



Early Educators' Experiences With Parent Aware, Minnesota's QRIS

Findings From Participatory Listening Sessions With Educators in Rated and Unrated Early Care and Education Programs

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Introduction

As part of an independent evaluation of Parent Aware, Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), and with funding from the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF),¹ Child Trends subcontracted with Wilder Research to conduct participatory listening sessions with early educators working in licensed early care and education (ECE) programs. The goal of these listening sessions was to learn about early educators' experiences and perceptions of Parent Aware, including strengths and barriers within the Rating process. To gather multiple perspectives on Parent Aware, Wilder Research conducted sessions with educators from child care centers and family child care programs that were currently Parent Aware Rated, as well as those that were not Rated. This report details our methods and findings from those sessions, along with implications for future revisions and improvements to Parent Aware.

Background and importance of Parent Aware

Parent Aware is designed to rate the quality of care provided in the state's ECE programs,² to provide tools and resources for families to connect with high-quality care that meets their needs, and to support programs in improving their practices. Participation in Parent Aware is currently voluntary, meaning programs can choose whether to become Parent Aware Rated as well as which Star Level they seek. However, the Minnesota Legislature recently passed a bill that will automatically assign all licensed child care programs a One-Star Rating unless the program opts out of the system.³ The legislation requires additional research on the impacts and costs of this policy change to inform a final process for implementing the change by July 2026. This upcoming policy shift makes it even more critical to understand patterns of Parent Aware participation among ECE programs and potential impacts of moving from voluntary participation to a system in which all licensed child care programs are automatically assigned a Rating.

A Child Trends analysis of state administrative data found that, as of May 2024, around one in three ECE programs had a Parent Aware Rating (31%). The proportion of Rated programs was higher among child care centers than among family child care programs, with almost half of child care centers having Ratings (47%) compared to around one in five family child care programs (18%).⁴ These data further underscore the importance of understanding the factors that influence programs' decisions to participate in Parent Aware as well as the barriers that may prevent them from doing so. Some programs, for example, may experience barriers to participating or achieving a higher Star Rating Level due to a lack of capacity (e.g., lack of staff or time) or financial support to go through the application and Rating process. Other programs may perceive that Parent Aware is incompatible with their program philosophy or is not inclusive of the racial, ethnic, or linguistic characteristics of their program, their staff, or the populations they serve. Some may choose not to participate because they do not feel they need the supports that Parent Aware offers, while others may feel that a Rating is not needed to market their program to families because their program is operating at full

¹ The Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) launched on July 1, 2024. From July 2024 to July 2025, state programs and staff will gradually transfer to DCYF from the Departments of Human Services, Education, Health, and Public Safety. As this new agency is established, documents may have previous agency logos or names and the DCYF website may temporarily redirect to original agency web pages. For more details, [visit the DCYF website](#).

² Parent Aware is available for family child care and center-based programs that are licensed through the Minnesota DCYF, certified child care programs, Head Start programs, and public school-based pre-K programs.

³ Child Care Aware of Minnesota. (2023). Final legislative update: May 25, 2023. Child Care Aware of Minnesota. <https://www.childcareawaremn.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Final-2023-Legislative-Update-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ Keaton, H., Ekyalongo, Y., Tang, J., & Hilty, R. (forthcoming). Statewide participation in Parent Aware among early care and education programs. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Child Trends.

enrollment.⁵ Non-participation of these programs may result in systemic biases in Parent Aware such that quality improvement opportunities are provided for select programs, while non-participating programs cannot access these supports.

As Minnesota explores the implications of implementing a One-Star Rating in all licensed programs, understanding early educators' perceptions of Parent Aware and reasons for non-participation may shed light on opportunities to better support programs through the Rating process and to strengthen community buy-in for Parent Aware. Importantly, this work also coincides with DCYF's efforts on the Parent Aware Redesign, which, building on recommendations from the Parent Aware Racial Equity Action Plan Report,⁶ aims to assess the effectiveness of Parent Aware as a system, to understand and address inequities, and to make improvements that support the needs of the children, families, and members of the ECE workforce whom the system was designed to serve.⁷ The intersection of the Parent Aware evaluation, the Redesign, and the upcoming Automatic One-Star legislation presents a unique opportunity to examine Parent Aware's effectiveness and identify meaningful improvements to ensure that Parent Aware equitably supports the needs of early educators, families, and children across the state.

Terminology in this report

Terms like “child care provider” or “early childhood educator” are often used interchangeably to describe the professionals who work in early learning programs, including home-based, center-based, family child care, and school-based preschool programs. Through another a recent engagement effort, DCYF received feedback that the term “early educators” is the preferred term amongst child care professionals to be used across all types of early childhood settings. Our team used this term throughout this report but did not edit direct quotes from participants.

Organization of this report

Wilder Research conducted participatory listening sessions with early educators in two rounds. Sessions with early educators working in Rated programs (referred to in this report as “Rated early educators”) were conducted in Spring 2023, and sessions with educators working in unrated programs (“unrated early educators”) were conducted in Spring 2024. As such, our methods and findings are organized into two sections: [listening sessions with Rated early educators](#) and [listening sessions with unrated early educators](#). Drawing on insights from both rounds of sessions, we also discuss [key recommendations for Parent Aware](#) at the end of the report.

⁵ Bultinck, E., Silamongkol, T., Lowe, C., Cleveland, J., & Tout, K. (2019). Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/provider-perceptions-parent-aware-minnesotas-quality-rating-and-improvement-system>

⁶ Awaah, E. (2022). *Advancing a racial equity action plan for Parent Aware: Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system*. <https://www.parentaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/MN-ParentAwareRacialEquityPlan-2022.pdf>

⁷ For more information on the Parent Aware Redesign, see the DCYF website: <https://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/program-overviews/child-care-and-early-education/parent-aware/>

Listening Sessions With Rated Early Educators

Methods with Rated early educators

Research questions

The primary goals of the listening sessions with Rated early educators were to understand how child care programs experience the Parent Aware application process, quality improvement processes, and financial and administrative requirements, as well as to explore early educators' perceptions of how Parent Aware does or does not support racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity among child care program staff and children. Our specific research questions for the listening sessions include:

1. What are the reasons programs do or do not participate in Parent Aware? Do those reasons differ by type of program or by the race/ethnicity of the program staff/early educator or children served?
2. What are the barriers to participating in Parent Aware? What supports exist for programs to overcome those barriers, and how can the state expand those supports and reduce barriers to participation? Do barriers differ by type of program, or by the racial/ethnic diversity of the program staff/early educator or children served?
3. To what extent is Parent Aware and the Rating process culturally inclusive and culturally relevant to diverse programs, early educators, and the families they serve? How could Parent Aware be more inclusive of racial, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity among programs, early educators, and the families they serve?

Sampling and recruitment

Wilder Research conducted seven virtual listening sessions in March and May 2023 with individuals who are in the decision-making role that determines whether a program participates in Parent Aware and/or facilitates the Rating process at their program. Most often, those individuals were child care center directors and family child care educators. Center directors who did not fill out the Parent Aware application could opt to refer a colleague who was more involved with the application process, such as a curriculum coordinator or other administrative leader.

We recruited Rated programs that were Rated through the Full-Rating Pathway. We did not recruit programs that were Rated through other Rating Pathways, as those programs go through a streamlined application process.⁸ To recruit Rated early educators, we developed an email invitation in English with information about the study and a link to register. A phone hotline was added for early educators who preferred to communicate in Spanish, Hmong, or Somali. We sent this invitation directly to the email addresses of all Rated early educators, which were provided to our team by DHS.

The registration link included a pre-screening questionnaire to facilitate enrollment of a diverse mix of early educators from different types of programs (centers and family child care programs), geography (Twin Cities Metropolitan Area and Greater Minnesota), Rating status, previous Rating status, and some background

⁸ For more information about the different Rating Pathways, see the Parent Aware website: <https://www.parentaware.org/programs/rating-eligibility/>

about other recent data collection activities they may have participated in about Parent Aware.⁹ A consent form was also included as part of the registration link.

Wilder enrolled a total of 113 people (about 25 in each session). The enrollment for each session was based on their responses to the pre-screening questionnaire to ensure we reached different types of programs and early educators across the state. Participants received a confirmation email with a link to join the listening session they signed up for at least two to three days prior to the session and the day of the session.

A total of 51 people participated from Parent Aware Rated programs. About two-thirds represented centers (65%) and about a third were family child care educators (33%).

Table 1. Characteristics of listening session participants (n=51)

	Percent (n=51)
Type of program	
Family child care provider	33%
Child care center director or representative	65%
Unknown	1%
Region	
Twin Cities Metropolitan Area	35%
Greater Minnesota	65%
Providers' race/ethnicity	
White alone	80%
Asian alone	8%
Multiracial/two or more races	6%
Black/African American alone	4%
Hispanic/Latino alone	2%
American Indian alone	0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander alone	0%
Race/ethnicity of families served in program (select multiple)*	
White (18% reported serving only White families)	98%
Multiracial/two or more races	74%
Asian	45%
Hispanic/Latino	43%
Black/African American	41%
American Indian	25%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	16%

Note: * Providers who registered for listening sessions were asked to select all racial/ethnic categories that described any of the families they served in their program, so percentages do not total to 100.

Data collection process

Participatory research involves engaging research subjects in the research process rather than simply gathering data from subjects. The participatory listening sessions were similar in some ways to a focus group. However, unlike traditional focus groups, the facilitators asked licensed child care center directors and licensed family child care educators to help interpret and understand previous data collected about Parent Aware.

⁹ In an effort to ensure the listening sessions engaged providers who may not have yet had the opportunity to share their experiences or feedback related to Parent Aware, we asked providers to indicate in the pre-screening questionnaire whether they had participated in a focus group or listening session about Parent Aware in the last 5 years.

The sessions conducted in Spring 2023 and described in this report focused on Rated programs that earned their Rating through the Full-Rating Pathway. The questions focused on specific features of providers' experiences in Parent Aware, including the application process and the financial and administrative requirements of participating. The sessions also included questions about how program staff and leadership feel that their own race, ethnicity, culture, and language (and those of the staff and families they serve) were supported and included during the Parent Aware application and quality improvement processes. Sessions included key data points from the administrative data analysis, selected based on their relevance to the three research questions associated with this activity.

