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Evaluation of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System Pilot

**Year 1 Evaluation Report
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 3 |
| INTRODUCTION | 4 |
| THE PARENT AWARE PILOT – PROGRAM DETAILS | 5 |
| Quality Standards | 6 |
| Rating and Monitoring | 7 |
| Quality Improvement..... | 9 |
| Financial Incentives..... | 10 |
| Dissemination of Ratings | 10 |
| Analysis of Parent Aware in relation to other QRSs..... | 10 |
| EVALUATION FINDINGS: PERSPECTIVES OF PARENT AWARE STAKEHOLDERS | 12 |
| The Potential of Parent Aware: Stakeholders’ Hopes and Concerns | 13 |
| Improving Quality | 16 |
| Improving Resources for Parents | 17 |
| Factors Important to the Success of Parent Aware..... | 18 |
| Response to Parent Aware by Organizations that Support Early Care and Education Programs and Providers..... | 19 |
| EVALUATION FINDINGS: EARLY IMPLEMENTATION | 20 |
| Program Enrollment and Ratings | 20 |
| Recruitment | 22 |
| Promotion and Marketing..... | 23 |
| The Rating Process | 24 |
| On-site Observations | 24 |
| Provision of Quality Improvement Resources | 26 |
| PUTTING PARENT AWARE IN CONTEXT | 28 |
| Type of Care | 29 |
| Weekly Rates..... | 30 |
| Vacancy Rates | 31 |
| Children Using the Child Care Assistance Program | 32 |
| Indicators of Quality in Early Care and Education Programs | 33 |
| Characteristics of Families in the Parent Aware Pilot Areas | 39 |
| SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS..... | 44 |
| REFERENCES | 46 |
| APPENDIX | 48 |

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INTRODUCTION

Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating System (QRS) – Parent Aware – was launched in July, 2007. The primary purpose of Parent Aware is to support parents by providing information about the quality of early care and education programs. Parent Aware also uses ratings to recognize the quality of early care and education programs and promotes quality improvement using a variety of resources. Together, these strategies aimed at parents and early care and education programs target an ultimate goal of improving children's school readiness. The purpose of this report is to describe the first year of implementation of Parent Aware and the perceptions of key stakeholders about the potential of Parent Aware to achieve its goals. In addition to a summary of key implementation activities and description of stakeholders' hopes, concerns and early observations about Parent Aware, the report also outlines a set of indicators that can be tracked over time to gauge the effects of Parent Aware on communities, individual early care and education programs, and families and children.

This report is the first to be produced from the Evaluation of Parent Aware being conducted by Child Trends and funded by the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF). It covers the first year of the program from July, 2007 through August, 2008¹, and is part of the *process* evaluation of the program. Two future reports are planned for December, 2009 and December, 2010 to provide further findings from the process evaluation as well as findings from outcomes evaluation (which will examine outcomes for children, families, programs and communities).

The report includes four sections. In the first section, we describe Parent Aware and provide a comparative analysis of its core components with other QRSs from across the nation.² This section was generated from a review of program documents and data (both internal and publicly available), participation in implementation meetings, interviews with the Parent Aware Implementation Team³, and a review of the existing QRS literature. In the second section, we describe evaluation findings from (1) the feedback obtained from interviews with selected Parent Aware stakeholders regarding their perceptions about the program and its successes and challenges to date; and (2) analysis of findings about early implementation of Parent Aware including program enrollment, recruitment, promotion and marketing, the rating process, on-site observations, and the provision of quality improvement resources and consultation. In the third section, we synthesize data about the Parent Aware communities – including information about the early care and education market, program characteristics, and family characteristics – to provide context for the Evaluation and indicators that can be examined at the end of the pilot period. We conclude by looking across the information summarized in the report and providing a description of the next steps that will be taken in the evaluation.

¹ Data from November and December, 2008, are included in the chart on Program Ratings and in the description of web analytics.

² A number of states and publications use the term Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The term QRS will be used throughout this report since it is more inclusive.

³ The Parent Aware Implementation Team is comprised of staff from agencies and organizations directly responsible for the day-to-day operation of the program. The Implementation Team includes staff from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Minnesota Resource and Referral Network, and the Assessment and Training Center at the University of Minnesota.

THE PARENT AWARE PILOT – PROGRAM DETAILS

Parent Aware is a Quality Rating System (QRS) that was initiated concurrently with the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship program as a mechanism for helping parents identify early care and education meeting high quality standards. It is a voluntary rating system open to licensed family child care programs (accredited or non-accredited) and center-based programs, including non-accredited community child care centers, accredited child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-K programs.

Parent Aware is being implemented in four Minnesota communities/areas including North Minneapolis (urban), St. Paul (urban), the Wayzata school district (suburban) and Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties (rural). These communities were selected because they represent urban, suburban, and rural areas and because the MELF initiatives could dovetail with other early childhood initiatives being implemented in these areas. MELF is working with the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network, the Center for Early Education and Development, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and the Minnesota Department of Education to implement Parent Aware.

Across the nation, QRSs are a relatively new strategy being used by states to identify and promote quality improvement in early childhood and school-age programs by establishing standards of quality for programs; offering resources, incentives and assistance to programs to meet and maintain higher levels of quality; and informing parents about the quality of early care and education options. The first QRS was launched in Oklahoma 10 years ago (1998) and since then, 21 additional states have developed statewide or a pilot QRS.

QRSs are distinguished by five common components. While the details of these components vary considerably between different QRSs, the core purpose of the components is similar. As described in various publications (Child Care Bureau, 2007; Mitchell, 2005; Zellman & Perlman, 2008), they each contain:

- ❑ **Quality standards** that provide the basis for a program's rating. Standards are usually articulated for: professional development, education or training of the administrators and teachers/caregivers; the learning environment; and parent/family involvement.
- ❑ A process for **rating and monitoring** program quality. A QRS uses a variety of tools to rate and monitor quality including observation, document review, and self report. It also sets guidelines for the frequency of program assessments and uses methods to ensure integrity of the assessment process.
- ❑ A process for supporting programs in **quality improvement**. A QRS either provides staff and other resources to assist with improvement efforts or it provides a connection to quality improvement services provided by another organization.
- ❑ **Financial incentives** to promote participation in a QRS. These incentives include tiered reimbursement, grants, scholarships and awards for programs meeting certain requirements.

- **Dissemination of ratings** to parents and other consumers. A QRS uses websites and other materials to inform parents about the quality levels and provides information about the quality of individual programs.

Below, we use this five-part rubric to describe the details of Parent Aware. Before describing these details, however, it is important to describe the three different tracks that programs can take to achieve a Parent Aware rating. Further details about these ratings can be found in the Parent Aware Manual (produced and updated by the Department of Human Services).

Full Rating. Licensed child care centers, preschools and family child care programs that are not accredited can apply for a full rating in Parent Aware (see process described below). Documentation is required for each of the Parent Aware quality standards, an on-site observation is conducted, and curriculum and assessment tools must be approved by the Department of Human Services. A rating of 1 to 4 stars is possible in the full rating track.

Automatic Rating. Programs (child care centers, preschools and family child care programs) accredited by an approved accredited body and Head Start/Early Head Start programs that are in compliance with the Program Review Instrument for Systems Monitoring (PRISM) can apply for an automatic 4-star rating in Parent Aware (see process described below).

Provisional Rating. Programs that are not accredited or Head Start programs and do not have a full Parent Aware rating may apply for a provisional rating through the Minnesota Department of Human Services or Education. Parent Aware displays these provisional ratings as 3 stars. Authority for the provisional ratings was included in legislation passed in 2007 establishing the Pre-Kindergarten Exploratory Allowance project (referred to as the “State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances” in this report). Parent Aware programs with a 3- or 4-star rating are eligible to receive the State-funded Allowances. In addition, programs with a provisional rating can receive Allowances. Licensed child care centers, preschools, and family child care programs can apply for a provisional rating designated by the Department of Human Services. School-based pre-K programs may apply for provisional approval from the Minnesota Department of Education. If a provisional rating is granted, the program appears on the Parent Aware website with three stars (denoted in green to distinguish it from the full ratings and automatic 4-star ratings in yellow). Additional information about the provisional rating is provided below.

Quality Standards

Programs applying for a full Parent Aware rating must first establish their eligibility for a rating by meeting basic requirements. These include signing a commitment to participate, attending an orientation session, verifying that they are licensed and have a positive licensing history over the past two years (with no negative licensing actions, maltreatment determinations, or operations under a conditional license), submitting a program philosophy statement, and completing a health and safety checklist. Once these requirements

are met, the following four areas are rated (with details about the indicators examined in each area):

Family Partnerships. Indicators in this area examine whether a program has a formal process for collecting and using feedback from parents; the strategies used for regular communication with families as well as communication about particular milestones (for example, transitioning to kindergarten); whether a program has an intake interview; whether programs provide information about preschool screening; and whether individual plans are used to help with transitions and other milestones.

Teaching Materials and Strategies. Indicators in this area examine whether the curriculum used is research-based and whether an effective learning environment and child-adult interactions are promoted. A select set of curricula have been pre-approved by Parent Aware. Other curricula must be reviewed and approved by the Curriculum Review Committee (described below). The learning environment and interactions are assessed through on-site observation with nationally-recognized tools (described below).

Tracking Learning. Indicators in this area examine whether the program uses a research-based instructional assessment tool to observe and monitor children's progress and if so, whether that information is shared with parents and used to guide instruction and design individual goals for the child. A select set of assessment tools have been pre-approved by Parent Aware. Other assessment tools must be reviewed and approved by the Child Assessment Review Committee (described below).

Teacher Training and Education. Indicators in this area examine the qualifications of administrators, teachers, or family child care providers; the degree to which credentials or degrees have been attained or specialized training has been completed; and, whether the teachers/family child care providers have a professional development plan. Connections are made between the indicators in this domain and some of the foundational elements of Minnesota's professional development system for early care and education and school-age programs. For example, programs are expected to enter information into the Provider Registry and to categorize their previous training using the categories described in Minnesota's Core Competencies (note that this linkage was a change in the indicators instituted after the Registry became operational in the summer of 2008).

Points are awarded in each of the quality categories and ratings of one to four stars are assigned based on the number of points received.

Rating and Monitoring

Parent Aware uses a combination of strategies to review, analyze, and rate programs on the quality standards described above. Program practices in the four quality standards are established through program documentation, observation by trained researchers, and review of materials by an expert panel (if applicable). At the orientation to the program, providers

receive a quality documentation packet that contains all of the relevant forms and explanation of procedures. The following procedures are of particular importance in the rating process:

On-site Observation – To complete the requirements of the Teaching Materials and Strategies category, programs must participate in an on-site observation conducted by trained observers from the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) at the University of Minnesota. In family child care programs, observers use the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale – Revised (FCCERS-R; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007) to assess the quality of the environment, materials, routines, health and safety and interactions. In center-based programs with preschool classrooms (serving children ages 3 to 5), observers complete the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) or the Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale Revised (ITERS-R; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 1990) depending on the ages of children in the selected classroom (one-third of the classrooms serving each age group are randomly selected for observation). They also complete the Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008) to assess the quality of emotional support and instruction.

Review of Curricula – If a program is not using a pre-approved curriculum, documentation about the curriculum must be reviewed and approved by the Department of Human Services based on recommendations from the Curriculum Review Committee. The Curriculum Review Committee is comprised of up to six experts in early childhood education who apply for the position and are appointed by the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Education (MDE). Committee members must have at least a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education (or a related field) and must have at least five years of experience in teaching, training, or research in early childhood education, curriculum and instruction, child assessment or a related area. Up to four representatives from DHS or MDE may participate in the Committee. Programs can nominate existing curricula for review by the Committee or they can submit written documentation about a curriculum that they have developed themselves. The Committee meets as needed and will end its term at the end of the Parent Aware pilot. To be approved, written curriculum and any associated manuals or instructions for use must address a number of criteria and show how it is aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPS).

Review of Assessment Tools – If a program is not using an assessment tool already included on the approved assessments list, the assessment tool used must be approved by DHS based on recommendations from the Child Assessment Review Committee. The process for appointing members to the Child Assessment Review Committee is the same as the process used for the Curriculum Review Committee (described above). In addition to other specific, defined criteria that are reviewed by the Committee, they assess the extent to which the assessment tool is aligned with the ECIPS.

Accredited programs that complete a short application, submit proof of their accreditation status and demonstrate their compliance with the licensing requirements

described above automatically receive four stars. Their rating process does not involve a review of curriculum and assessment, nor does it involve an on-site observational visit. Parent Aware accepts accreditation from the following bodies: National Association for Family Child Care, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Council on Accreditation, National Early Childhood Program Accreditation, American Montessori Society, and the Association of Montessori International-USA. These accrediting bodies were selected for Parent Aware because they are also used to document eligibility for tiered reimbursement in Minnesota's Child Care Assistance Program. To increase the number of high quality programs in Parent Aware, the decision was made to allow accredited programs throughout the entire Twin Cities seven-county metropolitan area to participate.

Similarly, Head Start programs that are in compliance with the Program Review Instrument for Systems Monitoring (PRISM) will automatically receive four stars after submitting an "intent to participate" form to the Minnesota Department of Education.

