



## Minnesota Child Care Choices:

# Families' Awareness and Use of a Pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System

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### Introduction to the Minnesota Child Care Choices Research Brief Series

*The purpose of this Research Brief Series is to summarize key findings and implications from the Minnesota Child Care Choices study, a three-year longitudinal survey of a sample of parents with low incomes who have at least one child age six or younger, have applied to receive financial assistance through Minnesota's welfare or child care subsidy programs, and lived in one of seven participating counties at the time of the baseline survey. Telephone surveys are conducted by Wilder Research every 5-6 months, starting in August 2009, and include questions about families' characteristics, parents' child care preferences, the processes*

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## OVERVIEW

Parent Aware, Minnesota's pilot child care quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) was launched in 2007, and will continue through 2011. Like QRIS in other states, Parent Aware is a rating tool for measuring the quality of early care and education programs. However, Parent Aware is unique among QRIS in its explicit focus on parents as the primary users of these ratings and its aim to provide parents with information about quality to help them make child care decisions. Parent Aware has been piloted in the seven-county metropolitan area surrounding the Twin Cities, as well as in two counties in southern Minnesota. The Minnesota Child Care Choices study surveyed parents from four of these pilot counties and five rural comparison counties. For a detailed map of the counties included in the study, please see the Study and Sample Description Brief.<sup>1</sup>

This Research Brief focuses on those families in the study sample who live in Parent Aware pilot areas, and examines parents' awareness and use of Parent Aware ratings and Parent Aware-rated early care and education programs. Parents' familiarity with Parent Aware was assessed in the baseline survey for the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study, fielded between August 2009 and April 2010.

## Background on Parent Aware

As of December 2009, 318 early care and education programs (55 licensed family child care homes, 188 licensed center-based programs, 23 Head Start programs, and 52 school-based pre-kindergarten programs), serving over 20,000 children, were rated by Parent Aware.<sup>2</sup> This represents 11% of the eligible programs in the pilot areas.<sup>3</sup> Center-based programs have participated in Parent Aware at a higher rate than family child care providers.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tout, K., Forry, N., Blasberg, A., Isner, T., Carlin, C., & Davis, E. (2011). *Minnesota Child Care Choices: Study and Sample Description*. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends & University of Minnesota.

<sup>2</sup>Tout, K., Starr, R., Isner, T., Cleveland, J., Soli, M., & Quinn, K. (2010). *Evaluation of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System pilot: Year 2 evaluation report*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Early Learning Foundation.

<sup>3</sup>This participation rate does not include school-based pre-kindergarten sites. Nearly 100% of school-based Pre-K sites are participating in Parent Aware.

<sup>4</sup>Tout, K., Starr, R., Isner, T., Cleveland, J., Soli, M., & Quinn, K. (2010). *Evaluation of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System pilot: Year 2 evaluation report*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Early Learning Foundation. For updated information about the participation rate in Parent Aware and the number of children served, see Tout, K., Starr, R., Isner, T., Cleveland, J., Soli, M., & Quinn, K. (2010). *Evaluation of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System pilot: Year 3 evaluation report*. Minnesota Early Learning Foundation.



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parents use to make child care decisions, parents' familiarity with and use of Parent Aware, Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), parents' perceptions of the quality of their child care, child care-related work disruptions, parental employment, and use of public assistance programs.

For each family, one child is designated as the focal child and detailed information is collected about the child care arrangements used for this child. In addition to the survey data, this study uses administrative data from the Minnesota child care subsidy program to track participants' use of subsidies and the type of subsidized care arrangements they use over time.

The Minnesota Child Care Choices Research Briefs are designed to answer questions of interest to state child care administrators, county agency staff and other early childhood stakeholders. The questions they have include: How do parents make decisions about child care arrangements? What factors affect whether a family uses child care subsidies? How will Minnesota's QRIS affect families with low incomes, particularly those eligible to receive a child care subsidy? What family, community, and child care characteristics affect child care stability and reliability, and parents' employment outcomes?