The questions we asked providers to reflect on during sessions were informed by findings from the administrative data analysis as well as findings from past engagement with Minnesota providers related to Parent Aware, as summarized in DCYF reports such as the Minnesota Department of Human Services Equity Engagement Report,¹⁰ Provider Perceptions of Parent Aware,¹¹ and the Parent Aware Participation Report.¹² In developing protocols for the participatory listening sessions, our team carefully reviewed past reports and feedback shared by both Rated and unrated providers to build off previous efforts and identify themes without duplicating.

A facilitator and a notetaker from Wilder Research attended each session. Sessions were facilitated in English.¹³ Following each listening session, participants received a \$50 Visa card sent via USPS.

Analysis and reporting

Wilder Research analyzed the listening session notes for key themes, making note of areas of similarities and differences between and across sessions. Preliminary findings were summarized and made available to listening session participants via an asynchronous visual Miro board. Participants received an email invitation to participate in a round of data analysis by interacting with the board, which had space for commentary and questions. The board was accessible via a website link and could be viewed via computer, tablet, or mobile phone. Once participatory data analysis was complete, Wilder Research conducted a final round of analysis to make sure that feedback from the Miro board was incorporated. While some participants viewed the Miro board, none left additional feedback on the analysis.

Findings from listening sessions with Rated early educators

This section summarizes the findings from seven sessions conducted in Spring 2023, organized according to the three main topics covered in each session: reasons for participation, barriers to participation, and cultural inclusivity and accessibility. Snapshots from the Miro board that Wilder Research created to gather participants' feedback on the analysis are provided throughout this section as visual depictions of the themes that emerged related to each topic.

In this report, we use the phrase BIPOC to refer to all participants who self-identified as Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color. We recognize that there are several distinct racial and ethnic groups in Minnesota. We use BIPOC to protect the privacy of participants.

¹⁰ Carroll, A., & Brown, J. (2022). *Minnesota Department of Human Services Parent Aware equity engagement report - Final analysis and compilations*. <https://www.parentaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/20220309-Final-DHS-PA-Equity-Engagement-Analysis-and-Compilation.pdf>

¹¹ Bultinck, E., Silamongkol, T., Lowe, C., Cleveland, J., & Tout, K. (2019). *Provider perceptions of Parent Aware: Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system*. *Child Trends*. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/provider-perceptions-parent-aware-minnesotas-quality-rating-and-improvement-system>

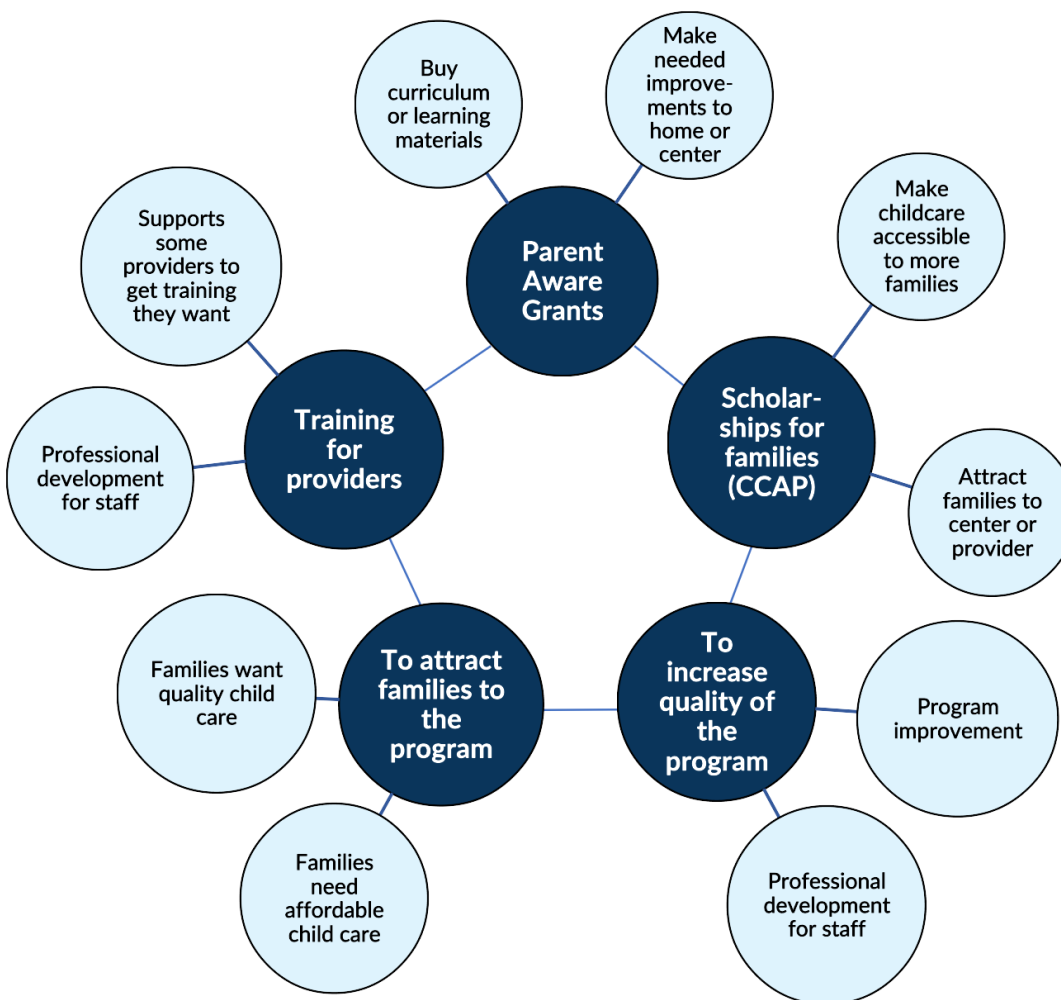
¹² Statewide Participation in Parent Aware (in process).

¹³ No programs requested the hotline, which was offered to programs who preferred to participate in Spanish, Somali, or Hmong.

Reasons to participate in Parent Aware

In the sessions, participants reviewed findings from the 2018 Provider Survey¹⁴ about reasons providers choose to participate in Parent Aware and then shared their own reasons for participating. The primary reasons why listening session participants joined Parent Aware included access to Parent Aware grants, financial assistance for families (including Early Learning Scholarships or ELS and higher reimbursement rates from the Child Care Assistance Program or CCAP¹⁵), training for providers and staff, increasing program quality, and attracting families to their programs (see Figure 1). Reasons for participating were shared across program type and race/ethnicity of early educators and families served. BIPOC family child care educators shared specific insights into the importance of Parent Aware supports for families that they serve. These insights are represented throughout this section and also highlighted in the Cultural Inclusivity and Accessibility section.

Figure 1. Miro board snapshot – reasons to participate in Parent Aware



Source: Wilder Research (2023)

¹⁴ Bultinck, E., Silamongkol, T., Lowe, C., Cleveland, J., & Tout, K. (2019). *Provider perceptions of Parent Aware: Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/provider-perceptions-parent-aware-minnesotas-quality-rating-and-improvement-system>

¹⁵ Minnesota uses tiered reimbursement, meaning CCAP reimbursement rates are higher for programs with a Three- or Four-Star Parent Aware Rating. See the Minnesota Department of Human Services' [CCAP Policy Manual](#) for more information.

Parent Aware grants

Early educators emphasized the importance of grants to support the quality and capacity of their child care programs. Many family child care and some center educators have used grants to make needed improvements to their home or center, such as new flooring or outdoor recreational equipment. Several early educators use grant money to buy learning materials, including curriculum, for children attending their program. Grants enable educators to keep their programs updated, and many said that they would be unable to afford these updates without quality grants. Early educators appreciate that grants are available to all Star Ratings, and access to grants is a major reason that they renew their Rating.

Financial assistance for families

Parent Aware makes child care more financially accessible to families through the ELS and tiered reimbursements for the CCAP. ELS increases access to high-quality early child care programs (e.g., Parent Aware Rated programs) for children with the highest needs. Likewise, CCAP provides money for child care to families with low incomes so that they can pursue and maintain employment. CCAP is available to families who enroll with any licensed child care provider, whether they are Rated or unrated, but programs with a Three- or Four-Star Parent Aware Rating are eligible for a higher reimbursement rate from CCAP. Early educators emphasized the importance of financial assistance for the families they serve and asserted that they know many families would not be able to afford child care without assistance like ELS and CCAP. BIPOC family child care educators said that access to these supports is a key reason for being Parent Aware Rated and that while the families they serve may not seek out their program for being Rated, they do seek out their program because of financial affordability.

“Main reason I participate – CCAP covers more for parents, so that is a huge incentive. Since I did the Four-Star Rating, they can pay less. Also, you learn more and you have a high-quality program.”

Training and supports for early educators

The training and professional development requirements for Parent Aware Ratings support the growth and development of early educators and their staff. Parent Aware supports many educators to get the training they want and increases the accessibility of free and low-cost training to staff through Develop and the state’s training delivery system (see Textbox 1).

Despite the fact that all licensed programs can access trainings through Develop, the training requirements for staff in Parent Aware Rated programs may help increase Rated early educators’ awareness of the training opportunities that are available to them while also creating a structure for completing ongoing training and professional development. Rated early educators also shared that coaches¹⁶ are an

Textbox 1. More about Minnesota’s training delivery system

Much of the state’s training delivery system is offered by Child Care Aware Districts, located statewide, as well as online learning events through Eager to Learn (Child Care Aware of Minnesota). These agencies offset costs to providers by offering free or low-cost training options related to licensing, requirements for Parent Aware, or other key topics with trainings approved by the Registry.

The statute requiring the state to create a registry for the ECE and school-age workforce also included a requirement for the data system to link staff to the ECE programs they work at, allowing for access to training records and educational achievements to support licensing and other ongoing needs.

¹⁶ During listening sessions, early educators spoke generally about their experiences working with coaches and other Parent Aware support staff, which could include Professional Development Advisors, Building Quality Coaches, or CLASS Coaches. Unless participants referred specifically to one of those roles, we use the term “coaches” in this report.

important bridge to learning and help facilitate their access to training and professional development opportunities through Develop.

