



May 27, 2026

Early Childhood Workforce and Community Partners

Re: Introduction of the redesigned State Quality Recognition System (QRS), **Montana's Treasures (MTT)**

Dear Early Childhood Workforce and Partners,

The Early Childhood Services Bureau (ECSB) is excited to introduce the newly redesigned State Quality Recognition System, **Montana's Treasures (MTT)**, and highlight the guiding principles that shaped its development. The redesign reflects the collective insight of Montana's early childhood community, gathered through multiple surveys and feedback¹ from providers, program staff, families, and partners across the state. The information gathered played a significant role in shaping a more responsive and realistic system.

Primary System Goal: Licensing Support and Timely Renewals

The Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) [37.96.112](#) requires child care providers to submit a complete license renewal application **at least 60 days before expiration**. For this reason, the first and most important goal of the redesigned system is to support programs in achieving and maintaining timely licensure.

By aligning with ARM, the Quality Recognition System (QRS) supports health, safety, and quality standards, decreases licensing non-compliance, reduces administrative stress, and ultimately enhances the wellbeing of the children and families, building quality from stability and compliance.

Provider-Informed and Provider-Responsive

Feedback from early childhood professionals made it clear that quality cannot be defined by a single model. Quality looks different across settings because every provider, program, and family brings unique strengths, needs, and values to their work. The redesigned system honors this truth by recognizing multiple expressions of quality.

¹ *Examples of surveys and feedback gathering include but are not limited to: ERS assessment surveys through 2020; QRS Redesign Survey to all current licensed/registered providers in October 2023; Birth to Five statewide Needs Assessment 2024; and Bright Futures Strategic Plan 2025¹*

Choice of Quality Indicators

Meeting the need for flexibility, the new model offers quality indicators from which programs can choose. These options allow providers to demonstrate quality in ways that best match their program model, their staff capacity, and the needs of the children and families. Choice is essential for a system that serves the wide diversity of early learning environments in Montana.

Recognition vs. Rating

Survey responses consistently emphasized that a rating-based system can feel punitive, overly comparative, or disconnected from a program's lived experience. The redesigned system moves away from "rating" and toward "recognition." Recognition is strengths focused. It honors progress, celebrates professional commitment, and supports continuous improvement without ranking programs against one another.

Quality Recognition Stages

- Stage 1 – Foundations of Quality
 - This is an automatic determination, with no additional requirements, that is awarded if a program meets [ARM 37.96.112](#) requirements and submits their license renewal application on time.
- Stage 2 - Committed to Quality
 - Option 2A – Early Childhood Career Path & Badges options
 - Option 2B – Specialized Training options
 - Option 2C – Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) options
- Stage 3 – Excelling in Quality (*programs receiving ongoing federal or national oversight*)
 - Accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
 - Accredited through the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)
 - Accredited through the American Montessori School (AMS)
 - Licensed Head Starts and Early Head Starts

It is important to note there is no equivalency between the previous STARS to Quality level requirements and the new Recognition System criteria. Therefore, all programs will have the option to choose a Quality Recognition Stage that fits their specific achievements upon the launch of MT's Treasures.

Benefits for Children and Families

Participating in the Quality Recognition System supports children and families by helping programs create steady, dependable environments that highlight what they do well.

Families get clearer, more useful information about a program's strengths and priorities, rather than relying on a simple rating. Recognition shows how a program's everyday practices and relationships help children grow. For kids, it reinforces the basics that matter most: safe spaces, strong connections, and consistent care.

Quality Matters and Quality Costs

ECSB is committed to infusing small, meaningful incentives into the system framework, but the incentive structure associated with the previous quality system is no longer possible. This reality has necessitated a shift towards more responsible expectations. The new Quality Recognition System focuses on what is most essential, most impactful, and most feasible based on current resources. The redesign ensures the system remains supportive without being overly burdensome on providers.

Moving Forward

We deeply appreciate the time, honesty, and expertise the early childhood workforce contributed to helping shape this redesign. Your voices shaped the new system. Your continued insight will guide more options for quality recognition in the future.

Additional system guidance and training will be shared soon.

Sincerely,

Shandi Hayes on behalf of the
The Early Childhood Services Bureau (ECSB) Quality Unit
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