

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.

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the quality of childcare in Minnesota

MEASURING UP

we could do better

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.



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

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.

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 firsthand 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 train-

ing, 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."