Increasing quality of programs

Rated early educators believe that participation in Parent Aware increases the overall quality of their program. The combination of financial and educational supports enables programs to serve families in safe environments with access to educated staff and updated learning materials. Several early educators shared that Building Quality, a Parent Aware-funded coaching program, is motivational and encourages them to continue to improve their programs by seeking higher Ratings over time. Building Quality provides up to 30 hours of professional coaching and up to \$1,000 in grant money after six months of participation. Building Quality also helped early educators understand that they do not have to aim for a Four-Star Rating their first time; they can take advantage of Parent Aware supports to build quality over time.

"I joined right away in the beginning, and they came to just a meeting with a lot of local providers and I joined it looking just for excellence in early childhood. I guess I've always figured if I was going to do something, I was going to be my best at it. I didn't know about grants. I didn't know about any of the trainings. And then they shoved me right into tons of trainings and all that. The grants were a perk when I heard about them later, but I just did it to increase the quality in my field."

Attracting families to programs

Early educators believe that Parent Aware attracts families to their programs, directly and indirectly. Some families are attracted because they want high-quality child care, and they know that Parent Aware is an indicator of program quality. They may search for programs via the Parent Aware website or choose a recommended program because of a Parent Aware Rating. Other early educators shared that families may not always know the significance of the Parent Aware Rating but recognize the quality of the program. Some also emphasized that Parent Aware helps them attract families who are looking for affordable child care. Specifically, BIPOC early educators, early educators that serve BIPOC families, and early educators in Greater MN (rural/small town) often made the connection between affordability and attracting families. ELS can only be used in Parent Aware Rated programs. Being a Parent Aware Rated program means that families who receive the Pathway I ELS can use their scholarship funding at their program, thereby making the program more affordable and accessible. Additionally, programs that offer Pathway II ELS can award a Pathway II slot directly to families who meet the ELS eligibility criteria.¹⁷

Barriers to participation in Parent Aware

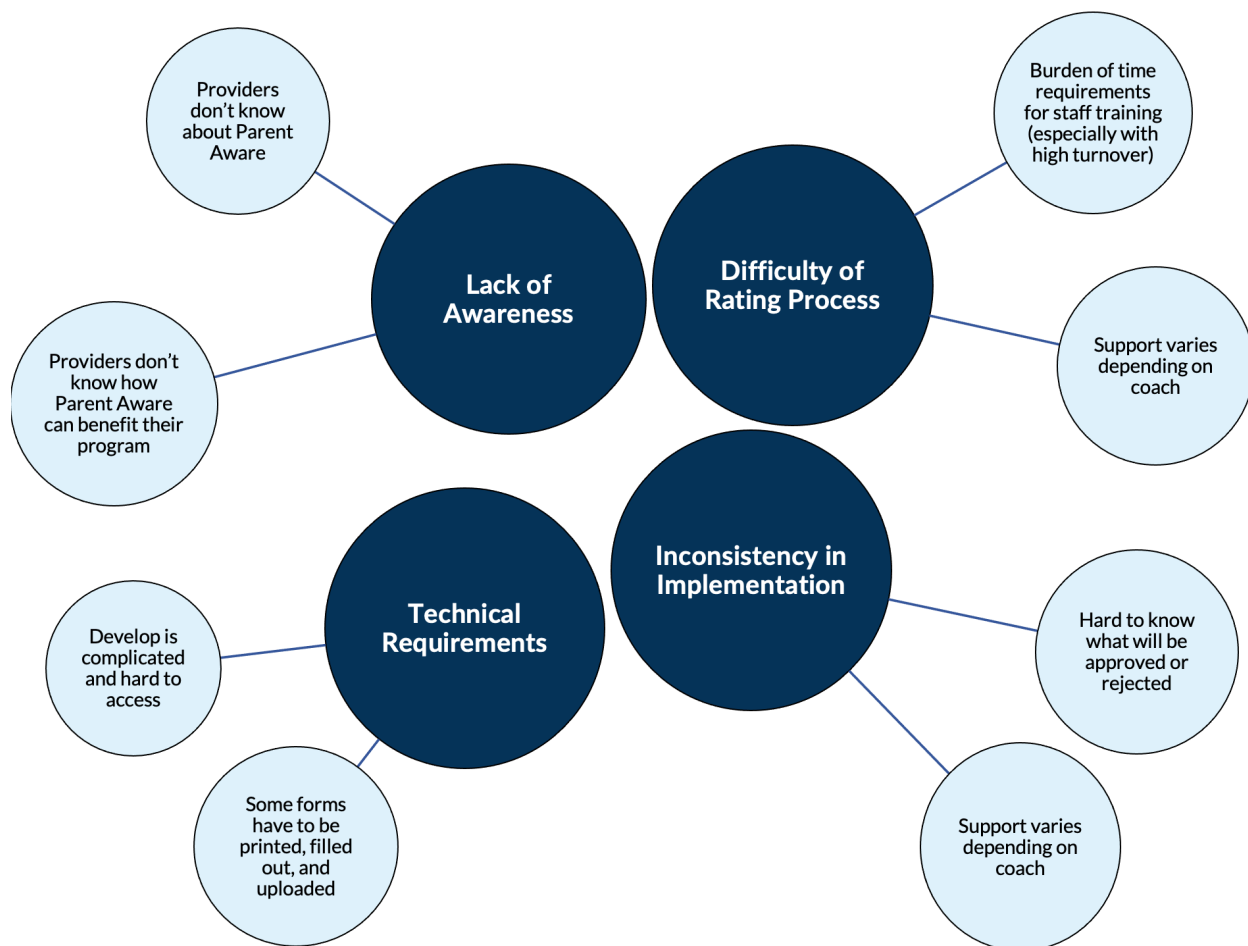
Next, early educators reviewed and discussed data from the 2018 Provider Survey¹⁸ that highlighted reasons educators choose not to participate in Parent Aware. Feedback from the survey indicated that early educators do not participate because they: do not need it to attract families to their program, do not believe that it is worth the investment of their time, do not trust that a Parent Aware Rating accurately reflects program quality, do not believe early care and education programs should be Rated, and/or think that the application and Rating process is difficult (see Figure 2). Participants reflected on these reasons during the listening sessions and offered insights based on their own experiences with the Rating process.

¹⁷ More information about the ELS program and eligibility criteria can be found here:

<https://education.mn.gov/mde/fam/elsprog/elschol/>

¹⁸ Bultinck, E., Silamongkol, T., Lowe, C., Cleveland, J., & Tout, K. (2019). *Provider perceptions of Parent Aware: Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/provider-perceptions-parent-aware-minnesotas-quality-rating-and-improvement-system>

Figure 2. Miro board snapshot – barriers to participation in Parent Aware



Source: Wilder Research (2023)

Lack of awareness or trust

Rated early educators believe that many unrated early educators do not participate in Parent Aware because they do not know about Parent Aware or do not believe participation can benefit their programs. Similar to the feedback from the 2018 Provider Survey, participants shared that it is difficult to find out about the Parent Aware Rating process, since information about Parent Aware is not distributed during the licensing process and the Parent Aware website does not provide much detail about what providers will need to do in order to be Rated. Additionally, participants shared that once they were engaged in the Rating process, they had concerns about the requirements and how fairly they would be evaluated. Participants shared feedback from other early educators they know and their own experiences that provided more insight into the ways that Parent Aware processes felt difficult or unfair and may discourage programs from participating.

Measuring authenticity

Rated early educators were not surprised that other educators may be hesitant to trust Parent Aware as a measure of quality. Many of those who participated in listening sessions had been running their own programs for several years or even decades and therefore felt knowledgeable about early care and

education and the needs of children and families in their communities. While participants appreciated the purpose of Parent Aware, some shared that Parent Aware did not enrich their experience or knowledge as an early educator, and that they participated primarily to gain access to grants for their programs and scholarships for the families and children they serve. When they reflected on survey data from unrated early educators from the 2018 Provider Survey that was shared in the sessions, they understood why unrated early educators were skeptical of the Parent Aware process because their own personal experiences included moments of dissatisfaction with the process and concerns about how their programs were assessed. Their own experiences during the Rating process reflected some of that mistrust and a feeling that their programs were not being fairly evaluated. For example, an Education Coordinator at a center-based program reported that a coach advised them to remove some of the “hardest” children from the classroom when their on-site observation was scheduled, and a family child provider questioned the validity of how Ratings are determined when family child care programs are Rated without an on-site observation. The quotes below highlight unique experiences of multiple Rated early educators that help to illuminate reasons why unrated educators may be skeptical or disinterested in Parent Aware.

“We were one of the first centers in our area to start Parent Aware. We have had coaches, a couple of times, tell us to take our hardest kids out of the classroom when we were being Rated. As the Education Coordinator, I felt like that was inappropriate because it didn't truly reflect what our classroom was like. Also, challenging kids are part of what we deal with. I was taken aback when that happened.”

“When I chose to join, I called them and I actually said, ‘I don't agree with everything. I agree with what you're trying to do, but what I don't agree with is how you're going about it.’ Meaning, as a family child care provider, they are solely rating us on a whole bunch of paperwork that we submit. We don't get observations.... How can you rate my program without even an observation of my program? That was really hard for me, but I did choose to do it because if I didn't, I felt like I was saying ‘no’ to kids who needed those scholarships and those families.”

“I can add that when I speak to other people, they say it's just too complicated and they don't need it.”

Difficulty of Rating process

Participants shared a general consensus that the Rating process can be burdensome due to the quantity and type of requirements. Early educators also agreed that the technical requirements to become Rated and inconsistencies in the Rating process—whether related to their experiences being Rated at different points in time or related to the supports and guidance they receive throughout the process—are especially difficult.

Burden of time

Early educators acknowledged that completing the Rating process takes a lot of time that they do not have. In particular, many programs are short-staffed, with most family child care educators working independently, which means that most Rating components must be completed outside of hours when children are present.

Center early educators frequently shared that training requirements also put a burden on staff time, especially with high turnover in the child care sector.

“I don't have time. I don't have the time and resources to do that, to get them certified. So that's been a challenge.”

“I would say the amount of training to start off with is a very large amount required of our lead teachers.”

“Currently, there is such a staffing shortage and it can get cumbersome to re-do everything every two years¹⁹ when programs may have staff turnover.”

