



the quality of childcare in Minnesota

MEASURING UP

we could do better

The McKnight Foundation and Otto Bremer Foundation funded this project, commissioned by Resources for Child Caring. The project brought together four child care resource and referral programs—Resources for Child Caring, Greater Minneapolis Daycare Association, Western Community Action Council, Inc., Clay-Wilkin Opportunity Council, Inc. (Region 4 CCR&R)—and researchers at the University of Minnesota.

The organizations collaborated on this project with the mission of discovering how well child care in four Minnesota counties rates when measured against several key national indicators of quality child care.

Researchers gathered data from child care providers in Clay, Hennepin, Lyon, and Ramsey counties. They also interviewed parents from those counties who participated in focus groups about their experiences with child care and their perspectives on quality. Their quotes are included throughout this report.

For more details about the research, please turn to page 10.

THE GOOD NEWS:

According to well-documented research, the better child care young children receive, the better they do later in school and in life.

THE BAD NEWS:

According to the results of a recent research project, Minnesota child care just doesn't measure up well against key indicators of quality.

THE RESULT:

Minnesota children enter school less prepared than they could. They run into greater challenges in forming healthy relationships than they could. In short, they are shortchanged by child care options.

In Minnesota, those are almost fighting words. But the reality is that we can do better and we should do better.



When a University of Minnesota research team took a closer look at three key indicators of quality child care in Minnesota, they found some startling results:

- Nearly 40 percent of staff who work in child care centers in four Minnesota counties—Clay, Hennepin, Lyon, and Ramsey—left within a year.

Turnover rates for child care are among the highest of any profession that is tracked nationwide by the U.S. Department of Labor. Nationwide, the rates hover at 30 percent annually, compared to about 7 percent for public school teachers.¹

For any business, such turnover rates would be considered a serious issue that demands immediate action. In a business that delivers care to young children, it is a significant crisis for the health of the state, which needs strong future generations to prosper.

- The four-county survey also revealed that about 25 percent of all staff in child care centers have any type of degree in early childhood education.

Yet, caregivers with degrees in early childhood education deliver a higher quality of child care, according to the results of national research.² Most Minnesotans wisely would not want an accountant without a degree to complete their taxes. Their children, whom they would consider infinitely more important, also deserve the quality that providers with degrees are able to supply.

- Only 20 percent of child care centers in the four counties have received accreditation.

Accreditation indicates that programs have met criteria associated with quality indicators. The military made accreditation such a prior-

ity that 95 percent of its child care centers now have achieved accreditation status.³

What would make a difference in improving child care in the state? The investment in the following actions offers the potential to more than pay for itself in positive outcomes.

TO REDUCE TURNOVER

- **Support The Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) initiative.**

A program under consideration for funding by the Legislature and supported by many educational organizations, T.E.A.C.H. provides scholarships for early childhood professionals who work full time to return to school. T.E.A.C.H. also offers them incentives to stay in the field by linking successful completion of T.E.A.C.H. course work with an increase in wages.

- **Explore additional ways to increase child care wages.**

Why do so many leave child care so quickly? Quite simply, many find jobs that pay better.

In 1998, teachers in child care centers on average earned about \$10 an hour, far less than elementary school teachers, and aides just over \$6 an hour. The majority of family child care providers earned a net income of less than \$10,000.⁴

Wages play a key role in helping stabilize the child care workforce. The challenge to improving the situation involves finding solutions that raise wages without increasing the cost of child care to parents. For some parents, Minnesota subsidizes child care to keep it affordable. It's important, as well, to make sure that the low salaries of child care staff and family child care providers do not function as an unintended subsidy.

TO BOLSTER THE EDUCATION OF CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

- **Resist attempts to lower educational requirements.**

In 2000, the Legislature made it easier for staff with less education to work directly with children. Aides in child care centers must meet only three requirements to spend 25 percent of their time alone in the classroom. They must be at least 20 years old, pass first aid training, and work in child care for an equivalent of about two years.

