

Rising Stars for ME

Site Visit Pilot Report



RISING STARS FOR ME
Maine's Quality Rating and Improvement System



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Introduction of *Rising Stars for ME*

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) transitioned Maine's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) from *Quality for ME* to *Rising Stars for ME* at the end of March 2023.

Key components of the revisions included:

- *Levels were changed* from Steps 1-4 to 1-5 Stars.
- Programs must submit evidence electronically to an e-portfolio.
- License exempt non-relative providers participating in the Child Care Affordability Program join *Rising Stars for ME* at Star 1.
- Ratings for licensed programs begin at Star 2.
- Center-based and Head Start program Standards have been merged into one document.
- OCFS will conduct random on-site monitoring of portfolios.

Rising Stars for ME Portfolio Review Site Visit Pilot

Over the last 10+ months, hundreds of programs have renewed or applied on the *Rising Stars for ME* website. As part of Maine's new QRIS, random on-site monitoring is to be done by OCFS. The goals of these visits are to validate applications, allow providers to showcase their programs' varied approaches to quality child care, to build relationships, and make connections within the wider Early Care and Education (ECE) ecosystem. To prepare for implementation of *Rising Stars for ME* portfolio reviews, programs were recruited to volunteer for a site visit and provide feedback.

GOALS OF THE PILOT

1. To test out portfolio reviews and the site visit process to determine the time and resources needed for ongoing monitoring.
2. Get feedback from programs to determine what changes or clarification might be needed.

PILOT RECRUITMENT

Notices were sent out over the OCFS listserv in December 2023 and January 2024. In total, there were 39 programs that volunteered. 31 were Facilities/Centers and 8 were Family Child Care/Small Facilities.

Programs that were the only volunteer in a particular type (i.e., Only one Star 3 Family Child Care volunteered) were selected. If there were multiple volunteers in a category, the license numbers were entered into a randomizer and selected by a computer program.

PILOT PARTICIPANTS

OCFS was fortunate to have programs selected in Androscoggin, Cumberland, Hancock, Penobscot, Piscataquis, Somerset, Washington, and York counties. Licensed capacity ranged from 12 to 75, and

programs included Out-of-School Time (OST), a special purpose private school, a HomeStart Program (a home-based Head Start partner), privately owned, and a non-profit child care.

STRUCTURE OF THE PILOT

On Friday, January 19th, all programs were informed if they were or were not selected for the pilot. Those that were selected were asked to provide preferred days or time for a visit between January 29th and February 10th, 2024. Once visits were scheduled, an OCFS Staff member did a pre-visit review of documents in the program's electronic portfolio. If there were any standards that could not be verified via the e-portfolio, the program was informed in advance that more information was needed, and that it could be provided at the site visit.

Site visits were scheduled for up to 3 hours, with the anticipation that visits would be complete in 1-2 hours. The actual time of these visits ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours and 45 minutes, with an overall average of just under 2 hours. Site visits typically started with introductions and a brief walk-through of the program. Next, the OCFS staff member would answer any immediate questions posed by the program and then review the programs affiliated with OCFS via a document created for this purpose (See Appendix A).

After the visit, a post-visit summary was sent to each program that outlined if there was any outstanding documentation needed, what was needed to increase star rating (if requested), and answers to any questions asked (but not answered on site). After the post-visit summary participants received survey to provide feedback (via SurveyMonkey, see Appendix B).

An example of feedback given to a program that wanted to increase their rating:

You are currently a Star 3, but your program appears to be a Star 4. To achieve Star 4, the following is needed:

- **2.4.1** The program conducts an annual self-assessment based on NAFCC or AMS accreditation standards.
- **2.4.2** The program completes all categories of the Rising Stars for ME Inclusive Practices Checklist on an annual basis.
- **2.4.3** The program includes results from the NAFCC/AMS self-assessment and all categories of the Rising Stars for ME Inclusive Practices Checklist in its CQI Plan.
- **4.4.1** The program uses an appropriate tool to measure the overall quality of their business and professional practices annually.
- **7.4.1** The program completes an annual nutrition/physical activity baseline self-assessment, then develops and implements an action plan to achieve two strategies for improvement.

If you need assistance with completing the above items to achieve that higher star rating, please don't hesitate to reach out to the MRTQ PDN Technical Assistance (TA) team [here](#).

Some of the questions asked at site visits (and answered in summary letters) were:

- More information regarding developmental screenings from Help Me Grow
- Child Care Affordability Program (formerly CCSP) eligibility guidelines for employees.

