Evaluation of Parent Aware: Key Findings and Implications for the Parent Aware Redesign

Final Evaluation Report and Synthesis

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Introduction

In March 2022, Child Trends contracted with the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)[1] to conduct an independent evaluation of Parent Aware, Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early care and education (ECE) programs.[2] The evaluation includes several legislatively mandated research activities designed to assess the effectiveness of Parent Aware in supporting the state's children, families, and ECE workforce. To ensure the evaluation could inform meaningful improvements to Parent Aware, these activities leveraged information from multiple sources and used various methodologies, including the following:

- Interviews with QRIS administrators to understand lessons learned from other states' QRIS

- Surveys and focus groups with early educators and families to understand their experiences with the ECE system in Minnesota, including its strengths and challenges

- Reviews of existing literature and other documentation to understand the extent to which Parent Aware aligns with best practices from the most recent research

- Analyses of administrative data to explore trends in Parent Aware participation and the extent to which families across the state can equitably access ECE that meets their needs

Child Trends developed this report to synthesize key findings across all the evaluation activities we conducted from March 2022 to September 2024. In this report, we first provide some background information on Parent Aware as context for the evaluation findings. We then briefly describe our goals and methods for the various research activities conducted as part of the evaluation. (More detailed reports about our methods and findings from each activity are linked in the Appendix Table A1 and can also be found on the Parent Aware Evaluation webpage.) Finally, we provide a summary of key findings and implications for the Parent Aware Redesign. Taken together, our findings highlight various ways that Parent Aware could be strengthened to better serve the needs of children, families, and members of the ECE workforce.

> ### Terminology in This Report
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> Terms like "child care provider" or "early childhood educator" are often used interchangeably to describe the professionals who work in ECE programs, including center-based, family child care, and school-based preschool programs. DCYF received feedback that "early educator" is the preferred term among most professionals across different types of ECE settings. Our team uses this term where possible throughout this report, but we did not edit the language of any direct quotes from participants.

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[1] This report was funded by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, which launched on July 1, 2024. Between July 2024 and July 2025, state programs and staff will gradually transfer to DCYF from the Departments of Human Services, Education, Health, and Public Safety. Visit the DCYF website for more information.

[2] The evaluation was passed by the Minnesota Legislature in 2021. For more information, see Minnesota Statutes 124D.142, Subd. 1-4 (2023) here: https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.142.

Background on Parent Aware

In this section, we provide background information on Parent Aware as context for understanding the findings and implications from the evaluation. The information in this section reflects how Parent Aware operated at the time of this evaluation, from March 2022 to September 2024. However, it is important to note that elements of Parent Aware may change pending DCYF's efforts on the Parent Aware Redesign, which will culminate in recommendations to the Minnesota Legislature regarding revisions to Parent Aware. Additionally, recently passed legislation and state efforts to revise and improve other elements of Minnesota's ECE system could have important implications for this work. More information about these other ongoing efforts to strengthen Minnesota's ECE system is discussed later in this section (see Evaluation Context: The Parent Aware Redesign).

Funding and implementation

Parent Aware was first implemented as a pilot QRIS program in Minnesota from 2007 to 2011. From January 2012 to January 2015, Parent Aware expanded as a voluntary statewide system with private, state and federal funding, including dollars from the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant and a federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant (2012-2016).[3] As of January 2015, Parent Aware has been administered by Minnesota DCYF's Early Childhood Administration, in coordination with the Department of Health, with support from contractors such as Child Care Aware of Minnesota and other partner organizations to manage statewide and regional implementation.

Mission and supports offered

Programs that choose to participate in Parent Aware[4] submit an application and other documentation to earn a quality Rating on a scale from One- to Four-Stars. A higher Star Rating indicates that a program has met criteria demonstrating the use of best practices to support children's learning and development. Programs eligible to participate in Parent Aware include family child care and center-based programs licensed by the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) or by a Tribal Government, certified child care programs, Head Start programs, and public school-based Pre-K programs.[5] In addition to assigning quality Ratings to ECE settings, Parent Aware offers various tools and resources to achieve three central goals: 1) support ECE programs in improving their practices, 2) help families find high-quality care, and 3) help children access high-quality ECE that prepares them for success in school and life.[6]

Support ECE programs' quality improvement. Parent Aware Rated programs gain access to a suite of resources aimed at supporting them in their ongoing quality improvement. In addition to qualifying for quality improvement grants, programs can leverage the support of coaches, professional development advisors, mental health consultants, and various other support staff. Program staff and family child care educators also use Develop, Minnesota's Quality Rating and Registry System, allowing them to search, find, and take free or low-cost training offered either online or in person, document their educational achievements determining a career lattice step, connect to their employer, and

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[3] From January 2012 to January 2015, Parent Aware slowly expanded to more counties each year until it was fully established and available statewide.

[4] Participation in Parent Aware is currently voluntary. However, the Minnesota Legislature recently passed a bill that will automatically assign all unrated licensed child care programs a One-Star Rating beginning in July 2026. For more information, see: https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.142.

[5] Read more about which programs are eligible to be Rated on the Parent Aware website: https://www.parentaware.org/programs/how-to-earn-a-rating/#EligibilityRequirements.

[6] See the Parent Aware website for more information: https://www.parentaware.org/programs/why-get-a-rating/.

access other professional development activities.[7] Programs rated at a Three- or Four-Star level also receive higher reimbursement rates through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP; Minnesota's child care subsidy program), and all programs that participate in Parent Aware are able to accept children receiving Early Learning Scholarships (ELS) regardless of their Star Rating Level.[8]

Help families find high-quality care. Parent Aware provides a number of resources to help families in Minnesota find high-quality care that meets their needs. The Parent Aware online search tool, ParentAware.org, allows families to search for care near them, with filters for factors such as program type, Parent Aware Star Rating, hours of operation, and language. The website also includes written materials to support families in finding care, such as explanations of different ECE care settings and checklists for finding an ECE program that meets their needs.

Help children access ECE that prepares them for school and life. Acknowledging that children's early educational experiences have important implications for their success and well-being in school and beyond, Parent Aware aims to support the healthy learning and development of children by expanding access to high-quality care by increasing the number of Rated programs. Parent Aware Star Ratings demonstrate when ECE programs go above and beyond the basic quality practices captured via licensing requirements to meet more of the best practices that support children's healthy learning and development. By offering quality improvement supports and financial incentives to Rated programs, Parent Aware encourages programs to make ongoing quality improvements and adopt evidence-based practices that support the needs of families and the healthy development of children. Additionally, Parent Aware aims to support families' access to high-quality care: Families who meet income and other eligibility requirements can apply for ELS and use their scholarship at a program that participates in Parent Aware, and Three- and Four-Star Rated programs that serve children receiving CCAP subsidies receive a higher subsidy reimbursement rate.

The Rating process

Parent Aware assigns participating programs a One- to Four-Star Rating based on the extent to which programs meet quality Indicators within five Categories of Program Standards: 1) Health and Well-being, 2) Relationships with Families, 3) Teaching and Relationships with Children, 4) Assessments and Planning for Each Individual Child, and 5) Professionalism.

Quality Standards and Indicators

Parent Aware's five Categories of Program Standards represent the quality teaching and learning practices that support children's healthy learning and development. For example, the Teaching and Relationships with Children Category includes Standards related to curriculum and kindergarten transition support, whereas the Health and Well-Being Category includes Standards related to nutrition and play. Table 1 provides an overview of the intention behind each Category as well as the Standards they include.

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[7] Certain staff at Rated programs are required to have an individual membership in Develop and a Career Lattice Step.
[8] Benefits to Rated programs vary by Rating level as well as program type and Rating Pathway. Head Start programs, for example, can become Four-Star Rated through the *Automatic Rating Pathway* due to alignment between Head Start and Parent Aware standards and monitoring processes, and therefore are eligible for different kinds of supports and grants than other programs. See the Parent Aware website for more information: https://www.parentaware.org/programs/why-get-a-rating/.

Table 1. Parent Aware Categories and Standards

Category of Program Standards	Overview	Quality Standards
Health and Well-Being	Providing a **safe and healthy environment** for children where they have access to nutritious food and opportunities for active play	• Health and safety • Nutrition and play
Relationships with Families	Building **two-way relationships with families** to ensure children feel a sense of belonging and children are respected and supported for their home cultures and languages	• Respect and ongoing two-way communication • Links families to services
Teaching and Relationships with Children	Creating a **caring and engaging learning environment using a research-based curriculum** that supports children's transitions to kindergarten	• Curriculum • Play and interactions • Learning and belonging • Kindergarten transition support
Assessment and Planning for Each Individual Child	Offering **individualized instruction and support** tailored to each child's developmental needs, using data from observational and assessment tools	• Observation and assessment • Assessment-based instruction
Professionalism	Employing and supporting program staff with the **professional qualifications needed to provide quality care**, including higher education coursework and credentials as well as ongoing training and professional development	• Program leadership • Qualifications and development

Source: Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2016). *Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System: Standards and indicators.* https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-6346B-ENG

Each program Standard also includes various quality Indicators, which are the outcomes, processes, or roles that can be observed or measured to determine whether a program is using best practices related to that standard. To achieve a Rating, programs must submit documentation or other evidence to demonstrate they are meeting the required quality Indicators for their desired Rating level within each Standard. Table 2 provides example Indicators and evidence required for programs to earn a Parent Aware Star Rating. More information about quality Indicators and evidence requirements for programs can be found on the Parent Aware website.

Table 2. Example Indicators and evidence required for programs

Category and Standard	Star Level	Example Indicators	Evidence required for Indicator
Teaching and Relationships with Children: Curriculum	One-Star (required)	**Routines:** Using consistent routines to support children	For each age group served, submit a daily routine (e.g., daily or picture schedule, outline of daily practices).
	Three-Star (required)	**Curriculum use:** Using a curriculum aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIP) across age groups	Submit the name of the approved[9] curriculum used for each age group.
Assessment and Planning for Each Individual Child: Observation and Assessment	Three-Star (required)	**Child assessments:** Assessing all children in at least one age group at least once per year	Submit the name of the approved assessment tool used.
	Three- or Four-Star (2 points)	**Asks for parent input:** Asking families to share observations from home and provide input on child development goals	Provide a written description or example of soliciting family observations and input (e.g., a family survey, conference form, communication logs).

Source: Parent Aware. (2024). *Rating resources.* https://www.parentaware.org/programs/rating-resources/

Parent Aware is a "hybrid" QRIS, meaning that it has "block" levels and "indicator-for-points" levels. In Parent Aware, the "block" levels are the One- and Two-Star levels. Programs seeking a One-or Two-Star Rating must meet all Indicators at their desired Rating level. At the Three- and Four-Star Rating level, Parent Aware is structured such that programs can pick and choose which "indicators-for-points" they want to submit documentation for (after also meeting all One- and Two-Star requirements), though they must submit documentation to meet some Indicators in all five Program Standard Categories.[10]

Rating Pathways

Parent Aware is available to licensed family child care and center-based programs, as well as certified child care programs, Head Start programs, public school-based Pre-K programs, and voluntary Pre-K programs. These different types of ECE programs are eligible to become Parent Aware Rated through different processes, or "Rating Pathways," which are described in Table 3.