This brief is based on data from the baseline survey of the Minnesota Child Care Choices study. Readers who want additional details about the study design and the sample of parents who participated in the baseline survey are referred to the Study and Sample Description Brief. The entire series of baseline briefs is available online at: [www.mdmnresearchpartnership.com](http://www.mdmnresearchpartnership.com).

Parent Aware programs are rated on a scale from 1 to 4 stars (4 is the highest rating), but may reach their rating through two different processes. Of the 318 programs rated in December 2009, 82 were fully-rated, meaning that their rating is based on their documented practices and training; their observed global quality as measured by the Environment Rating Scales;<sup>5</sup> and (for centers) the observed quality of teacher-child interactions as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System.<sup>6</sup> The other 236 rated programs were accredited child care providers, Head Start programs, and school-based pre-kindergarten programs, all of which automatically receive a 4-star rating. While these automatically-rated 4-star programs have constituted the majority of rated programs throughout the Parent Aware pilot, the proportion of fully-rated programs has been growing over the course of the pilot.

Information about quality is available to parents on the Parent Aware website and through promotional materials displayed by rated programs. Programs that have a Parent Aware rating are given a banner to hang outside their facility, and other materials to publicize their rating to current and prospective families. In addition, in early 2010 the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation promoted Parent Aware through radio and online ads that emphasized the importance of early care and education for school readiness and directed parents to the Parent Aware website. The 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey (conducted before this publicity effort occurred) found that 88% of parents said that they would find it helpful if their community had a child care quality rating system that would give them information they could use for selecting a care provider.<sup>7</sup> The Minnesota Child Care Choices study will examine how parents' awareness and use of Parent Aware changes over time. The research questions and findings from the baseline survey are described below.

### **What resources (including Parent Aware) do respondents use for learning about child care?**

Among 270 respondents surveyed who live in the four Parent Aware counties (84% of the full survey sample), 40% reported using the Internet to learn about available child care options; 40% reported relying on the recommendations of friends, coworkers, and neighbors; and 30% reported relying on home visitors, parent mentors, social workers, or caseworkers for this information. Other frequently-reported sources of information include: relatives (21%), child care resource and referral agencies (15%), and the newspaper or yellow pages (10%).<sup>8</sup>

Half of the sample (50%) had heard of an organization or website where they could get a list of child care providers. In contrast, only 16% had heard of an organization or website where they could get information on the quality of child care. When asked for the name of the organization or website that provided this information, four respondents named Parent Aware.

When asked explicitly about their familiarity with Parent Aware, over one-fifth (21%) of respondents reported that they had heard of Parent Aware. This number is slightly higher than the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey finding that 10% of parents statewide and 17% of parents in Minneapolis and St. Paul had heard of Parent Aware.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup>FCCERS-R; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007; ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998; ITERS-R; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 1990.

<sup>6</sup>CLASS; Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008.

<sup>7</sup>Chase, R. & Valorose, J. (2010). *Child Care Use in Minnesota: Report of the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey*. Wilder Research: St. Paul, MN.

<sup>8</sup>Details about the sources used for child care information in the full sample are available in Forry, N., Blasberg, A., Tout, K., Isner, T., Carlin, C., & Davis, E. (2011). *Minnesota Child Care Choices: Child Care Decision-Making and Perceptions of Quality*. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends & University of Minnesota.

<sup>9</sup>Chase, R. & Valorose, J. (2010). *Child Care Use in Minnesota: Report of the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey*. Wilder Research: St. Paul, MN.

Of those respondents in the Minnesota Child Care Choices study who said they had heard of Parent Aware, most reported that they learned about it from a caseworker or other county-based service provider, through word-of-mouth, or from their child care provider. Eleven percent (6 respondents) of those who had heard of it reported that they had used Parent Aware ratings data.

### **What factors affect parents' knowledge and use of Parent Aware information?**

Differences were examined between the group of parents that knew about Parent Aware and the group that did not. Neither family income, nor parental education level, nor immigrant status, nor the age of child for whom care was being sought differentiated these groups.<sup>10</sup> However, families that had heard of Parent Aware were more likely to report receiving a child care subsidy to help them pay for child care.

