

Parent Aware

Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Parent Aware is Minnesota’s voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early care and education (ECE) programs. In 2015, Parent Aware became available statewide after a gradual rollout that began in 2012 with the support of Minnesota’s Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant and quality funds from the Child Care and Development Fund. The primary goal of Parent Aware is to improve young children’s school readiness by helping families “identify programs using the practices that best prepare children for kindergarten” and by providing improvement resources to participating programs.

The Parent Aware evaluation tracks the implementation and outcomes of Parent Aware and is designed to provide research results that inform continuous improvement of the system. The purpose of this Initial Validation Report is to describe the extent to which the Parent Aware rating process is producing ratings that meet interrelated criteria for being fair, accurate, and meaningful.

- QRIS ratings that are *fair* are produced from a reliable, equitable process.
- QRIS ratings that are *accurate* reflect and distinguish the quality of services available to children and families in the program. For example, the environment, interactions and experiences of children and parents in programs with a high rating (at the top level of the QRIS) should be of higher quality – and visibly different – than those in programs with a low rating (at the lowest level of the QRIS).
- QRIS ratings that are *meaningful* measure and promote the elements of quality that link to the outcomes targeted by the QRIS. Because QRIS aim ultimately to support the positive development of young children, meaningful ratings should be comprised of quality indicators that have been shown through research to support children’s language and literacy skills, early math skills, and social-emotional development.

Addressing the question of QRIS validity is a critical step when using ratings for accountability and improvement initiatives. Indeed, the RTT-ELC grant required that state grant recipients conduct an independent validation of their QRIS.

Parent Aware at a Glance

What is Parent Aware?

Parent Aware is Minnesota's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) for early care and education programs. It is available to all licensed child care centers and family child care providers, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, school-based pre-kindergarten programs and Early Childhood Special Education programs.

How do programs receive a rating?

Parent Aware has two rating pathways. Licensed, non-accredited child care centers and family child care providers rated under the *full-rating* pathway submit program documentation in four areas of quality.

- Physical Health and Well-Being
- Teaching and Relationships
- Assessment of Child Progress
- Teacher Training and Education

Reliable raters review documentation and award a One- to Four-Star Rating. Parent Aware requires that programs meet all quality indicators at the One- and Two-Star levels before being able to achieve a Three- or Four-Star Rating. Center-based programs aiming for a Three- or Four-Star Rating receive a preschool classroom observation using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Programs eligible for the full-rating process participate in a rating cohort. Ratings earned under the full-rating process are awarded two times per year: June 30th and December 31st.

A second option for rating is the *Accelerated Pathway to Rating (APR)* process. Accredited child care centers, accredited family child care providers, Head Start, Early Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs are eligible for the APR process and can apply for a Parent Aware rating at any time during the year. Because the quality standards for these programs are aligned with Parent Aware standards, APR programs are eligible for a Four-Star rating after submitting documentation on indicators related to curriculum and assessment.

What is the timeline for statewide expansion of Parent Aware?

As of January 1, 2015, Parent Aware is available statewide. Programs eligible for APR have been eligible to enroll since 2012. For all other types of programs - licensed, non-accredited child care centers and family child care providers - Parent Aware began a gradual rollout in 2012. In 2013, Parent Aware was available to licensed, non-accredited programs in 22 counties and on seven reservations. In 2014, Parent Aware rolled out to an additional 23 Minnesota counties and one additional reservation. Programs in the remaining 42 counties were eligible to participate in 2015.

What supports do programs receive as part of Parent Aware?

Fully-rated programs receive support from a Quality Coach who helps assess quality needs and assists with assembling the documentation needed to apply for a rating. CLASS coaching is also available. Programs eligible for Building Quality (a pre-rating support process) receive \$500 in pre-rating quality improvement supports, additional time to prepare for the rating, and additional coaching time. Programs that earn a One-, Two-, or Three-Star Rating receive up to \$1,000 in post-rating quality improvement supports. After being rated, a program also receives marketing materials to promote the rating.

How do parents learn about Parent Aware Ratings?

When a program earns a Star rating, it is posted at parentaware.org, a statewide search engine. Parents can search for rated (and non-rated) programs in their area using a variety of search criteria.

What information has been learned about Parent Aware?

Evaluation reports have been produced by Child Trends for each year of the statewide expansion. Reports are available at <http://www.pasrmn.org/work/research>.