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[9] Parent Aware has lists of approved observational and child assessment tools that programs can use to meet quality indicators. If a program uses a tool that is not approved, they can submit a nomination form to the state for consideration.
[10] Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2016). *Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System: Standards and indicators.* https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-6346B-ENG

Table 3. Parent Aware Rating Pathways

Pathway	Programs Eligible	The Rating Process	Ratings Earned
Full-Rating	✓ Licensed child care centers ✓ Licensed family child care programs ✓ Tribally licensed programs	Programs participate in a 6-18 month cohort process[11] and work with a coach to earn their Rating (centers may also be required to receive an onsite observation)[12]	One-, Two-, Three-, or Four-Star Rating
Accelerated Rating	✓ Licensed, accredited child care centers ✓ Licensed, accredited family child care programs ✓ Public school-based Pre-K programs that meet the School Readiness statute[13] ✓ License-exempt charter schools officially recognized by MDE	Because these programs meet or exceed most Rating requirements through another monitoring agency (e.g., national accreditation), eligible programs can move through a streamlined and faster process to receive a Four-Star Rating.	Four-Star Rating
Automatic Rating	✓ Center-based Head Start and Early Head Start programs ✓ Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) programs	These programs apply for and receive a Four-Star Rating through the annual Head Start/VPK monitoring processes aligned with Parent Aware requirements.[14]	Four-Star Rating
Expedited Rating	✓ Licensed child care centers part of a chain of centers (under the same license) where at least one center in the chain currently holds a Three- or Four-Star Rating	Within six months of applying for a Three- or Four-Star Rating, eligible programs must meet training requirements and may also be required to receive an onsite observation	Three- or Four-Star Rating

Source: For more information on the various Pathways to becoming Rated, see the Parent Aware website: https://www.parentaware.org/programs/choose-your-path/.

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[11] Before joining a Full-Rating Cohort, eligible programs can choose to participate in a Building Quality Cohort and receive 20-60 hours of free coaching over a 6-12 month period. Participating programs can receive up to $1,000 via a Building Quality Grant after participating in a minimum of 20 hours of coaching over 6 months.

[12] Child care centers seeking a Three- or Four-Star Rating are required to receive an on-site observation scored using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) tool and must achieve a minimum score to earn their desired Rating.

[13] School-based Pre-K programs and their partners can qualify for the Accelerated Rating Pathway if they meet School Readiness or Voluntary Prekindergarten Statute.

[14] Head Start and Early Head Start programs, for example, are rigorously monitored and must meet federal regulations, Head Start Program Performance Standards, or state laws that match or exceed the requirements for a Parent Aware Rating.

Evaluation context: The Parent Aware Redesign

As part of the Parent Aware Redesign launched in 2021,[15] DCYF is working internally and with partners 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 that the system was designed to serve. Minnesota's focus on improving equity as part of the Parent Aware Redesign follows another recent statewide equity engagement effort. In 2022, DCYF collaborated with a variety of partners to release the Parent Aware Racial Equity Action Plan report—the culmination of a multi-year effort to engage early educators and other community members in identifying and developing strategies to address key racial equity-related challenges within Parent Aware.[a] Along with feedback shared by hundreds of early educators from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds across Minnesota about barriers within the Rating process (summarized in the Parent Aware Equity Report[b]), the Action Plan report focuses on four priority equity-related issues and recommends strategies to address them. Topics covered in the report range from racial inequities in statewide access to high-quality care to disparities in the supports offered to help ECE programs meet Parent Aware requirements and the need for revised Quality Standards and Indicators aligned with community values. Importantly, the report authors note that the release of the report does not mark the end of Minnesota's work, but rather the beginning of the long process needed to make Parent Aware a more equitable system that meets the needs of all the state's children, families, and early educators.[16] The roadmap provided by the Racial Equity Action Plan report, along with findings from the Parent Aware Evaluation and various other efforts led by DCYF and their partners, will together help to inform proposed changes to Parent Aware as part of the ongoing Parent Aware Redesign.[c]

Importantly, the Minnesota Legislature recently passed several pieces of legislation allocating funds to support other efforts to revise and improve elements of Minnesota's ECE system. For example:

- In 2021, the Legislature allocated federal funding for DHS[17] to lead several child care regulation modernization projects, which will include revisions to licensing standards for ECE programs.

- In 2023, the Legislature passed a bill that says that, beginning in July 2026, all licensed unrated ECE programs will automatically be assigned a One-Star Rating unless they opt out or seek a higher Rating.[18]

Although these efforts were ongoing at the time of the evaluation, meaning changes were not yet implemented, they nonetheless have important implications for the Parent Aware Redesign and the Parent Aware Evaluation. The Automatic One-Star legislation, for example, is important to consider in thinking through any proposed revisions to Parent Aware Standards and Indicators, as the change would mean that licensing standards will effectively replace the current One-Star Rating requirements. Likewise, any changes to ECE licensing standards may require an updated crosswalk of the new standards with the Parent Aware Standards and Indicators to assess alignment and address any gaps or redundancies. In the Key Findings and Considerations for the Parent Aware Redesign section of this report, we discuss specific implications of new legislation where relevant.

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[15] 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/.
[16] See the Parent Aware Equity Report for more information about the engagement effort that led up to the Parent Aware Racial Equity Action Plan report: https://www.house.mn.gov/comm/docs/IwVBzpJMjkajPwIj_1oPMw.pdf.
[17] The Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) launched on July 1, 2024. Between July 2024 and July 2025, state programs and staff will gradually transfer to DCYF from the Departments of Human Services, Education, Health, and Public Safety. Visit the DCYF website for more information.
[18] For more information, see: https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.142.

Evaluation Goals and Methods

Goals for the evaluation

Parent Aware is a complex system in that it aims to achieve multiple goals using multiple, interconnected strategies—each of which has important implications for how our team approached this evaluation and how we framed the implications of our findings in this report. For example, in examining how well Parent Aware defines and measures quality in ECE settings, we consider not only how well Quality Standards and Indicators align with the latest research on practices to support children's development, but also the extent to which early educators and families find them meaningful and how well Parent Aware supports early educators in implementing the quality practices associated with them.

In collaboration with DCYF and other key stakeholders, our team developed plans for several research activities to be conducted as part of the evaluation. While each activity was designed to examine a different component of the system using varied methods, all evaluation activities align with one or more of four central goals guiding our work.

Goal #1: Revise and strengthen Parent Aware's Standards and Indicators for defining quality to ensure they are both meaningful and aligned with best practices to support children's development. Included under this goal are questions about:

- o Parent Aware Quality Standards and Indicators
- o Rating Pathways
- o How observation and assessment tools are used within the Rating process (also discussed under Goal 3)
- o How Parent Aware supports children's healthy learning and development

Goal #2: Improve the Rating process to reduce barriers to participation and ensure participation is meaningful and worth the investment for early educators. Included under this goal are questions about:

- o QRIS structure and how quality levels are defined
- o The Automatic One-Star Rating legislation
- o The Rating process and documentation requirements
- o Alignment between Parent Aware and other state ECE systems (e.g., licensing)
- o The Cohort model and timelines for Ratings and Re-Ratings
- o Parent Aware incentives (e.g., Building Quality grants)

Goal #3: Improve and expand the resources and other supports Parent Aware offers to promote programs' ongoing quality improvement and ensure the well-being of the ECE workforce. Included under this goal are questions about:

- o How Parent Aware supports early educators' professional development through training, coaching, and other supports
- o Educators' professional needs and interests
- o How observation and assessment tools are used to support quality improvement
- o Challenges impacting the ECE workforce (e.g., compensation, benefits, well-being)

Goal #4: Identify strategies for Parent Aware to better support families in finding and accessing affordable, high-quality care that meets their unique needs and prepares their children for success in school and life. Included under this goal are questions about:

- o Trends in ECE availability relative to community characteristics
- o Consumer education and the Parent Aware search tool
- o Families' access to ECE and other needs

Evaluation activities and methods

Our team conducted various activities as part of the Parent Aware Evaluation from March 2022 to September 2024. More detailed information—including more information on the specific goals, research questions, and methods for each activity—can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix of this report, along with links to reports of findings for each activity.

Literature review and comparisons to other state QRIS. Our team reviewed and synthesized information from 45 recent publications and interviewed QRIS administrators from six other states to answer questions about Parent Aware's Quality Standards and Indicators, as well as the Rating process.

Analyses of Parent Aware Rating data. We analyzed Rating data for 2,162 programs that earned Parent Aware Ratings (including Re-Ratings) in nine Full-Rating Cohorts from June 2019 through June 2023 to identify trends in how programs meet indicators to earn their desired Ratings and any differences by program type or over time.

Stakeholder engagement. With support from DCYF and Portage Partners Consulting, we gathered and analyzed 1,804 responses to a survey about feedback from early educators, coaches, families, and other key stakeholders on ten proposed changes to Parent Aware.

Crosswalk of Parent Aware requirements and Rating Pathways. Our team reviewed relevant documentation to create a matrix of requirements for programs to earn each Star Rating Level through each Rating Pathway and to assess alignment with Parent Aware Standards and Indicators for programs Rated through the Full-Rating Pathway.

Exploration of quality and children's development in Rated programs. We collected observational and survey data from early educators in 37 Parent Aware Rated programs to explore patterns of quality in Rated programs and learn more about early educators' needs and experiences. Our team coded observational data using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) tool and also piloted a new tool called the Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES) to explore its potential value as a supplemental measure of equitable sociocultural interactions in ECE programs. To identify the developmental areas where children are thriving or may need more support, we also asked participating early educators and the families of 68 preschool-aged children enrolled in their programs to complete a brief survey including the Healthy and Ready to Learn (HRTL) measure at both the beginning and the end of the 2022-2023 school year. The small sample of programs and children in the evaluation limited how we were able to use the data to draw conclusions about Parent Aware.

Survey and focus group engagement with early educators and families. Our team gathered insights on the experiences and needs of early educators and families via surveys of 433 early educators and 319 families and follow-up focus groups with 44 early educators and 31 families. The early educator survey and focus groups included both Rated and unrated educators from across the state, and covered questions about early educators' experiences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, any changes they've noticed in the needs of children or families, what quality means to them, and how Parent Aware could better support them. The family survey and focus groups included a diverse group of families with a young child enrolled in any type of

ECE program and covered questions about families' access to ECE options that meets their needs, experiences with their current program, and trends they notice in their children's learning.

Analyses of child care availability and Parent Aware participation. We analyzed administrative data to explore patterns in Parent Aware participation and Star Rating levels across the state. We also conducted analyses to determine whether those patterns varied by and/or were predicted by program-level characteristics (e.g., program type, size, or ages served) or community-level characteristics (e.g., population of children under five, racial/ethnic characteristics, or average income within census tracts where programs are located).