Because Parent Aware is primarily accessed via a website, it was expected that respondents who use the Internet more frequently would be more likely to have heard of Parent Aware. However, there was no significant relationship between frequency of Internet usage and knowledge of Parent Aware. These findings suggest that Internet access is not related to the use or non-use of Parent Aware ratings data.<sup>11</sup>

As described below, the research team could identify respondents who were using a Parent Aware-rated program for their child. The familiarity with Parent Aware for these respondents was compared with those respondents who were not currently using a Parent Aware-rated program for their child. The group using a Parent Aware-rated provider was not more likely to have heard of Parent Aware. This lack of familiarity with Parent Aware is noteworthy, given that participating programs receive promotional materials to display in their programs, and indicates the need for additional strategies to market Parent Aware to parents.

### **What percentage of families is using Parent Aware-rated programs?**

Using both survey and administrative data, it was determined that 20% of respondents living in Parent Aware counties were using at least one Parent Aware-rated program to care for their child at the time of the baseline interview.<sup>12</sup> However, these numbers are likely an underestimate of the usage of Parent Aware-rated programs, since some parents declined to name the child care provider they were using, some programs were difficult to identify using only the parents' descriptions, and some programs are known to have been rated before or after the time of the interview.

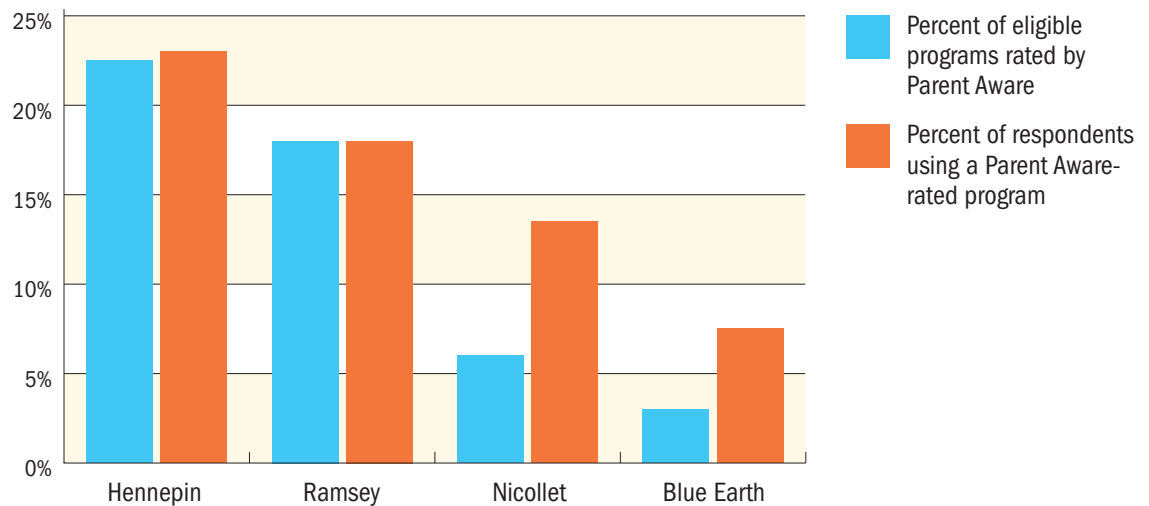
The rate at which respondents use Parent Aware-rated programs varies by county. This is expected given that the availability of Parent Aware-rated care also varies by county. Figure 1 shows that a higher percentage of respondents are using Parent Aware-rated programs in counties where a higher percentage of eligible programs are rated by Parent Aware.

<sup>10</sup>The three income groups compared in this study are families earning 100% or less of the federal poverty level, families earning between 100% and 175% of the federal poverty level and families earning 175% or more of the federal poverty level. The three education levels compared are those with less than a high school diploma and no GED, those with either a high school diploma or GED, and those with more than a high school diploma or GED (at least some vocational school or college).

<sup>11</sup>To learn more about how parents in the study are acquiring information about their child care options and making child care decisions, see Forry, N., Blasberg, A., Tout, K., Isner, T., Carlin, C., & Davis, E. (2011). *Minnesota Child Care Choices: Child Care Decision-Making and Perceptions of Quality*. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends & University of Minnesota.