Initial Validation Findings in Brief

The validation study analyzes multiple sources of evidence including observations of quality in 325 Parent Aware-rated programs and direct assessments of developmental skills in nearly 1,200 children in both the fall and spring of their year before kindergarten. The study was conducted with all program types participating in Parent Aware: licensed family child care programs and child care centers (including those with national accreditation), Head Start programs, and school-based prekindergarten programs. Approximately two-thirds of the children in the study are from low-income families (with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty level).

The findings address the effectiveness of the rating tool overall, the Accelerated Pathway to Rating process offering a Four-Star rating for programs that meet external quality standards aligned with Parent Aware, and the rating process for different program types.

- Results of analyses on observed program quality and children’s development provide positive support for the validity of the Parent Aware ratings in supporting meaningful quality differences that are related to children’s development in expected ways.
- Overall, the Accelerated Pathway to Rating (APR) process appears to function effectively to identify programs that engage in practices to support school readiness, particularly for low-income children. APR Four-Star programs and Three- and Four-Star fully-rated programs both engage in quality practices, according to the observational data and findings on children’s development.
- Prior to receiving their rating, Three- and Four-Star fully rated child care centers are eligible to receive coaching on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a tool that emphasizes the quality of teacher-child interactions. These programs had higher scores on the Instructional Support dimension of the CLASS, a finding which demonstrates the potential benefits of investments in coaching to support improvement in practices that support children’s school readiness.
- Children in Parent Aware-rated programs made gains from fall to spring of their pre-kindergarten year on skills that are critical for their school readiness: math skills, language and literacy skills, social competence, persistence, and executive function. Gains in language and literacy and executive function were greater for children from low-income families than for children from higher-income families, though spring scores for low-income children were still equal to or lower than fall scores for higher-income children.
- Further research is needed to identify gaps and opportunities for strengthening the rating process and incentive structure for family child care programs.

The initial validation study has limitations that should be considered when reviewing the findings. The results of the study are limited to 3- and 4-year old preschool children. Future research should address the experiences of infants and toddlers in Parent Aware-rated programs. In addition, the study was conducted early in Parent Aware statewide implementation (primarily 2013-2015). Enrollment of programs and children in the study reflected program participation in Parent Aware at the time the study was conducted; it is expected that patterns of program participation will change over time and will include a greater proportion of programs in the full-rating pathway.

Overall, the results of the initial validation study suggest that Parent Aware has integrity as a framework for building and connecting efforts to support all types of early care and education programs in Minnesota. The findings can be used to refine the system and to chart a course for the future. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to support continuous improvement and to ensure that Parent Aware is achieving its goals for Minnesota’s children and families.

Background on QRIS Validation

Though state QRIS were first developed in the late 1990's, the growth in new systems was greatest in the last five years (from 22 to 40; QRIS Compendium, 2015). Since 2011, many existing QRIS underwent redesign or revisions in response to new requirements from RTT-ELC (for example, to incorporate quality indicators related to health and to include more early care and education program types such as Head Start and state pre-kindergarten programs). Thus, QRIS are still relatively new as a policy framework for supporting quality improvement in early care and education settings. Research can play an important role in supporting design and revision of QRIS (Tout, 2013).



To date, the limited research on QRIS validation nationally has produced mixed results. A recent literature review that includes findings from the pilot of Parent Aware and 11 other QRIS evaluations indicates that higher scores on the Environment Rating Scales (which measure global quality) are found in programs with higher ratings; however, most of the QRIS include scores from the Environment Rating Scales in the rating which may inflate the results (Karoly, 2014). Among four studies with strong research designs, two documented linkages between children's development and QRIS ratings. Thus, there is a pressing need to build the literature with information about how QRIS ratings are functioning in practice and how ratings are associated with children's development. The current study was conducted in part to fill this gap.

Early care and education researchers have defined QRIS validation as a multi-step process, not a construct that can be addressed fully with only one study or one analysis (Zellman & Fiene, 2012). In Minnesota, we addressed the question of validation through a series of activities launched in parallel with implementation of statewide Parent Aware expansion. Some of the activities are research activities conducted by Child Trends and other activities are conducted by the Statewide Parent Aware Coordination Framework as part of their management of Parent Aware.