- Standard 7.3.2 regarding a food policy – what if we don't serve food?
- If TEACH can be used at a NH school.
- Excused vs unexcused absences for CCAP.
- How to get waivers for P-MELDS and IT MELDS
- Possibility of adding HomeStart (early head start) to the recognized accreditations for Family Child Care/Small Facilities.
- Therapy referral experience and developmental screenings from Help Me Grow
- Do programs need to pay 7% towards TEACH recipients tuition?
- Translation service for licensing guidelines
- Possible funds for internet access
- Child Care Enrollment Data collection
- Salary Supplement Early Childhood Educator eligibility requirements
- Child Care Infrastructure Grants

General Feedback

Overall, the feedback to the *Rising Stars for ME* site visits and portfolio reviews was positive. As one participant noted:

I thought the visit was comprehensive and not at all intimidating, which sometimes visits can be.

In the survey, participants were asked “Did the visit feel individualized to your program?” 67% said “a great deal”.

When asked if the list of OCFS services was helpful, 56% answered “a great deal” and 22% stated “a lot.” One provider mentioned specifically:

I learned a lot about all the new services and opportunities that OCFS is working on for the field of ECE and that was a relief. I feel more encouraged about the future of ECE and my business.

When asked “Was the post-visit summary letter helpful?” over half of respondents (56%) answered it was helpful “a great deal”. The other 44% stated it was either “moderately helpful” or “very helpful”.

The site visit process was very helpful, I appreciated the amount of responsiveness that was given as well as resources to help get more information to (answer) the questions asked.

OTHER THEMES

There are special circumstances for programs that may need to be considered:

Rising Stars has felt daunting to some of our staff and training is hard to access due to lack of internet availability in our rural area located far from any institution of higher education, which limits the ability of staff to raise their (program's) star ratings.

I also think that there should be some review or individualization for programs licensed by OCFS for "child care" but are providing special education services because that is the current service model in Maine and not all areas are applicable.

And there still seems to be some resistance to the program more generally. One Provider stated:

I still don't think Rising Stars is a true indicator of quality, but I have been trying to help other providers understand that the process is not as overwhelming as it may seem.

Another theme that came up several times was around education for parents/families/caregivers on what *Rising Stars for ME* is. An expansive public outreach project is currently being formulated and will be coming soon.

CHANGES AND SUGGESTIONS

Through this pilot process a few changes were made immediately:

1. Instead of using the previously created checklist for standards, the OCFS staff member quickly shifted to using a **printed version of the application**, as this included the self-report information and page numbers if provided by the program.
2. Future visits will likely be **scheduled for 1.5 to 2 hours**.
3. Changes to the list of OCFS services happened throughout the pilot, and a laminated **career lattice** will be added to documents for future visits.
4. Early visits, there weren't any bags for the gifts (mugs, pens, magnetic clips, stickers). When bags were introduced, this took away the "ice breaker" element of handing over the items more personally. This is something to consider moving forward, depending on whether we will continue to bring items to non-pilot volunteer programs.
5. In prepping for visits, 3 or 4 **portfolio reviews** were done at a time but this appeared to cause some confusion between different programs. In the future no more than 2-3 reviews should be done at any given time should be allotted to do **summaries** while information is fresh.

- For example, 2-3 reviews on a Monday afternoon, 2-3 visits Tuesday, 2-3 summaries Wednesday morning, 2-3 reviews Wednesday afternoon, and then 2-3 more visits on Thursday.

The participants suggested the following changes to consider:

1. It would be helpful if there was additional clarification about **what needed to be uploaded** to rising stars for documentation. For example, a cover sheet with an explanation of how we are meeting the standard vs the entire document.
2. It would be great to eventually have a process where regions have **routine visits** with the Rising Stars rep. More contact improves relationships and makes for a less stressful process.
3. I thought someone was coming here to observe the school and classrooms and give feedback on the program not just the information I provided on the portal. I was hoping to get **feedback on the space, the environment, our curriculum etc.** (Note: This is a service available from the MRTQ TA team).
4. I feel like those teaching for that long have such a valuable experience and are amazing teachers and shouldn't be penalized for **not having a degree**. There should be some sort of test to skip schooling and be accredited a teaching certificate that is the equivalent to a degree so they can get a higher bonus.
5. I think that Rising Stars for ME could have a better online presence. It is really hard to find the right contact information for the specific need that you're looking for. It would be nice to have a **"meet our team behind the scenes making this possible" and have their photo listed with and email and a brief description of what they do** and how they can offer to help us rather than just emailing risingstarsforme@maine.edu and being bounced to someone else.

SUPPORTS

Through this process, referrals to other services were made. Such as:

1. Help Me Grow
2. Workforce Navigator
3. Child Care Expansion Grants
4. Technical Assistance through MRTQ PDN

This is likely to be a continued trend, possibly more so with programs that didn't volunteer for this pilot.