<sup>12</sup>In the phone survey, respondents were asked to provide the names of the programs and/or providers they were using and the town in which the provider is located. State administrative data on child care subsidy payments provide a record of the providers that receive subsidy payments, the child for whom the payment was provided and the service dates of subsidized care. These two data sources were combined to determine whether respondents were using a Parent Aware-rated program for that child at the time of the parent interview.

**FIGURE 1: Availability and use of Parent Aware-rated programs across four participating counties**



**SOURCE:** Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data; MEC2 data extracted for Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey respondents; Parent Aware Rating Tool database; Minnesota NACCRRAware database

#### What differences are there between families who are and are not using Parent Aware-rated programs?

Characteristics of the respondents who were and were not using a Parent Aware-rated program were examined to determine if there were significant differences between the groups. Respondents who used a Parent Aware-rated program did not differ from other respondents by parents' education level, family income level, or parents' immigrant status, but they did differ by the age of the child receiving care. Infants and school-aged children were significantly less likely to be in a Parent Aware-rated program, whereas preschool-aged children were significantly more likely to be in a Parent Aware-rated program. This may be attributable to the fact that preschool-aged children are more likely to be in center-based care or pre-kindergarten programs, the types which constitute the majority of programs in Parent Aware.<sup>13</sup>

One-quarter of families receiving child care subsidies use a Parent Aware-rated program, compared to 15% of families not receiving subsidies, a difference which is statistically significant. However, parents who were using a Parent Aware-rated program were not significantly more likely to say that their subsidy receipt affected their choice of a child care provider. Parent Aware users were not significantly more likely to receive other forms of financial support (scholarships, employer subsidy, etc.) to pay for child care.

No statistically significant differences were noted between the decision-making process of parents who use a Parent Aware-rated program and parents who do not.

All respondents were asked to report on the care their child was receiving from their primary provider. Parents were asked, for example, how often their provider used a curriculum to guide instruction and how often children's development was assessed. Compared to respondents who were not using a Parent Aware-rated program, respondents who were using a Parent Aware-rated program were significantly more likely to report that their primary provider tracked their child's learning and development using an assessment tool, that their provider had teachers/caregivers with formal education and training in working with young children, that their provider had staff that are warm and friendly with their child, that their provider enrolled children from different backgrounds, and that their child gets a lot of positive, individual attention. This may be preliminary evidence that parents using Parent Aware-rated programs perceive their children to be receiving higher quality care than do parents using non-rated

<sup>13</sup>Tout, K., Starr, R., Isner, T., Cleveland, J., Soli, M., & Quinn, K. (2010). *Evaluation of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System pilot: Year 2 evaluation report*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Early Learning Foundation.

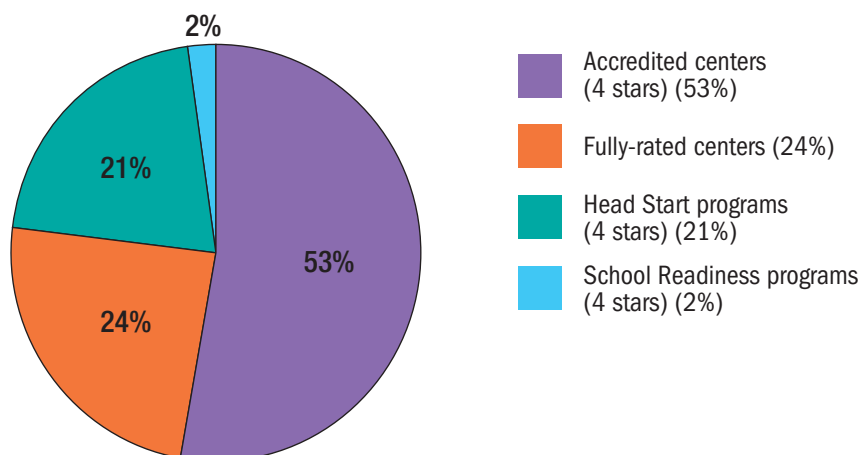
programs. The exception to this trend is that respondents using a Parent Aware-rated program were significantly less likely to say that their child likes the caregiver or provider.