- To address whether Parent Aware ratings are fair, Child Trends has analyzed the quality indicators in the rating scale to understand scoring patterns and whether certain indicators are more or less likely to be met by programs.¹ Child Trends has also tracked provider perceptions of Parent Aware and the implications for improving access and enrollment in Parent Aware.² Through analysis of Develop (the data system that supports Parent Aware),³ the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) tracks participation in Parent Aware on a quarterly basis (looking across program type and state geography) and analyzes the extent to which children with high-needs are being served in rated programs. In addition, DHS has developed protocols to assess whether reliability of the rating process is established and maintained over time.
- To address whether Parent Aware ratings are accurate, Child Trends analyzed whether scores on measures of observed quality differ by program ratings.⁴ We also analyzed whether accuracy of the ratings differs by the rating pathway programs use to enter Parent Aware (the full-rating or the Accelerated Pathway to Rating).

¹ For more information, see the Year 2 and Year 3 reports conducted by the Parent Aware Evaluation team (available at <http://www.pasrmn.org/work/research>). Findings were also shared in an internal memo submitted to the Department of Human Services.

² For more information, see the provider perception reports (available at <http://www.pasrmn.org/work/research>).

³ Information about Develop is available at: <http://www.developoolmn.org/>. In addition, see the Year 3 Parent Aware Evaluation Report for details: <http://tinyurl.com/nw2qc8z>.

⁴ Due to the unequal distribution of Parent Aware-rated programs across each of the four rating levels, One- and Two-Star rated program data were collapsed to comprise the "lower quality" group. Three- and Four-Star rated program data were collapsed to comprise the "higher quality" group.

- To address whether Parent Aware ratings are meaningful, Child Trends and DHS conducted an evidence review to document the research base supporting each quality indicator.⁵ In addition, Child Trends conducted extensive data collection and analysis to examine how Parent Aware ratings are related to measures of children’s development, including their language and literacy skills, math skills, and socio-emotional development. Because a Parent Aware rating is intended to identify early care and education programs that are effectively supporting children’s development, especially those children with risk factors that make them vulnerable to poor school outcomes, the analyses also consider the developmental progress of children from low-income families.

A QRIS validation process considers multiple sources of evidence and does not produce a yes/no designation of validity (Zellman & Fiene, 2012). In Minnesota, the Parent Aware validation process has been conducted with the input of Parent Aware stakeholders and a Technical Expert Panel to produce information that can contribute to continuous improvement of Parent Aware.

Table ES1 provides an overview of validation questions, sources of evidence, hypotheses, and key findings from the validation study.

Table ES1. Parent Aware validation questions, sources of evidence, hypotheses and validation findings

| Key Questions for Validation of Parent Aware | Source of Evidence | Hypothesis | Key Findings |
|---|--|--|--|
| Are the Parent Aware quality indicators consistent with the evidence base on early care and education program quality? | Evidence review ¹ | The Parent Aware quality indicators are based on research and best practice according to professional guidelines. | Yes. The evidence base for the Parent Aware indicators is solid, particularly for quality indicators supporting teacher-child interaction and the implementation of curriculum and assessment practices. Support for indicators related to specific training content is less strong. |
| Do programs seeking full ratings gain points on Parent Aware indicators in expected ways (i.e., showing that they are working on quality indicators across different aspects of quality)? | Analysis of indicators ² Provider reports of goal ratings ³ | Programs achieve points in each of the quality areas (Physical Health and Well-Being, Teaching and Relationships, Assessment of Child Progress, and Teacher Training and Education) to work toward a Four-Star rating. | No. Programs are selective in the goal ratings they set and the indicators they pursue for a Parent Aware rating. Programs may set a lower goal rating than they could otherwise achieve because they want to work through each level of Parent Aware incrementally, either to provide feasible, attainable goals for their program or to access the maximum amount of quality improvement grants. The implication of this finding is that the lower rating levels of Parent Aware are likely to have greater variation in quality than the higher levels. This variation is expected to diminish over time. Indicators related to assessment and the director’s credential are the most likely to be unmet or undocumented (meaning that a program did not attempt to be verified on those indicators). Programs are most likely to achieve all points on the Physical Health and Well-Being indicators. |

⁵ The evidence review is an unpublished document that was developed to provide support for internal discussions and decision-making.