Next Steps

The Office of Child and Family Services is looking forward to feedback from the implementation team on the pilot. Especially regarding feedback from the survey. Next, we will create a process for selecting sites moving forward and create a timeline.

Rising Stars for ME

Maine’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Rising Stars for ME, is a rating system designed to:

- Increase awareness of the basic Standards of Early Care and Education.
- Recognize and support Early Care and Education Programs (Program) providing care above and beyond those Standards; and
- Educate the community about the benefits of higher quality care.

Rising Stars for ME is funded by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Block Grant Program and administered by Maine’s Department of Health and Human Service’s Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS). Rising Stars for ME’s purpose is to recognize Programs that provide quality care, encourage Program Owners to increase their level of quality, and provide parents with identifiable Standards of quality. Applications are reviewed and validated by Amber Taurasi amber.taurasi@maine.gov (207) 557-1593.

Workforce Navigator

Our Workforce Navigator can help you understand the multitude of professional development and educational opportunities available as well as financial resources for full or part-time students. Consider a career in Early Childhood Education and experience the benefits and unlimited potential, while fulfilling a high priority need for Maine’s communities. The Workforce Navigator is Holly Benson and she can be reached at 207-949-2631 or Holly.V.Benson@Maine.gov

Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplement

The Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplement System is funded and administered by Maine’s Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child and Family Services. The purpose of the ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System is to develop and implement a system to provide salary supplements to child care providers and early childhood educators who provide direct services to children in licensed child care programs, incentivize continuing education of the early childhood workforce, and raise the overall quality of care for young children.

Providers need to update staff levels in the [Wage Supplement portal](#).

Payments December 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024:

| Tier | Maine Roads to Quality Registry Level | Amount |
|------|---------------------------------------|--------|
| 1 | Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4 | \$275 |
| 2 | Level 5, Level 6 | \$415 |
| 3 | Level 7, Level 8 | \$625 |

Child Care Affordability Program

The Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) Child Care Affordability Program (CCAP) reimburses CCAP Child Care Licensed Providers at the 75th percentile of the Market Rate Survey per Maine statute. Market Rates are by county, by license type, and by child age. In addition, OCFS has several initiatives tied to CCAP reimbursement adding to the weekly reimbursement providers receive.

- Infant Stipend \$100 per infant receiving CCAP with award of 20+ hours,
- Infant /Toddler 10% Bump,
- QRIS Bump 3 Star -2% bump, 4 Star -5% bump, 5 Star -10% bump,
- Children with documented special needs - additional 35% rate,
- After hours care (6 pm and 6 am) and/or weekends receive - additional 35% rate increase.

To learn more about the CCAP: Email CCAP.DHHS@maine.gov; or go to <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/support-for-families/child-care/paying-forchild-care>;

[Child Care Affordability Flyer for Providers](#)

- Child Care Provider Agreement: [Licensed Child Care Provider Agreement \(PDF\)](#)

Child Care Infrastructure Grant Program

If you were issued a new license or expanded capacity after March 28, 2022, or if you are currently planning to start a new facility or expand your current licensed capacity, you are eligible to receive an award and are encouraged to apply.

Additional information including [eligibility requirements](#), [FAQs](#), and grant applications can be found at: [Maine State Child Care Infrastructure Grant Program - CEI \(ceimaine.org\)](#). Please do not hesitate to reach out to DHHS, CC Infrastructure Grant at CCInfrastructureGrant.DHHS@maine.gov for further information/questions.

Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP®) Expansion & Evaluation

The Maine Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP®) is an infant and early childhood mental health consultation program that addresses the social-emotional needs of children birth to age eight (0-8) by offering support, education, and consultation to the adults who provide care for them.

ECCP® provides strategies, support, and training to improve the capacity of early childhood education and childcare providers as they work with children who have challenging behaviors or social-emotional concerns. ECCP® also incorporates brief consultation to families (including resource families) of children referred for support through the child's early childhood education setting.

For more information, please contact Maine ECCP® Program at eccpprogram.dhhs@maine.gov or (207) 624-7991 or see [Early Childhood Consultation Partnership Website](#).

Help Me Grow Maine

Help Me Grow (HMG) Maine is a free service available statewide for children up to eight (8) years of age, as well as pregnant caregivers. HMG offers free developmental screenings online, over the phone, and at screening events (including at child care settings!).

HMG connects families to information and resources related to child development and other community resources. Any parent/caregiver or provider can call or email for support. The HMG team will listen, make connections to resources, and offer short-term care coordination when needed.