Licensed child care centers and family child care programs that are interested in participating in Parent Aware quickly to accommodate families that would like to use the State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances or the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship in their program can apply for a temporary Provisional Rating (an option available through the end of June, 2009). The Provisional Rating involves documentation of the quality standards in the Family Partnership category (all indicators described above), Teaching Materials and Strategies category (reporting the use of an approved research-based curriculum and training on the curriculum), and Tracking Learning category (reporting the use of an approved research-based assessment tool and training on the assessment tool). In addition, programs must operate for a minimum of 12 hours per week. Information is not collected about Teacher Training and Education and on-site observations are not conducted. MELF made a policy decision that a provisional rating is equivalent, in practice, to a rating of 3 stars generated through the full rating process, and thus provisionally rated programs are included on the Parent Aware website with 3 stars.

School-based pre-K programs applying for provisional approval through MDE to receive State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances must meet a set of indicators that are aligned with programmatic requirements for School Readiness Programs required by statute (M.S. 124D.15).

Quality Improvement

When programs apply for a full rating in Parent Aware, they are paired with a Provider Resource Specialist (referred to as Resource Specialist in this report) who assists them in the rating process. The Resource Specialist also helps the program initiate a quality improvement process (note that provisionally-rated programs and programs with four stars are not eligible for improvement supports). This process is individualized and tailored to the needs of the program and includes the provision of financial resources as well as technical assistance. The Resource Specialists are able to use the feedback reports generated from the on-site observations to inform their work with programs.

Financial Incentives

Programs receiving a rating of 3 or 4 stars or a provisional rating (equivalent to a rating of 3 stars) are eligible to serve children receiving State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances of up to \$4,000 (available to low-income families in the Parent Aware pilot areas) or scholarships through the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship (of up to \$13,000 annually for a select set of families living in District 6 and 7 within the St. Paul pilot area). The effectiveness of these financial incentives for families and for programs is being evaluated in separate studies conducted by SRI International with support from the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation.

Dissemination of Ratings

Quality ratings are publicized and shared with parents primarily through the Parent Aware website (www.parentawareratings.org). Options are provided for parents to read information in languages other than English or to speak directly with a referral specialist via a toll-free number.

The website was designed to include portals for parents and programs so that each group is able to access the information most relevant for them.

Parent Aware also provides marketing materials for programs that have been rated. Programs that have achieved a 4-star rating receive a banner, lawn sign, and a Parent Aware highest rating window cling (decal) to display their rating. They also receive a postcard shell and press release template if they want to undertake a mailing or press release. Programs with a 3-star rating receive a Parent Aware participant window cling and press release template. Programs with a 1- or 2-star rating receive a Parent Aware participant window cling.

Analysis of Parent Aware in relation to other QRSs

A focus on school readiness. As noted earlier, the first QRS was launched 10 years ago in Oklahoma. A recent analysis of QRS pioneer states or “early adopters” in Colorado, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania (Zellman & Perlman, 2008) shows that quality improvement was a primary motivator for the development of QRSs. Similarly, Mitchell (2005) identified 14 goals – including quality improvement, increasing consumer awareness, and alignment of funding with standards – that underlie the development of QRSs. Yet, recent summaries of motivation for a QRS include improving children’s outcomes as an explicit, additional goal emerging in statewide and pilot QRSs (Child Trends, 2008b). Parent Aware is clearly in this new generation of QRSs that places a direct focus on children’s outcomes and school readiness.

One way that Parent Aware includes children’s school readiness as an explicit target of the program is through the inclusion of quality standards that focus on monitoring children’s progress (and sharing these results with parents) and a requirement that curriculum must align with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPS – the early learning guidelines specifying expectations for what young children should know and be able

to do before entering kindergarten). Including such standards directly in the QRS quality indicators is a practice occurring in some (but not all) systems. Parent Aware also incorporates competencies for practitioners in the quality indicators in the Teacher Training and Education category. Early childhood education and policy experts are promoting alignment of standards (for children and for practitioners), professional development systems and quality improvement strategies as a way to promote and ensure effective teaching (see paper from the National Center for Research in Early Childhood Education by Howes, Pianta, Bryant, Hamre, Downer & Soliday-Hong, 2008). Evaluation will be a critical tool in determining the extent to which alignment and integration of systems is indeed promoting improvements in teaching and caregiving practices.

Parent Aware also includes scores on the CLASS (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008) as part of the rating process in addition to scores on the Environmental Rating Scales (referred to as ERS throughout this report; includes the FCCERS-R: Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007; ECERS-R: Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998; and ITERS-R: Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 1990). The CLASS – an observation that examines the quality of interactions between teachers and children and includes an assessment of emotional support and instruction – was included because of a growing concern among early childhood researchers that global ratings of the environment alone may not be sufficient to capture the aspects of early care and education settings that are critical supports for children’s school readiness (Child Trends, 2008a). Inclusion of the CLASS extends the information provided in the Environmental Rating Scales, though evaluation is needed to understand the costs and benefits of using multiple observational tools in Parent Aware.

A focus on parents. Parent Aware is unique among QRSs with its explicit focus on parents and their role in selecting high quality early care and education. The name Parent Aware was deliberately chosen to empower parents in their decision-making, and the goals of Parent Aware center on ensuring that parents have information available to select an early care and education that meets their child’s and family’s needs.

Expert review of curriculum and assessment tools. The strategy adopted by Parent Aware to review curriculum and assessment tools is relatively unique. A number of other systems rely only on the on-site observation to monitor actual practices with children rather than requesting extensive documentation about the curriculum and assessment processes used. Evaluation will be helpful in determining the extent to which the review process is producing information that adds value over and above the other information gathered in the rating process.

A focus on cultural sensitivity and diversity. Evidence provided from the Baseline Survey (Wilder Research, 2008) in the first year of Parent Aware alerted the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship team to the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population targeted by MELF initiatives and included in the Parent Aware pilot areas. A number of provisions have been included to address this diversity, though stakeholders acknowledge that the work in this area is not yet complete (see below in the reporting of stakeholder feedback).

- Cultural-specific focus groups were held to elicit feedback on initial materials developed for Parent Aware.
- As part of the materials submitted for the curriculum and assessment approval process, programs must demonstrate how the tools they are using address cultural and language diversity.
- Outreach efforts are being made to include cultural-specific programs in Parent Aware, with mixed success to date.
- The Parent Aware Implementation Team received initial and ongoing training on cultural diversity and the provision of culturally sensitive services.
- The Assessment and Training Center staff conducting observations has developed a language access plan which outlines procedures for observing programs in which a language other than English is spoken.

While the outcomes of all of these efforts are not yet known, the focus on the issue of cultural sensitivity and diversity in Parent Aware is noteworthy.

Linkages with early childhood initiatives. The direct connection between Parent Aware and the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship and the State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances is a unique feature that distinguishes Parent Aware from other QRSs. The opportunities afforded by the linkages to financial incentives have great potential (the value of which will be evaluated in the next two years; see Gaylor, Spiker & Hebbeler, 2008). There is an assumption that the combined empowerment of parents (through the provision of information about quality) and the financial incentives for parents will drive the demand for high quality early care and education. Creating accountability for programs, through the Parent Aware ratings, is an additional driver of high quality (Gaylor, Spiker & Hebbler, 2008).

Yet, the linkages with other early childhood initiatives have also placed heavy pressure on Parent Aware to prepare and launch its program at an ambitious pace. This early rapid pace did not allow for the Parent Aware Implementation Team to engage in activities to prepare programs and other stakeholders for the system (prior to its launch) in ways that they otherwise may have done with a more gradual timeline. This is an important contextual factor to understand, especially as background for analyzing the mixed reaction of key stakeholders to Parent Aware (described below).

EVALUATION FINDINGS: PERSPECTIVES OF PARENT AWARE STAKEHOLDERS

To gain insights into the early implementation of Parent Aware and the perceptions of key stakeholders, Child Trends conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with 33 respondents during the summer of 2008. The respondents were selected to include stakeholders with various perspectives in the field of early childhood care and education, including representatives of programs/organizations that: (1) provide direct service to parents and children through early care and education programs (both center-based and home-based) and/or through parent education⁴; (2) offer services and support for early care and education programs/family child care providers, (3) offer services for early care and education

⁴ This group includes some programs participating in Parent Aware.

programs/family child care providers and give information to families, and (4) are part of the Parent Aware Implementation Team. The Appendix contains a complete listing of interview respondents and organizations.

Interviews were conducted by the research team using protocols tailored to each respondent type (all protocols are included in the Appendix). Interviews were recorded digitally, and notes were completed after the interview (while reviewing the recording). The research team reviewed the notes by respondent type and identified themes that emerged both within groups and across the interviews.

A related group of early care and education professionals, coordinators for the Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program, were asked for feedback on their experiences with parents and their thoughts on Parent Aware. This group was contacted by email and asked to fill out a survey on Survey Monkey. Responses were received from 82 ECFE coordinators across the state (both within and outside of the MELF pilot areas). The responses were reviewed and coded, and key themes were recorded.

For this report, we focus on themes that emerged across the different groups of stakeholders as well as issues that were specific to each stakeholder group. The questions that we report on include:

1. What is the potential of Parent Aware to:
 - a. improve quality among the providers you serve (if applicable)
 - b. help parents locate quality early care and education programs (if applicable)
2. What are your hopes about Parent Aware?
3. What are your concerns about Parent Aware?
4. What do [providers/you] need most to improve quality?
5. What resources do parents need to help them find early care and education?
6. What critical factors will determine whether or not Parent Aware is successful?
7. What changes have you made to your program as a result of the Parent Aware pilot?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about Parent Aware?

In addition, we report on specific questions addressed to two groups interacting closely with programs participating in Parent Aware: the Resource Specialists and the on-site observers who complete the Environment Rating Scales and the CLASS with programs.

When possible, we use the terms “many” respondents if more than 16 of the 33 respondents voiced the theme, “some” if between 6 and 10 respondents voiced the theme, and “a few” or “several” if 3 to 5 respondent voiced the theme.

The Potential of Parent Aware: Stakeholders’ Hopes and Concerns

Looking across the respondents, most perceived that Parent Aware has excellent potential both in terms of helping programs improve quality and in helping parents understand

quality and find high quality programs for their children. Yet, the positive responses were typically qualified with cautions or concerns about the program or a comment that it is too early to tell if Parent Aware can achieve its potential. Some respondents also reported that the potential might vary for different groups (for example, different communities and different types of programs).

The following examples demonstrate the optimism that respondents voiced.

- ❑ Some respondents used positive words such as “great,” “huge” and “enormous” to describe the potential of Parent Aware to improve program quality.
- ❑ A few respondents talked specifically about the potential of Parent Aware in terms of system-building or an integrated approach to early care and education.
 - Parent Aware is a “strategic initiative...more than just a shot in the arm kind of initiative”.
 - It provides a “baseline” measure of what the needs are among programs and how they can be better addressed to improve quality.
 - It is a comprehensive program that can bring together resources for programs.
 - Programs in Parent Aware will see themselves as part of Minnesota’s education system.
- ❑ Some respondents noted the potential of Parent Aware to improve the educational qualifications of the early childhood workforce through the professional development requirements that are in place.
- ❑ Parent Aware has motivated the development of other programs that can support programs and providers (for example, the Accreditation Facilitation project and specialized training in business and management).
- ❑ Some respondents expressed hope about the longevity of Parent Aware. They would like to see it “continue beyond the pilot phase”, be “available statewide” and have “ongoing funding”.
- ❑ Many respondents described the potential of Parent Aware to provide parents with an opportunity to learn about quality and have information available that can help them choose early care and education.
 - Parents want to know what a quality program is and, now there is a common way to measure quality.
 - It simplifies for them a way of judging what high quality care is.
 - It gives them some comfort that this program has been looked at and has met quality standards
- ❑ A few respondents noted their hopes about Parent Aware as a strategy to improve children’s school readiness.

Though many respondents were optimistic about the potential of Parent Aware, they also expressed a number of concerns.

- ❑ Some respondents qualified their optimism about Parent Aware by saying that the potential to improve program quality is there only if supports are available to programs.

- Parent Aware needs a strong infrastructure and incentives for programs.
- Parent Aware should be a nurturing model that builds community.
- Programs need the resources, supports and individual consultation in place to help programs move from one level to the next.
- Parent Aware needs to continue offering improvement supports and help programs gain a strong understanding of the requirements.
- Parent Aware gives providers guidelines about what aspects of their program are strong and what areas need improvement, but they also need support to make that improvement.
- Specific supports for programs that were described include funding, technical assistance, on-site consultation, and training opportunities. Respondents highlighted support that occurs in the context of a relationship and that provides assistance in applying knowledge to practice.
- Some respondents noted the importance of having resources that are sustained and adequate. Respondents mentioned concerns that the program would be under-funded or not sustained after the pilot period.

Another area of concern mentioned by some respondents was a perceived lack of responsiveness of Parent Aware to different groups.

- Some respondents raised concerns about the ability of Parent Aware to understand the needs of family child care providers and to use tools that align with providers' definition of quality. In particular, respondents noted that the use of the FCCERS-R, rigorous requirements related to curriculum and assessment, and the amount of time needed for paperwork are barriers for family child care providers.
 - One respondent noted that she was overwhelmed by the different books and rating scales provided during the Parent Aware orientation.
 - Another respondent stated that the FCCERS-R has not been well-received by providers because it seems to rely on center-based care as the model of quality.
- A few respondents raised the concern that Parent Aware will leave out culturally diverse family child care providers.
- A “disconnect” between the people deciding the ratings and the day-to-day experiences of providers was described by a few respondents. They noted that it is difficult for centers and perhaps especially difficult for family child care programs to meet the expectations of Parent Aware.
- One respondent described a concern about novelty and the ability of the system to be sustained over time. “Parent Aware and the star system is the exciting thing of the moment and there has been a lot of money spent on it.”