Participatory listening sessions with early educators. With support from our partners at Wilder Research, we facilitated a total of 11 virtual participatory listening sessions with 51 Rated early educators and 52 unrated early educators to understand their perceptions of Parent Aware, reasons for participating or not participating in Parent Aware, barriers to becoming Rated or seeking a higher Star Level, and perceptions on whether the Rating process is culturally inclusive and relevant.

Key Findings and Considerations for the Parent Aware Redesign

In this section, we synthesize the key findings from across evaluation activities and considerations for the Parent Aware Redesign, organized by the four central goals guiding the evaluation. More detailed findings and considerations related to a specific component of the evaluation can be found in the full reports our team developed for each evaluation activity, which are linked in the Appendix to this report (see Table A1).

Goal 1: Revise and strengthen Parent Aware Quality Standards and Indicators

> **Goal #1:** Revise and strengthen Parent Aware's Standards and Indicators for defining quality to ensure they are both meaningful and aligned with best practices to support children's development.

Key findings (Goal 1)

Quality Standards and Indicators

Most programs earn the Rating they request and improve their Ratings over time.

Our analyses of Rating data from nine Full-Rating Pathway Cohorts found that across program types and Star Levels, most programs (92-99%) earn the Parent Aware Rating they request. Additionally, our findings showed that most programs increase their Ratings with each Re-Rating attempt over time. When programs in our sample were Rated for the first time, most requested and earned a Rating of either Two- or Three-Stars on average. But, by the fourth time they went through the Re-Rating process, programs on average requested and earned a Four-Star Rating. (Programs are required to be Re-Rated every two years.)

Early educators face challenges navigating Parent Aware Standards and Indicators, and many want to see requirements simplified and streamlined.

Across the several activities in which our team engaged early educators, we consistently heard feedback related to the complexity of the requirements for programs to become Rated. In our listening sessions with Rated and unrated early educators, for example, both groups felt that the type and number of requirements to be Rated were the primary barrier preventing more programs from joining Parent Aware or seeking a higher Rating. Similarly, a common theme from the stakeholder engagement to gather feedback on proposed changes to Parent Aware was that many respondents thought that the state's top priority should be to simplify the Rating process.

Our team heard similar sentiments not only from early educators, but also from QRIS administrators in other states. During interviews, some states shared they are moving towards a "less is more" approach to QRIS and streamlining quality indicators to help reduce burden on participating ECE programs. Evidence from our review of the recent literature also suggests the importance of selecting research-based indicators, especially those that promote children's development. A recent synthesis of the literature on ECE quality identified three elements of quality—educator-child relationships, effective teaching and use of curricula, and educator preparation and professional development—that researchers have most consistently found are associated with positive developmental outcomes for children.[d]

> *"Part of designing the system has been a recognition that we are not funding it at the level that it needs to be funded, and therefore we have to have reasonable expectations of providers. For too long, we have piled new regulations onto a field that is underpaid [and] under resourced… We are unwilling at this point in time to create more hurdles without funding the resources necessary to jump those hurdles."* **– Delaware QRIS Administrator**

Indicators in the Professionalism Category are barriers to earning higher Ratings for some programs.

Our team also heard from early educators across several activities that Parent Aware requirements related to training and professional qualifications are particularly burdensome. From our analyses of Rating data, we found that across settings, programs seeking a Three- or Four-Star Rating most commonly opt out of optional Indicators for points in the Professionalism Category. In the listening sessions and stakeholder engagement activities, both Rated and unrated early educators called for more flexibility in how to meet requirements. Some, for example, advocated for adding certain specialized certifications or credentials to the list of ways that early educators can meet requirements, streamlining the process for new trainings to be approved, and finding ways to better value educators' years of experience. Others noted that the frequency of training requirements combined with limited options in some areas of the state (e.g., rural areas) mean that some early educators have to take the same trainings multiple times in order to meet their training hour requirements, noting that more variety in trainings would make that time and effort feel more worthwhile.

> *"I think that experience doesn't carry enough weight. It is very financially difficult for early childhood employees to pursue degrees, so a system that honors their experience would be more equitable."* **– Stakeholder Engagement Survey Respondent**

CLASS® is a well-researched global measure of quality in ECE settings; however, because of the limitations of its use as a high-stakes point-in-time measure in QRIS, it may be more meaningful if used primarily as a reflection tool for quality improvement.

On-site observations are an important part of how many state QRIS, including Parent Aware, define quality in ECE settings. Recent research highlights notable limitations to using observations within state QRIS. For example, many early educators find the process of being observed disruptive and also stressful, particularly when scores from the observation impact programs' ratings and/or access to quality improvement supports (e.g., grants).[e] Additionally, most state QRIS lack the funding or staff capacity to conduct observations in all programs and all classrooms across Rating levels, and most only observe programs once every two or three years, which limits programs' ability to use scores to inform quality improvement goals.[f] CLASS® was also designed to measure the average experience of all children in an ECE setting, meaning it does not take into

account the extent to which all children experience the classroom environment.[g,h,i] Additional discussion of the limitations of CLASS® as well as strategies state QRIS could adopt to address these limitations can be found under Goal 3: Improve Resources to Support Programs' Quality Improvement.

Although families' and early educators' views on what makes an ECE program high quality are well-aligned with Parent Aware Standards, some early educators don't feel that Ratings are accurate.

From our surveys and focus groups with families and early educators, we found that their views on what makes an ECE program high quality are well-aligned with Parent Aware Quality Standards. However, around one in three unrated early educators who responded to the survey said one of their main reasons for not joining Parent Aware was that they do not believe Ratings accurately reflect quality. Rated early educators who took part in listening sessions also thought that distrust in whether Ratings are accurate or fair may be an important factor dissuading some unrated programs from becoming Rated. Various findings from across evaluation activities could point to the reasons underlying early educators' skepticism or lack of trust in the Ratings. Many early educators noted, for example, that the Rating process can be very cumbersome, and that some requirements feel like boxes to be checked. Although most early educators agree conceptually with Parent Aware's indicators for defining quality, these comments about the Rating process could indicate that early educators may not see how Parent Aware's operationalizes or measures quality indicators (i.e., via the evidence and other documentation requirements for programs to earn a Rating) as accurate or meaningful. Early educators also expressed concerns about on-site observations conducted as part of the Rating process. In both the listening sessions and stakeholder engagement activities, some early educators noted that an observation collected at a single point in time does not feel like an accurate representation of a program's quality, with some educators feeling that "one bad day" could significantly impact their program's Rating. Some early educators were also concerned about the accuracy of Ratings in family child care programs, which are not required to be observed as part of the Rating process.

When we asked unrated educators why they don't participate in Parent Aware:

1 in 3 don't think Ratings are accurate

1 in 5 don't see a clear benefit to participating

"I think there is a lot of paperwork that doesn't really prove the quality. The best way is to interview/observe staff and see that the goals are being met and work on quality together." – **Early Educator**

Recent literature highlights opportunities for state QRIS to better promote equitable and culturally inclusive practices in ECE settings.

Although our review of recent literature showed that Parent Aware Standards and Indicators are well aligned with the latest research, it also highlighted opportunities to more effectively promote equitable and inclusive practices in ECE settings. Current standards are often based on the norms of privileged populations, meaning they may not reflect common cultural practices for all the diverse communities they are intended to serve.[j] A study by Garrity et al. (2021) highlighted the ways in which QRIS standards may not align with the cultural values or practices of all communities. For example, some families might have different norms and preferences related to food or sleeping arrangements, and others place a higher value on programs that offer safe opportunities for play and community building than on those that adhere to a strict curriculum for school readiness.[k] Some QRIS standards may not only be culturally discordant, but also rely heavily on physical assets within programs, making it difficult for small or less-resourced programs such as family child care educators to meet them.[l]

In a 2022 report, a team of researchers from the Children's Equity Project suggested various prompts for reflection and example indicators that states could adopt to better center equity in their QRIS (see Textbox 1).[m] The authors also highlight the importance of QRIS offering early educators ongoing professional development related to equitable practices. In a survey of Rated early educators, our team found that the professional development topics educators were most interested in were supporting children's positive behavior and social-emotional development, planning learning activities that meet the needs of all children, and working with children and families whose racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds differ from their own.

Textbox 1. Examples of equity-focused QRIS indicators from The Children's Equity Project
- Offering materials in families' preferred languages
- Using varied hours & modalities for family engagement activities
- Completing training on cultural inclusivity or other equity-focused topics
- Using observation & assessment tools validated for use with diverse populations

Rating Pathways

Frequently assessing the alignment between Parent Aware Quality Standards and requirements for other ECE systems can help ensure Rating pathways are consistent and equitable.

Our crosswalk of Parent Aware Rating requirements and Pathways found that most external organizations that set and monitor requirements for programs eligible to be Rated through the Automatic or Accelerated Pathways have requirements that align with the Parent Aware Standards and Indicators. However, the specificity of these external standards varied. Our review of the recent literature highlighted that, although streamlined rating processes for certain program types can promote efficiency, states should carefully and frequently assess alignment across systems, as well as assess who can access streamlined rating processes to ensure consistency and equity in the process.[n] For example, it can be expensive and time-intensive for programs to become accredited, which may pose disproportionate barriers for family child care programs in particular.[o] In the stakeholder engagement to gather feedback on proposed changes to Parent Aware, our team found that some early educators perceive inequities in the Automatic and Accelerated Pathways. Although some felt that more clear and transparent explanations of the Pathways could help clarify misunderstandings and strengthen early educators' trust in the Rating process, others felt that requirements should be the same for all types of programs.

"Home providers will still have to 'prove themselves' and [do] not get that Automatic Rating that centers, Head Start, and school-based programs seem to be just given. Home providers do a ton of work; why are we not given that same opportunity to get a Four-Star Rating with our licensing?"
– Stakeholder Engagement Survey Respondent

Findings from across activities highlight the various ways in which family child care educators experience the Rating process differently and often face greater barriers to meeting requirements.

In our stakeholder engagement to gather feedback on proposed changes to Parent Aware and other surveys of Rated and unrated early educators, many respondents noted that family child care programs are often a staff of one, meaning they are responsible not only for caring for the children, but also for managing the business operations of their program and ensuring compliance with licensing and other regulations. Because

of this, the Rating process can be particularly cumbersome for family child care programs. Quality improvement activities such as assessing individual children or on-site coaching visits, for example, may be less burdensome for center-based programs, which have teacher's aides and other staff who can help coordinate logistics and manage disruptions to children's routines, compared to family child care educators, who may not be able to leave the room for the entirety of the visit because they are the only individual approved to be alone with children. In line with these perceptions, our analysis of historical Rating data found that, while most programs within the study period earned the Rating they requested, far more child care centers both requested and earned a Three- or Four-Star Rating (69%) compared to family child care programs (26%).