| Key Questions for Validation of Parent Aware | Source of Evidence | Hypothesis | Key Findings |
|--|---|---|---|
| Do aspects of observed quality differ in programs with higher ratings? | Observations of program quality | Scores on measures of global quality, teacher-child interactions and practices related to math, literacy, and individualized teaching will be higher in programs with higher ratings. | <p>Yes. Observed quality differs in center-based programs⁴ with higher ratings. Global quality scores were higher, and specific practices related to math, literacy, and individualized teaching occurred more frequently in higher-rated programs than in lower-rated programs.</p> <p>No differences in observed quality were found for family child care programs at higher and lower quality levels.</p> |
| Do measures of observed quality relate in predicted ways to patterns of children's development? | Observations of program quality and assessments of children's development | Observed quality scores will also be associated positively with children's developmental growth. | <p>Yes, on select measures. Measures of global quality were related to language development of low-income children. Specific literacy practices were related to gains in expressive vocabulary and social competence. CLASS instructional support was related to gains in executive function. Each of these quality practices was observed to be occurring at higher levels in programs with higher ratings.</p> |
| Do patterns of children's developmental gains from fall to spring in the year before Kindergarten align with Parent Aware ratings? | Assessments of children's development | Children in programs with higher ratings will show greater gains in developmental skills than children in programs with lower ratings. | <p>Yes. Children attending higher-rated programs made greater gains from fall to spring of their pre-kindergarten year on social competence and attention/persistence, a measure of children's approach to learning. In addition, low-income children attending higher-rated programs made greater gains on a measure of literacy (print knowledge) and social competence. Though findings linking children's development and Parent Aware ratings were not pervasive across every outcome examined, associations in the expected direction were noted on three of the five developmental domains examined (language and literacy, social-emotional development, and approaches to learning).</p> |

| Key Questions for Validation of Parent Aware | Source of Evidence | Hypothesis | Key Findings |
|---|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Do patterns of findings with observed quality and children's development look similar for programs with a Three- or Four-Star full-rating and programs with an Accelerated Pathway to Rating? | Rating data, by pathway status | Associations with observed quality and children's development will look similar for programs, regardless of rating pathway. | The findings were mixed. Differences by rating Pathway were observed. On balance however, the differences were not systematic and indicate that the APR process is producing ratings that are functionally equivalent to full-ratings. CLASS Instructional Support scores are higher in Three- and Four-Star rated programs than in other fully-rated and APR programs, except Head Start. School-based programs and Head Start programs had significantly higher scores than other programs on specific literacy and math practices. Thus, some findings favor fully-rated programs and others favor APR programs. |

Source: Child Trends' analysis

Key Findings and Implications

Patterns of Children's Development

The Parent Aware validation study offers a unique opportunity to observe patterns of development in a large sample of children from across Minnesota. Though the sample was not designed to be representative of all children, it includes children from a variety of early care and education programs and a high proportion of children from low-income families. Both sample features are important for informing policy decisions about Minnesota's early care and education system.

The analysis focused on the extent to which children showed improvements over time on developmentally appropriate assessments of their skills. This strategy acknowledges that children have different starting points and thus may grow and change on the assessments at different rates. For children who start behind their peers, it is helpful to track whether they are able to make up ground and approach national averages on assessments during the course of the year before kindergarten.



Key findings about child development include:

- Children in Parent Aware-rated programs made gains from fall to spring of their pre-kindergarten year on skills that are critical for their school readiness: math skills, language and literacy skills, social competence, persistence, and executive function. Gains in language and literacy and executive function were greater for children from low-income families than for children from higher-income families, though spring scores for low-income children were still equal to or lower than fall scores for higher-income children.

- Low-income children scored significantly lower on a composite measure of basic concepts such as understanding of color, size, and counting (administered in the spring only). Low-income children also were more likely to be either over- or under-weight than the sample of children from higher-income families.

The findings on children’s development are both encouraging and a source of concern. Even though the time between fall and spring assessments is quite short, children in Parent Aware programs are making significant gains on key skills. Across the sample, children from low- and higher-income families are at or above the national averages on measures of math and language skills. The gap in assessment scores by family income, however, is of concern, and the results of the basic concepts screener and weight category screener indicate that greater supports are needed for children from low-income families. Parent Aware can be used as a foundation for providing additional resources to Parent Aware programs serving low-income children. These supports may include training and coaching that promotes more effective individualizing of instruction and interactions. In addition, supports for children’s health and development may be enhanced through sustained coordination with Child Care Health Consultants (a service which is available currently through RTT-ELC grant funds).