A final concern mentioned by most respondents is that Parent Aware will have difficulties securing “buy-in” across programs and parents.

- Some respondents worry that the definitions of quality and the approach to rating quality in Parent Aware will not be accepted by programs (and as a result, programs will not enroll).

- Respondents discussed the need for programs to understand why the Parent Aware indicators are important and to align with the philosophy of Parent Aware.
- Some respondents voiced the concern that providers will feel judged and feel that what they have to offer is not valued.
- One respondent stated that “we need to empower [providers] and let them know that some of the requirements are things they are already doing and help them find things that they are doing to improve their quality.”
- Another related worry cited by some respondents is that the incentives are not strong enough to encourage programs to participate, particularly when programs are concerned about what their rating might be. As a result, Parent Aware may not be successful unless it is linked with licensing or made mandatory in some other way.
- A few respondents stated that the public – and legislators – need to buy-in to the Parent Aware approach if it is to be sustained over time. The program needs adequate publicity to make this happen.
 - Low-income families and families that don’t have access to the internet will have difficulty learning about Parent Aware and engaging with it.
 - Parents need to know that the system is out there. They need to understand the components of Parent Aware – what it’s made up of and why those things are important.

Summary and Implications:

- Among most key stakeholders, Parent Aware is perceived as having the potential to improve the quality of programs and the information available for parents. Yet, stakeholders expressed concern about the additional supports that must be available for Parent Aware to achieve its goals. They also highlighted the importance of engaging all programs and all families (not just those that are easy to reach) and promoting buy-in to the program.
- Parent Aware should continue efforts to engage diverse programs and families and to offer supports for programs to improve quality. These efforts need broad publicity to ensure that key stakeholders have information about what Parent Aware offers in terms of quality improvement resources.
- Parent Aware should continue to work with stakeholders to establish realistic goals, expectations, and timeframes for change.

Improving Quality

Respondents working directly with programs/providers, those providing direct services to children and families, and those working with programs in Parent Aware (as a Resource Specialist or an on-site observer) were asked to reflect in general on what programs need to improve their quality.

Many respondents noted that education and training are key factors in improving quality, with some describing the need to set higher initial requirements for licensing to raise the overall level of quality in the system. Respondents stated that specific training needs include:

- ❑ Information about curriculum and assessment.
- ❑ Assistance setting up an environment and a structure to the day.
- ❑ Assistance with recognizing the role that providers can play in school readiness. They need “to see themselves as early childhood educators”.
- ❑ Information on business practices and procedures.

Some respondents highlighted the particular need for building relationship-based practice into the professional development opportunities that are offered.

- ❑ There is a need for training and education that occur in the context of a relationship with personal support provided for quality improvement.
- ❑ Technical assistance is needed to help put into practice what has been learned.
- ❑ “They need a hands-on experience about how to apply knowledge”.

Two additional factors noted by some respondents are the need for adequate funding or financial resources and the need for time to engage in planning and make changes.

- ❑ Money is needed to get quality and dedicated staff, a good curriculum, and an assessment system in place.
- ❑ Staff work very long days. They need time to read the materials and buy into the program.

Summary and Implications:

- Parent Aware has included the supports for programs that stakeholders identify as necessary: relationship-based consultation/technical assistance, financial resources, and access to training on critical tools (curriculum and assessment).
- Strategic planning related to quality improvement resources should be prioritized, and connections with other resources in the professional development system and higher education system should be made to the extent possible.

Improving Resources for Parents

Respondents working directly with children and families or providing resources directly to parents were asked to reflect in general on the resources that parents need to select high quality early care and education.

- ❑ Some respondents stated that parents need to know not only how to find quality child care but to understand what quality means.
 - Parents need information and they need it clearly with no jargon and in a readily accessible way.
 - Parents need better access to lists of available programs/providers.
 - “Brochures” and “checklists” with reminders of what to look for would be helpful to parents.
- ❑ Some respondents said transportation is needed to improve the child care options available to the families they serve.
- ❑ The supply of care was described by some respondents as an additional barrier for parents. Infant care was mentioned as a particularly difficult type of care to find. The limited availability of care in small towns/communities was also noted as a barrier.

- ❑ Some respondents noted that interpreters and translators are needed as a resource for parents who do not speak English.
- ❑ Access to financial incentives (such as the State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances and the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship) will be helpful to parents.

Summary and Implications:

- Parent Aware is focused on parents and on providing information about quality in a clear, accessible way.
- Parent Aware should continue to engage families and test program materials with parents to ensure their usefulness.
- It may be useful to parents to provide links on the website or in other materials to programs that can help them with some of the other barriers identified by respondents (transportation, translators, etc.).

Factors Important to the Success of Parent Aware

All respondents were asked to articulate the critical factors that would determine whether Parent Aware is successful at the end of the pilot period. The following examples illustrate the range of responses to this question.

- ❑ Providers need
 - To feel supported and secure with the message of Parent Aware – providers need to see it as a resource and a positive experience.
 - Well-targeted resources and a person they can connect to in the program.
 - To engage and “buy-in” to the program.
 - A coordinated professional development system.
- ❑ Parents need
 - To know that Parent Aware is out there.
 - To have an understanding of how Parent Aware operates and how to easily access information.
 - To feel that the concepts being promoted through Parent Aware are meaningful and important.
 - To trust the system.
- ❑ Good leadership and organization within Parent Aware will be essential to determining its success.
- ❑ Marketing and advertising are critical factors for success.
- ❑ Cooperation and good communication between the various agencies that are involved in the oversight of the program is important. They all need to be on the same page.
- ❑ The system needs to be fair and equitable. Some respondents voiced concerns about the alternative routes into Parent Aware.⁵ One respondent stated that the “system of evaluation needs to be of the same level and rigor for each type of program”.

⁵Accredited programs and Head Start automatically receive a 4-star rating. School-based programs receiving provisional ratings through MDE to receive State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances must meet an aligned set of indicators. MELF assigned these programs a 3-star rating in Parent Aware.

- ❑ A critical factor is to remember the needs of families when communicating with them, such as their language needs, transportation needs because they move a lot, and working one-on-one with families. “This is very time intensive. We need to stay in touch with families and make sure to follow through with them.”
- ❑ “What will really make or break it is if the provider community has a lot of support in terms of grant dollars and technical assistance.”
- ❑ The success of Parent Aware will be slow, so expectations need to be managed.

Summary and Implications:

- A wide range of factors will contribute to the success of Parent Aware. The structures and content for many of these factors are already in place (including evaluation activities to determine the comparability of the different rating options available to programs).
- Parent Aware should continue to promote the quality improvement activities and resources they have.
- Parent Aware should recognize the difficulty of engaging all parents and develop creative plans for hard-to-reach parents.

Response to Parent Aware by Organizations that Support Early Care and Education Programs and Providers

Respondents who provide support for early care and education programs through training, education, and advocacy were asked to describe any changes they have made to their program or to the services they provide to programs or providers as a result of the Parent Aware pilot. **We focus in this section only on changes made by organizations who are not partners in the implementation of Parent Aware.**

- ❑ Some respondents noted that their training courses for providers and schedules have been modified or expanded to better accommodate the quality standards (and related training) in Parent Aware. In particular, respondents noted that they are offering more courses on curriculum and assessment.
- ❑ Portions of the professional development system are becoming integrated with Parent Aware including the career lattice and the Professional Development Registry, so some respondents indicated that they expect to make further changes in their programs as the pilot progresses.
- ❑ Some respondents noted that they have NOT made changes as a result of Parent Aware.

Summary and Implications:

- Some stakeholders have already made changes to their programs to accommodate Parent Aware.
- Connections between Parent Aware and other programs should continue to be made that can leverage and align resources in support of quality improvement or parent education. Further connections with the professional development system, resource and referral agencies, and Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) are promising targets.

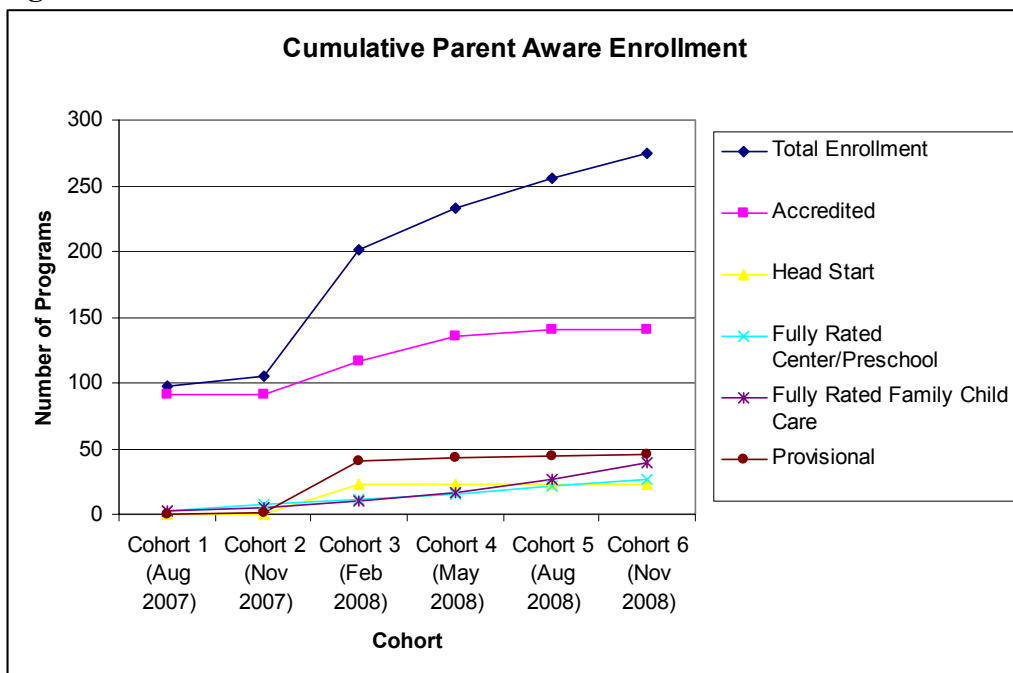
EVALUATION FINDINGS: EARLY IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, we highlight findings on early implementation related to program enrollment, recruitment, promotion and marketing, the rating process, on-site observations, and the provision of quality improvement resources.

Program Enrollment and Ratings

Parent Aware made the decision to enroll programs into the system in cohorts as a way to manage the flow of activities needed to move programs through the rating process. Early estimates anticipated that 20-40 non-accredited and 20-40 accredited programs would enroll each quarter. However, the enrollment expectations were modified significantly after the first cohort. Figure 1 contains a line graph showing the pattern of enrollment over the first six cohorts.

Figure 1.



Source: Parent Aware program data

It is clear from the graph in Figure 1 that, as of the November 2008 cohort, the enrollment of programs in Parent Aware has been most successful for the two enrollment “tracks” that require less intensive or rigorous entry processes and which the outcome of the process (the final rating) is known. The majority of programs enrolled in Parent Aware are accredited child care centers. Provisionally-rated programs (many of them are school-based pre-K programs) are the second largest group in Parent Aware. Fully-rated programs – either child care centers or family child care programs have entered Parent Aware in much lower numbers. However, it is important to note that the enrollment has been steadily increasing, with slight increases occurring across all cohorts. It is also notable that fully-rated child care

centers and licensed family child care programs are entering Parent Aware in nearly equal numbers (not including the accredited child care centers). This is in contrast to the experience of other QRSs that have had less success enrolling licensed family child care programs. It will be important to track whether this pattern among non-accredited centers and family child care programs remains consistent over time.

In addition to looking at enrollment over time, it is helpful to examine trends in enrollment by pilot area and by Parent Aware rating. Table 1 contains these data elements by program type at one point in time (December, 2008).

Table 1
Parent Aware Ratings by Pilot Area and Program Type as of December, 2008

| Program Type | 4 Star Accredited or Head Start | 4 Stars | Provisionally Rated | 3 Stars | 2 Stars | 1 Star | Total |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------|---------------------|----------|-----------|----------|------------|
| 7 County Metro Accredited | | | | | | | |
| Child Care Center | 107 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 107 |
| Family Child Care | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Preschool Program | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | 109 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 109 |
| Blue Earth/Nicollet Counties | | | | | | | |
| Head Start/Early HS | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Child Care Center | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| School-based Pre-K | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| | 4 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| North Mpls | | | | | | | |
| Head Start/Early HS | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 |
| Child Care Center | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 12 |
| Family Child Care | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 11 |
| Preschool Program | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| School-based Pre-K | 0 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| | 15 | 0 | 12 | 2 | 9 | 4 | 42 |
| St. Paul | | | | | | | |
| Head Start/Early HS | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| Child Care Center | 11 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 18 |
| Family Child Care | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Preschool Program | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| School-based Pre-K | 0 | 0 | 30 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 30 |
| | 23 | 2 | 33 | 3 | 9 | 1 | 71 |
| Wayzata | | | | | | | |
| Child Care Center | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 |
| | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 |
| | 157 | 3 | 48 | 5 | 18 | 5 | 236 |

Source: Parent Aware program data

Currently, the bulk of programs in Parent Aware are in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area (109 accredited programs, primarily child care centers) followed by St. Paul (with 42 programs across all program types). Of those that have received a full rating, most

(18 of 31) have received a 2-star rating with the remainder receiving 4-stars (3 programs), 3-stars (5 programs), or 1-star (5 programs).