Family child care and center educators shared the sentiment that the two-year re-Rating cycle is cumbersome. A few participants shared that they did not know they needed to be Rated every two years and may not go through the Rating process again because of the time requirements.

“I feel like two years seems way too close together. It doesn't give you enough time to even implement some of the things that you said you were working on before you're like, 'Oh, Building Quality application is already back out'.”

“I thought the process was very difficult to navigate through, and if that was the only thing I had to do, it would have been a breeze. But when you're a director, you know, you're subbing as a teacher, you're shopping, you're doing all of the other things and I think everyone understands that. Taking that time out to really go through the process was pretty difficult. It was a little frustrating because some of the directions, to me, weren't clear.”

Type and number of requirements

Educators also shared that a major challenge during the Rating process was the number of different types of requirements. Understanding all the different requirements was challenging, and participants depended on coaches to help them navigate the process.

“I see there is a road map now 10 years later or maybe...in the beginning, I didn't understand where I was on that road map, and I didn't understand that 'P' stood for physical and 'R' stood for relationship and 'T' stood for teachable relationships. I knew nothing of that. And none of that was given to me clearly in the beginning.”

“The way they have it labeled with the different categories. The T1.1 [labeling] in itself is confusing and if you get off track, or if somebody distracts you, it's like, okay, now, where am I am now? So, that was a problem.”

Early educators described the Rating process as “tedious” and “time-consuming” and shared that other educators may also find the requirements to be discouraging.

“I've talked to some other colleagues that are at centers and I think when you just go online and read material, it does seem overwhelming...and I don't think that they understand exactly always how the coach works and walks through that process with them.”

“You know, the whole process has been very, very cumbersome. I always equate it to there's different hoops that you have to jump through to get the star Ratings. It felt like when I thought that I had done things [right], there was some tiny detail that needed to be a little different and so it's been very frustrating over the years.”

Regarding the cohort model and learning communities, most early educators were unaware of learning communities or how to participate in them, and those who did participate often felt that they needed more from the communities.

“I was involved with [learning communities] for the first time and they didn't quite meet my needs either. I couldn't really get a whole lot out of them. I think if it had more doable and practical things for everyone it would have been better. Some of the things that the people were doing were great. But it didn't fit what I would need, or could do reasonably.”

¹⁹ Parent Aware Ratings expire after two years.

“I think the cohort model [is] time consuming...[I] got all of our information, there were so many dates and times and we have these Zoom meetings over the nap time and we have these Building Quality sessions in the evening, and it just was so overwhelming for us.”

Technical difficulties

A major challenge of the Rating process is accessing and utilizing the web-based tools and systems. Some early educators were challenged because of lack of experience with internet websites or computer programs. However, most participants shared common experiences with technical difficulties, including problems with Develop and variations in the format (electronic vs. paper) throughout the Rating process.

Problems with Develop

Early educators expressed frustration with Develop, Parent Aware’s online registry system for professional development and quality improvement. There were multiple concerns that came up across listening sessions:

- Platform and content are difficult to navigate
- Takes a long time to refresh and update
- Providers got “locked out” of Develop and were unable to access it
- Inability to correct or update missing information before Rating

Participants also had concerns about their Rating being affected by their ability to navigate technology rather than the quality of their child care program.

“I have a problem with the rewriting. It was very difficult for me to understand. ... And it was really back to basics, for me, because I wasn't familiar with even a computer screen, it was really hard. And there was no training in that. So I said, way back in the beginning, ‘Can I just hire somebody to do this for me because I don't need to learn how to upload documents?’ To me, it's not important. My view is curriculum. ... And she ended up saying I had to learn it if I was going to stay with Parent Aware, so I'm better at it. The whole technology piece really was too much for me. I really wish there was an option to hire that out or something else.”

“The nit-picking on the way things are worded or formatted was daunting...like I did all the work, but the way I presented it didn't meet the requirements and maybe I wouldn't get my Rating.”

One center director shared that they did hire someone to help with the organizational and technological aspects of the Rating process.

“I did hire someone to help me—they were one of my previous directors—to upload it and I kept asking my coach, you know, ‘This is the part that I'm just kind of nervous about,’ and she's like, all this, ‘It's easy. Follow instructions.’ ...It's like, ‘You don't know who you're talking to,’ you know? It doesn't come that easily for me, being a senior citizen... It is kind of scary when you're not savvy with all this...and it's a lot of stuff that you have to upload and if you make a mistake...”

Streamlining of format

In addition to Develop being difficult to access, early educators also said that the inconsistencies in technical requirements for different parts of the application make it much less accessible. For example, participants talked about how some documents are available to fill out online, while others have to be printed, completed, scanned, and then uploaded. With the numerous requirements for the program and each staff member, early educators said that streamlining the technical aspects would make the process easier.

Inconsistencies in implementation

The quality of early educators' experiences with the Rating process varied greatly across type of program, location, and race/ethnicity of the educator. Furthermore, one educator often had different experiences each time they went through the Rating process, pointing to inconsistencies in implementation. Participants attributed variations in experience to coach quality and consistency as well as differences in the evaluation of materials.

Coach quality and consistency

Early educators had varied experiences with coaches: some loved their coaches, while others had difficult experiences. Educators' ability to successfully navigate requirements seemed conditional on their coach—how knowledgeable their coach was, how frequently and easily they were able to contact their coach, and how much assistance the coach was willing to give. Some participants noted greatly different experiences with the Rating process depending on who their coach was.

While many early educators shared very positive experiences with coaching supports, they consistently shared that communication is not always reliable or quick, so they turned to other supports, like early educator friends or peers.

"I'm an at-home provider and I have had two coaches. The first one just did not work out for me at all. She was not reliable. [She] would not show up for meetings. That was back when we actually had meetings. And then they gave me another coach, and she was so intelligent and I really like working with her."

Variations in Rating

Participants shared that it was hard to know if their application would be approved because of inconsistencies with the Rating process. One aspect of this was related to coaching. If a coach did not catch something missing in an application or was not available to assist when something was missing in the application, early educators felt unsure whether they would get their desired Rating.

"I think it definitely depends on your coach...If they are a coach, they should have a higher level of understanding than we do... They should be catching things that maybe we're not catching. I don't expect them to do the work, but when they take it, and they say they go over everything... you're trusting them that you've given everything you possibly can."

One early educator described their journey through Building Quality, during which they started with a Two-Star Rating and were seeking a Four-Star Rating. They relied on their coach for help and still did not receive the Rating they were seeking.

"I currently had a Two-Star Rating program and I was re-Rating for Four-Star, and I had gone through the whole process, did all the coaching, did everything and then when it came to the point where, you had an opportunity to submit information that might have been missing from everything, there was one thing that had come up. So, I was able to submit a documentation piece that was missing. And so, after that, I was, like, 'I feel pretty good about this.' ...And then the day the Rating came in, it still fell at a Two-Star, and I was just dumped on and, like, 'Well, we did everything.' I even had a chance to fix it and what was cited that was missing, I never was given an opportunity... I said, 'Oh, my gosh. How did we miss this?' I called my coach and said, 'How did we miss this? How do we not submit points in this one area?' And they said we had, like, 40 points that could have come in and we had stuff for this area, but we were already so far over and she goes, 'Oh, yep. Yep. You were supposed to submit points there.'"

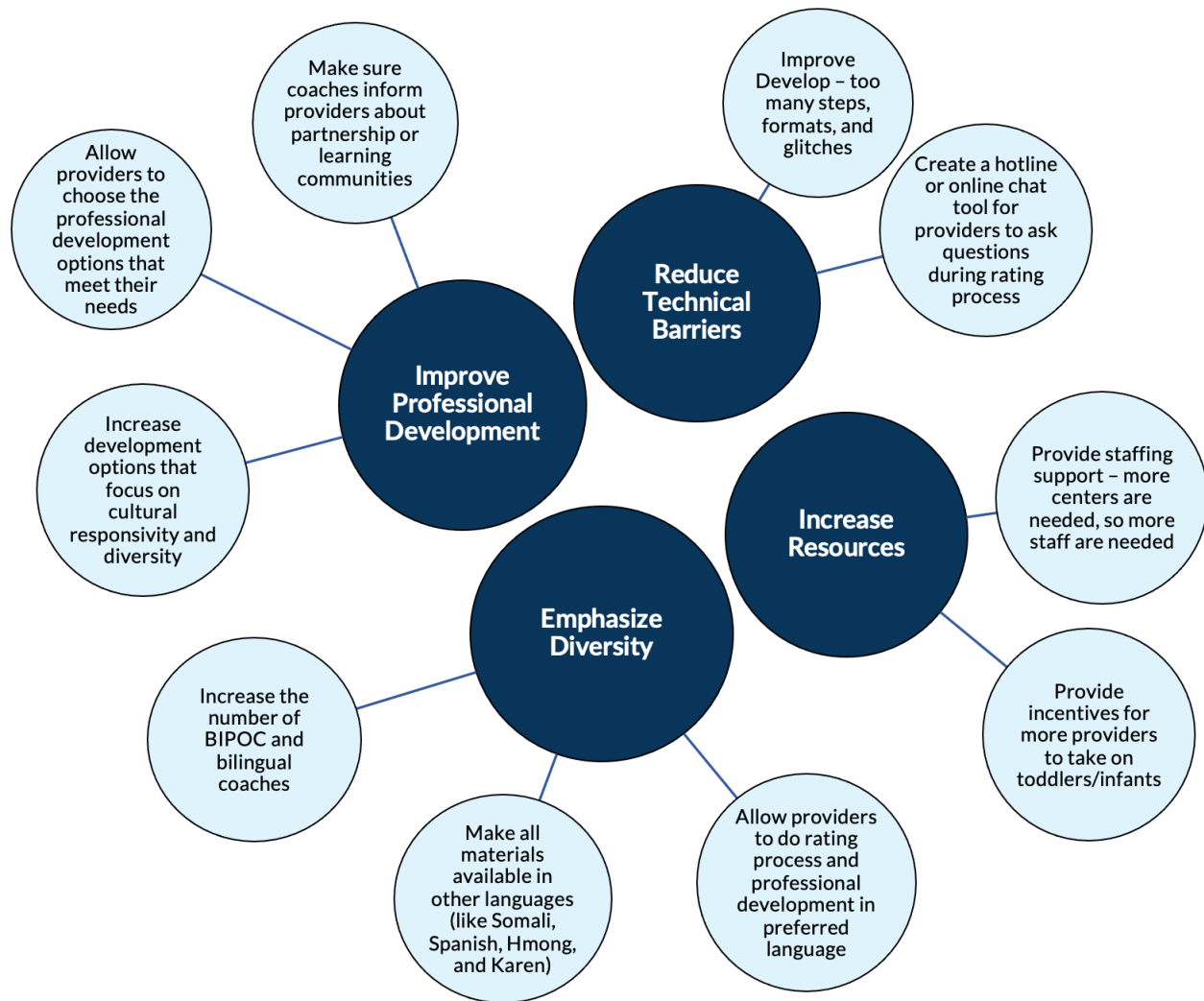
Additionally, sometimes early educators have experienced inconsistencies with raters. One center director who submits applications for multiple sites said she submitted identical applications that were Rated by

different raters.²⁰ One application was approved, and the other was not. Similarly, other participants agreed that it can be hard to know what will be accepted or rejected.