Supporting child outcomes

Most early educators and families thought children were "on track" across developmental domains, but center educators had concerns about children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills.

Our analyses of data from activities to learn about quality and preschool-aged children's development show that children in the Parent Aware Rated programs who participated in the evaluation demonstrate age-appropriate progress in their development over the course of a school year. In surveys completed at the beginning and end of the 2022-2023 school year, most early educators and families assessed children as "on track" in three or more domains of the HRTL measure, and very few assessed children as "needs support" in any domain. In different surveys conducted in the winter of 2023-2024, we again asked families and early educators questions about young children's learning and development. However, instead of asking them to complete the full HRTL measure, we instead asked them broadly in which developmental areas they felt children were on track and in which areas they had concerns about children's progress. Again, most families and early educators felt children were on track in most domains, with one exception: Early educators, and especially center educators, had more concerns about children's social-emotional development and self-regulation skills than families. Around half of center educators said they were "very concerned" about children's progress in these areas compared to less than one in five family child care educators and less than one in ten families.[19] Some respondents said their concerns were related to the COVID-19 pandemic and lost learning time, while others felt children's increased reliance on technology was an important factor.

Considerations for the Redesign (Goal 1)

Drawing on our findings from across evaluation activities relevant to Goal #1 of revising and strengthening Parent Aware Standards and Indicators, our team offers the following considerations for DCYF as they explore potential changes to Parent Aware.

Identify ways to streamline and simplify Standards and Indicators to those that are most important to children's learning and development. Many early educators find the Rating process burdensome, and some requirements feel like administrative boxes to be checked rather than meaningful aspects of what makes a high-quality program. Recent research suggests the importance of using select research-based indicators that promote children's positive development,[p] which states could leverage not only to make the Rating process less stressful for early educators, but also to potentially reduce the administrative costs of operating their QRIS. Should DCYF consider ways to streamline indicators, however, it will also be crucial to consider the extent to which the selected indicators equitably meet the needs of all children, families, and programs. It may be valuable to identify a shared definition or framework

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[19] Notably, most of the center educators who responded to the survey were in an administrative role at their center (e.g., Director, Assistant Director), so their perceptions of children's developmental strengths and challenges may be more reflective of what those individuals heard from their staff (rather than their own personal experiences in the classroom).

for what makes indicators equitable (e.g., the guidelines outlined in the Children's Equity Project's report[q]) to help inform decision making.

Assess indicators that might pose barriers to programs seeking a higher Rating, particularly related to requirements in the Professionalism Category. Participating in ongoing training, education, and professional development can help support programs' quality improvement, but these activities can also be time consuming and costly for early educators—particularly in programs struggling with frequent staff turnover (e.g., centers) and those that may have to meet requirements for multiple entities (e.g., Parent Aware and accreditation). DCYF should consider early educators' suggestions for expanded definitions of what counts toward Parent Aware's professionalism requirements, including ways to streamline the training approval process, place more value on early educators' years of experience, and ensure requirements are aligned and do not create redundancies with other related ECE systems (e.g., ECE licensing, training requirements for K-12 educators, and ECE-related certifications or credentials).

Explore new ways to use the CLASS® and other observation tools within Parent Aware to ensure the process is supportive of the diverse needs of programs and families. The CLASS® tool has been widely researched and validated, and scores can provide a helpful benchmark for programs' overall quality and areas to improve. However, the tool may not be equally useful in all setting types, and how it is currently used within the Rating process[20] can be stressful for early educators. Drawing on changes other states have made to how observations are used within their QRIS to address these limitations, DCYF could consider strategies such as offering a mix of scored and unscored observations to support lower stakes opportunities for programs to reflect on their practices, or even eliminating required scores tied to programs' Ratings entirely. DCYF could also expand the list of approved observation tools so that programs can choose the tool best suited to their setting and needs. Notably, early educators who responded to the stakeholder engagement survey were overwhelmingly in favor of the proposed changes to remove cut scores and expand the list of tools that programs can choose from.

Continue to examine the extent to which Rating Pathways are equitable and aligned, and develop clear messaging about any differences to promote transparency and trust. Offering streamlined Rating processes for programs that meet requirements for other monitoring entities (e.g., licensing, school-based Pre-K, or Head Start) can help promote efficiency and reduce redundancies across the ECE system. However, DCYF should continue to frequently and carefully assess Parent Aware's various Rating Pathways to ensure they are aligned and do not create systematic inequities for programs. Many family child care educators feel that they have to do more to prove their quality than other types of programs, particularly those Rated through the Automatic or Accelerated Pathways. Developing clear and plain language information that explains the alignment and rationale behind how Pathways are structured may help address early educators' concerns about fairness and transparency.

Explore strategies to address the barriers many family child care programs face to becoming Rated and continue identifying opportunities for improved supports. Engaging stakeholders to better understand the costs and benefits of different approaches to QRIS and how they are experienced by early educators in programs with different characteristics (e.g., program type, geographic location) is an important activity to include in Redesign efforts. For example, to support improved adult-child interactions in Rated programs, DCYF proposed expanding observations into all types of ECE settings. However, in the stakeholder engagement activity, many family child care educators felt that the disruptions caused by on-site visits in their homes would outweigh the benefits. With these concerns in mind, alternate methods could be explored, such as allowing programs to submit their own video-recorded observations virtually or complete a relevant training in lieu of participating in an on-site visit. This approach could also help identify areas where Parent Aware incentives could be increased (or altered) so that early educators

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[20] Currently, Parent Aware only requires that centers serving preschool children receive a CLASS® observation when seeking a Three- or Four-Star Rating.

feel that the benefits of being Rated are worthwhile relative to the effort they need to invest in the process. DCYF can also consider opportunities to promote a more inclusive experience for Parent Aware participants. Some family child care educators, for example, feel that they are not valued as professionals in the same way that center educators are. Using a term such as "early educators" for staff in all types of programs may better reflect the important role of the profession in shaping children's learning during their formative years, and our team chose to use that term throughout this report in response to feedback shared by family child care educators during the stakeholder engagement activity.

When considering whether to use child assessment measures within Parent Aware, recognize that children's development is shaped by a complex network of factors, of which ECE is only one part. The small sample size for our activities to learn about quality and children's development meant that our team was not able to explore whether children in higher-Rated programs exhibited more growth in academic and social-emotional skills than those in lower-Rated programs. Nonetheless, the differences we observed in children's HRTL scores as reported by early educators compared to families during the school year highlight the complex nature of children's development and the limitations of using a single measure collected at a single point in time. Minnesota's newly-adopted Successful Learner Equation recognizes that children's development is not a product of their experiences in ECE alone, but rather is shaped by a network of interconnected factors, including their families, communities, educational experiences, and state-level systems. Assessment measures such as the HRTL could be a useful way for early educators and/or families to identify children's strengths and needs without a time-consuming, in-person assessment. However, the measure is not sensitive enough to capture children's growth during a single school year, nor does it identify the specific factors that contribute to children's strengths or areas of need. If DCYF chooses to adopt the HRTL or a similar assessment measure as part of Parent Aware processes, consider using the measure at the population level (i.e., across the state or in targeted geographic locations) to identify areas where children (and their early educators) could benefit from additional supports. For example, if future HRTL findings again show concerns about children's social-emotional development, Parent Aware supports could focus on a more systematic strategy for providing additional resources for families and programs.

In future evaluations of Parent Aware, identify an evaluation approach that leverages varied and equitable methods and measures that center the needs and experiences of the community. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified many of the challenges facing the ECE sector, including the availability of affordable ECE for families, low wages and benefits for the ECE workforce, and staff shortages across the industry. Because of these challenges, our team was not able to recruit a sufficient sample of Rated programs and families to address questions about how well Parent Aware Ratings differentiate quality or predict child outcomes. However, the context of the pandemic created an important opportunity for ECE researchers and state leaders to pause and reflect on how we think about quality and children's development in ECE settings and how we approach QRIS evaluations. To ensure QRIS can equitably support the needs of all children, families, and early educators, evaluators can prioritize using evidence-based measures that are able to reliably capture the range of children's and early educators' experiences, as well as the complex and sometimes subjective nature of quality in ECE settings. For example, rather than using a single observation measure such as the CLASS® tool to measure quality in ECE settings, evaluators could consider using other supplemental measures to capture more nuanced elements of quality, such as families' satisfaction with their program, staff well-being and retention, or the extent to which interactions with children are individualized to support their unique developmental needs. Additionally, it could be beneficial to share this information with programs and their coaches on an ongoing basis so they can use it to inform their quality improvement. In line with the philosophy behind Minnesota's Successful Learner Equation,

future evaluations of QRIS should aim to take this more holistic view to assess how well the QRIS and associated resources are supporting the state's children, families, and ECE workforce.

Goal 2: Improve the Rating process

> **Goal #2:** Improve the Rating process to reduce barriers to participation and ensure participation is meaningful and worth the investment for educators.

Key findings (Goal 2)

QRIS structure and levels of quality

States are reexamining how their QRIS define levels of quality, and some are moving away from an emphasis on ratings to make the process more meaningful for and supportive of early educators.

From our review of the recent literature and interviews with QRIS administrators in six other states, our team gained various insights and considerations related to how states QRIS define levels of quality. Various studies in multiple states have found that some early educators feel QRIS' reliance on point-in-time assessments and extensive paperwork not only makes the rating process feel stressful and high stakes, but also may not be an accurate representation of quality.[r,s,t] In response, some states are shifting their focus away from ratings and toward quality recognition and improvement driven by self-reflection, self-assessment, and giving programs flexibility to showcase what quality means to them. Some of the states we interviewed are de-emphasizing ratings and instead promoting quality improvement by changing how observations are used within their QRIS. For example, Vermont's QRIS allows programs to receive an unlimited number of scored and unscored observations so they can receive multiple rounds of feedback and formulate a continuous quality improvement (CQI) plan without always having the added pressure of scores impacting ratings. Acknowledging the limitations of using a single tool such as the CLASS® or the Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) in all program types, Michigan and Pennsylvania have expanded their list of approved observation and self-assessment tools so that programs can choose the tool best suited to their unique setting, quality improvement goals, and the needs of the children and families they serve. Other states are de-emphasizing ratings by creating opportunities for programs to showcase their unique strengths and what they think makes their program high quality to families, such as by offering more options for programs to customize their program profiles.

> *"We knew that we wanted to not make [observations within the Rating process] feel like a high-stakes, anxiety-provoking system that wasn't actually even a true representation of what was happening every day. The whole process was really established to have that in mind, with the teachers driving. … In a 10-to-15-minute clip, there is amazing information that you can gain, and then it's not hidden from the providers. They choose this clip, and then they work with their coach on [it] together."*
> **- Washington QRIS Administrator**

In light of emerging evidence regarding how well rating levels differentiate programs' quality, some states are thinking about collapsing quality levels within their QRIS.