Summary and Implications:

- 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.
- Continue to promote program enrollment in the full-rating track so that information will be available to compare the results of the alternative rating strategies with the full-rating.

Recruitment

As noted above, the connection between Parent Aware and the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship program was a driving force in the launch of the rating system. The Parent Aware Implementation Team focused heavily on recruiting programs that were located in the pilot areas defined for the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship program as well as other programs in the broader MELF pilot areas. By the end of the first year of Parent Aware, the Implementation Team reported that further recruitment in these areas would be challenging given that programs expressing an initial interest in the program had enrolled already (Parent Aware, 2008, internal document). The Parent Aware Implementation Team has planned to use a variety of strategies to recruit programs from among those not stepping forward to participate in earlier cohorts of the program. These strategies include developing positive relationships with provider associations, bringing more visibility to Parent Aware by connecting it with other community initiatives, developing Parent Aware mentors and “spokespeople”, and conducting one-on-one visits with targeted programs.

Another area of concern with respect to recruitment is the lack of culturally diverse providers/programs expressing interest in Parent Aware or that are able to participate in Parent Aware because they meet basic eligibility criteria. A number of Somali and Latino providers are not licensed and are therefore unable to participate in Parent Aware. Efforts to recruit programs from this group would require initial work to encourage licensure and help programs become licensed (which is often difficult because providers are located in housing that doesn’t meet licensing requirements). St. Paul has a number of Hmong family child care providers, and Parent Aware is currently conducting outreach with this group to encourage and support them in enrolling in Parent Aware. One drawback to these approaches is that they require a slow pace in which trusting relationships can be built over time. These issues may be difficult to address in a program that is required to adhere to an ambitious schedule of enrollment.

Summary and Implications:

- Recruitment of programs is more difficult now that programs with initial interest have enrolled. The next “layer” of programs is harder to engage.
- Continue to make connections that promote positive press coverage and positive relationships with groups that providers/programs trust (for example, associations).

- Recognize that some investments will need time before returns can be realized. Efforts to recruit culturally diverse programs into quality improvement initiatives will have value even if they are not immediately able to help Parent Aware meet specific targets on a rapid timeline.

Promotion and Marketing

Parent Aware is focused on creating materials that are geared toward parent empowerment and that have straightforward, clear messages for potential users of and participants in the program. The Parent Aware Implementation Team works directly with a communications consultant who assists in developing a strategic plan for marketing and communication. The team reports that this assistance is valuable in crafting clear and consistent messages.

In the first year of implementation, a number of key promotion and marketing events took place that generated interest in the program as well as press coverage. These events included a July 2007 kick-off meeting, launching of the website in February 2008, and a major marketing push that began in August 2008. The Parent Aware Implementation Team has noted that these events have been received positively by the public in general and by programs interested in learning more about Parent Aware.

To date, the extent to which some of the marketing and promotion efforts are reaching their intended audiences (particularly parents) is unknown. However, the Parent Aware Implementation Team is able to use Google Analytics to track visits to the Parent Aware website and to particular pages within the website. Since June 30th, 2008, the website has received 52,016 page views. As of mid-November, the English search page had been viewed 3,186 times. The Parent Aware Implementation Team has set as a goal that 4,000 parents visit the website. While the current analytic package used to monitor web traffic is not able to provide this level of detail about the visitors to the site, it is noteworthy that the site has received considerable traffic.

One area in which particular interest has been expressed is in the promotion and outreach of the program to parents enrolled in various public programs including the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), Minnesota Family Investment Plan (MFIP)/Diversionary Work Program (DWP), Women Infants and Children program, Employment and Training Centers, Head Start, and Early Childhood Family Education. This work will require that direct connections be made with each of these programs to establish buy-in among caseworkers/case managers to ensure their willingness to promote the program to their clients.

Summary and Implications:

- Parent Aware is well-positioned to create a successful communications and marketing campaign using the strategies and materials already developed and drawing upon the expertise and experience of the communications team.
- Parent Aware should continue efforts to develop and design materials that can be accessed and used by low-income parents. Focus groups with parents were used to

- generate feedback on early materials. It would be helpful to conduct another round of focus groups to gather input on the website and other newer materials.
- Direct connections should be established with other public programs (for example, CCAP, MFIP/DWP) to begin building buy-in among staff (including job counselors) who work with low-income families and to create better linkages between families and Parent Aware.

The Rating Process

The process for a full rating begins in Parent Aware when a child care center staff member (usually the director) or family child care provider attends an orientation session. In this session, programs receive the documentation binder with information describing the rating process, the documentation required, and details about the observational visit.

Initial orientation sessions received positive evaluations from participants, though a number of them reported that the information was extensive and somewhat overwhelming. Parent Aware staff have worked to improve the orientation sessions by altering/editing materials, eliminating information that wasn't perceived as useful and focusing in on the components that are most difficult for participants.

Resource Specialists are available to answer questions about the ratings as they arise.

Summary and Implications:

- Parent Aware is working to create a process that is accessible and understandable to participating programs. The Parent Aware Implementation Team has been responsive to feedback and attempted to improve the orientations for programs.
- Parent Aware should continue to refine the rating process and to provide supports to programs as they complete it. Possibilities for improving support materials include: the development of an on-line module to learn more about the Parent Aware rating tool and process; on-line modules to learn more about the ERS and the CLASS tools (in addition to the frequently asked questions documents that already exist).

On-site Observations

On-site observations (ERS and CLASS) are conducted for programs/providers seeking full ratings by trained observers from the Assessment and Training Center within the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota. Interviews with ERS and CLASS observers have provided insight into how the observations are carried out, challenges that have been encountered thus far, and what changes have been made to the observation protocol.

Respondents perceived their interactions with directors, teachers, and providers as playing an important role in Parent Aware. One respondent stated it in this way: “As observers, we are the face of Parent Aware.” A goal of the observers is to help teachers to feel at ease with the process, as they are sometimes nervous about it. However, respondents

reported that they usually talk to the director first and are typically greeted in a very friendly manner. In general, observers feel welcomed at the program sites.

Challenges that have been faced by the observers include keeping their own beliefs and experiences out of the observation (maintaining objectivity), concerns about the inability of existing observational tools to capture important dimensions of culture, and Parent Aware participants raising challenges about the observations.

To date, few changes have been made to the observation protocol, but changes have been made to procedures and process around the visit. One respondent talked about how changes have occurred in the way she talks to program staff. She spends more time building rapport, to set them at ease. She tries to be very positive. Also, changes were made to the sequence of visits, such that the CLASS visit occurs before the ERS visit to a classroom. Observers felt that the CLASS is less invasive and gives the program an opportunity to get used to having someone observe their environments. Another change is that there is more detail provided when explaining scores in the feedback report. This is largely a result of feedback received via the Resource Specialists. Finally, CEED has implemented an observation accountability form on which programs can document any concerns they have about the observation. To date, no negative comments about the observers have been made by programs. In some cases, programs use the accountability form to describe why they may not have been performing at their best during the time of the observation.

The observers report that they receive support from their supervisors and feel that new challenges encountered during their observations will be handled professionally and thoughtfully when presented to supervisors. This feeling of being trusted in the field by supervisors and by Parent Aware in general was described as a very important factor in feelings of confidence and competence in the field. Observers receive regular reliability checks from an “anchor” observer and have opportunities to debrief about difficult field decisions as needed.

According to respondents, Parent Aware participants to date have not asked a lot of questions during the observational visits. However, some typical questions include whether they can get credit for extra materials that they have, that just aren't out in the classroom at the moment, or why playground equipment is measured. Observers do not provide advice to the program during their visits. The feedback report is the only input that the programs receive from the observers. The feedback is delivered in the rating packet containing their official Parent Aware score.

Respondents report that they have seen a lot of variation in the observation scores across programs. Whereas the lowest score is typically on the Personal Care Routines subscale of the ERS (which assesses routines around health and safety, mealtime and other practices), the highest score depends on the site. The respondents noted that there is also a lot of variation in how much assistance different programs need, with some programs needing more assistance than others.

Summary and Implications:

- The on-site observations play an important role in contributing to the overall rating of the program and in providing feedback that can guide improvements. Observers are also serving as one group of “ambassadors” of Parent Aware (in addition to the Resource Specialists).
- Continue providing rigorous oversight (in terms of reliability monitoring) combined with reflective supervision to the observers. This will be important to the integrity of the rating process as well as to the morale of the observers in the field.
- On-site observers should continue to have opportunities to debrief about field experiences with colleagues and supervisors.
- All decisions about observational scoring should be systematically documented and shared in a transparent process with key stakeholders.
- Continue to provide opportunities for programs to receive training on the observational tools. This should include detailed training as well as overview training to orient programs to the reasons for using the tools. Again, all tools used in Parent Aware should be transparent to programs so that they do not perceive a barrier in obtaining information about them.

Provision of Quality Improvement Resources

In this section, we discuss two interrelated components of the quality improvement process: the Resource Specialists and the quality improvement supports for programs.

Resource Specialists. As part of the quality improvement resources, each early care and education program in Parent Aware is assigned to a Resource Specialist. The role of the Resource Specialist is to provide support by helping programs to understand Parent Aware requirements and advising them on how to make specific quality improvements to their program (through onsite visits as well as other forms of communication). Interviews were conducted with the three Resource Specialists (as described above) in order to gain insight into how this particular type of support is being implemented.

The three Resource Specialists bring extensive experience and education to their roles. They all have at least Bachelor’s degrees and have taken graduate level courses in early care and education. When asked about their greatest strength as a Resource Specialist, they talked about their past experience, their resourcefulness, and their ability to listen and connect with the providers.

The Resource Specialists have run into several challenges in their roles, but largely feel that they have the necessary supports to deal with challenges. A particular challenge is the recruitment of programs into Parent Aware from the rural counties. For example, eligible programs have had anxiety and concerns about Parent Aware, making it difficult to secure buy-in to the program. The Resource Specialists also noted that working in a pilot program is challenging because it is new and unfamiliar. Yet, they also feel that it offers opportunities to create and learn as they go and to make suggestions for what could be added or changed in the program.

Support for the Resource Specialists has in large part come from each other. They communicate often, sharing what has worked and what hasn't. One respondent voiced that Parent Aware is always working on supports, although the timing could be improved. For example, it would be optimal if trainings specific to Parent Aware could be offered soon after orientations.

The interviews with the Resource Specialists provided insight into how the on-site consultation visits are being carried out. An overarching theme that emerged is that the onsite visits are individualized based on the needs/wants of each program. There was consensus that the first visits are to begin to establish a relationship and to go over Parent Aware documentation. After that, the visits are very individualized according to the personality and needs of the directors/teachers/providers or according to the varying challenges and supports that are characteristic of different communities.

On-site visits can last anywhere from one hour to half a day, but often the visits get shorter as the program progresses through Parent Aware. The number of visits to each program also varies widely. One respondent reported that she may visit a program anywhere from three to fifteen times, depending on their needs or requests. Follow-up after a visit also varies. Respondents talked about checking in with programs to see how they are doing on follow up steps/assignments. Again, follow-up is individualized, but there is usually ongoing communication by email and by phone.

Currently, there is no standardized method for keeping records or case notes of the visits, but respondents reported that they typically keep general notes on what was discussed and what follow up steps/assignments were given. They also track how money has been spent on improvement supports.

The interviews with the Resource Specialists also revealed characteristics of the interactions between them and program staff. The number one concern voiced to the Resource Specialists has to do with questions about the ERS tools. Program staff often have anxiety and want to make sure they are prepared to be rated. One respondent pointed out that programs don't want to join Parent Aware as a one- or two-star program. Program staff are also concerned about the different financial assistance options connected to Parent Aware. Resource Specialists regularly are asked questions about how the MELF-funded Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship and the State-funded Pre-Kindergarten Allowances work.

Respondents reported that they typically provide several pieces of advice to programs. They help programs to understand the requirements for the Parent Aware indicators and overall ratings. They are often asked about the ERS specifically, but also receive questions about how to complete the written documentation and information on curriculum and assessment. They emphasize that being part of the process is valuable (even at the one- or two-star level). Resource Specialists also help programs by telling them about other resources, such as trainings that are available in their community. Respondents noted that they haven't experienced a situation in which a director, teacher, or family child care provider disagrees with their recommendations. As a result of their experiences with program staff, respondents believe that the supports most needed by the early care and education practitioners they work

with include consulting on the ERS, more training, help with curriculum and assessment tools, and support around use of the Professional Development Registry.

As a whole, respondents believe that they, along with other Parent Aware supports, are very effective in helping programs improve quality. One respondent stated: “I think we are very effective. I can see the changes occurring.” Another talked about having great relationships with programs, pointing out that program staff listen to what the Resource Specialists say, value their opinions, and see them as resources.