This change is exactly the opposite of actions regarding the education of child care staff and family child care providers that would raise the level of quality child care. Because of its importance to school preparedness, the educational background of providers should be viewed as a quality to bolster.

- **Increase access to professional development opportunities for family providers.**

Because home-based providers handle all aspects of the child care business, it can be much more difficult for them to pursue additional educational opportunities.

As a start, it makes good sense to ask family providers what type of educational offerings and settings might work best for them. Supporting a needs assessment of family providers as the first step helps ensure that the ultimate solution or solutions do reach family providers.

TO ENCOURAGE ACCREDITATION

- **Develop a mentor program for child care centers and family child care providers to help gain accreditation.**

Through a mentor program, child care centers and family child care providers learn first-hand what it takes to pass the accreditation review. A mentor program also encourages the sharing of information among providers about quality practices.

- **Provide accreditation scholarships for child care centers and family child care providers.**

Standards for accreditation cover teacher training, adult-to-child ratios, and curriculum. The accreditation process includes a self-study, a site visit, and a review and decision by an outside panel of professionals. By participating in the accreditation process, child care centers and family care providers must address many quality child care criteria.

The more that Minnesota does to encourage child care centers and family child care providers to pursue accreditation, the better the care its young children can expect.

- **Expand the resource and referral system to reach more parents and to include additional information about centers and providers.**

Limited resources prevent resource and referral agencies from providing additional information that parents often find most valuable, such as current openings, licensing status, and educational qualifications of staff.

Ultimately, any action that Minnesota takes to strengthen child care benefits all Minnesotans. Economic and social trends guarantee that child care will remain a critical issue for Minnesota families well into the future. The concerns won't go away.

Whether by action or through inaction, state policy affects the child care choices of Minnesota families. What changes really lead to better quality? That's the true question for those who shape the debate.

For Minnesota parents, the question is even simpler. Can they find quality care?

For one Brooklyn Park mom, who participated in focus groups as part of this research project, the answer is clearly no. She visited her children's provider unexpectedly one day. "My baby, who was six or seven months at the time, was strapped in her car seat in the living room—no toys in her hands. That's when I pulled them."



MEASUREMENT #1

Children need healthy relationships

“WHAT I LIKE IS THAT THE CHILD CARE PROVIDER IS REAL POSITIVE WITH MY CHILDREN. THERE ARE A LOT OF POSITIVE INTERACTIONS AND YOU CAN TELL THAT SHE REALLY ENJOYS THE CHILDREN. SHE INCORPORATES INTO THE DAY ACTIVITIES AND PLAY TIME AND ALSO SHE THINKS THAT NAPS ARE REALLY IMPORTANT, EVEN AS HE GETS OLDER, BECAUSE WITH SOME OF THE KIDS IT’S HARDER TO GET THEM TO NAP. BUT I THINK IT’S CRUCIAL. JUST THE WAY THAT SHE INTERACTS IS GOOD.”

This St. Paul parent wants her child to feel comfortable with the caregiver. She wants her child to learn from educational activities and from the trust that builds between a child and a caregiver who understands the child.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

In fall 2000, project partners conducted research to learn more about staff turnover in child care centers. The survey found that, on average, 37 percent of staff who work in child care centers for Clay, Hennepin, Lyon, and Ramsey counties left within a year. One center experienced an extremely high turnover rate of 300 percent in one year for aides, and others experienced a 100 percent turnover rate for aides.

The survey gathered turnover data for lead teachers, assistant teachers, aides, and other staff. The turnover rate is highest among assistant teachers and aides, as Table A shows. But the situation for lead teachers, who direct classroom activities, also offers pause for concern. In a one-year period, child care centers lost nearly one-third of all lead teachers.

An ongoing problem for a number of years, staff turnover rates remain high in the state.

