portfolio):
 - ✓ Way to understand and learn quality standards and requirements
 - ✓ Opportunity to increase the quality of work and personal level of professionalism: The educational level of providers is a key point of quality of early learning education
 - ✓ Great opportunity to get training (some of it for free) and increase ORO step
 - ✓ Communication and establishing relationships with colleagues and collaboration with early learning specialists
 - ✓ Financial help

2) Question #2

- **What strengths would you like families to know about your program? What strengths and unique features of your program could you highlight?**
 - Safe environment and highly reliable providers who are devoted to children's health, safety and growth.
 - Warm family atmosphere. Deeply caring providers and friendly children ("relative" like relationships) and warm close relationships with families. Holidays and gatherings.

- Safe, very clean, and cozy “home-style” environment
 - Family style, healthy, and freshly homemade food with several options (including organic, kosher)
 - Speaking home language and following family traditions, beliefs, and culture
 - Focusing on academics (advanced curriculum, homework help, practicing speaking and reading in home language) and a variety of fun activities for development (PE / sport, music, cooking, gardening, art / craft)
 - Flexibility in scheduling and activities, following individual needs of children and parents
- **What are important criteria for parents when they are looking for childcare?**
 - Kind and deeply caring provider. A family-friendly atmosphere when a child gladly goes to childcare
 - Homemade food (Slavic food traditions)
 - Using the home language (Russian or others), respecting and following the family culture, tradition, and beliefs
 - Close, honest, and trusting relationship with the provider (opportunity to talk, confidence that you will be understood and supported)
 - Flexible schedule
 - Activities for education and development, a strong curriculum for preparing for school, teaching literacy skills in Russian (or other languages)
 - Safe environment and following all hygiene/sanitation requirements
 - A responsible, competent, conscientious (following rules) provider who also takes into consideration parents’ needs and requests.

3) Question # 3

What would you like to see as a general system for recognizing the quality of early learning programs in the future (stars, steps, a general certificate, various badges/medals for certain achievements, or something else)?

- Stars (about half of respondents)
- Badges for specific achievements or for meeting certain criteria /areas of quality

How do you see the transition of your current star rating into Spark's updated system?

- Keep the star rating unchanged (until the certificate expires) and then transfer it accordingly to the new quality rating system.

Recommendations

1) New system and rating transition.

- As an alternative option to star rating, establish some types of rewards (badges, signs, certificates of achievements/competency in certain areas of quality). Rationales:

- o it will allow providers to focus on areas to which they are dedicated and proud of the most;
 - o it will be not so overwhelming for them (will take less time, will be more understandable and concrete, and will allow them to focus on one goal at a time);
 - o it will give providers an opportunity and encourage them to participate in Spark continuously;
 - o it will help providers not to feel disappointed and not be discouraged from further participation because of not getting the desired star level;
 - o It will eliminate “bragging” and competition between 3, or 4- or 5-star levels programs;
 - o it will give the parents more understanding of what that program is offering for their children and make parents’ choices clearer and easier.
- For existing star level: Keep star rating unchanged (until the certificate expires) and then transfer it accordingly to the new quality recognition system*.
- * Nuance to think about: programs who submitted portfolios but were not awarded with stars, can apply for some rewards in the new Spark system based on the already submitted portfolio (for example, for those of them not meeting criteria only for PD1 standard)*

2) General recommendations

- **Redesign portfolio and develop other options** for recognizing the quality of programs, taking into consideration:
 - o Volume/amount of work (for example, dividing the portfolio into parts by standards);
 - o levels and numbers of requirements (specifying them by different types of programs);
 - o the time required to prepare and submit evidence;
 - o level of terminology and level of literacy used (taking into account different educational experiences and levels of language proficiency);
 - o level of technology proficiency and availability of technical equipment (for some providers, sending an application by mail is still the only available and preferred way of working with documents)
- Increase the amount and frequency of provided **financial support** (to encourage participation in the continuous quality improvement process)
- Provide **MORE training**, preferably **FREE** (including in **native language**)
- Continue to provide all Spark **in Russian**, as well as additional resources (at least the most important ones, such as templates for Policy and Handbook, assessments tools, etc.)
- Establish a more robust support system (individual guiding through the process, in-time personal consultations, video, examples of documents, mini-trainings)

- Increase public **popularization** and wide spreading of information about the Spark for parents, providers themselves, and society
- Announce/advertise programs that have received quality rating/achievement awards (for example, via Spark / DELC site, CCR&R newsletter, and social media)
- Periodically **monitor/assess** programs to ensure compliance with the declared quality parameters.

Quotes from providers

- o If you would like to teach something to children, first you must learn a lot by yourself.*
- o A portfolio is an achievement to be proud of.*
- o Participation in the Network group and communication with colleagues while working on a portfolio became an invaluable time for me. I will remember forever the joy, honor, and the vivid impressions of the celebration organized to honor providers who received a star rating.*
- o Financial support and incentive payments do not adequately correspond to the amount of work and time spent.*
- o The new system can be any type. The most important is not to lose a status/quality rating*