Cultural inclusivity and accessibility

Listening session discussions revealed several recommendations that providers have for Parent Aware (see Figure 3). These recommendations focus on inclusivity and highlight the feedback from BIPOC providers, as well as other family child care and center educators throughout the state. Additionally, more detailed recommendations highlight ways that the state can encourage participation in Parent Aware.

Figure 3. Miro board snapshot – cultural inclusivity and accessibility



Source: Wilder Research (2023)

Encouraging participation in Parent Aware

BIPOC early educator feedback highlighted multiple ways that DCYF and other agencies could encourage participation in Parent Aware, including direct outreach and communication and more intentional

²⁰ While the applications may be identical, submitted evidence must be unique to each site.

partnership with communities that have few programs participating in Parent Aware or where families have limited access to quality child care.

Direct outreach and communication

Multilingual recruitment materials. BIPOC early educators appreciate the efforts of Parent Aware to increase racial, ethnic, and linguistic representation during the Rating process, such as diversity in coaching staff and the multilingual search option for parents on the Parent Aware website. However, they highlighted that a significant gap in their experience was a lack of multilingual recruitment materials. Although Parent Aware currently allows programs to submit evidence in any language as part of the Rating process (these materials are then translated by a member of the Rating team before being reviewed), many providers were either unaware of this option or felt that Parent Aware needs to offer all recruitment and application materials translated into multiple languages. They shared anecdotes of talking with other early educators, particularly multilingual family child care educators, who are often unaware of opportunities like Parent Aware. Rated BIPOC early educators believe that distributing recruitment materials in commonly spoken languages in Minnesota, such as Somali, Hmong, and Karen, will increase awareness and participation among BIPOC early educators.

“And for language, for people who don’t speak English as well, it would be good if there were translated materials or translators. I think maybe some of the wording of some of the materials – for people who don’t speak English well – may definitely be a barrier.”

Informing newly licensed programs about Parent Aware. A conversation with one BIPOC early educator highlighted the disconnect between the child care licensing and Parent Aware Rating processes as a barrier to participation in Parent Aware:

“Parent Aware doesn’t do this anymore, but when I became licensed I got a flier in the mail about Parent Aware, and that’s how I called and got signed up. I wish licensing would tell you about Parent Aware – would have been cool to learn about it directly from licensing. I think more people would join.”

Early educators suggested that the state and county licensors could coordinate more directly with Parent Aware to ensure that educators are contacted about opportunities during licensing sessions or immediately after licensing. Sending information via flyers or emails—including in mailings about licensing—could increase awareness and participation.

Partner with communities

Referrals help connect early educators to Parent Aware. BIPOC family child care educators emphasized the role of fellow early educators in their networks as connectors for opportunities and partners during the referral process. While all Rated BIPOC participants generally had positive experiences with the Rating process, they often relied on external networks to help them navigate the requirements.

“Other than the coach, having provider friends has been really helpful. If I was doing the application and got stuck on a question and the coach maybe couldn’t get back to me for a day or two, I would just reach out to a provider friend.”

Rated BIPOC early educators have the capacity to conduct outreach to early educator networks and, in many cases, already are. Creating a referral program could encourage BIPOC early educators, and educators in other underrepresented or isolated communities, to share information, resources, and provide needed supports.

Intentional partnerships at the local level create networks of early educators. Very few Rated early educators—urban or rural, White or BIPOC—were aware of existing opportunities to partner with Head

Start, the Minnesota Department of Education, and public school-based programs. However, many expressed interest in partnerships. Participants suggested that Parent Aware form intentional partnerships with local offices or programs, and work with them to provide information to Rated early educators and coaches. This could increase awareness of Parent Aware overall and increase quality of care for children in participating programs.

Local partnerships also present an opportunity to make more intentional connections between families and educational opportunities from birth to high school. For example, St. Paul-based early educators that serve families who speak Hmong may be interested in connecting with Txuj Ci Hmong Language and Culture, an immersion school serving elementary and middle school students on St. Paul's East Side. Participants felt that by taking an active role in facilitating these connections, rather than just providing information, Parent Aware can help to increase access to quality educational opportunities.

Resources for support and growth

Early educators prefer local training opportunities. Participants across Parent Aware regions are interested in different professional development opportunities than those currently supported by Parent Aware. Some Rated early educators in the Metro District, particularly those located in communities on the edges of the district, find current professional development and training opportunities too limiting. Parent Aware's partnership with local agencies provides a direct gateway to parents, early childhood educators, and community members to over 1,000 trainings per year in the Twin Cities seven-county metro area in English, Hmong, Somali, and Spanish. While there are diverse and accessible options for training, Metro District early educators in smaller, less racially/ethnically diverse communities do not feel as satisfied with the available options. Additionally, early educators in the urban center of the Metro District often wanted to access professional development options that were not supported by Parent Aware and were confused as to why they were not. Participants also shared that these external professional development options focused on racial and ethnic diversity felt relevant to their programs.

Similarly, early educators outside of the seven-county metro area are interested in professional development and training opportunities that are local and relevant to their communities. Since they have access to their local partner agencies, early educators noted that it may be important for Parent Aware to form new partnerships or collect some administrative data on access to current partners. Early educators in Greater Minnesota encourage Parent Aware to seek out partnerships with local agencies that focus on the needs and challenges of early educators in diverse communities across the state.

Early educators need support to expand the workforce. Participants recognized the need for more high-quality child care slots across the state. When asked questions about how the state could improve cultural inclusivity within the Rating process or encourage more early educators to become licensed to serve infants and toddlers, participants focused on one common factor: staffing. In order to increase programs' ability to be more inclusive, accessible, and able to enroll more children, they need support to hire and train staff for their programs. While Parent Aware currently offers professional development opportunities around cultural inclusivity, early educators feel that training is not the only way that they will be better positioned to serve their communities. If the state is interested in increasing the number of programs licensed to serve infants and toddlers, especially in Minnesota's racially and culturally diversifying population, participants believe that the state has to be willing to offer more incentives and supports for programs to increase staffing. Many participants shared that they would like to expand their programs but are not able meet the staffing ratios required for infant and toddler licenses.

Listening Sessions With Unrated Early Educators

Methods with unrated early educators

Research questions

The original research questions guiding the listening sessions were:

1. What are the reasons programs do or do not participate in Parent Aware? Do those reasons differ by type of program or by the race/ethnicity of the program staff/early educator or children served?
2. What are the barriers to participating in Parent Aware? What supports exist for programs to overcome those barriers, and how can the state expand those supports and reduce barriers to participation? Do barriers differ by type of program, or by the racial/ethnic diversity of the program staff/early educator or children served?
3. To what extent is Parent Aware and the Rating process culturally inclusive and culturally relevant to diverse programs, early educators, and the families they serve? How could Parent Aware be more inclusive of racial, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity among programs, early educators, and the families they serve?

Based on previous early educator feedback and learnings from the evaluation and other efforts related to the Redesign, DCYF is currently exploring potential changes to Parent Aware and seeking feedback from early educators and other stakeholders to refine their ideas and inform decision making.²¹ During the 2024 listening sessions, Wilder Research asked unrated early educators about their overall opinions and perceptions of Parent Aware and their reactions to a subset of DCYF's proposed changes that were designed to reduce barriers, improve processes, and increase accessibility of Parent Aware.

Sampling and recruitment

Wilder Research conducted six virtual listening sessions in February and March 2024 with early educators who are in the decision-making role to determine whether a program participates in Parent Aware. Most often, those individuals were child care center directors and family child care educators.

In 2024, we recruited unrated programs primarily via email. We conducted direct outreach to early educators using a list of unrated programs provided by DCYF. From that list, we identified approximately 500 people to send the initial invitation. This included all early educators who had indicated they speak languages other than English or who identified with a race or ethnicity other than White.²² We then randomized the rest of the list, excluding those without email addresses.

We developed an email invitation in English, with information about the study and a link to register. The email invitation and registration form were also translated into Spanish, Hmong, and Somali. To recruit a more diverse group of unrated early educators, Wilder Research worked with staff at Think Small's

²¹ For more information on the Parent Aware Redesign, see the DCYF website: <https://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/program-overviews/child-care-and-early-education/parent-aware/>

²² Because providers' race/ethnicity and language(s) spoken are optional fields that providers can choose to self-report, many providers had missing data.

language access line. Think Small staff reached out directly to eligible early educators and shared the email invitation via internal mailing lists.

The registration link included a pre-screening questionnaire to gather some demographic information about those who signed up to participate. A consent form was also included as part of the registration link. In 2024, 101 unrated early educators registered to participate in a session and 52 attended.

Table 2. Characteristics of listening session participants

	Unrated (n=52)
Type of program	
Family child care owner	63%
Child care center director or representative	33%
Unknown	4%
Region	
Twin Cities Metropolitan Area	63%
Greater Minnesota	33%
Unknown	4%
Providers' race/ethnicity	
White alone	83%
Asian alone	4%
Multiracial/two or more races	0%
Black/African American alone	4%
Hispanic/Latino alone	4%
American Indian alone	0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander alone	0%
Prefer not to answer	8%
Race/ethnicity of families served in program (select multiple)*	
White	77%
Multiracial/two or more races	27%
Asian	29%
Hispanic/Latino	27%
Black/African American	25%
American Indian	6%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4%
Prefer not to answer	21%

Note: * Providers who registered for listening sessions were asked to select all racial/ethnic categories that described any of the families they served in their program, so percentages do not total to 100.