For more information go to: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ocfs/support-for-families/child-development>

Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network

Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) supports early childhood and out-of-school-time professionals in developing the expertise necessary to provide high-quality, inclusive, and culturally responsive care to Maine's children. MRTQ PDN consists of a partnership between the [Cutler Institute](#) at the University of Southern Maine, the [University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies](#), and the [Maine Afterschool Network](#). Services include:

- Maine Roads to Quality Registry
- Core Knowledge Training Program
- Maine Credentials (Infant Toddler, Youth Development, Inclusion, and Director)
- Child Care Leadership Institutes I, II, and III
- Technical Assistance, including the Warm Line, peer-to-peer networks, and on-site consultation
- Statewide Training Calendar: <https://ececaldarmaine.org>
- Search for child care on Child Care Choices: <https://childcarechoices.me>

For questions about training, registry, or for technical assistance, please see <https://www.mrtq.org>

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® MAINE

Funded and supported by OCFS, T.E.A.C.H. collaborates with early childhood educators, higher education institutes, child care centers, and family child care programs to offer scholarships and supports that improve the knowledge and compensation of early childhood educators. In return, young children receive high quality and consistent education from highly qualified educators.

To be eligible, you need to work 30+ hours/week, earn less than \$22/hour; and have the sponsorship of the early care and learning program which employs them. This scholarship program can cover 80-90% of tuition and book expenses, a per semester travel/access stipend, a \$250-600 bonus for scholars who complete their contract, counseling support from a staff member at MaineAEYC, and paid release time from the classroom.

For more info, please see <https://maineaeyc.org/teach>

First4ME

The First4ME Early Care and Education Program is a two-generation, multidimensional framework for a community-based, coordinated birth to kindergarten-entry program providing quality early care to support a child's school readiness.

First4ME aims to: Achieve efficiencies across local and statewide systems to support at-risk children and their families, improve outcomes across all domains of development for increased kindergarten readiness regardless of risk factors, and support providers and early childhood educators in achievement of comprehensive, high-quality early childcare and education across the State of Maine. For more information email Tonya.M.McVay@maine.gov.

Access Maine

Is an online resource guide with information to connect people living in Maine to public programs, services, and other resources that are available to provide support they need to be safe, happy, healthy, and successful. Go to: <https://www.accessmaine.org>

DHHS programs and services

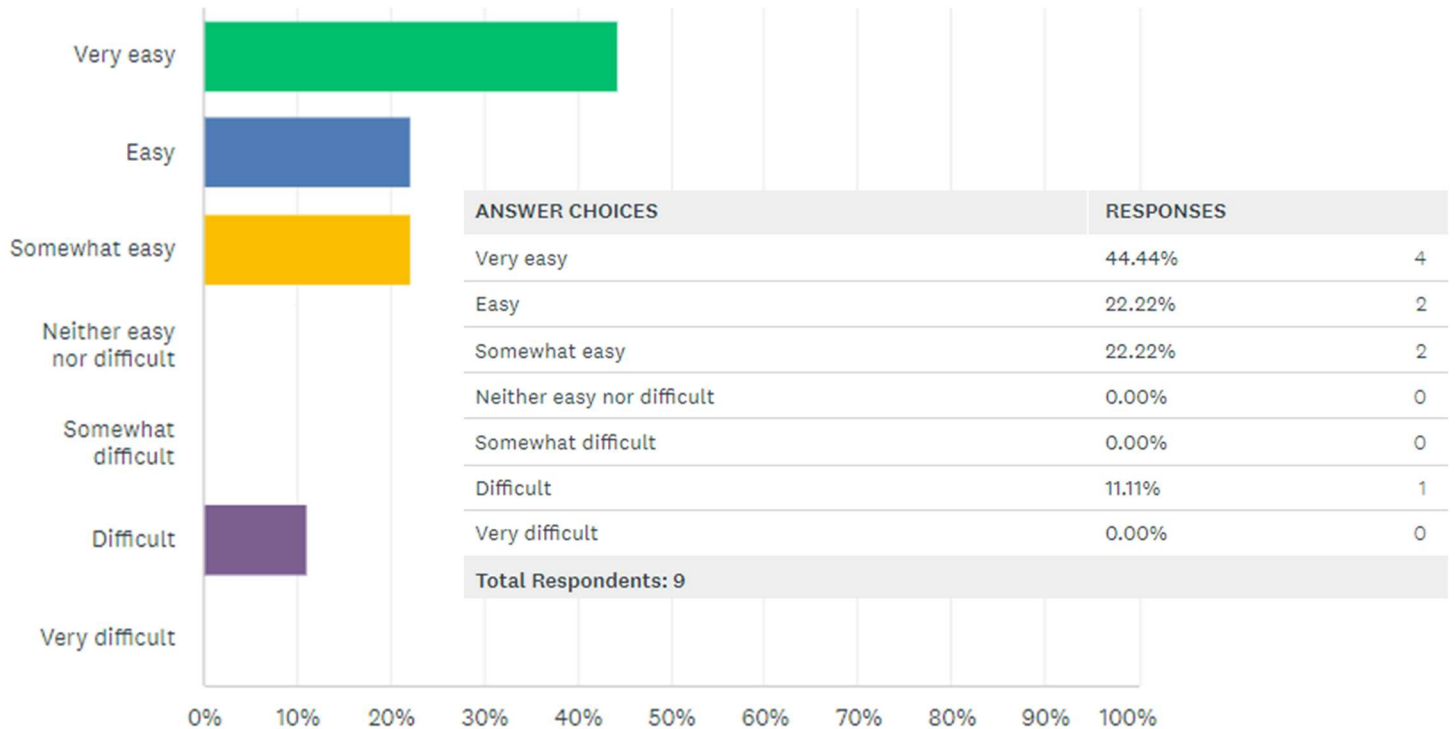
For Information about DHHS benefits to help individuals and families find and receive assistance like financial, food stamps, medical, child care, nutrition, and community services, go to:

<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/programs-services>

- DHHS will assist you to apply for benefits and renew benefits for cash assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (**SNAP**) health care coverage, and home heating assistance (**LIHEAP**). Go to: <https://www1.maine.gov/benefits/account/login.html>
- The Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (**HOPE**) Program: Helps Maine families pursue training and education beyond high school and achieve their career plans by addressing barriers to success. Helps cover costs related to school and provides tools and resources for a short-term training certificate, or an associate or bachelor's degree:
<https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/ofc/hope/>
- Child Care Choices includes steps to choosing safe and healthy child care, high quality child care for a child with special needs, matching your infant's or toddler's style to the right child care setting and more. Go to: <https://www.childcarechoices.me/index.php/resources/>
- **Developmental Monitoring** (watching how your child grows and changes over time) and **Developmental Screening** (a closer look at how your child is developing) is described.
 - Go to: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/screening.html>
- **Maine Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program (WIC)** serves all Maine families with free nutrition advice, tips for staying healthy, and resources for growing families.
 - Go to: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/population-health/wic>

Rising Stars for ME Site Visit Pilot Survey

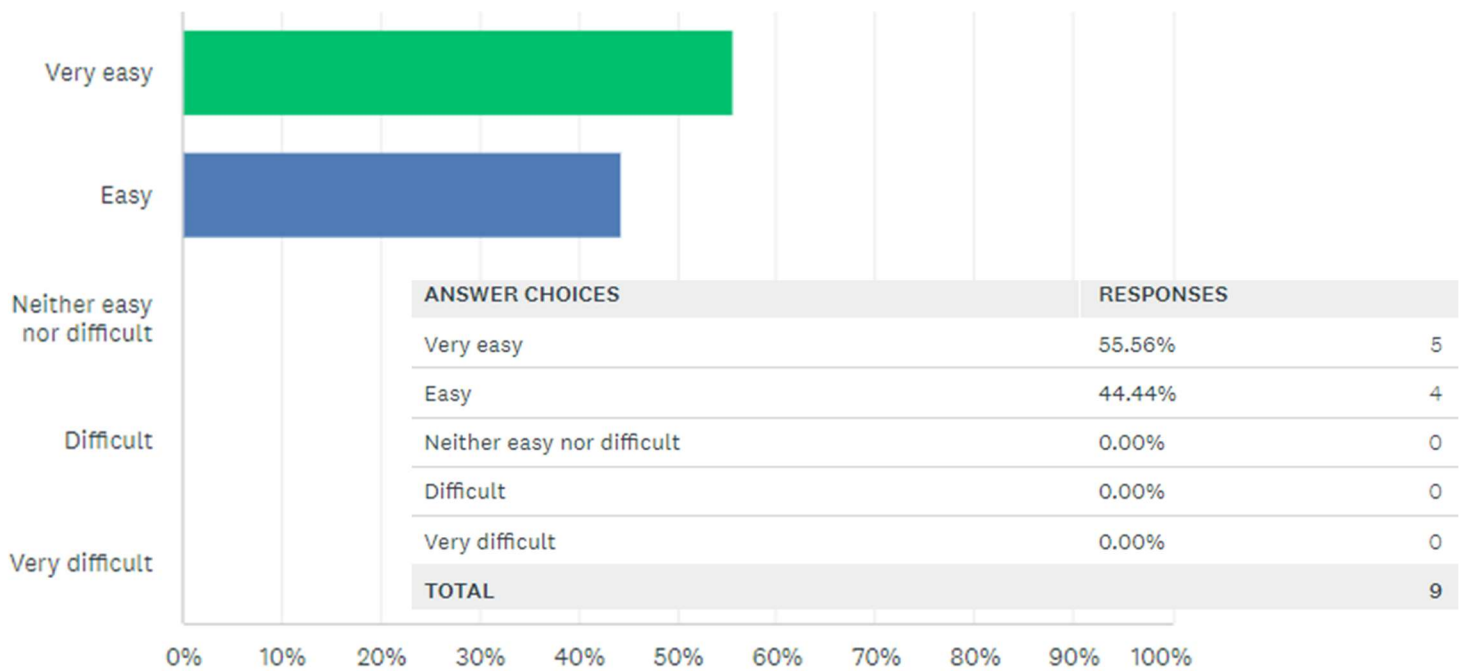
1. How was the online application process?