Observed Quality in Parent Aware Rated Programs

Ratings that are *accurate* reflect and distinguish the quality of services available to children and families in the program. For the Parent Aware validation analyses, we hypothesized that the learning environment, interactions, and experiences of children in programs with a high rating would look different from those in programs with a low rating.

Key findings about observed quality include:

- On four of the seven measures of observed quality examined, center-based programs with higher Star ratings– those with Three- and Four-Star ratings – demonstrated higher scores than programs with lower ratings– those with One- and Two-Star ratings. The differences were noted on a measure of global quality (the ECERS-R, which includes the learning environment and provisions for children’s daily routines and activities) and measures of specific practices to support children’s math, literacy, and individualized learning (the ECERS-E). No differences between rating levels were found on the CLASS domains which assess the quality of teacher-child interactions. These findings provide initial support for the validity of the ratings. We conclude that Parent Aware is functioning to differentiate quality in center-based programs. At this early stage of implementation, major changes to the process for determining ratings levels are not warranted by the validation findings for center-based programs, though the magnitude of observed quality differences is small.
- No differences between programs by Star rating level were noted for family child care programs on the four measures we examined. The measures include a global quality measure (the FCCERS-R, which is similar to the ECERS-R but is tailored for family child care programs and measures the learning environment and provisions for children’s routines and activities) and the measures of specific practices to support math, literacy, and individualized learning (the ECERS-E).

A number of explanations are possible for the lack of differentiation among quality levels for family child care programs. First, the sample sizes for family child care programs in the evaluation were lower than desired. It is possible that the sample represented a select group of family child care programs that was willing to participate in the evaluation, but was not necessarily representative of other family child care programs in Parent Aware (among which a greater diversity of observed quality may have been evident). Alternatively, evidence from other evaluation activities (including analyses of provider perceptions of Parent Aware; see Child Trends, 2014) suggests that family child care providers may have chosen to work incrementally through the Parent Aware rating levels, even though they may have been able to achieve a higher Star rating. They may have wanted to access the financial incentives associated with achieving each rating level, or they may have chosen to set goals that could be met more feasibly within the rating timeframe (rather than tackle the multiple indicators at the highest rating level). In either scenario,

we would expect to see less differentiation across the quality levels since the group with lower ratings includes those who are able to meet higher quality indicators, but are choosing instead to work through the rating process at a slower pace. Over time, the quality levels may be more differentiated as those programs move to higher Parent Aware levels.

Even with plausible explanations for the lack of differentiation among family child care quality levels, it is important to consider options for strengthening Parent Aware ratings for family child care programs. These strategies could include collection of on-site observations, similar to the rating process used for child care centers seeking a Three- or Four-Star rating. However, given the cost of implementing observations in family child care programs as part of the rating process,⁶ a field test could be conducted first to examine the effectiveness of different options and measures. The availability of measures to capture quality in family child care programs is limited. It will be useful to confer with other states and review the results of forthcoming validation studies to learn about the functioning of different measures in family child care programs. Some states are using the FCCERS-S in family child care programs while others (Oregon, for example) are using a modified CLASS protocol (which is typically used only in center-based programs) in family child care programs. Different sources of evidence could be examined to inform this important decision.

Linkages between Ratings, Observed Quality and Children’s Development

Ratings that are *meaningful* measure and promote the elements of quality that link to the outcomes targeted by the QRIS. Because Parent Aware aims ultimately to support the positive development of young children, it is important to examine whether and how ratings – and the quality promoted by the ratings – are associated with children’s developmental outcomes.

Key findings about ratings, observed quality and children’s development include:

- Children attending higher-rated programs made greater gains from fall to spring of their pre-kindergarten year on social competence and attention/persistence, a measure of children’s approach to learning. In addition, low-income children attending higher-rated programs made greater gains on a measure of literacy (print knowledge) and social competence. Though findings linking children’s development and Parent Aware ratings were not pervasive across every outcome examined, associations in the expected direction were noted on three of the five developmental domains examined (language and literacy, social-emotional development, and approaches to learning).
- Further exploration of observed quality and children’s development indicated positive associations though we note that there were relatively few significant findings given the number of models tested. The following associations were noted:
 - CLASS Instructional Support was associated with growth on executive function.
 - Global quality scores in center-based programs (ECERS-R) were associated with gains on language skills (print knowledge and phonological awareness) for low-income children. And, higher rated programs scored higher on the ECERS-R than lower rated programs.
 - ECERS-E literacy practices were related to gains in expressive vocabulary. And higher rated programs had higher ECERS-E literacy scores than lower rated programs.