Table A compares the four-county results to the results of the 1998 and 1996 *Early Childhood Workforce Survey*.⁵

While not every center surveyed experienced high turnover rates, 85 percent had staff leave during a one-year period. Interviews with center directors revealed their ongoing concerns about finding and retaining qualified staff. As one director in Hennepin County summarized the situation: “The recruitment of staff is just horrendous.”

Turnover also impacts parents who place their children with licensed family providers. Between 6 and 10 percent of all licensed family child care homes closed for business during the six-month period from January to June 2000 in the four counties surveyed (see Table B). As a result, as many as 20 percent of licensed family child care homes may close during a year within one county.

New family providers enter the market, which offsets those who leave the field in number, but not necessarily in experience. And, with each closure of a licensed family provider, families must find new arrangements, disrupting the continuity of care for their children.

WHY IT’S A PROBLEM:

More than 80 percent of children ages five and below spend a significant amount of time in child care.⁶ Accordingly, child care providers play an increasingly important role in meeting children’s educational and developmental needs, including social and emotional growth.

In point of fact, the quality of child care does affect the development of a child. Consider the findings of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

TABLE A **T U R N O V E R**
Child care staff

	2000 Four-County Study (unweighted average)	1998*	1996*
Lead Teacher	30%	21%	29%
Assistant Teacher	44%	43%	41%
Aides	57%	40%	43%
Total Staff	37%	N/A	N/A

*1998 *Early Childhood Workforce Survey*

Source: Survey conducted fall 2000

Study of Early Child Care, a nationwide long-term ongoing examination of the impact of child care on children.

Caregivers reported fewer problems with children who received more sensitive and responsive attention at an earlier age. Research shows that infants and toddlers who enjoy secure relationships with caregivers do a much better job in forming healthy relationships later in life than infants and toddlers who do not experience those early stable relationships.⁷

What stands in the way of achieving the nurturing relationships that are so important to young children? One critical factor involves the stability of the child care staff or family child care providers who care for them.

After all, if caregivers change frequently, young children lose the opportunity to build secure relationships with caregivers. The greater the turnover, the less likely the child will benefit from the relationship with a caregiver.

In one research project, children with more changes in teachers rated lower in positive and gregarious behaviors and higher in social withdrawal and aggression.⁸ Another research initiative rated child care centers with lower turnover as higher in quality.⁹

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN:

- **Support T.E.A.C.H.**

The Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) initiative provides scholarships for early childhood professionals who work full time to return to school.

T.E.A.C.H. support makes it easier for child care staff to pursue additional educational opportunities. T.E.A.C.H. also offers them incentives to stay in the field by linking successful completion of T.E.A.C.H. course work with an increase in wages.

North Carolina, which already has implemented T.E.A.C.H., successfully reduced turnover to less than 10 percent among par-

TABLE B

TURN OVER

Licensed family child care providers

	Clay	Hennepin	Lyon	Ramsey
Percent that opened*	10%	10%	12%	3%
Percent that closed*	6%	10%	6%	7%

*January through June 2000

Source: Resource and Referral database

ticipants, down from the statewide rate of 32 percent.¹⁰ Inspired by North Carolina results, other states are following North Carolina's lead.

T.E.A.C.H. requires legislative support and funding. It already has received endorsement as part of the Minnesota Early Care and Education Finance Commission Report, released in November 2000.¹¹

- **Explore additional ways to increase child care wages.**

Increasing wages of child care staff and family child care providers offers one alternative to help curb high turnover rates.

The reality is clear: It is difficult to find and keep high-quality child care staff and family child care providers. One child care center director in Hennepin County recounts her struggle:

“We take people with their bachelor’s degrees. They’re still around the poverty line. I would like day cares to be subsidized the way that nursing homes are. I’ll give you examples. For a nursing home, you can go take a six-week course and then start out at \$14 an hour. Here, you go to school for four years and you average about \$8.50 an hour because you cannot pay staff enough even if you want to.”