Summary and Implications:

- The Resource Specialists serve as the day-to-day contact with programs/providers participating in Parent Aware. They are qualified and confident in their abilities to help programs improve quality. They value their independence in working with programs but also appreciate the collaboration and support of the other Resource Specialists.
- Continue to allow individualization of the relationship-based process but institute more systematic requirements about tracking the number and content of contacts that the Resource Specialists have with programs. This will assist with determining not only the financial resources needed to improve quality but also the time and extensiveness of contacts that are currently being made. Since the labor and resources vary by program, analysis to learn who tends to need – and receive - more support would be useful.

Supports for Quality Improvement. In addition to the Resource Specialists, programs in Parent Aware are eligible to receive supports and resources to make quality improvements. For the initial Parent Aware cohorts, available resources (in the form of materials and services, not cash for the program) totaled up to \$5,000 per program. Programs in subsequent cohorts receive up to \$3,500 in materials and services (though this amount may be reduced in subsequent cohorts). They are also eligible for free training on curriculum and assessment. To date, the flexible funding for improvements is being used to purchase equipment, toys and books with a very small percentage (5%) used for training, consultation, or other curriculum and assessment materials.

Summary and Implications:

- The supports for quality improvement are being used primarily to make environmental changes.
- Continue to support and promote investments in program quality that facilitate professional development and improved interactions between staff/providers and children.

PUTTING PARENT AWARE IN CONTEXT

In this section, we provide data that can be tracked over the course of the Parent Aware pilot to examine trends in the early care and education market, program characteristics, and in family characteristics.

Using data from Minnesota NACCRRAware (data obtained from the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network) and from Wilder Research (Chase & Moore, 2008), we examined several early care and education program indicators at a community level, according to the geographic areas defined by the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation as Parent Aware pilot areas or comparison areas. The Parent Aware pilot areas consist of the city of St. Paul, selected neighborhoods in north Minneapolis, the Wayzata school district, and Blue Earth and Nicollet counties in southern Minnesota. The Parent Aware comparison areas are made up of selected neighborhoods in Minneapolis (Steven's Square/Loring Heights, Elliot Park, Cedar-Riverside, Phillips, and Powderhorn) and seven counties in southern Minnesota (Sibley, Le Sueur, Waseca, Faribault, Martin, Watonwan, and Brown). In a number of the indicators described below, information is grouped by urban and rural (further divided by low-income and high-income families). These groupings allowed greater alignment between the MELF Baseline Study data and the Parent Aware pilot areas.

Use of Data from the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) Baseline Survey conducted for MELF by Wilder Research.

This report uses data originally presented in the report “Early Learning Conditions among Low-Income Families in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties” (Chase & Moore, 2008). The purpose of including the indicators from the MELF Baseline Study in this report is to provide estimates across the pilot areas for Parent Aware (which differ from those examined in the MELF Baseline Study) and to highlight indicators that are particularly important to track over the pilot period.

Type of Care

The numbers and types of early care and education programs in the pilot areas as of May, 2008 are shown in Table 2. With the exception of the Wayzata pilot area, the majority of programs in the pilot areas are family child care programs. In St. Paul, north Minneapolis, and southern Minnesota, 79% of the available programs are licensed family child care programs. In contrast, when examining the total number of slots available in the pilot areas (that is, the reported licensed capacity of programs), 41% are in licensed family child care and 59% are in center-based (including Head Start/Early Head Start) and preschool programs.⁶

⁶ There are 20,317 slots in the pilot areas: 8,253 in licensed family child care programs and 11,947 in center-based (including Head Start/Early Head Start) and preschool programs.

Table 2

Numbers of Programs by Type of Care in Parent Aware Pilot Areas (May, 2008)

| Type of Care | St. Paul | N. Mpls. | Wayzata | Blue Earth/ Nicollet | Mpls. Comp. | S. MN Comp. |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|---------|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Head Start/ Early Head Start | 8 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 20 |
| Child Care Center | 63 | 15 | 17 | 22 | 26 | 14 |
| Family Child Care | 363 | 104 | 23 | 245 | 58 | 427 |
| Preschool Program | 22 | 3 | 7 | 13 | 6 | 21 |
| Total | 456 | 123 | 47 | 285 | 93 | 482 |

Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

In contrast to the St. Paul and North Minneapolis pilot areas, the Minneapolis comparison area has a higher percentage of child care centers, preschools, or Head Start/Early Head Start programs (37%). The programs in the southern Minnesota comparison area are 89% family child care, similar to the southern Minnesota pilot area.

Weekly Rates

As of May, 2008, the mean weekly rates for centers and preschools in the urban pilot areas (St. Paul, North Minneapolis, and Wayzata) range from just over \$200 for preschoolers to just over \$300 for infants. Rates are slightly higher in the Minneapolis comparison area, and significantly lower in the southern Minnesota areas, where rates range from just over \$130 for preschoolers to just over \$160 for infants (see Table 3). Rates are much lower for family child care homes; in the urban areas ranging from just over \$130 for preschoolers in St. Paul to \$200 for infants in Wayzata. All of the family child care rates in the southern Minnesota areas are between \$110-120 per week (see Table 4).

Table 3

Mean Weekly Rates for Centers and Preschools (May, 2008)

| | Mean Weekly Rates for Centers and Preschools (\$) | | | | | |
|-----------|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| | St. Paul | N. Mpls. | Wayzata | Mpls. Comp | S. MN Pilot | S. MN Comp |
| Infant | 279.34 (n = 31) | 270.72 (n = 7) | 307.89 (n = 9) | 309.17 (n = 13) | 161.57 (n = 13) | 136.60 (n = 5) |
| Toddler | 232.85 (n = 41) | 236.83 (n = 9) | 248.58 (n = 12) | 250.38 (n = 15) | 148.91 (n = 12) | 129.60 (n = 5) |
| Preschool | 200.95 (n = 47) | 208.36 (n = 11) | 216.08 (n = 13) | 228.59 (n = 18) | 136.78 (n = 14) | 133.00 (n = 6) |

Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Table 4
Mean Weekly Rates for Family Child Care (May, 2008)

| <u>Mean Weekly Rates for Family Child Care (\$)</u> | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | St. Paul | N. Mpls. | Wayzata | Mpls. Comp | S. MN Pilot | S. MN Comp |
| Infant | 152.55 (n = 245) | 169.09 (n = 77) | 200.00 (n = 8) | 180.56 (n = 41) | 119.56 (n = 137) | 119.87 (n = 123) |
| Toddler | 142.08 (n = 250) | 160.72 (n = 78) | 193.75 (n = 8) | 170.14 (n = 41) | 115.45 (n = 137) | 115.79 (n = 123) |
| Preschool | 137.54 (n = 250) | 147.09 (n = 78) | 184.00 (n = 7) | 157.74 (n = 41) | 111.98 (n = 139) | 114.02 (n = 123) |

Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Vacancy Rates

Vacancy rates, defined as the difference between the licensed capacity and the number of children currently enrolled in a program [percent vacant = 1 – (enrolled/licensed capacity)], were also examined throughout the pilot and comparison areas. In general, family child care programs had higher vacancy rates than centers and preschools in all of the areas. For example, for centers, preschool vacancy rates ranged from 0% in southern Minnesota to nearly 40% in north Minneapolis, whereas in family child care programs they ranged from 51% (southern MN) to 68% (N. Minneapolis). Family child care programs have lower licensed capacities than do centers and preschools, so even one vacancy in a given age-range would result in a relatively high vacancy rate. Preschool vacancy rates were higher in the urban as compared to the rural (southern MN) areas, but there was more variation in the infant and toddler vacancy rates across areas (see Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5
Mean Vacancy Rates for Centers and Preschools

| <u>Mean Vacancy Rates for Centers and Preschools</u> | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| | St. Paul | N. Mpls. | Wayzata | Mpls. Comp | S. MN Pilot | S. MN Comp |
| Infant | 7.5% (n = 41) | 26.6% (n = 9) | 31.9% (n = 11) | 29.3% (n = 18) | 27.8% (n = 19) | 21.9% (n=12) |
| Toddler | 20.5% (n = 54) | 25.4% (n = 13) | 8.4% (n = 16) | 30% (n = 23) | 34.58% (n = 18) | 26.6% (n = 12) |
| Preschool | 16.5% (n = 70) | 39.1% (n = 18) | 16.3% (n = 21) | 30.7% (n = 27) | 0% (n = 28) | 0% (n = 37) |

Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Table 6
Mean Vacancy Rates for Family Child Care

| <u>Mean Vacancy Rates for Family Child Care</u> | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | St. Paul | N. Mpls. | Wayzata | Mpls. Comp | S. MN Pilot | S. MN Comp |
| Infant | 59% (n = 361) | 57.9% (n = 95) | 50% (n = 21) | 59.7% (n = 57) | 34.8% (n = 231) | 25.6% (n = 401) |
| Toddler | 56.9% (n = 361) | 58.3% (n = 95) | 65.1% (n = 21) | 57.6% (n = 57) | 48.5% (n = 230) | 39.5% (n = 400) |
| Preschool | 65.2% (n = 357) | 67.5% (n = 94) | 63.1% (n = 21) | 65.8% (n = 55) | 51.1% (n = 231) | 51.21% (n = 403) |

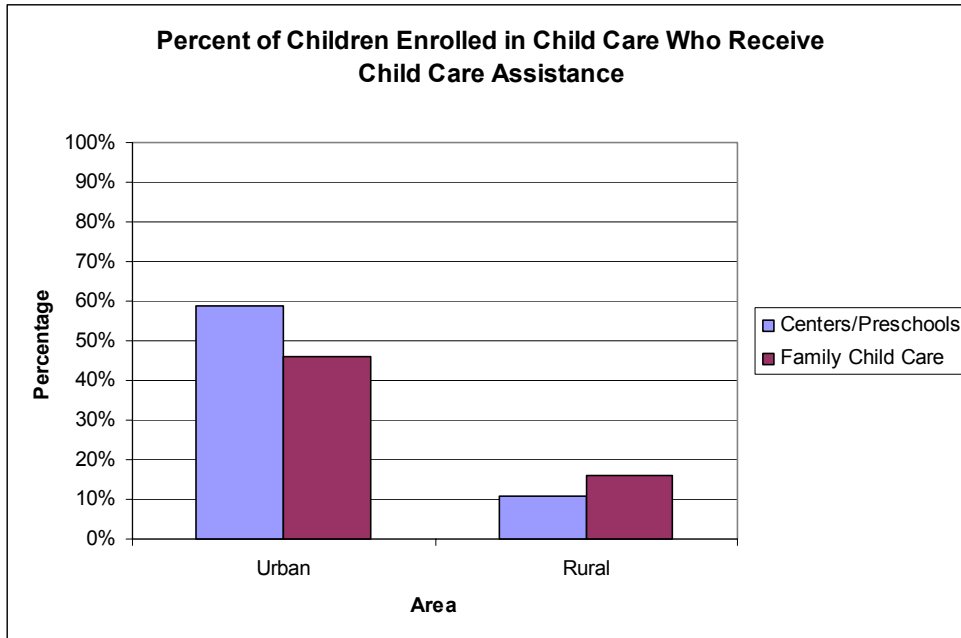
Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Children Using the Child Care Assistance Program

The percentage of children that received subsidies from the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and were served by early care and education programs in the Parent Aware areas was drawn from the MELF Baseline Study conducted by Wilder Research (Chase & Moore, 2008). The data are grouped into geographic areas consisting of the “urban” portions of the Parent Aware communities (including the North Minneapolis pilot area, the St. Paul pilot area, and the Minneapolis comparison area), and the “rural” portions of the Parent Aware communities (including the Southern Minnesota pilot area and the Southern Minnesota comparison area).

According to program directors who completed the MELF Baseline Study, nearly 60% of children enrolled in centers and preschools and 46% enrolled in family child care programs in the urban area receive subsidies from the CCAP. Programs in the rural area serve a much lower percentage of children receiving CCAP, about 11% of children enrolled in centers and preschools and 16% of those enrolled in family child care programs (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

Indicators of Quality in Early Care and Education Programs

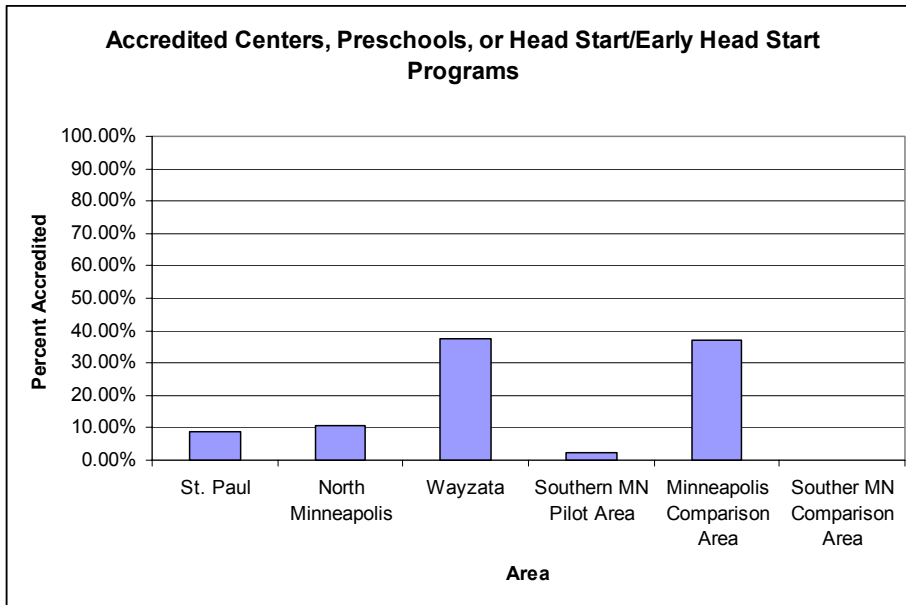
In this section, we examine selected indicators of program quality that align with the indicators included in the Parent Aware rating tool. These include accreditation as well as indicators relevant to the Parent Aware categories of Family Partnerships, Teaching Materials and Strategies, Tracking Learning, and Teacher Training and Education. An examination of the indicators provides useful information to track changes in quality at the level of early care and education programs.