Although none of the states we interviewed had implemented this change at the time of this evaluation, several shared that they are considering the possibility of collapsing the quality levels within their QRIS in the future (e.g., going from a Five-Star rating scale to a Three-Star scale). Pennsylvania, for example, is currently revising its licensing regulations, and because licensed programs are automatically awarded a One-Star Rating, the state may consider collapsing its QRIS levels if they feel those levels are no longer needed. In considering whether to collapse quality levels, some states may be influenced by recent evidence that QRIS are not consistently able to capture meaningful differences in quality across five levels.[u,v] Michigan is currently conducting a study to explore if their QRIS is effectively differentiating quality, and QRIS administrators from the state say that findings could inform a move to fewer quality levels if appropriate.

By engaging in a system-level CQI process, states can help ensure that QRIS revisions are equitable and meet the needs of families and the ECE workforce.

Findings from various evaluation activities also highlighted the importance of state leaders continually engaging key stakeholders in QRIS revision processes to ensure any changes serve community needs and do not create unintended consequences or inequities. In interviews with QRIS administrators in other states, several mentioned the importance of frequently assessing their own processes and policies to identify who is and is not being served and then identify strategies for expanding access and promoting equity. This system-level CQI process could be facilitated by establishing a shared vision of a successful and equitable QRIS, conducting ongoing research to determine the effectiveness of coaching and other quality improvement supports in helping programs achieve higher ratings, or

> *"As long as I am requesting of providers that they continuously improve their quality, then the system itself needs to do the same thing. The needs of the children we're serving today are not the needs of the children we were serving five years ago, and they are not the needs of the children we will be serving in five years."*
> **-Delaware QRIS Administrator**

engaging with early educators to identify strengths, barriers, gaps, or redundancies in the system. However, it is important to note that states may not be able to completely address the concerns and preferences of all stakeholders. Indeed, our analyses of stakeholder feedback on proposed changes to Parent Aware found that respondents had mixed opinions about most of the proposed changes. Nonetheless, ongoing and iterative stakeholder engagement to understand community concerns and perspectives can help states build stronger QRIS policies and processes that meet the needs of as many individuals as possible.

Implications of new legislation: Automatic One-Star Ratings

In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature passed a bill that will automatically assign all licensed unrated ECE programs a One-Star Rating unless they opt out of participating or choose to seek a higher Rating.[w] Although the legislation will not go into effect until July 2026, it nonetheless has important and more immediate implications for the Parent Aware Redesign. We asked early educators, coaches, families, and others for input on the upcoming change as part of various activities, including the stakeholder engagement, listening sessions with unrated early educators, and engagement with families via focus groups. Key findings and considerations for the Parent Aware Redesign are discussed below.

Early educators and other Parent Aware stakeholders have a lot of concerns about the upcoming move to Automatic One-Star Ratings. A common concern among early educators was that Automatic One-Star Ratings seem unfair to programs Rated at the One-Star level via the current process. Many others, and particularly family child care educators, felt that families may perceive One-Star Ratings negatively, which might dissuade programs from participating. Many unrated educators similarly shared that they are unlikely to accept an Automatic One-Star Rating, as it does not communicate high quality or come with many of the financial benefits of being Parent Aware Rated.

> *"If u had to pick a restaurant to eat, would u go to a 1 star or 4 star? Just because I don't participate in Parent Aware doesn't make my program bad, but rating me 1 star would make it appear that way."* – **Early Educator**

Families' misconceptions about Ratings underscore the importance of careful framing and clear public messaging. While some families' interpretations of Star Rating levels were fairly accurate, others had misconceptions about Ratings. For example, some assumed that reviews from other families factored into programs' Ratings, much like other rating systems (e.g., those used for hotels or restaurants). In the same vein, others thought that a One-Star program is low quality or does not meet baseline expectations. A couple families even said they might view a One-Star Rating as a bigger deterrent than no Rating at all, echoing the same concerns raised by early educators. For the rollout of this change to be successful, families need clear information and guidance for how to interpret Ratings, and early educators need to understand the benefits of participating while also being assured that they will not be penalized for opting out. It is also important to note that, from our survey of families and early educators to learn about what quality means to them, we found both groups saw health and safety as the most important factor in quality—even compared to factors aligned with other Parent Aware Categories of Standards. DCYF could consider ways to leverage this perception in implementing Automatic One-Star Ratings. For example, crafting quality designations that communicate that One-Star programs meet the rigorous quality standards captured by licensing could help address concerns about family perceptions and stigma associated with a One-Star Ratings.

DCYF should carefully consider stakeholders' concerns about Automatic One-Star Ratings as they make decisions about other changes related to the Parent Aware Redesign. As noted above, for the concerns related to how families might perceive a One-Star Rating, any changes DCYF makes to how Parent Aware classifies quality levels (e.g., as "Recognition Levels" instead of "Ratings," as proposed in the stakeholder engagement) could potentially help alleviate some of those concerns—particularly if the changes involve removing numbered Star levels or other language that might suggest low quality. Similarly, a shift to a Five-Star Rating scale could help address concerns about fairness for programs that earned a One-Star Rating via the current process. However, some research shows it can be challenging to meaningfully differentiate quality on a Five-Star scale,[x,y] and, notably, this change alone would likely not address the possibility of families perceiving One-Star as meaning low quality.

The Rating process and documentation requirements

Early educators want to see changes to make the Rating process simpler and more streamlined—particularly related to documentation requirements and the frequency of Re-Ratings.

Across activities, we consistently heard from early educators a desire for a more simplified and streamlined Rating process. In listening sessions, Rated early educators shared that they experience a great deal of pressure managing requirements and also find the Rating process to be very time consuming and stressful at times. Many spoke about difficulties keeping track of the many requirements to become Rated. For example, some have trouble making sense of Parent Aware language, such as abbreviated indicator designations like "T1.1." Others find it challenging to navigate the various types of evidence required as part of the process, particularly when some elements need to be submitted online whereas others need to be printed, scanned, and uploaded. Many early educators also experience difficulties navigating Develop,[21] such as getting locked out of the system or not being able to correct or add to their program's information. In our interviews with QRIS administrators in other states, streamlining documentation requirements for programs came up as a promising strategy to reduce the administrative burden on early educators participating in QRIS. Some states are accomplishing this by creating more flexibility in the types of evidence that programs can submit to demonstrate that they meet indicators, and others are leveraging documentation required for other ECE systems (e.g., licensing) so that programs don't have to duplicate work they have already done.

> "The whole [Rating] process has been very cumbersome. … 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."
> **- Rated Early Educator**

In both the listening sessions with early educators and in the stakeholder engagement activity, several early educators also mentioned that the frequency of Re-Ratings creates significant burden for them. Some suggested that requiring programs to go through the process every two years is too much and also said that the process felt like an administrative hurdle that does not add a lot of value for the program. Our review of the recent literature found that most state QRIS require re-ratings every three years, though some states vary how frequently re-ratings are required and/or the intensity of the re-rating process based on factors such as the programs' quality level, whether they are seeking a higher rating or re-applying for the same rating, or what their individual goals are.[z]

When we surveyed unrated educators for **ideas to make Parent Aware more accessible**:

49% said simplify or reduce requirements

45% said increase the financial benefits

40% said allow programs to join any time and complete the process at their own pace

Language accessibility within Parent Aware materials, including the Rating application process itself, may be a barrier to some programs' and families' ability to engage with Parent Aware.

In both the stakeholder engagement activity and listening sessions with Rated and unrated early educators, many respondents advocated for Parent Aware to prioritize accessibility by providing clear and accessible materials and offering those materials as well as other supports (e.g., coaching, training) in multiple languages. Many feel that revising public-facing resources to ensure they are clear, helpful, and user-

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[21] Develop is Minnesota's online registry system for professional development and quality improvement for the ECE workforce.

friendly could help spread the word about Parent Aware among both families and unrated early educators who may not be familiar with the system. Additionally, some early educators suggested strategies such as making all recruitment, application, and professional development materials available in many languages or increasing the number of coaches who are Black, Indigenous, persons of color, and/or bilingual across the state could help encourage more programs to become Rated.

Incentives

Rated programs have seen tangible benefits of participating in Parent Aware, though center-based and family child care programs have different experiences of certain benefits.

In both the survey and listening sessions, most Rated early educators across settings agreed that that their program has benefited in some way from being Parent Aware Rated. Most often, early educators mentioned financial benefits of being Rated, such as access to Parent Aware grants, access to free or low-cost training, and the ability to accept ELS (Early Learning Scholarships) or receive higher reimbursement rates for children receiving CCAP subsidies. Other early educators mentioned support with increasing the quality of their program as a key benefit of being Rated.

> *"Main reason I participate – CCAP covers more for parents, so that is a huge incentive. Also, you learn more, and you have a high-quality program."* **– Early Educator**

Although most early educators agreed they had seen some benefits, there was some variation across program types regarding the extent to which programs experienced certain benefits of being Rated. For example, nearly three out of four center educators strongly agreed they had benefited from access to ELS compared to less than half of family child care educators. In contrast, a higher proportion of family child care educators strongly agreed they had benefited from access to Parent Aware grants and coaching support compared to center educators. Overall, family child care educators reported seeing fewer benefits compared to centers.

Some unrated early educators are hesitant to join because they either don't see how a Rating would benefit them or don't think they need the benefits Parent Aware advertises.

Although most Rated early educators reported various benefits to being Rated, a few said they have not seen some of the benefits they expected, such as attracting families to their programs. Additionally, many unrated early educators were less clear on how participating in Parent Aware could benefit their program, and some said that was a key factor behind their decision not to participate. In listening sessions, some unrated early educators shared that they were Rated before and benefited from their participation at that time, but few had interest in being Rated again. Some of these early educators didn't think they needed those benefits anymore because their program was already high quality or at maximum enrollment, for example. Others felt that the benefits were not enough to outweigh the time and costs needed to complete the trainings and documentation required to earn a Rating—especially knowing that they would have to go through the Re-Rating process again after two years.

> *"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 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."* **– Early Educator**

Considerations for the Redesign (Goal 2)

Explore ways to simplify or eliminate documentation requirements and offer more hands-on technical support to help early educators navigate the Rating process. The Rating process requires a great deal of time and effort from early educators, many of whom juggle many responsibilities with little support and low compensation. As DCYF considers possible changes to Parent Aware, prioritize finding ways to streamline the Rating process—particularly related to the number and type of documentation requirements. Importantly, across all the proposed changes to Parent Aware, stakeholders' most common concerns were about time and cost. This feedback also was not limited to time or cost for programs to fulfill any new requirements (e.g., observations in all settings rather than only in center-based programs seeking Three- or Four-Star Ratings). Rather, many emphasized that any big changes to Parent Aware—including those that seemingly would not require more effort, such as changes to terminology—will create extra work for not only early educators, but also the coaches and other support staff who work with them. These individuals have already invested their time and energy into learning how Parent Aware currently operates and are concerned that they may soon have to re-learn how to navigate a revised system. With this in mind, DCYF may want to prioritize removing or collapsing requirements rather than simply changing requirements. Additionally, it will be crucial to create clear messaging about changes and to equip coaches and other support staff with the skills and knowledge they need to support early educators in navigating changes.