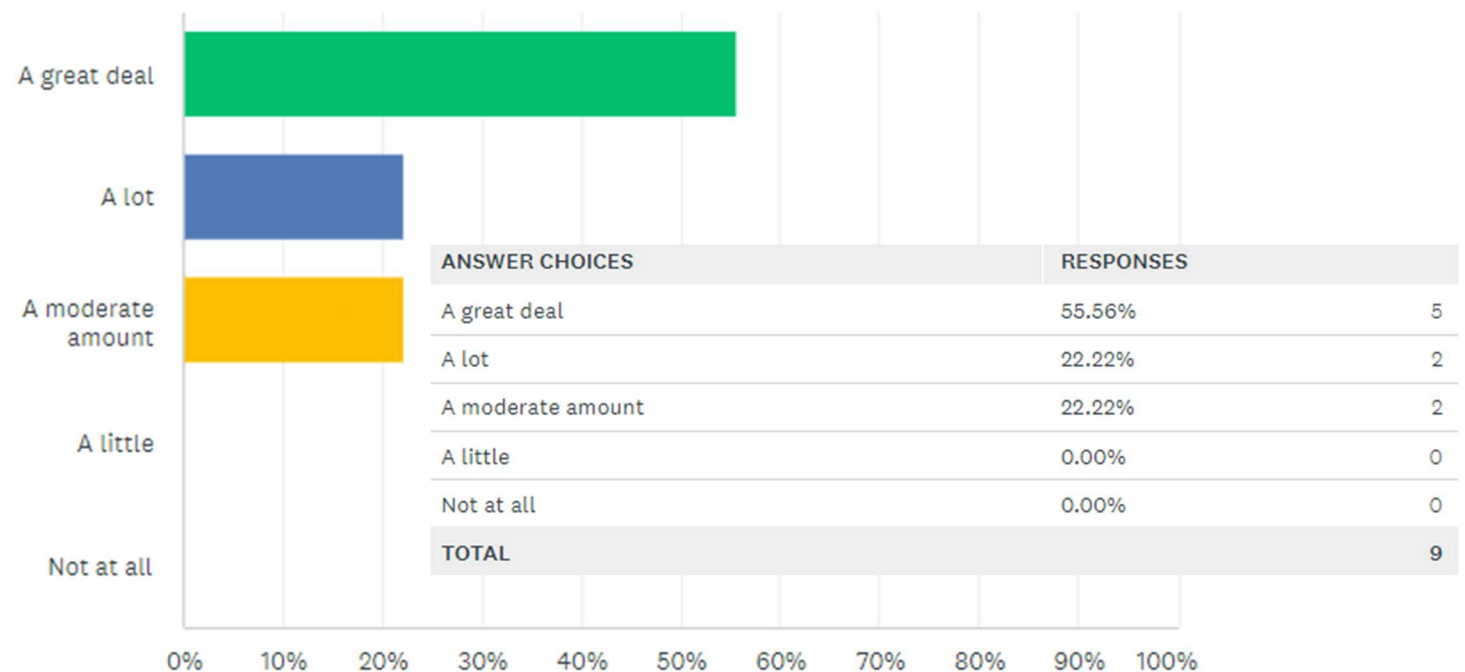
2. Anything that could make it better?

- More options for centers that don't participate in offering meals, or some services that we are downgraded for.
- It would be helpful if there was additional clarification about what needed to be uploaded to rising stars for documentation. For example, a cover sheet with an explanation of how we are meeting the standard vs the entire document.
- Amber was amazing.
- It would be great if we could enter our website rather than uploading documents. That link could include a "see Curriculum Policy", for example, for specific standards.