Data collection process

The sessions conducted in Spring 2024 focused on unrated programs. The questions focused on early educators' awareness and knowledge of Parent Aware, feedback on three potential changes to Parent Aware, and general feedback on how to increase participation in Parent Aware. In developing protocols for the participatory listening sessions, our team carefully reviewed past reports and feedback shared by both Rated and unrated early educators to build off previous efforts and identify themes without duplication.

A facilitator and notetaker from Wilder Research attended each session. Sessions were held using the virtual platform Webex. Five sessions were facilitated in English, and one was in Spanish. Following each listening session, participants received a \$50 Tango card sent via email that allowed them to select a gift card of their choice.

Wilder Research analyzed the listening session notes for key themes, making note of areas of similarities and differences between and across sessions.

Findings from participatory listening sessions with unrated early educators

This section summarizes the findings from the six sessions, organized according to the three main topics covered in each session: awareness of Parent Aware, feedback on potential changes to Parent Aware, and ideas for improvement to increase participation. This section integrates direct quotes from participants that highlight key themes in the findings.

Awareness and knowledge of Parent Aware

Previous participation in Parent Aware increases awareness of processes and benefits.

Early educators who had participated in Parent Aware previously had knowledge of Parent Aware and its benefits. They knew about the Star Ratings, the grants for Rated programs, the training requirements, the ability to receive increased reimbursement rates for children receiving subsidy through CCAP and ELS. On the other hand, early educators who had not been through Parent Aware had little knowledge of Parent Aware, though a few did recall receiving flyers or emails.

“I know that Parent Aware is a rating system that helps parents find daycares that may or may not have a more educational [focus].”

“I also know that there are tools for providers as far as scholarship grants and business growth and development.”

“I do not have a Rating either and I'm not all that familiar with Parent Aware.”

Some early educators had heard about Parent Aware via word of mouth, and, in general, that feedback was negative. For example, they had heard about coaches who were not responsive or complaints about the process being extensive and all-consuming.

Unrated early educators may not have accurate information about Parent Aware.

Though less common, some unrated early educators were misinformed about aspects of Parent Aware. For example, they thought Parent Aware would require them to use a formal or “boxed” curriculum or they would be unable to use religious materials. Others believed that their play-based or outdoor activities would not meet Parent Aware criteria. Some family child care educators expressed concern that Parent Aware forces early educators to operate like a formal, classroom-based preschool. Some had heard rumors that they would have to be Parent Aware Rated to take preschoolers at age three.

“I don't do a formal curriculum so I didn't feel like I would really meet the goals that Parent Aware thought were important...My understanding was you get Rated based on your kindergarten readiness.”

“Centers automatically get a Four-Star Rating.”

The benefits of joining Parent Aware

Previously Rated early educators benefited from their Rating, though few have interest in being Rated again.

Early educators who had been Rated before explained that they had already received the Parent Aware grants and the coaching to improve their program and no longer saw the benefit of going through the Full Rating Pathway to be Rated again. While many had benefited from the experience, they did not want to go through the extensive process again, especially if they had already used a Parent Aware grant for program materials and did not have a need for additional items for which the grants are eligible to be spent. Some complained about losing their Parent Aware Rating after two years even though their program had not changed.

"I [was] disappointed that once you get those Stars you lose them after two years. ... That's kind of a hard thing because once you've gone through all the work, and it's a lot of work, you know, you think you'd be able to keep them...I still feel I'm a Three-Star because I went through the work and I feel I'm doing what I was supposed to do."

"I wanted to try it and give myself a little push and I am using a lot of the stuff [I learned], so I don't regret taking it, but it's just like I say, to have to do it over again. So, I am still using everything and I've learned from [the Rating process]."

"I was willing to go through the work once, but they're so strict that if you go through the work once and you don't get it, there is absolutely no push to ever want to do it again."

"I did not have any children that benefited from the scholarship part of the program... My main reason for not starting this new cohort was just because I know I do not need the [grant] funding for any more items. I don't need to make any major purchases...And I don't have anyone that qualifies for the scholarship program part of it. So I did not sign up this time, but I do, however, feel as though it could be beneficial for parents that qualify for scholarships."

The potential financial benefits of Parent Aware do not apply to all early educators or do not outweigh the high cost of required training.

Early educators expressed that the financial benefits of participating in Parent Aware were not applicable to them, as many early educators do not serve families who are income eligible for CCAP or ELS. If the families in their program stood to receive CCAP or ELS, they may consider joining Parent Aware so the families could stay with them.

"I like the idea of what they're trying to do, [to provide] information for families to connect to child care, [increase] child care support, [and] offer us ways to help our teachers. I struggle with the same thing that's already been brought up. My program doesn't fit in the boxes. And the time [becoming Rated] is not worth the benefit [of being Rated]."

"[Joining Parent Aware is] not a revenue-generating activity [for my business]."

Center directors said it was cost prohibitive for their program to join because of the amount of professional development required of their staff to achieve their desired Parent Aware Rating. They would need to cover substitute teachers and the additional costs of the trainings themselves.

"The trainings required did not fit the things that we felt we needed, either as teachers or that the children needed, so it was too many hoops and not enough return."

“They want me to train my staff for 10 hours [in topics that Parent Aware has] prescribed. What kind of training? My staff, each of them work 25 hours or less. To have them do that training on top of the training that’s already required by [DCYF], they don’t have the bandwidth for that and they’re not on board for that.”

“My understanding is a certain number of hours have to go through Think Small or other Develop-approved trainings. So that’s been our main concern, as it will increase our [center’s] professional development spending considerably because of the limitations of where we have to get specific trainings from.”

Rated early educators benefited from the increased CCAP reimbursement rates and ability to accept ELS. They may be serving more lower-income households and thus, this benefit is a more significant factor in their decision to join Parent Aware.

Early educators, and the families they serve, feel as though they are high-quality programs and do not need a Parent Aware Rating to attract families.

Many early educators reported that their programs are full, they receive many referrals from existing families, and they have waitlists. Parents seek them out because of the care they have provided to others; they are not shopping based on the number of Stars a program has. That word-of-mouth amongst parents is powerful. Many unrated early educators believe they have a high-quality program and do not need a Rating to demonstrate their quality, and thus see little reason to do the additional work for a Parent Aware Rating. The effort to participate in the Rating process can also feel “risky” in that early educators can invest a lot of time and may not get the Rating they want.

“I feel like I’m a Five-Star program²³ and I don’t need anybody to tell me that I’m a Five-Star program. I have a great program. Our kids come to us on referrals. We have families sharing with other families.”

“I have a good system going. I’m full all the time. I don’t think that has anything to do with Parent Aware because I don’t think my clients even know what Parent Aware is.”

“I’m not sure how the rating is done. [Quality] can be a perception. There is always a subjective bias in a rating. Not everything is an equation. When you offer a program that is working well, why take the risk [of getting a low-quality rating]?”

“[To be Rated, a] home daycare has to fill out all of these forms to see if you can get approval. If there is something they don’t like, you have to rewrite.”

“One of the reasons that I sit on the fence is that my program is financially strong and has high enrollment, because my program feeds into a private elementary school. [W]e aren’t looking for more kids in our preschool program that will need financial aid when they transition over to the K-8 school. When Parent Aware started we had strong enrollment and a strong financial institution, so it didn’t make sense [to join] if we didn’t need those financial benefits to help students with tuition. There’s such a shortage of child care in my city that I think people would leave their kid with anyone at this point.”

Relatedly, early educators felt that the Stars were not an adequate representation of quality. A few were aware of Four-Star Rated programs that were closed due to a licensing violation and thus felt a Parent Aware Rating was not an indicator of quality. Others noted that Rated programs in their area were struggling to fill spots while they, as unrated programs, were always full.

²³ While some state QRIS have five Rating levels, Parent Aware assigns programs Ratings between One- and Four-Stars.

Some early educators do want to learn more about the benefits and processes or would be more willing to join Parent Aware if their families benefited.

Some early educators, especially those who knew little about Parent Aware at the onset of the listening session, wanted to learn more.²⁴

“I would be willing to sign up again or get started again if the benefits went to all of my families again and not just low-income qualifying families. I would put forth the extra effort [to get Rated] if I could spread the benefit [of being Rated] to all of my patrons. I haven't had anyone on CCAP for multiple years now. I don't have anybody low income qualified to receive the benefits. I'm not going to put forth that extra work more than I've already done to maintain my license. I have credentials as well. I am very much educated to do this and I've done it for 28 years. But if we can extend that qualifications to broaden it to assist all of my local families because everybody would love to benefit from some kind of discount.”

Automatic One-Star Rating

Currently, licensed child care programs must go through the Rating process to earn a Parent Aware Rating. In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature passed a law that all licensed child care programs will be included in Parent Aware and will receive at least a One-Star Rating, unless they opt out.²⁵ Starting July 1, 2026, all licensed programs that are not already Rated would receive a One-Star Rating, unless they choose to apply and earn a higher Rating or opt out of being Rated by checking a box on a website. There are two main reasons for this change: 1) to increase the number of eligible programs where families can use their children's ELS and 2) to better align Parent Aware with the licensing system. During listening sessions, we asked unrated early educators for their reactions to the new legislation, as well as what factors might lead them to choose to accept the Automatic One-Star Rating, seek a higher Rating, or opt out of being Rated.

Early educators are unlikely to accept an Automatic One-Star Rating.

The 52 early educators who participated in a listening session overwhelmingly said they would not accept an Automatic One-Star Rating. Based on the information available at the time of the listening sessions, early educators primarily indicated that they would either opt out or work towards a higher Rating.

Participants who said they would opt out indicated that the Automatic One-Star Rating would not change many of the reasons behind why they had decided not to participate in Parent Aware previously. For example, being Rated is unlikely to benefit their business financially. Though the Automatic One-Star Rating may reduce the time and resources necessary to get a Rating, many early educators still do not want to be part of a rating system, feel they do not need a Rating to attract families, or feel they are already a high-quality program.

“I struggle with the star system...I'll be opting out of that hoop the minute I can get online and do that. If I go online and I look at a hotel and it has one star, I'm never going to think that they might be working their way to a [higher] star.”