The issues of cost and affordability are among the most complex to consider. As difficult as these issues are, exploring them in greater detail may result in new ideas for increasing the stability of child care providers, and, in turn, making the world a more stable place for young children.



MEASUREMENT #2

Children need good preparation for school

“WITH OUR FIRST DAYCARE, SHE WAS BRAND NEW AND JUST LICENSED. WE’D GET THERE EVERY DAY AND THE BABY WOULD BE IN THE SWING, ALL DAY LONG SLEEPING IN THE SWING. SHE NEVER HAD BABY TOYS AND NEVER INTENDED TO PURCHASE ANY. I WENT THERE ONE DAY UNEXPECTEDLY AT ABOUT 10:30 IN THE MORNING TO PICK HIM UP, AND SHE DIDN’T COME TO THE DOOR. I RANG THE BELL AND STOOD OUTSIDE FOR 20 MINUTES. FINALLY SHE CAME TO THE DOOR. SHE WAS IN THE BATHROOM WITH HER TWO KIDS IN THE BATHTUB, WHILE MY KID IS OUT OF SIGHT. SO I PULLED THEM BOTH THE NEXT DAY.”

This Brooklyn Park mom recounts a frightening child care experience—one that did not offer her child interaction or attention. She is not alone in her concern about what takes place at child care. Whether positive or negative, the activities that occur make a difference in a child’s development.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

The survey of four Minnesota counties found that 25 percent of all child care center staff have a two-year or four-year degree in early childhood education. Lead teachers and directors are most likely to have an early childhood education degree, and aides are the least likely (*see Table C*).

“Finding qualified staff has been terrible, absolutely terrible,” says one director of a child care center in Clay County. “I don’t want to water down our quality, but I think you’re not finding people going into four-year programs.”

In Minnesota, child care center providers also can earn a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential by completing a competency-based program of classes in early childhood education and a final evaluation. Of the four counties studied, Clay County has the highest percentage of CDA recipients, with

18 percent of staff who earned the credential, followed by Ramsey with 17 percent, Hennepin with 14 percent, and Lyon with 7 percent.

“I think the CDA program has been wonderful, but I think there needs to be another step up again for the education because I can really tell the difference between a CDA candidate and a four-year person,” says the director. “We’re talking minimal standards to get somebody in here and yes they can be a good teacher, but they’d be so much more valued if they had that additional educational experience to go along with it.”

Family child care providers face additional challenges in pursuing education, and the survey reflects that reality. An average of only 12 percent of licensed family child care providers have received two-year or four-year degrees in early childhood education (*see Table D*).

Although many regulations apply to licensed family providers, family providers do not need to meet the same requirements regarding educational background as teachers in child care settings do.

Whether in a child care center or family provider setting, the greater the investment in early childhood education for caregivers, the better the results for children.

TABLE C

CREDENTIALS

Percent of child care staff with two- or four-year degrees in early childhood education

	Clay	Hennepin	Lyon	Ramsey	All 4 counties
All staff	34	28	31	16	27
Assistant teachers	14	18	11	8	13
Lead teachers	42	45	45	28	40
Directors	69	61	0	33	41

Source: Survey conducted fall 2000

TABLE
D

CREDENTIALS

Licensed family child care providers with two- or four-year degrees

	Clay	Hennepin	Lyon	Ramsey
Percent with two-year degrees	3%	3%	3%	4%
Percent with four-year degrees	10%	6%	11%	7%

Source: Resource and Referral database



WHY IT'S A PROBLEM:

The higher the quality of child care, the better prepared children are for school. The NICHD study showed that infants and toddlers exposed to a higher quality of child care developed greater language abilities at 15, 24, and 36 months and better cognitive development at age two.¹²

The Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study followed children from their child care years into elementary school. The results indicate that children who attended higher quality child care had better language and math skills.¹³

The educational background of child care providers impacts their ability to deliver the kind of educational activity and care that succeeds in preparing young children for school. For example, in classrooms with more educated and trained teachers, preschoolers scored higher on tests.¹⁴

What kind of background is the best?