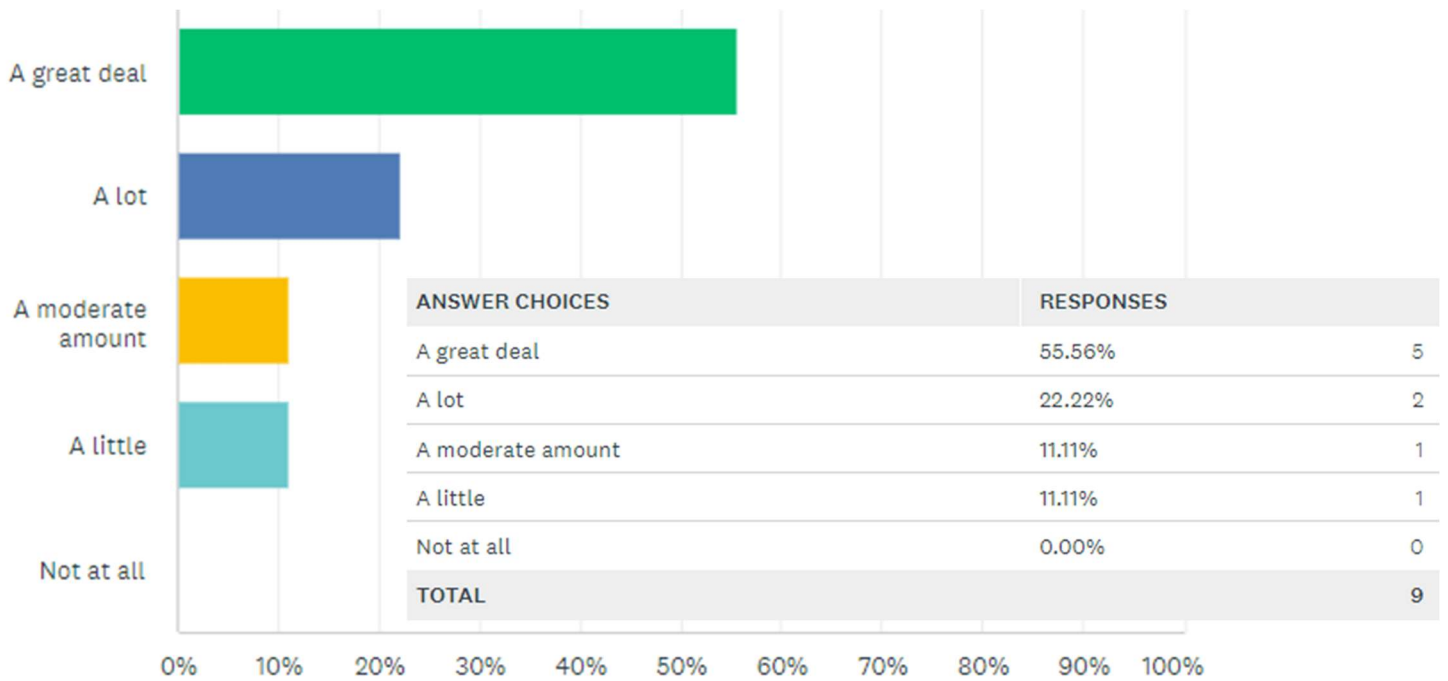
3. How was the initial contact with the Office of Child and Family and Child services and ease of scheduling?