### Which Parent Aware-rated programs are parents using?

A large majority (79%) of respondents using Parent Aware-rated programs are using a program with a 4-star rating. Moreover, nearly all of these programs received an automatic 4-star rating due to their status as an accredited center or family child care home, a Head Start program, or a school-based pre-kindergarten program. The high proportion of automatically-rated programs is expected since automatically-rated programs make up 68% of all Parent Aware-rated programs, and an estimated 87% of children served by Parent Aware are cared for in automatically-rated programs.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, the majority of respondents (53%) using a Parent Aware-rated program were using an accredited center-based program. Of these, about two-thirds were using child care centers administered by two companies (Kindercare and New Horizon Academy; see Figure 2).

No respondents reported using a Parent Aware-rated family child care provider. This is not surprising since only 10% of respondents reported using licensed family child care, and fewer than 10% of eligible licensed family child care providers are participating in Parent Aware.<sup>15</sup>

**FIGURE 2: Types of Parent Aware-rated programs used by respondents**



**SOURCE:** Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data; MEC2 data extracted for Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey respondents; Parent Aware Rating Tool database

### What differences are seen between families who are and are not using 4-star programs?

Respondents were asked if the arrangement they use most often for their child was their first choice for child care. Respondents who used Parent Aware-rated programs were not significantly more likely than parents who did not use Parent Aware-rated programs to say that their child's program was their top choice. However, respondents whose children were in 4-star programs were significantly more likely than respondents whose children were in 2-star or 3-star programs to report that their current provider was their top choice for care. Respondents whose children were in 4-star programs were significantly more likely than respondents whose children were in 2-star or 3-star programs to report that their provider has a lot of books and learning materials; that their provider has staff who are warm and friendly; that their child likes the caregiver or provider; that their child gets a lot of

<sup>14</sup>Tout, K., Starr, R., Isner, T., Cleveland, J., Soli, M., & Quinn, K. (2010). *Evaluation of Parent Aware: Minnesota's Quality Rating System pilot: Year 3 evaluation report*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Early Learning Foundation.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

positive, individual attention; that there are lots of creative activities such as art, music, dance, and drama; that the caregiver provides activities that are right for my child and fit their child's needs, and that their child is learning new things and new skills.

## Implications and Next Steps

Parent Aware's primary goal is to provide information to parents, and Minnesota parents have reported interest in information about quality they could use to select a care provider. Early in the implementation of Minnesota's QRIS, about one-fifth of respondents (21%) in the pilot areas had heard of Parent Aware. A very small proportion (2%) reported having used Parent Aware as a source of information. Perhaps because the baseline survey was conducted only 24 to 30 months after the initial roll-out of the Parent Aware pilot, parents in the study showed modest levels of awareness and low-reported usage of the QRIS. Future Research Briefs from this study will track parents' familiarity with Parent Aware and their reported use of the QRIS information as the program becomes more established.

The finding that 20% of children in this sample of families with low incomes were being cared for in a Parent Aware-rated program, despite the fact that only 14% of child care providers in the pilot areas are participating in Parent Aware, is noteworthy. More than three-quarters of the rated programs used by these parents were rated at the highest level of quality, indicating substantial access to high-quality care among the families in the sample.

A higher percentage (25%) of families that were receiving child care subsidies used Parent Aware-rated programs than of families who were not receiving child care subsidies (15%). One possible explanation for this difference is that subsidy receipt may make it possible for low-income families to access high-quality care that they would not otherwise have been able to afford. Another possibility is that families who are receiving subsidies are getting child care advice from caseworkers that is influencing their choice of providers. These results will be explored in more depth in future briefs.

As Minnesota explores proposals for a statewide QRIS and more QRIS are developed across the nation, it will be important to continue collecting data about parents' access to QRIS information, their use of the ratings to make child care decisions, and their participation in rated-programs. In particular, QRIS need strategies for targeting parents with low incomes and for integrating subsidies and QRIS to allow families making child care decisions a wider range of choices and access to higher-rated programs.