Accreditation. Parent Aware recognizes national accreditation as a mark of the highest possible quality in early care and education programs. Accredited programs that enroll in Parent Aware are automatically assigned a 4-star rating (the highest possible rating). Therefore, early in the implementation of Parent Aware, it is useful to assess the number of accredited programs and to track this number over time.

With the exception of Wayzata, around 10% or less of centers, preschools and Head Start/Early Head Start programs in the pilot areas were accredited as of May, 2008 (see Figure 3). This amounts to eight accredited centers in St. Paul, one in Blue Earth County, and two in north Minneapolis. Wayzata had 9 accredited centers, making up 37.5% of the total number of centers. There was only one accredited family child care program in the pilot areas and it was in Blue Earth County.

There were 13 (37%) accredited centers, preschools, or Head Start/Early Head Start programs in the Minneapolis comparison area. There were no accredited centers, preschools, or Head Start/Early Head Start programs in the Southern Minnesota Comparison area and there were no accredited family child care programs in either comparison area.

Figure 3



Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

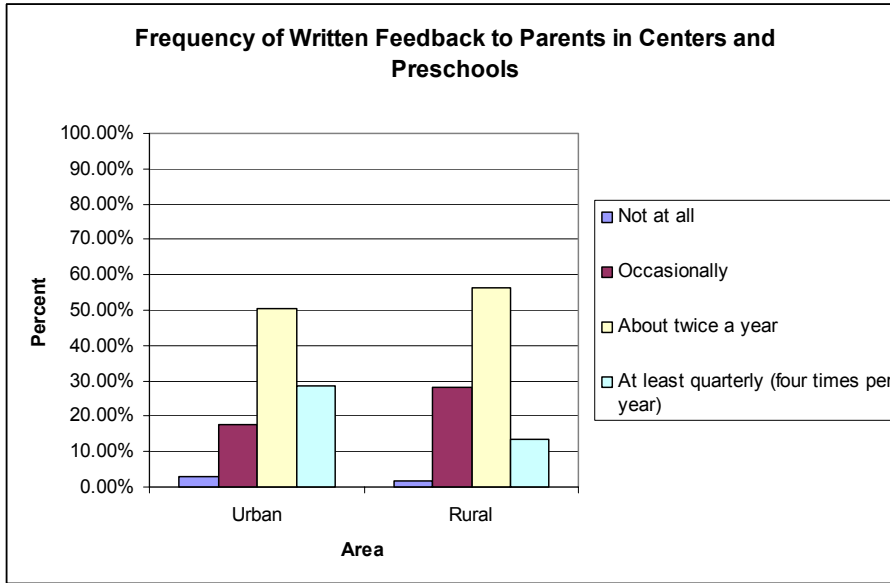
Family Partnerships. As noted above, the Family Partnerships domain requires early care and education programs to have a variety of plans for communicating with the parents of the children they serve. Programs must have systems in place to regularly collect feedback from parents, have a written plan for using parent feedback, have strategies in place to communicate with families, conduct intake interviews, refer parents to preschool screening, have plans to help children make developmental and school transitions (i.e., transition to Kindergarten), and talk to parents about those transitions.

The MELF Baseline Study (Chase & Moore, 2008) provided information on three indicators that align with the Family Partnerships category: Frequency of written communication with parents, frequency of informal communication with parents, and the extent to which programs provide assistance to children and families making the transition to Kindergarten.

According to the MELF Baseline study, approximately 30% of center and preschool teachers in the urban areas provide written feedback to parents at least four times a year, while fewer teachers provided written feedback at least four times a year in the rural areas (see Figure 4). Written feedback to parents was less common in family child care settings, particularly in the rural areas, where close to 70% of providers reported that they never give written feedback (see Figure 5).

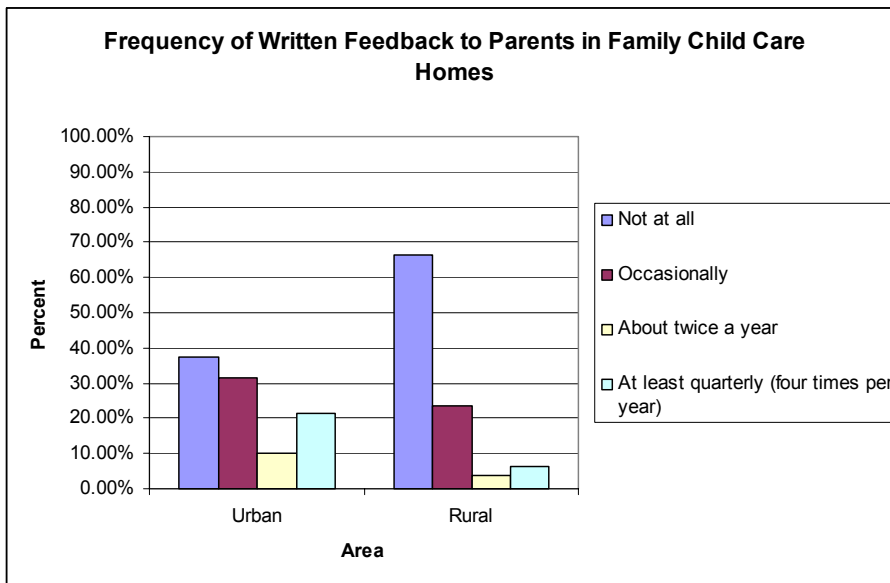
Informal feedback to parents was much more common for both center/preschool teachers and family child care providers across all study areas. On average, 64% of center/preschool teachers and 70% of family child care providers provided informal feedback “almost every day”.

Figure 4



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

Figure 5



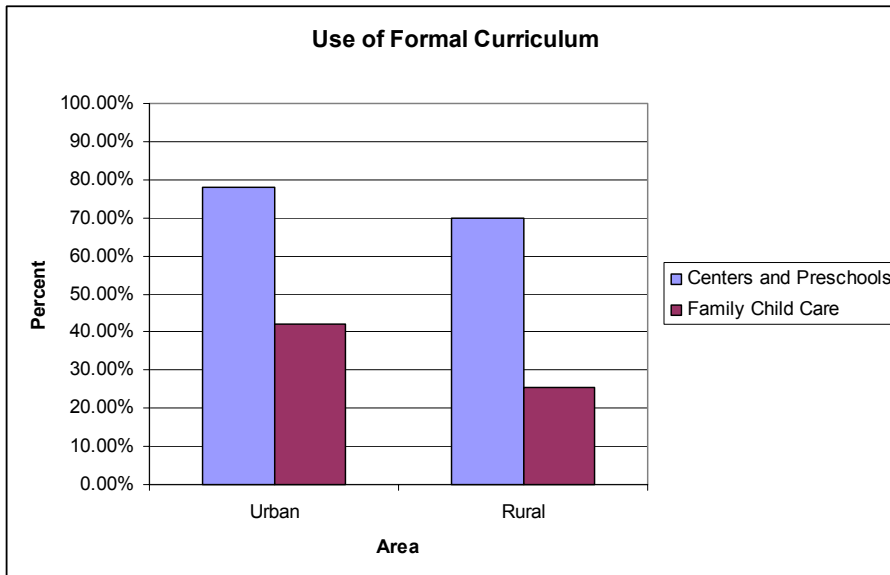
Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

Finally, according to the MELF Baseline Study, an estimated 73% of centers and preschools in both the urban and rural areas offer assistance to families to help children transition to Kindergarten. For family child care programs, 60% in the urban area and 50% in the rural offer such assistance.

Teaching Materials and Strategies. One component of the Teaching Materials and Strategies domain is the use of an approved research-based curriculum on which staff have been trained.

Data from the MELF Baseline Study indicate that, on average, about 76% of the urban and 70% of the rural centers and preschools report using a formal, written curriculum. Curriculum use was considerably lower for family child care programs, averaging 40% in urban areas and around 26% in the rural areas (see Figure 6).

Figure 6



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

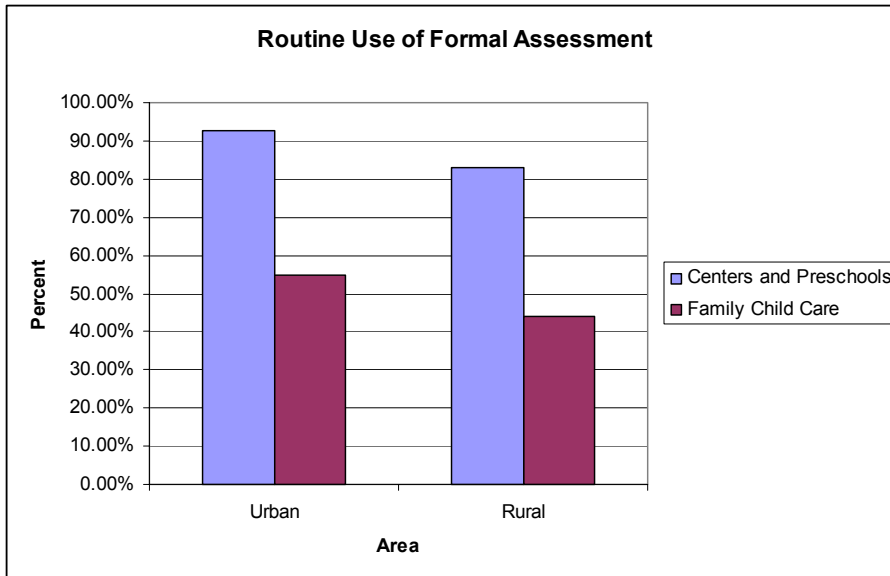
A large variety of curricula were used by the early care and education programs in the study areas. For centers and preschools, the most common curricula were those developed by the program or by corporate headquarters, followed by Creative Curriculum and High Scope (both of which are on the approved curriculum list for Parent Aware). Creative Curriculum and providers' own curricula were the curricula most commonly reported in family child care programs (Wilder Research, 2008).

Tracking Learning. Formal assessment of children is an indicator of quality in the Tracking Learning domain in the Parent Aware rating tool. Requirements for programs include using an approved, research based assessment tool on which staff have been trained, providing assessment results to families, and using assessment results to guide instruction. The MELF Baseline Study asked programs whether they routinely use formal child assessments, and if so, which specific assessment tools they use.

Across all of the study areas, both centers/preschools and family child care programs reported use of formal child assessments (as well as screening tools) at a higher rate than use of a formal curriculum described above. In the urban areas, reported use of formal assessments/screening tools was around 93% for centers and preschools. The rate was lower

(83%) for the rural areas. For family child care programs, reported use of assessments was lower: 55% for the urban areas and 44% in the rural areas (see Figure 7).

Figure 7



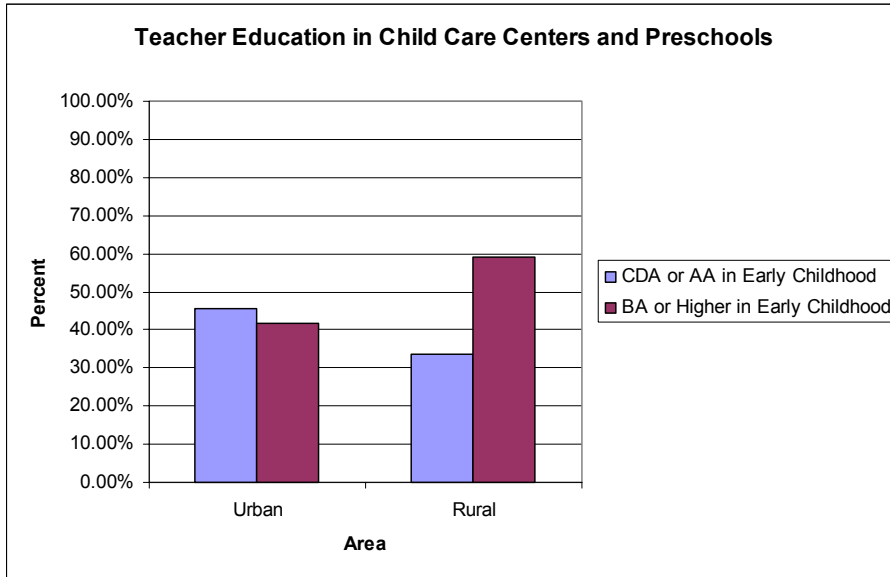
Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

A variety of assessments were used by the different programs, and it was noteworthy that programs/providers often reported using a screening tool or an assessment they had developed themselves rather than a research-based assessment tool. For centers and preschools, “homegrown” assessments, Ages and Stages, and IGDIs were most commonly reported in the urban areas; “homegrown” assessments and Work Sampling were used most frequently in the rural areas. For family child care programs, “homegrown” assessments and an assessment offered through Provider Choices were most commonly reported (Chase & Moore, 2008). Of those reported most frequently, Work Sampling is the only assessment on the approved list for Parent Aware.