⁶ For details about cost estimates, see The Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System: Increasing Accessibility for Families and Early Care and Education Programs (pages 28-29) available at: https://mn.gov/dhs/images/Parent_Aware_Accessibility_Report.pdf

- Thus, while the models examining ratings and child development showed only one linkage in the domain of language and literacy development (with low-income children gaining more on print knowledge in higher quality programs), the analysis of observed quality provides initial indications that practices engaged in by programs at higher rating levels were positively associated with all three measures of children’s language development.

Taken together, the findings provide positive, initial support for the validity of the Parent Aware ratings in supporting meaningful quality differences that are related to children’s development in expected ways.

Parent Aware Rating Pathways

Ratings that are *fair* are produced from a reliable, equitable process. Because Parent Aware provides two enrollment pathways for programs, it is important to examine the extent to which these pathways are producing ratings that are functionally equivalent. Licensed, non-accredited child care centers and family child care programs enroll in the full-rating pathway and receive a One- to Four-Star rating. Accredited programs, Head Start/Early Head Start programs and school-based pre-kindergarten programs are eligible to enroll in the Accelerated Pathway to Ratings (APR) process that has fewer quality indicators and does not include an on-site observation. The APR process results in a Four-Star rating. The validation study examined observed quality and children’s development by rating pathway.

The analyses presented by rating pathway (for center-based programs) provide important insights into similarities and differences between programs and have implications for assessing the effectiveness of the APR process.

Key findings on rating pathways include:

- On global quality, Three- and Four-Star fully-rated programs and APR programs had nearly identical scores, and both scored higher than One- and Two-Star rated programs on the ECERS-R. This finding on global quality held when APR programs were analyzed by program type (accredited center-based programs, Head Start and school-based pre-kindergarten programs).
- On the other aspects of observed quality, differences emerged among higher rated programs with full-ratings and APR ratings. Three and Four-Star rated child care centers program had higher scores on Instructional Support than all other program types except Head Start. Notably, Three- and Four-Star fully-rated child care centers and Head Start programs are likely more knowledgeable about the CLASS tool than other program types because it is part of their program requirements: Fully-rated Three- and Four-Star centers receive a CLASS observation and CLASS coaching as part of the Parent Aware rating process while Head Start programs learn about the CLASS because of its role in the Head Start Designation Renewal process. From the perspective of the early care and education system, it makes sense that these programs are distinct from others on their CLASS Instructional Support scores (though note that Head Start scores were not significantly higher than One- and Two-Star programs or any other APR program type). Accredited programs and school-based pre-kindergarten programs did not score higher on the CLASS domains than One- and Two-Star rated programs.
- On Planning for Children’s Individualized Needs, APR programs and Three- and Four-Star fully-rated programs scored higher than One- and Two-Star programs. On Literacy and Math practices, APR programs overall had higher scores than One- and Two-Star rated programs and Three- and Four-Star rated programs. Head Start and school-based programs had significantly higher scores on literacy and math than other program types, and Head Start scored higher than other program types on planning for individualized needs.
- The findings on children’s development and rating pathways clarified and extended the findings on ratings and children’s development. For example, the models revealed that gains in children’s social competence are associated with their participation in APR programs, especially Head Start

and school based programs. Language and literacy gains across all three measures examined were associated with participation in Head Start programs.

Overall, the Accelerated Pathway to Rating appears to function effectively to identify programs that engage in practices to support school readiness, particularly for low-income children. APR programs and Three- and Four-Star rated programs both have strengths, according to the observational data and findings on children's development. On balance, the differences between rating pathways are not systematic; on some measures, the differences favor APR programs, and on other measures the differences favor fully-rated programs. The differences noted by program type across the APR programs suggest that there are strengths in Head Start and school-based pre-kindergarten programs compared to accredited centers and Three-Star and Four-Star rated centers. These differences, however, are not of sufficient magnitude to indicate that different tiers of quality exist within APR programs. For example, the average scores on the quality measures examined in this study – even when programs are examined by rating level – are not in the highest range for the measures identified by the developers (scores above a 5 on the ECERS-R and ECERS-E, and scores above a 3 on the CLASS Instructional Support domain). If the measures were used in professional development efforts and incorporated more fully into the early care and education system as quality improvement tools, scores may improve over time.