To ensure Parent Aware can support the needs of the diverse early educators and families across Minnesota, continue efforts to make Parent Aware content more accessible. Across activities, many participants emphasized the importance of accessibility. Educators and families will be better positioned to benefit from Parent Aware if they have clear and accessible information tailored to their needs. Many early educators also have difficulties navigating the technical aspects of the Rating process (e.g., Develop, figuring out which parts of the application can be completed online vs. on paper), and some worry their ability to use technology impacts their Ratings. Most Parent Aware materials and other resources (e.g., coaching) are currently available in English only, which may further create barriers to spreading the word about Parent Aware. In exploring ways to make content more accessible, DCYF could consider translating more materials for both early educators and families and hiring more multilingual coaches, trainers, and other support staff to help educators navigate the Rating process if information is not available in their preferred language. To address technological barriers, priority should also be given to improving the usability of online tools (e.g., Develop) and offering more hands-on technical support to early educators.

Better integration between Parent Aware and other parts of Minnesota's ECE system could help reduce burden and also promote more awareness of Parent Aware among early educators. When we asked early educators in listening sessions for ideas to improve Parent Aware and make it more accessible to other programs, some advocated for greater integration with other parts of the ECE system. Stronger integration with licensing, for example, could be very beneficial—particularly given that licensing requirements will replace Parent Aware's One-Star requirements following the rollout of Automatic One-Star Ratings in 2026. Equipping licensors with information about Parent Aware that they could share with early educators as part of the licensing process could help build a valuable bridge between becoming licensed and becoming Rated. Over time, these connections could also lead to better communication and alignment across systems should gaps or redundancies become apparent.

Consider ways to tailor Parent Aware incentives to the unique needs of early educators. Early educators have varying awareness of and experiences with the benefits of participating in Parent Aware. Rated family child care educators, for example, were more likely to say that they had benefitted from access to Parent Aware grants and support from a coach, while Rated center educators were more likely to

say they had benefited from being able to accept Early Learning Scholarships (ELS). In listening sessions, some unrated early educators said they were interested in learning more about Parent Aware benefits and might be willing to join if they were confident that it would benefit their families. Some early educators also advocated for expanding financial supports, including ELS and CCAP subsidies, to more families across the state, regardless of whether they have a child enrolled in a Rated program. DCYF should continue to engage early educators to learn about their experiences with Parent Aware benefits, including how well benefits are aligned with programs' most pressing needs and the extent to which benefits are equitably experienced by all families and early educators.

Goal 3: Improve resources to support programs' quality improvement

> **Goal #3:** Improve and expand the resources and other supports Parent Aware offers to promote programs' ongoing quality improvement and ensure the well-being of the ECE workforce.

Key findings (Goal 3)

Educators' professional development needs

Early educators want more support and professional development options related to several topics.

Learning about early educators' experiences, caregiving practices, and needs—particularly related to practices that support children's healthy learning and development—is an important component of the Parent Aware Evaluation. In our survey to learn about quality in Rated programs, we asked early educators about the skills or knowledge areas they most want to improve. Nearly all Rated educators said they wanted help with a few common topics (see Textbox 2), including behavior management and supporting children's social-emotional development. This aligns with what we heard from early educators in another survey: many educators,[22] and especially center educators, had concerns about children's social-emotional development and self-regulation skills and also said they experience high stress and feel less confident about supporting children's growth in those areas.

Textbox 2. Most Rated educators say they are interested in a few professional development topics:

- Managing and supporting children's behavior
- Supporting children's social-emotional development
- Individualizing play and learning activities
- Working with families and children from different backgrounds
- Using culturally inclusive practices

Many of the early educators who completed our survey about quality in Rated programs said they also wanted support on using culturally inclusive practices, including working with children from racial and cultural backgrounds different than their own, serving children with disabilities, and using anti-bias approaches to help children appreciate differences in others. These findings aligned with the teaching practices Rated educators reported using less consistently. Although most said they were consistently using

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[22] This survey included both Rated and unrated educators.

various best practices to support a quality ECE environment, there were a few gaps—particularly related to using culturally inclusive practices and materials. For example, around one in four early educators said they were consistently teaching children about historical or present-day figures from various backgrounds, and just one in three said they were consistently teaching children about individuals from their own cultures who have made important contributions to the world, or creating classroom activities to celebrate holidays or days of significance from other cultures.

Many early educators say that collaboration with families is needed to address concerns about children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills, though the time and cost needed to access other professional development supports is also a key barrier.

As discussed under Goal 1, findings from our survey and focus groups with early educators and families showed that early educators have more concerns about children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills compared to families. Some early educators noted that this disconnect can create barriers to getting support and addressing their concerns. In focus groups, for example, early educators shared that it can be difficult to gain "buy in" from families to seek screening or other services for their children, particularly when families might not necessarily share their concerns. Educators noticed that some families seem hesitant to follow through with screening or other next steps for various reasons, including having a negative emotional reaction to the early educators' concerns, not wanting their child to be labeled a certain way, or not agreeing with educators' concerns and/or not taking the concerns as seriously. Another barrier to supporting children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills that early educators encounter is accessing professional development related to these topics. In our survey to learn about quality in Rated programs, early educators shared that the biggest barriers to getting support are a lack of time or capacity and the cost of accessing training. Some educators in rural areas also noted that local options are sometimes limited or don't have sufficient capacity.

Coaching

Early educators see coaches as a crucial resource for getting help with their professional development needs and navigating the Rating process, though some experience inconsistencies in coach quality.

Particularly in light of the challenges programs face in navigating the Rating process, support from coaches and other Parent Aware staff is important in shaping programs' experiences with Parent Aware. In our survey to learn about quality in Rated programs, early educators said that coaches are a key source of support and information related to the skills or areas of knowledge they want to build. In listening sessions, many Rated early educators similarly shared that support from their coach was immensely helpful to them as they navigated the Rating process. Other Rated early educators had more varied experiences with coaching, however, noting inconsistencies in how knowledgeable their coach was, how easy it was to contact them for help, and how involved they were in the Rating process overall. A few Rated educators also mentioned the importance of having a coach willing to review their program's materials to avoid their application being denied because of minor errors.

> *"[We need] more people power!! We need more highly trained coaches to actually coach about quality practices vs. coaching for a Rating."*
>
> **– Stakeholder Engagement Survey Respondent**

To promote equitable and culturally inclusive practices in ECE programs, some state QRIS are embedding equity-focused tools and resources into their coaching processes.

From our interviews with QRIS administrators, we learned that other states are working to embed equity into their QRIS by including new tools and resources in their coaching and quality improvement processes for programs. Washington, for example, developed equity-focused exercises and discussion questions for coaches to work through with programs as part of the quality improvement process so programs can identify any gaps in their own practices and discuss strategies to address them. Vermont, Delaware, and Pennsylvania have adopted new equity-focused self-assessment and observation tools, such as the Inclusive Classroom Profile, to encourage programs' ongoing learning and reflection regarding their own subconscious biases or gaps in knowledge, as well as ways their programs can better meet the needs of the diverse children and families they serve.

Rethinking how observations are used in QRIS: Insights from other states' efforts to embed equity in their QRIS

Reducing burden on educators

As discussed in the key findings for Goal 1, our review of the recent literature highlighted some notable limitations to using observations within state QRIS. For example, many early educators feel that observations are disruptive or stressful, and most state QRIS unfortunately do not have capacity to conduct observations frequently enough to allow programs to use scores to inform quality improvement goals or track progress over time.[aa]

In our interviews with QRIS administrators in other states, we heard various strategies states are implementing to make observations within the rating process feel less stressful, less burdensome, and more supportive of programs' ongoing quality improvement, including:

- collecting observations via video-recordings, rather than an on-site visits,
- expanding the list of approved tools so programs can choose one that suits their setting and individual goals,
- removing minimum score requirements that impact programs' ratings, and
- allowing programs to receive unscored observations and work with a coach to develop quality improvement goals based on the results.

Supporting quality and equitable practices in all settings

Another challenge is that tools such as the CLASS® and the ERS were designed to measure the *average* experience of all children, meaning they do not capture the extent to which all children equitably experience important but infrequent positive or negative interactions and also may not have equally strong associations with quality and child outcomes across all populations or types of ECE settings.[bb,cc,dd]

Considering these limitations, our team piloted the Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES: Pre-K-5) as part of our activities to learn about quality in Parent Aware Rated programs. The ACSES tool was designed to capture the experiences of individual children in a classroom,[ee] thereby addressing a key limitation of CLASS® and other commonly used tools. We coded observations of Rated center-based programs[23] using both the CLASS® and the ACSES tools to explore the feasibility of using ACSES within Parent Aware. Our analyses found that some ACSES and CLASS® dimension scores were significantly correlated while other dimensions scores were not correlated. These findings indicate that, although the ACSES and CLASS® tools capture some common elements of quality in ECE settings, the ACSES may also capture some unique elements of quality not reflected in CLASS®—particularly those focused on equitable sociocultural interactions and the experiences of individual children in the program.

Our analyses also found that classrooms in our sample had scores on the lower end of the ACSES scoring scale. However, ACSES is intended to be used as a professional development tool to increase early educators' competency in equitable sociocultural interactions. Rather than using the ACSES as a benchmark for determining Ratings, the tool may be more valuable if used to give early educators baseline information to then inform their individual quality improvement goals and measure growth over time.

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[23] At the time of this study, ACSES was validated for use in center-based classrooms. Efforts to validate the tool for use in family child care programs are currently underway.

System-level challenges affecting the ECE workforce

Issues like low wages, insufficient benefits, and industry-wide staffing shortages have significant impacts on early educators' well-being.

Across findings from various evaluation activities, many of the broader systemic challenges facing the ECE workforce loomed large. Educators who responded to our survey said the key stressors they are facing right now are staffing challenges (in center-based programs), stress in their personal lives, keeping up with their day-to-day work responsibilities, and managing the business operations of their program. The majority of early educators said these stressors have had a moderate to severe impact on their personal well-being.

In focus groups, many early educators similarly spoke about how low wages and insufficient benefits for the workforce have impacted their programs. These factors create immense stress for early educators, particularly as they simultaneously have to care for children, communicate with families, ensure they have enough staff to be within the allowable teacher-to-child ratios, maintain compliance with licensing and any other applicable requirements (e.g., Parent Aware), pursue ongoing training and professional development, and more—often while also balancing the needs of their own families and personal stressors.

In a survey, we asked educators **what support their programs most need to be successful**. Among *center educators*:

76% said help paying higher wages

61% said help recruiting & retaining staff

47% said additional funding

Among *family child care educators*:

69% said additional funding

39% said more opportunities to connect with and learn from other early educators

23% said help with business & financial management

In our survey of Rated ECE programs, we found that most center educators felt positively about their workplace climate, whereas findings were more mixed for family child care educators. Only around half of Rated family child care educators we surveyed agreed that they have enough support to do their job, that there are opportunities for advancement in the ECE field, and that they feel respected and valued as an ECE professional.