Teacher Training and Education. The Teacher Training and Education domain in Parent Aware includes indicators related to a teacher or family child care provider’s professional development. Education and training were included in the MELF Baseline Study (Chase & Moore, 2008).

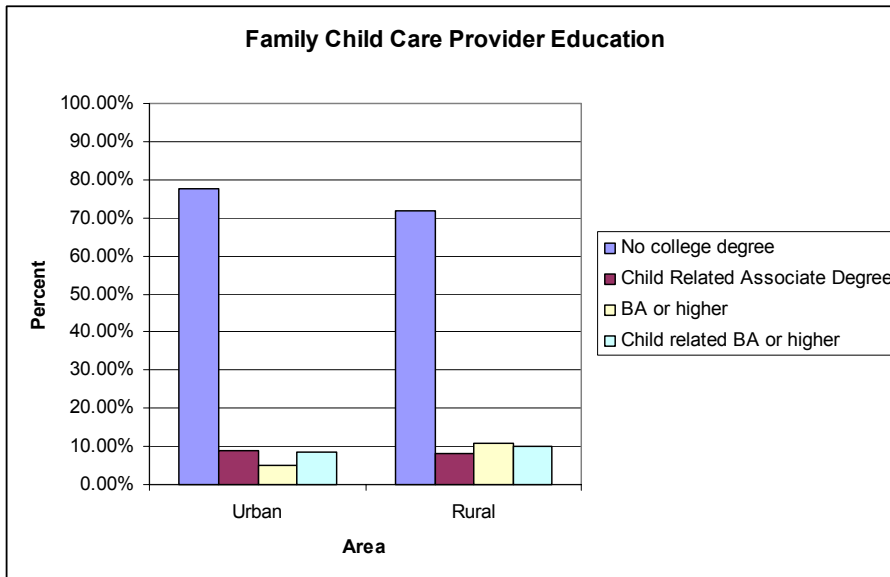
In the urban areas, 46% of center and preschool teachers had a CDA or AA in early childhood and around 42% had a BA or higher in early childhood. In the rural areas, nearly 60% of center and preschool teachers had a BA or higher and 33% had a CDA or AA in early childhood (see Figure 8). The educational level of family care providers was considerably lower across all areas, with 78% in the urban and 72% in the rural areas reporting no college degree (see Figure 9).

Figure 8



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

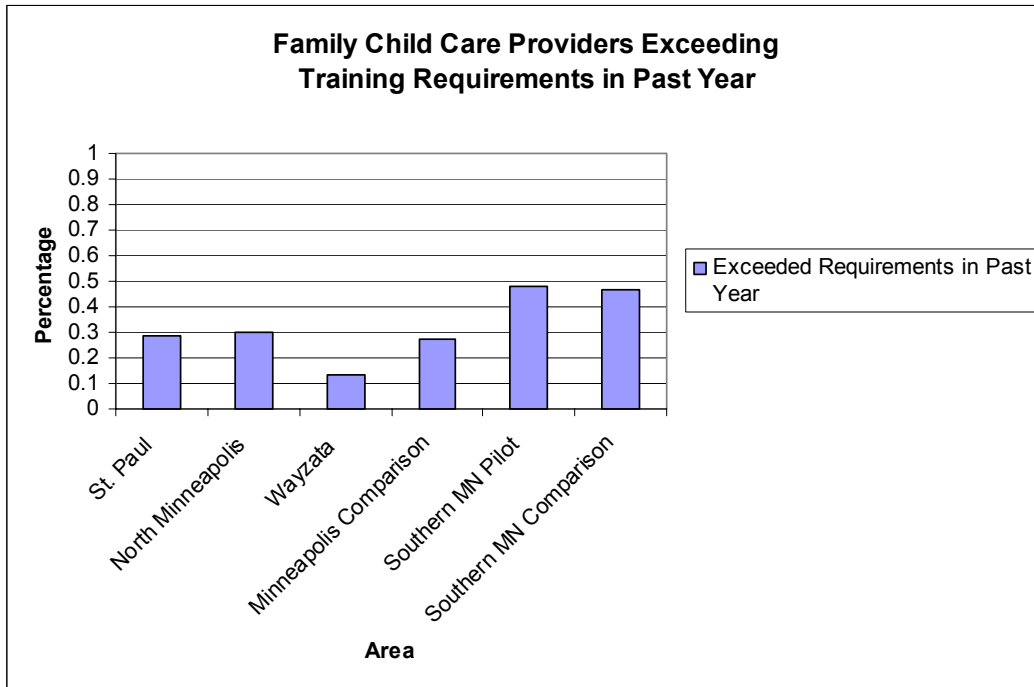
Figure 9



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

With regard to training, in the urban areas, 63% of teachers in centers and preschools exceeded their annual in-service training in the previous year. In the rural areas, 52% of teachers did so. The percent of family child care providers who exceeded their annual training requirements in the previous year ranged from 13% in Wayzata to 48% in the Southern Minnesota pilot area (see Figure 10).

Figure 10



Source: Minnesota NACCRRAware, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Characteristics of Families in the Parent Aware Pilot Areas

A final set of important contextual factors to examine are the characteristics of families in the MELF pilot areas. The MELF Baseline Study (Chase & Moore, 2008) provided rich information about the families in both the urban and rural pilot areas. Here, we highlight those factors that are most important for understanding the challenges to Parent Aware and the effectiveness of the program in achieving its goals.

Income. Wilder Research interviewed families for the MELF Baseline Study who were defined as having “low-incomes” which meant incomes under \$50,000 [note that a rural higher-income comparison group is included in a number of the findings reported below]. Within this representative sample of low-income families in the pilot areas, however, there were distinct differences between the urban and rural areas that have implications for Parent Aware.

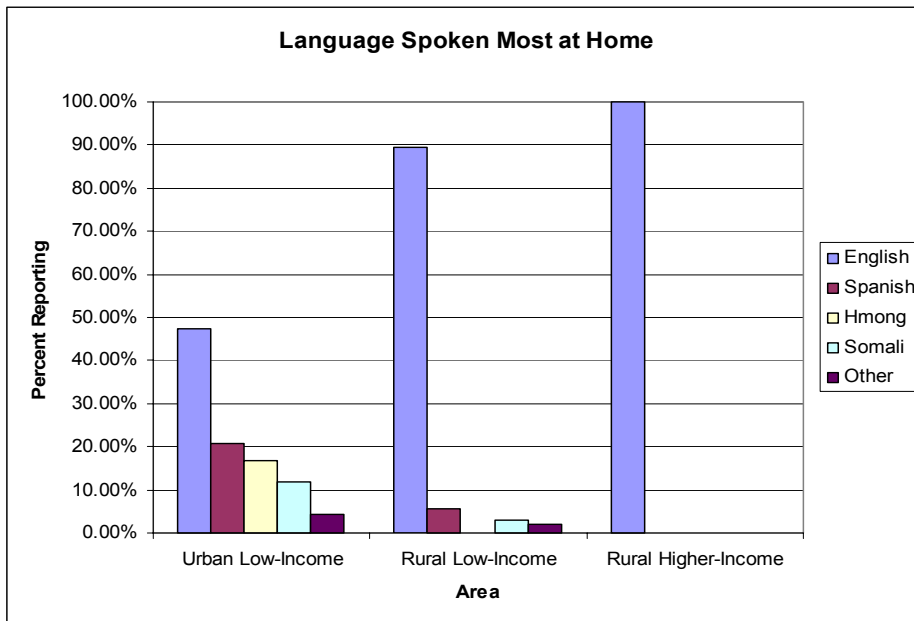
- ❑ 63% of low-income families in the urban areas had incomes under \$25,000 while 67% of low-income families in the rural areas had incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000.
- ❑ The low-income urban population targeted by Parent Aware is thus significantly more disadvantaged in terms of income compared to the rural population.

Race and ethnicity. Among the families interviewed for the baseline study, the low-income families in the urban area had much greater racial/ethnic diversity than either of the rural groups.

- The urban area was made up of similar percentages of African American (17%), Asian (16%), Hispanic/Latino (24%), Caucasian/White (20%), and African (16%).
- In contrast, families in the rural areas were primarily White (86% and 99% in the low-income and higher-income groups respectively).
- In addition, the urban sample was made up of 50% immigrants/refugees whereas only 10% claimed immigrant/refugee status in the low-income rural group (and there were no immigrants/refugees in the rural higher-income group).

Language. Similarly, there was a marked difference in the languages spoken most at home in the urban vs. rural groups (see Figure 11). Fewer than 50% of the urban families reported English as their primary language whereas the numbers were much higher (90% and 100%) in the rural low- and higher-income groups respectively.

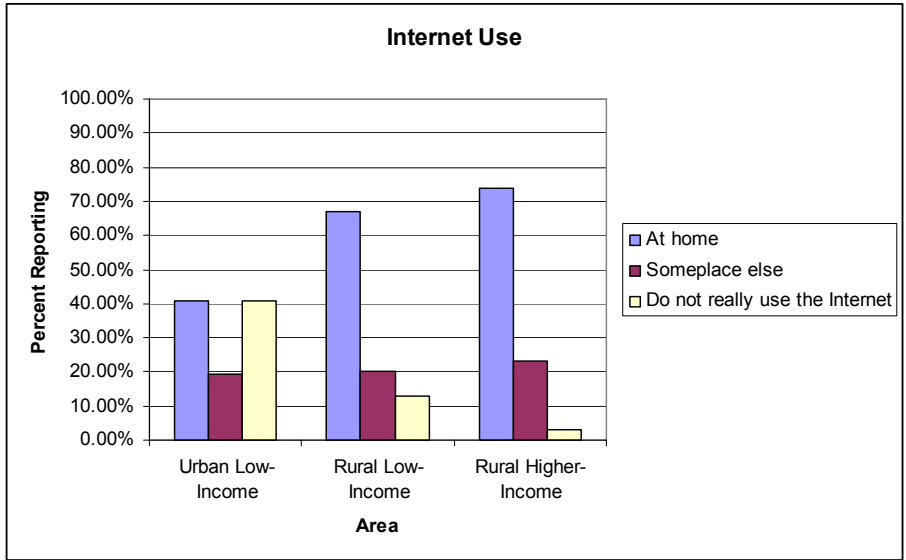
Figure 11



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

Internet Use. For families, the primary source of information about Parent Aware is the internet (www.parentawareratings.org). The website provides information about the Parent Aware rating tool as well as the participating early care and education programs and their Parent Aware ratings. Therefore, an important indicator to take into consideration is the number of families who report having access to the internet. According to the MELF Baseline Study, approximately 41% of families in the urban area have internet access at home, while the same percentage reported that they do not really use the internet. Internet access varies widely in the urban area with 74% of White families reporting internet access at home and only 23% of Latino families and 20% of Hmong families reporting internet access at home (Chase, 2008). In contrast to the urban area, internet use at home is higher in the rural areas (67% and 74% in low-income and higher-income families respectively). Still, 13% of low-income families in the rural areas reported that they do not use the internet (see Figure 12).

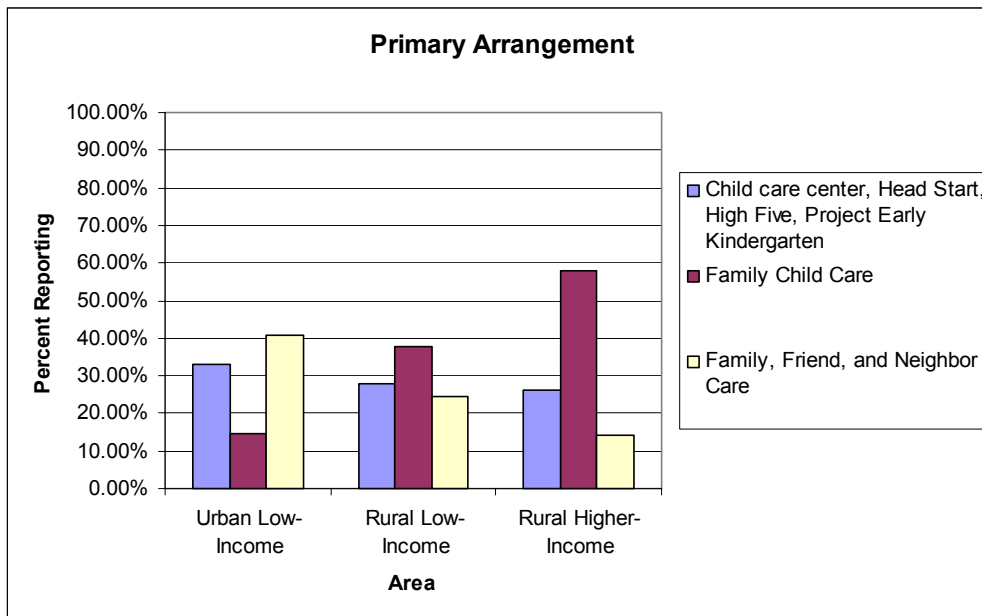
Figure 12



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

Primary Early Care and Education Arrangements. The MELF Baseline Study documented the primary early care and education arrangements used for children age 0-5. In the urban area, the most common primary arrangement reported was family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care (41%), followed by center/preschool (33%), and family child care (15%). Primary arrangements varied by child age, with children 2 years of age and younger more likely to be in parent care or family, friend, and neighbor care, and children 3-5 years of age more likely to be in center care. Primary arrangements also varied by race/ethnicity, with African American and Hmong families more likely to use family child care than Latino, Somali, or White families, and Hmong families less likely to use center care than families of other race/ethnicities (Chase, 2008). In both rural groups, family child care was the most common primary arrangement (38% and 58% for low- and higher-income groups respectively), followed by center/preschool (28% and 26%), and finally FFN care (25% and 14%) (see Figure 13).