“I think if I were starting in this profession, as it is complex and demanding, I would accept that One-Star Rating. It would influence me to continue on. Like an incentive or goal as I'm starting off. As someone with experience, if I was given the One-Star [Rating] right now, I would not accept it.”

²⁴ For those interested, facilitators pointed them to existing web resources to learn more about Parent Aware.

²⁵ The legislation requires additional research on the impacts and costs of this policy change to inform a final process for implementing the change by July 2026. See Child Care Aware of Minnesota's 2023 Legislative update for more information: <https://www.childcareawaremn.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Final-2023-Legislative-Update-FINAL.pdf>

Others suggested they would work toward a higher Rating once more details and information were available. These early educators tended to already be considering joining Parent Aware. Like most business owners or managers, they were weighing the costs, primarily time, of being Rated with the benefits. However, they were in agreement with those who want to opt-out in that they did not want an Automatic One-Star.

“The fine print. You need a lot more detail and it's always a matter of weighing the amount of time with the benefit [of being Rated].”

“If we do get a Three- or Four-Star Rating, we would do everything we could to keep that. We wouldn't just accept a One-Star Rating.”

“I would not accept the One-Star Rating because nowadays people use ratings as a way to judge quality such as with restaurants. I would rather work towards a higher Star Level instead.”

A One-Star Rating does not communicate high quality and does not come with many of the financial benefits of Parent Aware.

Early educators are concerned that a One-Star Rating does not communicate quality, and many are concerned it actually communicates the opposite—that they are of poor quality. Some early educators likened it to reviewing hotels or restaurants on Yelp, where one star is interpreted as bad or poor, whereas in actuality, Parent Aware is more like a Michelin Star for a restaurant, where one star means “a very good restaurant.”

“The programs that are not participating get sort of penalized with a One-Star [Rating]. People are going to look at you and automatically think you're lower when that's not the case.”

“I like the idea of offering a rating that shows I am going the extra mile. I do not like the idea of being labeled with a [One] Star Rating because to me a One [Star Rating] seems low, when in reality a One-Star [Rating] is above the normal expectation of child care.”

“Parents don't even know what a Parent Aware Rating means.”

“I would hate that to look bad because I only have a One-Star Rating, when really I just didn't care about any stars.”

“If I didn't know about [Parent Aware], I'd think, 'Wow, one star, they just were terrible.'”

In addition, even with a One-Star Rating, early educators noted that they still would not receive the higher CCAP reimbursement rate (available to Three- and Four-Star programs only), and some incorrectly assumed they would be not able to accept ELS with a One-Star Rating.

Early educators are concerned the Automatic One-Star Rating will be coercive or they will be penalized for opting out.

Some early educators feel the Automatic One-Star Rating is coercive and designed to force programs into joining a voluntary system. While they would like to opt out, they are concerned they would be penalized by the state or county licenser for doing so. Given they do not want to look bad by having only One Star, early educators feel forced into working toward a higher Rating.

“They're just automatically putting [a Rating] on to us and then saying, but you're only One Star. So, I feel like I'm being forced into being in this program. I don't see the benefits of it. Except for those

things that you mentioned, which really don't impact me, I don't see what the benefit is so that's frustrating to me."

"As a child care center provider, I wonder what is hiding behind the opt-out option. What is going to happen to me if I opt out? Am I going to be a bad person, a bad child care center because I didn't want to be [Rated]?"

"It seems you're pushed into two options: decline the Rating and explain to families why they won't get the financial incentive from Parent Aware or be forced to go for a higher Rating and manage the workload to get there so you aren't scaring families away."

"You're being volun-TOLD [to join]."

Some early educators reported that they started their own small business for a reason, primarily for their and their friends' children. They want to continue to operate as independently as possible. Family child care educators who are close to retirement are especially disinterested in joining Parent Aware, even when the One-Star Rating is automatic.

"I'm sure there's ups and downs to [Parent Aware], but I'm not a government program."

"Many of us get into this because we want to, you know, run our own businesses, be at home with our own children, raise peoples' kids the way we've raised our kids. Then all the government. I think people want less of that."

Other proposed changes to Parent Aware

During listening sessions, we also asked unrated early educators for feedback on two other proposed changes to Parent Aware:

- First, from previous engagement with early educators, Minnesota DCYF has heard that some early educators do not participate in Parent Aware because the Rating process takes too much time and involves too much paperwork. Based on that feedback, Parent Aware is considering changes so that programs can spend more time working with a professional coach to assess their quality and establish achievable goals. What this means in practice is that programs would spend less of their time and effort on documenting what makes their program high quality and instead focus on working with their coach to identify goals for improvement that better serve their families, support their staff, and support their own well-being.
- Second, the state has also heard some concerns about the concept of Ratings more broadly. Some early educators are concerned that Ratings are unfair or do not accurately reflect their quality, and others feel that the idea of Ratings sets up programs to be in competition with one another. Based on that feedback, DCYF is considering a shift away from Star Ratings to instead award "Quality Recognition Levels" to recognize programs that are setting goals to improve and working toward improvement with help from a coach.

A large majority had few comments on either of these changes, so this feedback should not be considered comprehensive.

The proposed changes are unlikely to influence unrated early educators' interest in joining Parent Aware.

Having not been part of a Parent Aware cohort, most unrated early educators were unable to comment on DCYF's proposed changes to the application process. While less paperwork sounded better to most, they

could not make any conclusive statements. A few early educators did believe a certain degree of work should be required to demonstrate quality.

“Of course, we all want less paperwork.”

“I feel like if you're going to make the choice to do it, then you're choosing to do the work that comes with it.”

Similarly, early educators did not offer much feedback about a potential transition from Star Ratings to “Quality Recognition Levels.” A few people were concerned about the subjective nature of goal setting to achieve a “Quality Recognition Level” or that “Quality Recognition Levels” would be a linguistic, not a substantive, change in the program.

“The idea of talking to a coach with arbitrary goals that can be set based on someone's opinion sounds a little convoluted to me, so I would rather have black and white instead of different goals for different programs. That sounds messy to me.”

“[Quality Recognition Levels] kind of just sounds like a change of wording.”

Ultimately, neither of these changes would be likely to influence most unrated early educators’ interest in joining Parent Aware. Even with some of these barriers addressed, early educators still would not have a business need to become Rated if their program is full.

Ideas for improvements to Parent Aware

Unrated early educators were specifically asked about how Parent Aware could be improved to increase the likelihood that they would join. These are their ideas, though some early educators expressed that they are categorically against any voluntary rating system and would be unlikely to join regardless of the changes that might be made. When similar feedback came up in sessions with Rated early educators, those findings are discussed here as well.

Make scholarship funding available to all families and available for use at all licensed programs to increase the affordability and accessibility of child care.

Child care early educators are largely in the business because they care deeply for the children and families they serve. That said, they would like to see Early Learning Scholarship funding made available to more families. Some early educators were not aware that they would be able to accept these scholarships regardless of their Rating. Rural early educators in particular noted that they may be the only program for tens or hundreds of miles, and if they cannot accept the ELS then families have to forfeit them. Other participants shared that the families they serve are not eligible to receive ELS. Early educators would be more willing to join Parent Aware and earn a Rating if they knew it would benefit their families.

“I would say that the scholarships for families in need of care are important, but the scholarship money needs to go to places that the families choose. They should be able to spend that scholarship dollar with any program that fits their family style...I feel like they should be able to use it where they need it.”

“I actually had a family who got the scholarship and opted out because they realized they couldn't use it at my program.”

Previously Rated early educators suggested easing the burden of the re-Rating process.

As noted above, many previously Rated early educators would have been interested in staying Rated had the re-Rating process not require the same amount of work as the initial Rating. They reported that their program had not changed, yet their program received fewer Stars simply because they opted not to engage in the longer, more complicated Rating process. They suggested a system like a nurse who takes CEUs to stay licensed but does not have to repeat their nursing training. In the 2023 listening sessions, Rated early educators similarly expressed frustration with the frequency of re-Ratings.

“Make sure you're still doing what you're supposed to do [to stay Rated], but not have to go through the whole thing [again]. More like the example of a nurse. Like continuing education instead of the whole thing starting from scratch to keep my Star Rating.”

Allow programs to resubmit applications to account for errors.

Unrated early educators had either personally experienced challenges with submitting the appropriate paperwork for their Parent Aware Rating or had heard about others whose paperwork was not filed correctly. Particularly concerning were examples of when coaches misinformed early educators who were then unable to get their desired Rating. While programs do have up to 15 business day to resubmit forms, not all early educators were aware of that policy. During the 2023 listening sessions, some Rated early educators also noted that coach quality can vary, with some coaches being more knowledgeable of the process or more available to provide support than others.

“I applied my first year and missed a form that was crucial during the application process and I resubmitted the wrong form because I had COVID.”

“My best friend went through the process...her coach missed one training, so they went through everything...but then at the end they said, ‘Oh, well, you missed this one training. So now you can only get a Three-Star [Rating] rather than Four Stars.’”

“I know a couple providers [whose] coach said they had everything, that everything was good to go for their Four-Star [Rating]. They submitted it, however, and then it was, “No, you're missing such and such. No, you can't get your Four-Star [Rating].” That's a letdown for providers.”

“Maybe there could be a way to have an option to correct and resubmit within a timeframe. Maybe that could be an option that we have for those situations when [mistakes] happen, or a possibility to show or verify whatever thing that you might have not completed properly.”

Early educators would like greater flexibility and additional options for professional development.

Unrated early educators also wanted more flexibility on where they could take the trainings necessary to join Parent Aware. Centers in particular feel the financial burden of having all their staff take Develop-approved trainings.

“I think more flexibility of where the professional development hours can come from would go a long way. I know that that can be a really big barrier because of the added cost.”

Similarly, in 2023, Rated early educators said they would like access to more relevant training, unique to their context in a rural or urban setting, and whether they operate a child care center or are a family child care educator. Rated early educators noted that many training and development opportunities had not been approved for Parent Aware.

Greater integration between systems would ease the administrative pressures.