Many early educators see low wages and benefits for the workforce as the key factors behind the pervasive staffing shortages in center-based programs.

In our survey of both Rated and unrated early educators, around 15 percent of all early educators across program types said they might leave their current job or the ECE field within the next year.

"...Lots of our families ...they pay on time, but it still is a huge expense for them, and the flip side of that is [that] our staff are very underpaid for what their qualifications are and what their jobs are. The only way, as a privately run program, to change that is to continue to raise tuition, which ends up being passed on to the parents, making things more difficult for them. And, if we don't do that, we struggle keeping really amazing teachers with us because they can't afford to work in this industry." **– Center Educator**

Those early educators most often cited factors such as low compensation, insufficient benefits, burdensome regulations, and a lack of respect for the profession as the main reasons they might leave. In the same vein, the top three things programs said they need support with right now are help recruiting and retaining qualified staff; increased pay, time off, and health benefits; and financial assistance or grants.

Additionally, some early educators noted that the challenges impacting the workforce can also have spillover effects on families' experiences with ECE. Many early educators feel a tension between their desire to support their staff with higher wages and the importance of keeping the cost of care affordable for families. Staffing shortages also limit the supply of ECE available to families, which can in turn limit families' financial stability and ability to participate in the workforce.

"People can't get to work because they don't have child care. The system is broken right now, and I'm hoping in some way something can get fixed. But a big part of it...I firmly believe the regulations have to change. They have got to loosen up some things, or we're [going] to have nobody." **– Family Child Care Educator**

In listening sessions, both Rated and unrated early educators emphasized that ECE is a difficult business to sustain economically, echoing concerns that low wages may lead to a critical shortage of ECE in Minnesota and beyond. Although early educators universally agreed that the cost of care needs to be kept affordable for families, the increase in free or low-cost options (e.g., school-based Pre-K, Head Start) can also put additional stress on ECE programs that are already struggling.

Some things have gotten better since the COVID-19 pandemic, but many early educators still face issues with staffing, operational costs, and enrollment.

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant and widespread impacts on the ECE sector as a whole. Many programs had no choice but to temporarily close or reduce their operations due to health and safety concerns. Additionally, families' ability to work was impacted by frequent disruptions to schooling and ECE services, and children lost learning and socialization time while they were forced to stay at home. In a survey and focus groups, early educators shared that some impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic had improved in the last year. For example, fewer early educators reported having to temporarily close their program in the last year (in 2023) compared to more than a year ago (between March 2020 and December 2022). Further, some families we surveyed and interviewed reported that programs' increased focus on health and safety has been a positive change and that they would like to see this emphasis on health and safety be sustained.

However, early educators also reported that some of the challenges that emerged during the pandemic have only become worse with time. More than half of the early educators who responded to the survey said that in the last year, they have had higher operational costs as well as higher staff turnover or trouble finding enough staff (in center-based programs only), compared to only around one in three who reported experiencing those challenges more than a year ago.

Considerations for the Redesign (Goal 3)

Expand professional development options related to the topics early educators say they need more support in, keeping in mind that their needs might vary. Educators identified several topics in which they feel they could benefit from more robust supports and professional development options. Most commonly, early educators mentioned topics such as positive behavior management, supporting children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills, working with families, and using equitable and culturally inclusive practices. Again, early educators noted, however, that time and cost are the main barriers to getting help in these areas. On top of expanding current offerings based on these identified areas of need, DCYF may also want to create structures for collecting ongoing feedback from early educators about the kinds of support that they need and how Parent Aware could help address barriers to getting that support. Additionally, DCYF should keep in mind that it may be necessary to tailor supports for different

ECE settings and contexts. Our survey of early educators, for example, found that center educators had more concerns than family child care educators about children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills.

Continue to refine and strengthen Parent Aware's coaching model and create structures to ensure all early educators can access consistent and high-quality support. Consistent and reliable support from coaches and other Parent Aware staff can promote equity in the Rating process by ensuring all early educators experience the same quality of support, and also help build early educators' buy-in and trust in Parent Aware as a supportive process to help their program and the children they serve thrive. In listening sessions, some Rated early educators shared that they have experienced inconsistencies in the quality and level of coach support they have received as part of the Rating process. To address this, DCYF can work internally and with partners to ensure Parent Aware's coaching model is evidence-based and supportive of early educators, and that coaches have sufficient training and oversight to ensure the model is implemented equitably and with fidelity.

Importantly, in reflecting on proposed changes to Parent Aware, many stakeholders noted that support from trained and knowledgeable coaches will be important to early educators in navigating any changes to Parent Aware. If the coaching model is revised such that coaches will work more intensively with programs on an ongoing basis, including outside of the Rating and Re-Rating processes, DCYF may also need to assess whether the state has the coach capacity to meet early educators' needs—particularly in the period of time in which any changes to Parent Aware are implemented.

Increase investments to support early educators' well-being, adequate compensation, opportunities for advancement, and longevity in the ECE field. Our findings from the evaluation highlight the many pervasive challenges facing the ECE sector. Workforce challenges, such as low wages, insufficient benefits, and staffing shortages have significant impacts on early educators, who experience high stress and difficulties juggling their many responsibilities and the needs of the families they serve with their own personal needs and family obligations. In a survey to learn about quality Rated programs, we found that only around half of Rated family child care educators agreed that they have enough support to do their job, that there are opportunities for advancement in the ECE field, and that they feel respected and valued as an ECE professional. Around 15 percent of all early educators across program types said they are likely to leave their current job or the ECE field in the next year, often citing similar workforce challenges as the reason they may leave.

These system-level challenges also affect families. In a survey and focus groups, many families spoke about frequent turnover at their ECE programs and the negative impacts that instability has had on their children's feelings about their program. Additionally, programs' desires to pay their staff a living wage can sometimes feel in conflict with their desire to keep the cost of care affordable to families; without outside funding, raising tuition is often programs' only viable option for increasing wages.

In planning for the Redesign, it will be important for DCYF to keep these broader challenges facing the ECE workforce in mind, while also acknowledging that system-level challenges require system-level solutions. Initiatives such as the Great Start Compensation Support Program are a promising step toward better supports for the workforce.[ff] To fully address these issues, however, a significant and sustained investment in the ECE system is needed.[gg,hh] Parent Aware may simply not have the funding or capacity to drive that change, at least not at this point in time, but DCYF can nonetheless strive to support the well-being of the workforce in the areas they can while continuing to explore and advocate for broader system-level changes.

Goal 4: Support families in accessing high-quality and affordable care

> **Goal #4:** Identify strategies for Parent Aware to better support families in finding and accessing affordable, high-quality care that meets their unique needs and prepares their children for success in school and life.

Key findings (Goal 4)

Availability of Rated programs

Being Parent Aware Rated is highly correlated with programs' willingness to accept children receiving CCAP subsidies.

Our analysis of trends in Parent Aware participation and ECE availability across the state revealed several interesting patterns. Nearly half of the 1,629 licensed centers eligible to participate in Parent Aware were Rated (47%). In comparison to centers, a smaller proportion of the 6,057 licensed family child care programs eligible to participate in Parent Aware were Rated (18%). In comparing the characteristics of Rated and unrated programs, we also found that Rated programs were different in several ways. For example, Rated programs, regardless of program type, were more likely to be willing to serve children receiving CCAP (Child Care Assistance Program) subsidies and offer non-standard hours of care than unrated programs. Rated centers were more likely than unrated centers to offer part time care and to serve infants and toddlers, while nearly all family child care programs serve infants and toddlers regardless of whether they are Rated.

In our analysis, we also explored which factors might predict the likelihood of a program being Rated. We found that child care centers that were licensed for longer, had a larger capacity, served infants and toddlers, and were willing to accept CCAP were more likely to be Rated. Family child care programs that were licensed for a shorter time period, had a larger capacity, were willing to accept CCAP, and offered nonstandard hours or part time care were more likely to be Rated. Across program types, willingness to accept CCAP was the strongest predictor of whether programs were Rated: Centers willing to accept CCAP were seven times more likely to be Rated than those not willing to accept CCAP, and family child care programs willing to accept CCAP were nearly nine times more likely to be Rated than those not willing to accept CCAP.

Families' experiences accessing ECE

Although some challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic have improved with time, many families still struggle to find affordable care that meets their needs—especially in rural areas.

Our survey and focus groups with families helped us understand families' perspectives and experiences with finding affordable ECE options that meet their needs, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the ECE sector. Like early educators, many families reported that some elements of their experiences with the ECE

> *"There were quite a few staffing issues in the last year at my child's daycare. My child is very sensitive to changes. Not knowing which classroom she would be in or who her teacher was going to be day to day was very hard on her."* **– Family**

system have improved since the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to the height of the pandemic (which we defined as March 2020 through December 2022), families reported seeing their children

experience some positive changes related to ECE in the last year, including more excitement about going to care and more opportunities to socialize with other children their age. Families also reported less difficulty keeping their children entertained at home and more opportunities for their children to socialize with other children their age in the last year compared to more than a year ago. Additionally, families said that some of the changes instituted during the pandemic were positive and should be continued in the future, such as programs implementing stronger health and safety procedures. However, families also reported that some of the challenges that emerged during the pandemic have not improved or have even become worse. In the last year, families reported that they have more difficulty paying for child care, more challenges related to their program not having enough staff, and more turnover in their child's teacher or caregiver compared to more than a year ago. Some families also noted that staff turnover in particular can have a big impact on children's feelings about their ECE program.

When asked about what they look for in an ECE program, families commonly cited several factors, including the convenience of the program's location, positive reviews or recommendations from other families, and flexible scheduling options. However, some families explained that these preferences were almost trivial because of the limited number of affordable options available to them—particularly in rural areas of the state or for families looking for infant and toddler care. One in four families said that since the COVID-19 pandemic started, it has been harder to find quality ECE options within their budget. Families in rural areas reported more difficulties finding an ECE program that meets their needs and has open slots. Further, when families need ECE but cannot find it, many said they have to rely on their family and friends for support with child care or leave their jobs and care for their children themselves until they can find an affordable and reliable option that allows them to return to work.

> *"Child care is my biggest monthly expense. It is more expensive than my mortgage! For one child to go full-time and another child to go two days a week, the cost is $2,300! That's half of what I make every month." –* **Family**

Search tool

Families want more up-to-date information about ECE programs' tuition costs and openings online, and would also appreciate knowing more about early educators' backgrounds and caregiving philosophies.

