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Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System Pilot

Summary of the Parent Aware Year 1 Evaluation Report

This fact sheet highlights findings from the process evaluation of Parent Aware which examines early implementation activities, successes and challenges encountered from July 2007 through August 2008. Child Trends compiled project documents, participated in implementation meetings and conducted 33 semi-structured interviews with selected stakeholders, including members of the Parent Aware Implementation Team, and staff from early care and education programs, organizations that provide services for parents, and agencies that support early care and education programs.



What is Parent Aware?

Parent Aware is a voluntary quality rating system (QRS) for early care and education programs including licensed family child care programs, child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-K programs. Pilot communities include North Minneapolis, the city of Saint Paul, the Wayzata school district, and Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties.

The primary purpose of Parent Aware is to support parents by providing information about the quality of early care and education programs. Parent Aware uses ratings to recognize quality and promotes quality improvement using a variety of resources. Ultimately, these strategies aimed at parents and early care and education programs seek to improve children's school readiness.

How are ratings assigned to early care and education programs?

Programs provide evidence of their quality in four areas:

- Family Partnerships
- Teaching Materials and Strategies
- Tracking Learning
- Teacher Training and Education

Programs submit documentation and supporting materials for each area. They receive an on-site observation and are scored on nationally-recognized scales that measure their environment, practices and interactions with children.

Accredited child care centers, accredited family child care programs and Head Start programs are awarded a 4-star rating automatically if they demonstrate compliance with licensing and current accreditation status. Provisional ratings assigned by the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education to programs meeting specified criteria are awarded 3 stars in Parent Aware.

How do parents learn about the ratings?

Ratings are posted on the Parent Aware website (www.parentawareratings.org). Parents can search for programs by pilot area. Searches are possible in English, Hmong, Spanish, and Somali. Parents may also call their local child care resource and referral agency to gather information on program ratings.

How is implementation progressing?

As of November 2008, 237 programs had received Parent Aware ratings.

- The majority of rated programs are accredited child care centers (132), Head Start programs (23) and provisionally-rated school-based pre-K programs (43).
- 31 programs have received full ratings.



What has been learned so far about Parent Aware?

- Stakeholders interviewed perceive that Parent Aware has potential to improve the quality of programs and the information available for parents. They expressed concern that supports for programs (to improve quality) and parents (to access high quality programs) must be available for Parent Aware to achieve its goals.
- Stakeholders emphasized the importance of engaging all programs and all families (not just those that are easy to reach) to promote buy-in to the rating system.
- Changes to training and supports for quality improvement have been made by organizations to accommodate Parent Aware, even within organizations that are not direct partners.
- Enrollment in Parent Aware is facilitated by the “automatic” processes available for accredited and Head Start programs as well as through the provisional rating process.



What do we know about programs and families in the Parent Aware pilot areas?¹

- Programs in Parent Aware pilot areas appear better positioned to meet some of the Parent Aware quality indicators (those in the Family Partnerships domain) than others (those that require the use of a research-based curriculum and assessment tool).
- Families in the urban pilot area are significantly more disadvantaged in terms of income than families in the rural pilot area.
- Families in the urban pilot area more likely than families in the rural pilot area to use family, friend and neighbor care, to be racially and ethnically diverse and to speak a language other than English.
- Nearly 40% of families in the urban pilot area do not use the Internet.
- Most families are quite confident in their ability to find and select child care.

Challenges for the Parent Aware Implementation Team include:

- Securing program buy-in to the quality standards and rating process
- Recruiting, enrolling and rating culturally and linguistically diverse programs
- Supporting quality improvements necessary to help programs achieve a higher rating
- Marketing to low-income families who may have financial, geographic, or language barriers to using Parent Aware-rated programs



Next Steps

Child Trends will release another interim evaluation report in December 2009 and a final report in December 2010. Both will examine additional implementation issues and analyze how communities, programs, families and children are changing in response to Parent Aware.

¹ These findings are based on data synthesized from the Minnesota Resource and Referral Network and the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation Baseline Study conducted by Wilder Research.