Similarly, the findings do not indicate that APR programs would be differentiated more successfully by requiring a full-rating process with the current set of Parent Aware indicators. If specific strategies were put in place to address and improve quality in APR programs or to target different quality practices, it may make sense to incorporate a rating process that is not “accelerated” and that could potentially capture resulting quality differences among APR programs (perhaps identifying programs that exceed the requirements at the highest rating level). However, without targeted quality improvement approaches in place for APR programs or new Parent Aware rating criteria specifying advanced practices and interactions (such as the literacy, math and individualized teaching practices observed in this study), the investment in additional rating criteria for these programs may not be warranted.

The findings do indicate that across all quality levels, program types and rating pathways, programs in Parent Aware, including those that have achieved a Three- or Four-Star full-rating and APR programs, could benefit from quality improvement efforts. In particular, average scores on Instructional Support, specific math and literacy practices and planning for individualized needs are in the low range (though they are consistent with the scores documented in other national studies). Investments in improvement strategies to strengthen these practices could support changes in practices that are likely to bolster children's development.

Coaching to help teachers and caregivers improve their practices with children is a promising quality improvement strategy to promote in Parent Aware. The validation study provides evidence to suggest that the CLASS coaching received by center-based programs seeking a Three- or Four-Star rating is supporting higher scores on CLASS Instructional Support. CLASS coaching is not provided to family child care programs or to programs in the APR pathway. Expanding CLASS coaching to these programs may be valuable, even if CLASS scores are not included in their rating. CLASS coaching (or other coaching to support teaching practices) could be made available to programs as part of a continuous quality improvement process through which programs develop improvement plans and action steps that are supported by coaches and/or participation in training but are not included in the rating process.

Limitations of the Validation Study

In reviewing the validation results in this report, it is important to consider the context of Parent Aware implementation from the fall of 2013 through the summer of 2015 when the bulk of data collection occurred for the analyses presented. At that time, Parent Aware was in its second and third year of statewide expansion. Implementation research conducted for the Year 1 and Year 2 evaluation reports indicates that Parent Aware policies, procedures and rating processes were still being refined (Tout et al, 2013). Thus, minor inconsistencies in the rating process are likely and may indicate that ratings in the early years of Parent Aware are less reliable than those being issued later when policies and procedures became more standardized. These potential concerns should be factored in when interpreting the results.



In addition, the analyses in this report focus on the experiences of children in the year before they enter kindergarten. Though Parent Aware is open to programs serving children beginning at birth, resource limitations for the validation study did not permit inclusion of infants and toddlers. Future work should focus on addressing the extent to which the Parent Aware ratings are capturing the features of quality that support the positive development of infants and toddlers. Similarly, children with special needs and children who could not be assessed using tools administered in English⁷ are not included in the study. Efforts to understand the experience of these children in Parent Aware programs should be included in future research.

In addition, sample sizes were limited for certain types of programs. In particular, the sample size of fully-rated family child care programs is relatively small compared to the number of programs included in the APR sample. Though these numbers represented the distribution of programs in Parent Aware during the time of recruitment for the evaluation, family child programs in 2015 are the most rapidly growing program type in Parent Aware. If resources are available to support further evaluation, it will be important to conduct additional observations in family child care programs that represent the full range of programs now rated in Parent Aware.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of the validation study suggest that Parent Aware has integrity as a framework for building and connecting efforts to support all types of early care and education programs in Minnesota. The findings can be used to refine the system and to chart a course for the future. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation should be conducted to support continuous improvement and to ensure that Parent Aware is achieving its goals for Minnesota's children and families.

Footnotes

- ¹ The evidence review was conducted collaboratively by Child Trends and the Minnesota Department of Human Services. It is an unpublished document intended to support decision-making.
- ² The indicator analysis was conducted in a separate report and is not included in detail here. Further information is available in the Year 2 and Year 3 reports conducted by the Parent Aware Evaluation team (available at <http://www.pasrmn.org/work/research>).
- ³ See Year 2 Provider perception report available at: <http://www.pasrmn.org/work/research>.
- ⁴ "Center-based programs" is a general term to refer to child care centers, Head Start programs and school-based prekindergarten programs.

⁷ Fewer than 20 of the recruited children were not assessed in this study because of low English proficiency. However, we anticipate that greater numbers of children speaking languages other than English will participate in Parent Aware-rated programs over time and should be included in evaluation efforts.