Again, the consensus is clear: Caregivers with two-year or four-year degrees in early childhood education deliver a higher quality of child care. Providers with early childhood education degrees are better able to design age-appropriate activities that succeed in preparing children for school.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN:

- Resist attempts to lower educational requirements.

Research shows the importance of early childhood education degree programs in providing

the kind of educational opportunities that prepare children for school.

Yet, reducing educational requirements is sometimes proposed as an antidote to reduce staff turnover. Because of its importance to school preparedness, the educational backgrounds of providers, instead, should be viewed as a quality to bolster.

- Increase access to professional development opportunities for family providers.

Home-based family providers handle all aspects of the business of child care. As a result, it can be much more difficult for family care providers to pursue additional educational opportunities.

Yet, education is as critical in home-based child care settings as in child care centers.

Of the many features that impact quality in home-based settings, only one, caregiver education, was consistently associated with positive child outcomes, according to one recent research study.¹⁵

Possible solutions to increasing the educational backgrounds of family providers include increasing educational alternatives, making those alternatives easily accessible throughout the state, coordinating classes to build toward a degree, and providing scholarships to help fund classes.

As a start, it makes good sense to ask family providers what type of educational offerings and settings might work best for them. Supporting a needs assessment of family providers as the first step helps ensure that the ultimate solution or solutions do reach family providers.

MEASUREMENT #3

Parents need fewer struggles in their search for quality care

“ONE SITUATION WAS THAT I COULDN’T FIND DAY CARE, AND I DID USE ONE OF THE PROVIDERS. IT WAS FRUSTRATING TO KNOW THAT THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN MY CHOICE, BUT SINCE I DON’T HAVE A CHOICE AND I WANT TO WORK, I HAVE TO DO THIS. THAT WAS A REALLY HARD FEELING TO GO THROUGH. I FELT SO LIMITED. THERE WEREN’T ENOUGH PROVIDERS OUT THERE. NO MATTER IF THAT PERSON WAS GOOD OR NOT, IT WAS JUST A WEIRD FEELING TO THINK THIS IS IT.”



This story from a parent in Dilworth, Minn., is a consistent and familiar one. Finding child care can be a stressful and time-consuming process. Finding quality child care can be an even more difficult task. What makes that search so agonizing for parents?

WHAT WE LEARNED:

Parents who participated in the focus groups candidly discussed their difficulties in finding quality child care. Many parents made frequent moves within short periods of times, often frustrated with the lack of positive interactions between providers and their children.

As one parent put it, “You can find another day care, but if you want to find a good one like those people have, it’s hard.”

Parents frequently talked about the qualities that they wanted to find in child care. They want programs that offer learning activities for children, providers that are caring and child-centered, and providers they know and trust, as well as programs that are convenient.

When parents do not find a safe, positive environment for their children, they take

action. One mom from Buffalo, Minn., noticed that her child often had bruises or cuts.

“One day I came to pick her up, and I showed up early,” she says. “There was not a teacher to be found anywhere. There were about 13 kids in this room. Brittany is huddled in a corner and these boys are beating on her with wooden blocks. Nobody is anywhere. I’m just standing there in shock. So we pulled her out.”

WHY IT’S A PROBLEM:

Without detailed information about child care options, parents and families aren’t always able to find that safe, positive environment for their child. Without availability of higher quality child care, they may never find what they need.

Accreditation offers one standard by which parents and families can gauge the quality of a child care provider. Child care centers may apply for accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The accreditation process includes a self-study, a site visit, and a review and decision by an NAEYC panel of professionals.