Figure 13



Source: MELF Baseline Study, Wilder Research, Chase & Moore, 2008

Choosing Early Care and Education. The MELF Baseline Study contained information about low-income parents’ perceptions about searching for and choosing child care. Parents in the urban low-income sample were less confident in their ability to search for and choose child care that is right for their families than parents in rural sample. Sixty-four percent of respondents in the urban group rated their ability to search for child care as “excellent” or “good” as compared to 78% in the rural low-income group and 88% in the rural higher-income group. In the urban group, 77% rated their ability to choose child care as “excellent” or “good”, as compared to 88% and 95% in the rural low-income and higher-income groups respectively.

Criteria Used in Early Care and Education Selection. In the MELF Baseline Study, families were asked to rate criteria in choosing care as “very important”, “somewhat important”, or “not important”. All three groups were most likely to rate “a place where child can learn new things and new skills” as a “very important” criteria. The rural groups rated “a caregiver who speaks your families’ native language” as the second-highest “very important” criteria and “a caregiver who has special training in taking care of children” as third. The urban group looked a bit different. Their second-highest “very important” criterion was having a caregiver with special training and their third criterion was “a reasonable cost”.

Out-of-pocket Cost. The MELF Baseline Study contained information about the out-of-pocket cost of early care and education. Of the three groups, parents in the urban area had the lowest out-of-pocket child care costs, spending on average \$38 per week (\$29 per child). The rural low-income group was spending more, on average \$59 per week (\$43 per child). In comparison, the higher-income group in rural Minnesota spent \$117 per week (\$90 per child). Twenty percent of the urban sample reported using child care assistance to help pay for child care, compared to 12% in the rural low-income sample and 2% in the higher-income sample.

Summary of Contextual Information:

- Programs in Parent Aware pilot areas appear better poised to meet some of the Parent Aware quality indicators (for example, those in the Family Partnerships domain) than others (for example, 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 are also more likely 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.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

This report summarized the first year of implementation of Parent Aware, a pilot quality rating system intended to promote children's school readiness by rating and recognizing quality early care and education, supporting quality improvements and helping parents select high quality programs and providers. Throughout the report, summaries of key findings and implications for the Parent Aware Implementation Team and stakeholders are included. The report also includes contextual information about programs and families in the Parent Aware pilot areas that can be tracked over time.

The report is intended to promote and support discussions about implementation and to pose important issues that should be considered in the next phase of decision-making about the pilot.

A number of strengths of Parent Aware were identified in the report:

- Parent Aware is a quality rating system model with unique features that are intended to support programs, parents and ultimately children.
- Stakeholders perceive that Parent Aware has great potential to achieve its goals if critical dimensions of the program are fully resourced.
- Connections are being made to organizations/systems outside of the Parent Aware Implementation Team that can support dimensions of quality improvement.
- A successful marketing campaign has generated positive press coverage of the program and significant traffic to the Parent Aware website.

The report also identifies challenges for the Parent Aware Implementation Team:

- Engagement and buy-in to the program are perceived as critical to the success of the program. There is consensus that Parent Aware needs new strategies to engage all programs and promote buy-in.
- Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse programs and families in Parent Aware has been and will continue to be challenging.
- Providing improvement supports that are sufficient for promoting change will require a major investment of funding and staff.

Two future reports from the Parent Aware Evaluation will examine these implementation issues as well as how communities, programs, families and children are changing in response to Parent Aware. A sample of specific topics to be addressed in these reports includes:

Year 2 Evaluation Report, December 2009:

- ❑ The factors parents use to make early care and education choices
- ❑ The characteristics of programs participating in Parent Aware
- ❑ The number of participants in Parent Aware
- ❑ Program ratings and how they change over time

- Participants' perceptions about the quality indicators and overall rating designated by Parent Aware
- The effectiveness of the provisional rating process

Final Evaluation Report, December 2010

- An examination of changes:
 - In the average quality of early care and education programs across the pilot and comparison communities over the study period
 - In the tuition rates charged by programs over the study period
 - In early childhood initiatives
 - In parents choices of early care and education
- Parents' use of the quality indicators and ratings
- Validation of the program indicators and implications for adjustments in the ratings if the program is expanded.
- How the characteristics of early care and education settings and children's experiences are related to children's school readiness (controlling for background characteristics)
- The resources programs use to make quality improvements, the cost of quality improvement, and how costs relate to outcomes for the program and for children.

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APPENDIX

Interviewees for Parent Aware Year 1 Data Collection

Stakeholders in early care and education programs (serving parents and children)

1. Cathy Arentsen, Senior Director, Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties (Head Start)
2. Chad Dunkley, Chief Operating Officer, New Horizon Academy
3. Mary Terass, Vice President of Strategic Planning, New Horizon Academy
4. Joy Harken, Center Director, Kindercare Learning Corporation
5. Ann Lovrien, Program Administrator, Pre-Kindergarten Program, St. Paul Public Schools
6. Jacqueline Felt, Program Administrator, Pre-Kindergarten Program, St. Paul Public Schools
7. Irene DeJong, family child care provider
8. Deb Evan, family child care provider
9. Jelane Shriner, family child care provider
10. Sherry Bristol, family child care provider

Stakeholders in organizations serving/supporting early care and education programs and providers

11. Nancy Johnson, Coordinator, Caring for Kids Initiative
12. Eileen Nelson, Early Learning Services, Minnesota Department of Education
13. Sheryl Warner, Hennepin Licensed Family Child Care Association
14. Katy Chase, Executive Director, Minnesota Licensed Family Child Care Association
15. Nancy Dougherty, MNAEYC
16. Heidi Malloy, Metropolitan State University
17. Zoe Nicholie, Ready 4 K
18. Bob-E Simpson-Epps, Vice President and Director of Strategic Operations, First Children's Finance
19. Denise Schumacher, Outreach Coordinator, Region 9, Child Care Resource and Referral
20. Sandy Myers, Director of Programs and Public Policy, Resources for Child Caring
21. Cassandra Williams-Sims, Career Path Guidance Manager, Early Childhood Resource and Training Center
22. Mary Ann Robinson, Program Specialist, Early Childhood Resource and Training Center

Parent Aware Implementation Team

ERS/CLASS Observations – Assessment and Training Center

23. Amy Susman-Stillman, Interim Co-Director, Center for Early Education and Development, University of Minnesota
24. Katie Gag, Center for Early Education and Development, University of Minnesota
25. Kerry Gleason, Center for Early Education and Development, University of Minnesota

Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

26. Ann McCully, Executive Director, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network
27. Valerie Peterson, Parent Aware Director, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network
28. Sue Larson, Provider Resource Specialist, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network
29. Wanda Hill, Provider Resource Specialist, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network
30. Kamayla Howard, Provider Resource Specialist, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Minnesota Department of Human Services

31. Deb Swenson-Klatt, Director of Child Development Services, Minnesota Department of Human Services
32. Michelle Lenhart, Minnesota Department of Human Services
33. Angie Jensen, Minnesota Department of Human Services

Interview Protocol Parent Aware Stakeholders (including Parent Aware Implementation Team)⁷

Questions for all stakeholders:

1. What are the primary goals of your program?
2. How successful has your program been in achieving its goals?
3. What are the challenges you face?

Specific questions for programs serving providers (provider associations; child care resource and referral);

4. What programs or services do you have in place to help providers improve their quality?
5. From your perspective, what do providers need most to improve quality?

Specific questions for programs serving providers and parents (child care resource and referral):

6. What programs or services do you have in place to help parents find quality programs?
7. From your perspective, what do parents need most to find quality programs

Specific questions for programs serving parents and children (early care and education service providers):

8. What services do you have in place for your programs to improve their quality?
9. From your perspective, what does your program need most to improve quality?
10. Thinking about the parents who are eligible for your program, but do not attend, what do they need most to help them find high quality early care and education programs?
11. What in your opinion is the value of a program like Parent Aware for parents who are like the parents you serve?

Questions for all stakeholders:

12. We're trying to understand the impact of Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating System, Parent Aware, on [providers and parents] in all types of early care and education programs. In your opinion, what is the potential of Parent Aware to improve quality among the providers you serve? What is the potential of Parent Aware to help parents locate quality early care and education programs?
13. What are your hopes about Parent Aware?
14. What are your concerns about Parent Aware?
15. What changes have you made to your program/services, if any, as a result of the Parent Aware pilot?

⁷ Note that a separate protocol was used for two groups within the Implementation Team – the Resource Specialists and the ERS/CLASS Observers

16. What changes, if any, do you expect to make to your program/services in the future as a result of Parent Aware?
17. What do you think are the most critical factors that will determine whether or not Parent Aware is successful?
18. Is there anything else you would like to tell us or that we need to know to understand how Parent Aware fits into the programs/services you are already providing?

Interview Protocol Provider Resource Specialists

A. Your Experiences as a Provider Resource Specialist

1. What is your highest level of education?
2. Can you describe your prior experience within the field of early care and education?
3. What were your expectations for your role as a Provider Resource Specialist?
4. What has been your greatest strength as a Provider Resource Specialist?
5. What has been your biggest challenge so far?
6. Do you feel you have the supports in place to effectively do your job? If not, what additional supports would you like to see put into place for you? What supports are the most effective in helping you do your job?

B. Going on a Parent Aware Site Visit

1. How do you determine which Provider Resource Specialist visits each site?
2. Can you describe the model of service you use when you visit providers? (Explain thoroughly, e.g. does your approach change depending on the model of service you use.)
3. In what ways is your service model approach similar or different to the other Provider Resource Specialist's approach?
4. How often do you and the other Provider Resource Specialist meet to discuss your work? What are the benefits of this, if any?
5. Is there anything standard or consistent across all of your visits?
6. What is the average length of a visit?
7. Do you keep records or case notes of your visits, and if so, what does a typical record include?
8. How do you follow-up with the provider after a visit?
9. How often (and when) do you visit a specific child care site?

C. Your Experiences with Parent Aware Child Care Providers

1. Who do you talk to when you visit child care sites?
2. What are some typical questions, concerns, or issues that providers contact you about or ask during your visit?
3. What are some typical pieces of advice you provide to child care providers?
4. How often do you refer to the Environment Rating Scale tools?
5. What are your perceptions of how welcome you are at the child care site?
6. How do you connect with a provider who is not focused on making the changes you suggest?
7. What, in your opinion, is the most critical piece of support that providers are currently lacking?
8. How effective do you think you are (in terms of reaching providers, addressing ERS items, effecting change)?

Interview Protocol ERS/CLASS Observers

A. Your Experiences as an ERS/CLASS Observer

7. What is your highest level of education?
8. Can you describe your prior experience within the field of early care and education?
9. What were your expectations for your role as an ERS/CLASS Observer?
10. What has been your greatest strength as an ERS/CLASS Observer?
11. What has been your biggest challenge so far?
12. Do you feel you have the supports in place to effectively do your job? If not, what additional supports would you like to see put into place for you? What supports are the most effective in helping you do your job?

B. Your Experiences with Observation Visits

9. Who do you talk to when you visit child care sites?
10. What are your perceptions of how welcome you are at the child care site?
11. What are the challenges you've faced in performing the observations? How have you dealt with the challenges?
12. Have you made any changes in the protocol for your visits? If so, what kinds of changes?
13. What are some typical questions, concerns, or issues that providers ask you about during your visit?
14. Do you provide advice to child care providers? If so, what are some typical pieces of advice that you provide to child care providers?
15. What sections of the observation tools typically have the highest scores? The lowest scores? How much variation have you experienced in the scores across sites?
16. What, in your opinion, is the most critical piece of support that providers are currently lacking?
17. What is your sense of how much preparation providers, teacher, and/or directors are doing to prepare for the observations?

C. After the Observation Visit

1. How is feedback from the observations provided to the sites?
2. What reactions have you/CEED received in response to the feedback?
3. What is the protocol for responding to provider or director reactions to the feedback?

Survey Monkey Protocol
Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) Coordinators

1. In your experience as a parent educator, how often do parents raise questions or concerns about finding early care and education settings for their child? (Check one)
 - a. Never
 - b. Sometimes (once or twice a semester)
 - c. Often (three or more times a semester)

2. When parents discuss the issue of finding and using early care and education settings, what general issues or concerns do they raise? (Check all that apply)
 - a. Where or how to get information
 - b. Quality
 - c. Cost
 - d. Convenience
 - e. Trust
 - f. Curriculum
 - g. School readiness
 - h. Qualifications of the provider/teacher
 - i. Transportation

3. Do you provide resources for parents who want more information about finding early care and education?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

4. What other resources do the parents in your programs use to find early care and education?
5. What additional information, resources and/or supports do the parents in your program need to help them find early care and education?
6. Have you heard about Parent Aware, Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating System?
7. From your perspective, how useful will a Quality Rating System (which provides information about the quality of licensed early care and education settings) be to the parents who participate in your program? (Check one)
 - a. Extremely useful
 - b. Useful
 - c. Somewhat useful
 - d. Not at all useful

8. Is there any other information on this topic that you would like to share with the research team?