Some early educators, particularly center directors, noted the extensive burden on them to comply with licensing, meet accreditation standards, and join Parent Aware. Each process is often cumbersome and requires their staff to take time away from children to accommodate visits from the various entities. In many cases, they ask for duplicative information. To the extent possible, early educators suggested that licensors, Parent Aware coaches, and accreditors work together to support early educators and reduce duplication and administrative burden.

"We go through an accreditation process and we are already licensed. It seems like one more bureaucratic loophole."

"All the organizations should be working hand-in-hand for the same quality goals. Everyone [that] providers consult with should be able to give them the same answers. Confusion between Parent Aware, licensing, even NAEYC could be a headache. Have everyone on the same page!"

Prospects for joining Parent Aware

Generally, unrated early educators fall into one of three categories (as described in Figure 4 below). These include: early educators who disagree with a quality rating system and would be unlikely to join Parent Aware under any circumstances (at least at the time of the listening session); early educators who see value in Parent Aware yet have not found it to benefit them; and early educators who would consider joining Parent Aware in the future if there were fewer barriers to entry.

Figure 4. Categories of unrated early educators' overall perceptions of Parent Aware and intention to participate

Early educators who do not agree with a secondary system	Early educators who see no practical reason to join Parent Aware	Early educators who would join if the process were more accessible
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appreciate their autonomy as self-employed business owners• Feel they are already being monitored by licensors and do not want to be part of another program• Do not want to adhere to someone else's definition of quality• Unlikely to join Parent Aware regardless of changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are full/have a waitlist; thus a Rating is not needed to attract families• Do not serve families that are eligible for CCAP or ELS• May have been Rated before and already benefited from grants• May consider joining Parent Aware if it benefited their families	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Required professional development is too expensive or too hard to access• Re-Rating every two years is too burdensome• The process feels "risky;" they may not get the Rating they are striving for• Have some similar feedback as Rated providers• Would join Parent Aware if barriers were removed

Feedback from early educators on child care ecosystem

Early educators also shared feedback about the child care ecosystem that is important contextual information for the Automatic One-Star Rating and any other proposed changes to Parent Aware.

Child care is a difficult business to sustain economically.

Study after study, both in Minnesota and nationally, has shown that the business of child care is difficult. The costs of operating a program, whether a larger center or smaller in-home program, often outweigh the revenue. The workforce is often not paid a living wage and work long hours. Yet, they are a committed group of people who are dedicated to the families they serve. Ultimately, we heard from educators in listening sessions that their decisions about whether to join Parent Aware are heavily driven by this financial equation. If they put in the time (often unpaid) and money to join Parent Aware, will they obtain either a financial benefit for their business or make the cost of care more affordable for parents? For unrated early educators, often the answer is no. They cannot charge more and their parents cannot afford to pay more if they get a Rating. Their families are not eligible for CCAP or ELS, and even if they were, the CCAP reimbursement rates are below the cost of care. Given that the need for child care outweighs the current number of licensed spots available for children, parents do not make decisions based on Parent Aware Ratings and are often left with little or no choice of early educators.

The increase in free or low-cost school-based preschool programs is putting stress on child care businesses.

Compounding the financial challenges of operating a child care business is the fact that school-based preschool programs (that are often heavily subsidized through state and federal funding) continue to grow. Parents of three- and four-year-olds are no longer paying tuition at family child care programs or child care centers, and these programs are increasingly focused on infant and toddlers. Given the licensing ratios, they cannot serve as many children when the bulk of their enrollment is under age three; thus, they have to provide a similar level of service with fewer children paying tuition.

“A lot of the funding now goes through to the school districts for ages three, four and five. I know a lot of in-home providers are only able to mostly accept infants and toddlers because the school system now is offering free early childhood education from ages three to five.”

Across all roles within the system, early educators would appreciate support.

Early educators noted the variation in how they were treated by staff in various roles across the system, from licensors to coaches to trainers. Early educators are hardworking, committed individuals who are doing a job that they love, often relying on the financial support of a spouse or partner. Family child care educators in particular feel they go above and beyond in opening their homes to families. They would like everyone they interact with in the system to treat them with respect, support and advocate for them, and assume positive intent. Some early educators noted being treated disrespectfully or punitively.

“[I] agree with that: you can get a really good licensor or a really nasty one.”

“When licensors change, some are great and some aren’t great. She isn’t advocating for providers at all.”

Key Recommendations for Parent Aware

The participatory listening sessions with Rated and unrated early educators highlighted various factors that go into early educators' decisions to participate or not participate in Parent Aware, as well as barriers to participation or challenges with the Rating process. Early educators' insights point to several recommendations for improving inclusivity and accessibility within Parent Aware.

- **Share clear information and provide supports for programs in advance of the Automatic One-Star rollout.** Most unrated early educators are hesitant to participate in a QRIS, and some do not see the value or benefit that it will bring to their businesses or the families they serve. While some unrated early educators said that they would never accept the Automatic One-Star Rating, others are willing to join if there are clear benefits to children and families and if barriers to Rating are removed. It is important to note that some early educators have concerns about accepting the Automatic One-Star Rating because they feel families may perceive it as a low rating on a four-star scale (i.e., like reviews on Google). For the Automatic One-Star Rating to be accepted, the state should consider the following: taking proactive steps to inform early educators about the process and benefits of participation; creating sustainable information pathways before, during, and after licensing; and addressing needed supports and expansions suggested by unrated and Rated early educators. Furthermore, to address early educators' concerns about how families will perceive the One-Star Ratings, the state should consider exploring strategies to effectively communicate the change and what a One-Star Rating means to families.
- **Make the Rating and re-Rating process easier and less time-consuming and ensure early educators have adequate support in getting Rated.** Though Rated and previously Rated early educators were the only ones with firsthand experience, both unrated and Rated early educators expressed perceptions that joining Parent Aware is a challenging and time-consuming process. Some Rated early educators have concerns about the type and number of requirements needed to achieve a Rating, noting difficulties keeping track of many minor details and making sense of complex terminology (e.g., indicator designations like "T1.1"). Some early educators also experienced technical difficulties with the Develop system, and a few expressed concerns about their Ratings being impacted by their ability to navigate technology. Both Rated and previously Rated early educators also felt that the two-year cycle for re-Ratings was too frequent and time-consuming. Becoming Parent Aware Rated is a voluntary process that adds additional stress and work to a job that is often already well over a typical 40-hour work week. Unrated early educators may be more likely to join if the process was easier or if they had support completing the application process and navigating the online system. Once Rated, early educators may be more likely to stay Rated if re-Ratings were less frequent, required a simpler process, and did not require the same, repetitive trainings. DCYF should consider ways to revise and improve the initial application and re-Rating process. A human-centered design approach that directly engages early educators and coaches may be particularly well-suited for identifying specific challenges within current processes and brainstorming new approaches that better meet the needs of early educators.
- **Expand professional development options, including more approved trainings that focus on cultural responsiveness and diversity and other diverse topics that meet early educators' needs.** Both Rated and unrated early educators recognize the importance of professional development and are eager for opportunities that meet their needs. However, not all Rated early educators feel well-served by the options made available to them, particularly if they have been in the field for a long time. Rated early educators would like access to trainings that are relevant to their context, whether that is rural or urban or whether they operate a child care center or are a family child care program. Both Rated and unrated early educators were aware of training and development opportunities that met their professional needs but were not approved for Parent Aware. Both unrated and Rated early educators are interested in Parent Aware expanding the available training

options, including which organizations provide trainings, especially when related to cultural responsiveness and diversity. Parent Aware should also ensure coaches inform early educators about partnership opportunities or learning communities.

- **Expand low-cost and free professional development options.** The approved trainings through Develop were noted as costlier, which was a barrier to joining Parent Aware for centers especially. Both unrated and Rated early educators are interested in Parent Aware expanding the available training options to include organizations that provide trainings at lower cost.
- **Streamline bureaucratic processes across systems within the child care ecosystem so that participating in Parent Aware is aligned more clearly with other systems.** In addition to the time-consuming process of becoming Parent Aware Rated, programs must maintain their licenses and some work with accrediting organizations, both of which are also time-consuming processes. Each of these—Parent Aware Ratings, licenses, and accreditations—must be renewed on regular cycles. Rated early educators would be more satisfied with Parent Aware and unrated early educators more likely to join if the process was easier and integrated into existing processes to reduce burden. Rated early educators suggested several strategies to engage more programs in Parent Aware, such as distributing information about Parent Aware as part of the licensing process or creating a referral program.
- **Emphasize diversity and inclusion within all aspects of the Parent Aware ecosystem by making all recruitment, application, and professional development materials available in many languages and increasing the number of BIPOC and bilingual coaches across the state.** Early educators reflected that the lack of multilingual recruitment materials may create significant barriers for some programs to join Parent Aware. While Parent Aware currently allows programs to submit evidence toward their Rating in their preferred language so it can be translated by a member of the Rating team before review, many early educators were either unaware of this option or simply felt that all recruitment and application materials should be translated into multiple languages. Furthermore, actively distributing recruitment materials in commonly spoken languages (e.g., Somali, Spanish, Hmong, and Karen) may help build awareness among BIPOC and multilingual early educators. Participants also expressed appreciation for Parent Aware’s efforts thus far to increase racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among coaching staff and hoped those trends continue. Rated BIPOC early educators noted that they knew other programs who may be more interested in participating if their staff had access to bilingual coaches and materials. Most Rated early educators agreed that the Rating process was intimidating for them initially, noting that currently-unrated early educators may also feel intimidated, especially if they are family child care educators with limited English proficiency.
- **Support and grow the child care industry and workforce.** Greater availability of child care, especially infant and toddler care, is needed to support ethnically and linguistically diverse families. Both Rated and unrated early educators reflected on the current saturation in the market—there are not enough spots for children who need care. These market pressures are often a reason that unrated early educators chose not to join Parent Aware, as they are already at capacity and have a waitlist. Early educators feel pressured to serve more children than they may want, and many do not feel that they can expand their enrollment or services due to current staffing levels. While many would like to add staff, this can put an economic strain on their businesses until enrollment reaches a certain level. Early educators are also aware that staffing requirements for infants and toddlers are often a deterrent for interested programs. Taking on more staff can be an economic burden before it becomes beneficial. Additionally, an increasingly racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population across Greater Minnesota is highlighting the need for bilingual and multilingual staff, and staff that have training or expertise in racially and culturally responsive care.

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