Families consider a variety of factors when choosing an ECE program. Our survey of families found that families most commonly prioritize factors such as the program's location, reviews from other families, and flexible scheduling options. Some families look for other factors, such as whether the program accepts financial assistance or can enroll multiple children (i.e., siblings), Parent Aware Ratings, and the racial or cultural diversity of a program's staff. When we asked families in focus groups about their experiences using Parent Aware's online search tool for ECE programs, many of the factors they said they would want to look for were already included as filters on the website (e.g., scheduling options, location, Ratings). However, families also shared that a challenge in their search process was that some of the most important information for finding an ECE program, such as cost and openings, was often missing or out-of-date on the program's profile. Many had frustrating experiences with finding programs they thought would work for their needs, only to call and find out the program had a long waitlist or was out of their budget. In line with other evaluation findings, families again noted that limited options in rural areas of the state make it difficult to find care.

In focus groups, families also shared examples of more qualitative information that would have been helpful in their ECE search process. For example, some families wanted to see information about early educators' experiences working with different populations (e.g., children with special needs), their professional background, what brought them to the ECE field, and their caregiving philosophy. Families shared that this information could help them get a better feel for the program and whether it would be a good fit for their family. Themes from our review of the literature and interviews with state QRIS administrators similarly highlighted that offering ways for early educators to include this kind of information in their online profiles—whether through descriptions written in educators' own words, photos, videos, family testimonials, or other ways to showcase their programs' special skills or areas of expertise (e.g., using certain practices or approaches, such as Montessori or nature-based care)—can allow ECE programs to showcase their unique strengths and characteristics and thus make it easier for families to find options that meet their unique needs.

> "I would appreciate background on the provider...almost like a little resume. 'Here's some things I'm interested in. Here's what I'm passionate about.' [Here's] why they went into being a daycare provider. Then you would have an idea of 'oh, they worked in this setting for 10 years, and now they're running a daycare because they had two of their own kids.' OK, then [you'd know] they'd have exposure to multiple different kids and different needs." **– Family**

Considerations for the Redesign (Goal 4)

Continue to explore trends in ECE availability to identify gaps in families' access. Exploring trends in participation and where programs are relative to the communities they serve can help states identify gaps—at a macro level—in families' access to care and inform strategies for expanding access. DCYF could leverage a similar analytic approach to the one our team employed for the evaluation to continue monitoring trends over time. By using both state administrative data on the characteristics of licensed programs and census data on the characteristics of families, DCYF can gain a clearer picture of the extent to which all communities across the state can equitably access ECE that meets their needs. Continued engagement with families and early educators could also further inform DCYF's efforts to expand access to high-quality ECE. We found that some families reported challenges finding ECE options that meet their needs more than others, including families who needed infant or toddler care, wanted to enroll multiple children in the same program, or lived in rural areas. Likewise, ECE programs may choose not to participate in Parent Aware or seek a higher Rating for various reasons, including a lack of capacity, barriers in the process, not seeing a clear benefit to participating, or not feeling that Parent Aware is compatible with or inclusive of their setting and/or philosophy. A stronger understanding of families' experiences accessing ECE as well as the factors that influence programs' decisions to participate in Parent Aware or seek a higher Rating could help DCYF better understand the statewide landscape of ECE access and target efforts according to community needs.

Make improvements to Parent Aware's online search tool, and explore ways to encourage programs to more frequently update information about tuition costs and openings. Families experience many challenges finding affordable ECE options that meet their needs, and many shared particularly frustrating experiences with calling program after program only to find out they do not have any openings or are outside of their family's budget. Although the search tool currently includes filters for tuition costs and openings, many programs are missing that information or have not updated it in a long time, which makes these features effectively useless to families. DCYF should consider ways to encourage programs to make more timely updates to their program profiles so that families can

access the information they need to find an ECE program. Additionally, some families expressed that they would like to see more qualitative information about programs' caregiving and educational philosophies in the online search tool. Creating more ways for programs to showcase what makes them unique could help families find an ECE program that meets their unique needs.

Conclusion

The findings from this evaluation highlight the critical role of early educators in supporting families with young children, as well as many opportunities for Parent Aware and other state systems to better support the needs of not only families but also the ECE workforce. As Minnesota DCYF continues their efforts on the Parent Aware Redesign, we hope these findings can inform their strategies and priorities for making revisions and improvements to Parent Aware. Following the Redesign, it will be important for DCYF to continually monitor the implementation of any changes as well as the impacts of changes on early educators and families.

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Appendix

Table A1. More detailed methods by evaluation activity and links to full reports

Evaluation Activity	Guiding Questions and Methodology	Link to Report(s)
Literature Review & Comparisons to Other State QRIS	*Purpose:* To understand the extent to which Parent Aware Standards and Indicators for defining quality and other system components align with recent research and best practices from other states. Specific topics explored included: QRIS structure (e.g., processes for defining and supporting quality); use of classroom observations; strategies to embed equity; and ways to promote system alignment in a mixed delivery system. *Methodology and sample:* • Reviewed and synthesized relevant information from 45 publications released within roughly the last five years, including peer reviewed articles, grey literature,[24] and presentations and blog posts from QRIS-related organizations • Interviewed QRIS administrators from six states, including Washington, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Louisiana, and Delaware	Insights on QRIS from Six States & a Literature Review (full report) 4 Trends in Early Care and Education Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (blog post)
Analysis of Parent Aware Rating Data (Indicator Analysis)	*Purpose:* To explore how programs meet indicators to earn their desired Ratings, which optional indicators programs commonly "opt-out" of when seeking a Three- or Four-Star Rating, and any differences in Rating trends across program types or over time *Methodology and sample:* • Analyzed Parent Aware Rating data for the programs earning Ratings (including Re-Ratings) in nine Full-Rating Cohorts from June 2019 through June 2023 • The analysis sample included 2,162 unique programs, which earned a total of 3,824 Ratings and Re-Ratings across the nine cohorts	Parent Aware Ratings and Standards and Indicators: A Multi-Cohort Analysis (full report)

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[24] Grey literature is work that is produced outside of traditional academic peer-reviewed channels. See https://www.nihlibrary.nih.gov/services/systematic-review-service/literature-search-databases-and-gray-literature for more information.

Evaluation Activity	Guiding Questions and Methodology	Link to Report(s)
Stakeholder Engagement on Proposed Changes to Parent Aware	*Purpose:* To gather feedback on ten proposed changes to Parent Aware to inform the Parent Aware Redesign *Methodology and sample:* • Gathered feedback on ten proposed changes via an online survey, including a version for individuals and a version for group discussion sessions about the proposed changes (facilitated by Parent Aware Ambassadors) • Analyzed feedback from 1,804 survey responses (including 1,711 from individuals and 93 from group sessions) using an approach called short-text topic modelling	Parent Aware Redesign: Spring 2024 Public Engagement Report on Ideas for Changes to Standards and Indicators
Crosswalk of Parent Aware Requirements and Rating Pathways	*Purpose:* To contextualize the experiences of programs eligible to be Rated through the various Parent Aware Rating Pathways—both to understand how well processes and requirements align and to understand any factors that might explain any patterns in program quality observed via the evaluation *Methodology and sample:* • Reviewed relevant documentation to identify the requirements programs must meet to earn each Star Rating level through each Rating Pathway (aligned with Parent Aware Standards and Indicators) and developed a "crosswalk" matrix outlining findings	N/A – Child Trends developed this crosswalk for DCYF's internal purposes

Exploration of Quality and Children's Development in Rated Programs	*Purpose:* To understand patterns in quality and preschool-aged children's development in Parent Aware Rated programs, as well as the factors that support or hinder the well-being of children, families, and the ECE workforce
	
	Methodology and sample:
	• To understand quality in Rated programs, our team recruited 37 early educators in Parent Aware Rated programs—including 20 lead preschool teachers in child care centers, 13 family child care educators, and 4 lead teachers in public school Pre-K classrooms—to participate in:
	   o video-recorded observations, coded using the CLASS® and the ACSES tools, and
	   o a survey about their personal, professional, and program-level characteristics, including factors that may contribute to program quality but are more difficult to observe, such as attitudes and beliefs.
	• To understand children's learning and development in Rated programs, our team recruited 68 families with a three- to five-year-old child enrolled in a participating program and asked both the child's family member and their early educator to complete the Healthy and Ready to Learn (HRTL) measure about the child's learning and development once in fall 2022 and again in spring 2023.
		Methods and Measures for Understanding Children's Experiences in Parent Aware Rated Programs (brief)

Evaluation Activity	Guiding Questions and Methodology	Link to Report(s)
Survey and Focus Group Engagement with Early Educators and Families	*Purpose:* To answer questions about the perspectives, needs, and experiences of Minnesota early educators and families navigating the ECE system, including: • How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact early educators and families, and to what extent have any challenges either improved or persisted? • How do early educators and families perceive young children's learning and development, and in what areas do they think children are on track or need support? • How do early educators and families think about quality in ECE settings? • How have families' needs changed, if at all, and what role do early educators have in supporting families to meet those needs—including needs outside of ECE? *Methodology and sample:* • Collected and analyzed responses from 433 early educators who completed a survey and 44 early educators who participated in follow-up focus groups about the topics listed above • Collected and analyzed responses from 319 families who completed a survey and 31 families who participated in follow-up focus groups about the topics listed above	Families' and Early Educators' Experiences with the Early Care and Education System in Minnesota (report and fact sheet)
Analyses of Child Care Availability and Parent Aware Participation	*Purpose:* To explore the extent to which patterns in Parent Aware participation and Star Rating levels vary by and/or are predicted by program characteristics (e.g., program type, size, or ages served) and community-level characteristics (e.g., population of children under five, average income) *Methodology and sample:* • Merged and analyzed a dataset with both 1) state administrative data on the nearly 9,000 ECE programs eligible to be Parent Aware Rated and 2) census data (from IPUMS NHGIS; 2018-2022[xxxv]) on community demographic characteristics for each census tract in Minnesota to explore patterns in Parent Aware participation and Star Rating Levels • Repeated analyses annually for three years (i.e., in spring 2022, spring 2023, and spring 2024) to explore any shifts in participation or Rating trends over time	Statewide Participation in Parent Aware Among Early Care and Education Programs (report)

Evaluation Activity	Guiding Questions and Methodology	Link to Report(s)
Participatory Listening Sessions with Early Educators from Rated and Unrated Programs	*Purpose:* To understand Rated and unrated early educators' perceptions of and experiences with Parent Aware and the Rating process, including: • The reasons that programs do or do not participate in Parent Aware, including any barriers that exist and what supports (either existing or potential) could help overcome them • The extent to which early educators feel the Rating process is culturally inclusive and relevant to diverse programs, early educators, and the families they serve—including ideas for improvements to make Parent Aware more inclusive • Whether early educators' perceptions or experiences differ based on factors such as their program type, location, race/ethnicity, languages spoken, or populations served *Methodology and sample:* • Facilitated and analyzed themes from five participatory listening sessions with 51 early educators in programs Rated through the Full-Rating Pathway (spring 2023) and six sessions with 52 unrated early educators in programs that are eligible to be Rated but do not participate in Parent Aware	[Early Educators' Experiences with Parent Aware, Minnesota's QRIS](#) (report)

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