TABLE E ACCREDITATION

Child care centers and family child care providers with accreditation*

	Clay	Hennepin	Lyon	Ramsey
Number of accredited centers	3	56	0	23
Total number of centers	8	270	3	129
Percent with accreditation	38%	21%	0%	18%
Number of licensed family providers	213	1,932	111	1,070
Number of accredited providers	0	14	0	4
Percent with accreditation	0%	1%	0%	1%

*As of November 2000

Source: Resource and Referral database

An accreditation team uses quality standards and measures to evaluate a provider, such as teacher training, adult-to-child ratios, and curriculum. While accreditation does not guarantee quality, it has been associated with higher quality care.

By the late 1980s, concern over the quality of military child care centers prompted the United States Government to require that all military child care centers successfully complete the accreditation process. “The military has shown that providing the resources necessary to obtain accreditation from outside validators...leads to better caregiver/child interactions, curriculum improvements, higher staff morale, and a variety of other quality improvements.”¹⁵

In the four-county study, the percentage of accredited child care centers ranges from a low of none in Lyon County to a high of 38 percent in Clay County. In Ramsey and Hennepin counties, some 20 percent of child care centers have received accreditation (*see Table E*).

Family care providers also can choose to pursue the accreditation by the national Association for Family Child Care, but few do. Even if they meet accreditation standards, they often cannot afford the cost of the accreditation process.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN:

- **Develop a mentor program for child care centers and family child care providers to help gain accreditation.**

Through a mentor program, child care centers and family child care providers could learn firsthand what it takes to pass the accreditation review. A mentor program also encourages the sharing of information among providers about quality practices.

Removing some of the barriers to accreditation paves the way for child care centers and family providers to pursue accreditation and

gain the marketing edge that accreditation can bring. Namely, they are able to tell parents they meet the standards of accreditation.

The more accreditation becomes a standard, the more important it will be for other providers to follow suit. A little support of accreditation offers the potential to go a long way toward raising the standard of care in Minnesota.

- **Provide accreditation scholarships for child care centers and family child care providers.**

When the military made its commitment to 100 percent accreditation of child care centers, it proved that widespread accreditation could become a reality.

- **Expand the resource and referral system to reach more parents and to include additional information about centers and providers.**

Currently, resource and referral agencies serve as a central location for parents and for child care centers and family providers. But limited resources prevent resource and referral agencies from providing additional information that parents often find most valuable, such as current openings, licensing status, and educational qualifications of staff.

Resource and referral agencies also are in a good position to provide early childhood family education programs with information and training. Parents often turn to such sources for information about child care options. Providing staff at those programs with greater tools about child care choices also will help increase resources for parents.

With additional funding, resource and referral agencies could expand their referral capabilities and improve their service to parents, as well as assist early family education programs.



About This Study



University of Minnesota researchers conducted research for this project, working in collaboration with child care resource and referral agencies in four Minnesota counties—Clay, Hennepin, Lyon, and Ramsey.

One part of the research involved collecting data from child care resource and referral databases in each county and from a survey of directors of child care centers. Researchers analyzed data on the amount of care available, the number of children in care, staff turnover, and the affordability and quality of child care.

Researchers looked most carefully at quality indicators that previous studies show have the greatest impact on children's ability to succeed later in life. Those indicators include staff turnover, academic credentials of staff, and accreditation.

In addition, researchers conducted focus groups of parents in the four counties to learn more about their experiences with different forms of child care and their perceptions about child care quality.

Seventeen focus groups were held at four Head Start locations, one in Hennepin County, two in Wright County, and one in Brown County, and at 13 Early Childhood Family Education programs, one in Clay County, three in Hennepin County, one in Lyon County, and eight in Ramsey County. Participants included five groups with 39 Hispanic parents, three groups with 21 Hmong parents, and one group with nine African American parents. Facilitators conducted focus groups in English, Hmong, and Spanish, as appropriate to the group.

Focus group participants talked about their care arrangements, the positive and negative qualities of their current arrangements, influences on their selection of child care, and the positive and negative qualities of previous child care arrangements.

This report summarizes information from these research efforts, as well as including information from previous studies. A complete research report is available for those interested in additional information by contacting Resources for Child Caring.

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