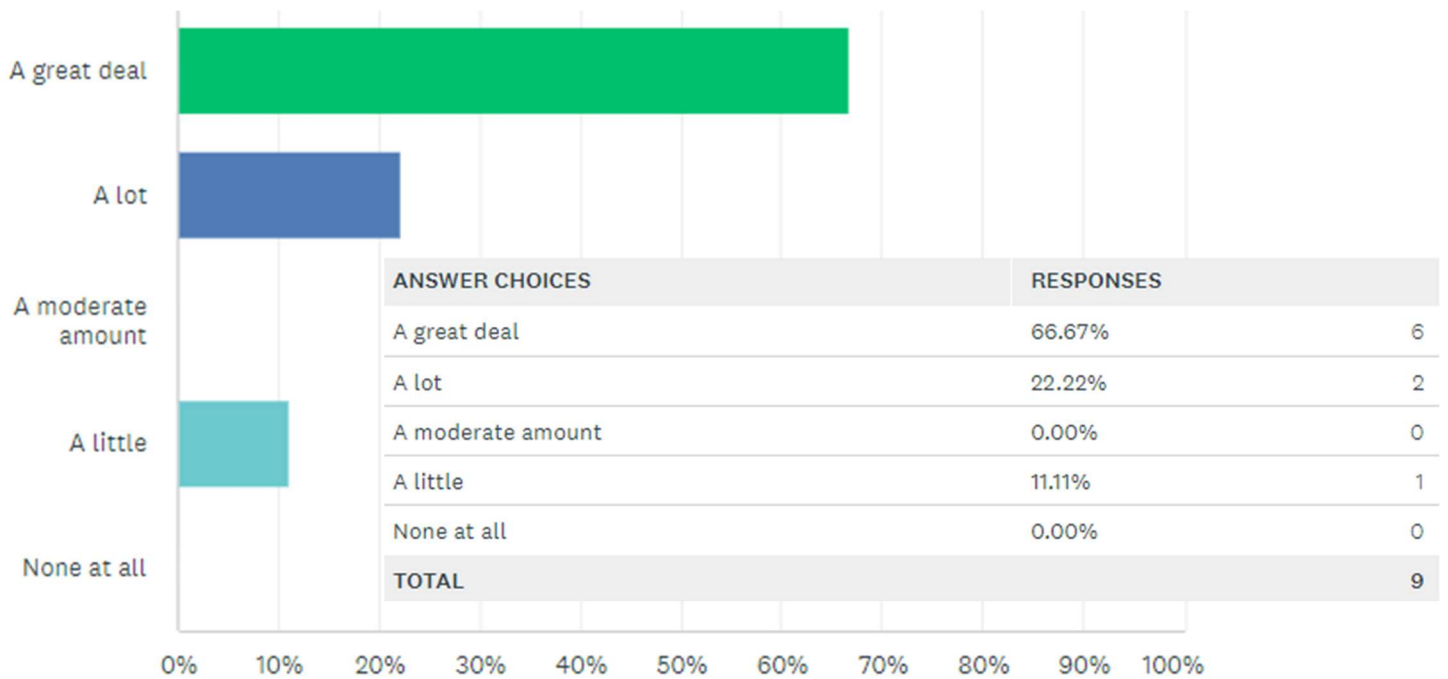
4. Was the post-visit summary letter helpful?



5. Was the list of OCFS services helpful?



6. Did the visit feel individualized to your program?



7. How can OCFS improve the site visit process?

- I think it was absolutely wonderful. Applying to rising stars online is my only issue. Also scanning in so many items that could just all be listed under your application instead of just having everything broken down would be nice.
- The site visit process was very helpful, I appreciated the amount of responsiveness that was given as well as resources to help get more information to the questions asked.
- The site visit was actually really smooth. It would be great to eventually have a process where regions have routine visits with the Rising Stars rep. More contact improves relationships and makes for a less stressful process. I also think that there should be some review or individualization for programs licensed by OCFS for "child care" but are providing special education services because that is the current service model in Maine and not all areas are applicable.
- No suggestions at this point, the visit was very helpful.
- I thought it was something a little different than it was. I thought someone was coming here to observe the school and classrooms and give feedback on the program not just the information I provided on the portal. I was hoping to get feedback on the space, the environment, our curriculum etc.
- Keep the process and expectations consistent.
- I thought the visit was comprehensive and not at all intimidating, which sometimes visits can be.

8. How would you describe your experience with Rising Stars for ME to other child care programs?

- I really enjoy the idea of rising stars, but I don't like the fact that some have been doing this for 15 plus years and they have a lower rating then those with a few years' experience and degree. I feel like those teaching for that long have such a valuable experience and are amazing teachers and shouldn't be penalized for not having a degree. There should be some sort of test to skip schooling and be accredited a teaching certificate that is the equivalent to a degree so they can get a higher bonus.
- I think that Rising Stars for ME could have a better online presence. It is really hard to find the right contact information for the specific need that you're looking for. It would be nice to have a "meet our team behind the scenes making this possible" and have their phot listed with and email and a brief description of what they do and how they can offer to help us rather than just emailing risingstardforme@maine.edu and being bounced to someone else. I am not sure if this is possible but I do think it would be helpful especially for those who are new in childcare or those who are looking to create a space in c child care.

- The Rising Stars for ME process was a bit of an undertaking at first to get all of the documents organized but overall was not difficult.
- Rising Stars has felt daunting to some of our staff and training is hard to access due to lack of internet availability in our rural area located far from any institution of higher education, which limits the ability of staff to raise their star rating.
- I learned a lot about all the new services and opportunities that the OCFS is working on for the field of ECE and that was a relief. I feel more encouraged about the future of ECE and my business.
- The visit was helpful in understanding expectations.
- Very good and staff easy to work with
- I still don't think Rising Stars is a true indicator of quality, but I have been trying to help other providers understand that the process is not as overwhelming as it may seem.