



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**

**Supporting Parent Aware:
Guidance for Minnesota's Philanthropic Community**

**Prepared by the Minnesota Department of Human Services
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Parent Aware has been adopted as Minnesota's quality framework for early care and education programs. Its goals are to improve school readiness outcomes for children by helping early childhood programs improve program quality, and to help parents find quality programs. With significant public and private investment, Parent Aware is expanding statewide in Minnesota as the cornerstone of a set of early childhood system reforms. State leaders seek to address key challenges in building early childhood program participation and buy-in at this crucial point in implementation. In response to a request from the Start Early Funders Coalition, this *Guidance for Minnesota's Philanthropic Community* invites and encourages Minnesota's dynamic funder community to learn more about Parent Aware and to invest in and help align additional private resources in this major initiative.

Parent Aware Basics

Child care and early learning programs are a critical place to start making progress on improving our achievement gap and building our future workforce. Most children under age six are in some form of non-parental care during the week, and the quality of care is highly variable. Parent Aware is Minnesota's voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System for child care and early learning programs. It is designed to:

- Provide parents with understandable consumer information about program quality.
- Ensure more children are ready for kindergarten by supporting early childhood providers and teachers in building the quality of their programs.
- Promote accountability for public and private investments by using program quality indicators linked to school readiness.

Licensed family child care providers, child care centers, school based and private preschool, Head Start and Early Childhood Special Education programs can all choose to participate in Parent Aware. These programs meet state-regulated health and safety standards. Family Friend and Neighbor providers who are interested in Parent Aware are encouraged to become licensed. A variety of supports are available to Family Friend and Neighbor providers as part of Minnesota's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant. While most states have Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, Parent Aware stands out nationally because of its focus on providing parents with meaningful, accessible information about the quality of child care and early learning programs.

Parent Aware uses a 4-Star scale, based on research that has identified which program features most impact children's school readiness. Early childhood programs have two pathways to demonstrate their quality: Full Rating and Accelerated Pathway to Rating (APR). For the Full Rating process, non-accredited child care programs demonstrate their quality by documenting the extent to which the program meets up to twenty evidence-based requirements. The Accelerated Pathway to Rating is a streamlined 4-Star rating process available to programs that already meet a set of quality standards. Specifically, Head Start, school-based pre-kindergarten, Early Childhood Special Education and accredited child care are eligible for an Accelerated Pathway to Rating that has two requirements.

With the start of statewide expansion of Parent Aware in 2012, Parent Aware has actively recruited and supported child care programs in preparing for and improving their quality rating using these strategies:

- Local community outreach through Child Care Aware agencies across Minnesota, including information and orientation sessions.
- Incentives for program participation, including consumer marketing to parents, free marketing kits for rated programs, free technical assistance and coaching, small grants to improve quality and low cost Parent Aware-required training.

Parent Aware is led by the Minnesota Department of Human Services in coordination with the Minnesota Office of Early Learning. Implementation is supported by local agencies of Child Care Aware of Minnesota, our state's Child Care Resource & Referral system. Funding is provided by a federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant awarded to Minnesota in 2012, federal Child Care Development Fund funding for child care quality and a unique partnership with community leaders through Parent Aware for School Readiness and Greater Twin Cities United Way.

Parent Aware Impact

In 2011, Parent Aware successfully concluded a four-year pilot in five communities. Key findings from the pilot's evaluation include:

- Children showed significant gains over the year in measures of expressive and receptive vocabulary, phonological awareness, print knowledge, pre-math concepts, social competence and approaches to learning.
- Positive gains were larger for children from low-income families than for the full sample.
- Sixty percent of centers and 70 percent of family child care providers improved their rating by at least one star from their initial rating to their second rating.

Parent Aware Timeline

Parent Aware is now available to licensed child care providers in 22 counties and seven tribes and will be statewide by 2015, when the goal is to have 3,700 programs rated. For Head Start, school based pre-k and accredited child care, it is already available statewide. Early Childhood Special Education programs will be able to enroll in Parent Aware in October, 2013.

Currently Rated Programs:

Star Rating	Programs Total
One Star	47
Two Star	73
Three Star	15
Four Star	917
TOTAL	1052

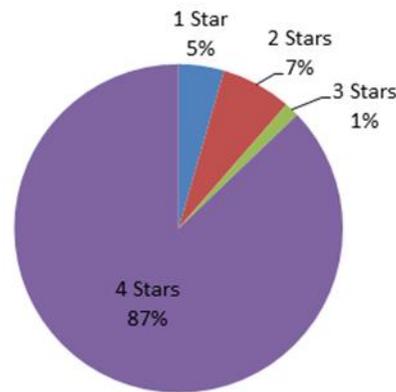


Table 1: Parent Aware ratings (August 15, 2013)

Figure 1: Percent of rated programs at each star level (August 15, 2013)

Parent Aware Successes and Challenges

Successes

Early childhood program participation is strong for APR-eligible programs

With the award of the Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant and the launch of statewide expansion in January 2012, Minnesota committed to specific performance targets for Parent Aware participation. The program was designed to rapidly roll out Parent Aware over the four-year grant period and engage a critical mass of early childhood programs across the state. Great progress has been made in Parent Aware participation among several types of early childhood programs, including Head Start programs (91% currently rated out of 286 eligible programs), accredited Child Care (82% currently rated out of 284 eligible programs) and school-based pre-kindergarten programs (74% currently rated out of 509 eligible programs). These programs are eligible for the Accelerated Pathway to Rating process. Participation rates of APR programs are expected to continue to climb as a result of the state’s new Early Learning Scholarships, which may only be used at Parent Aware programs.

New public investments create important incentives

Two 2014 legislative initiatives align public investment and public policy by creating new incentives for programs to participate in Parent Aware.

- Early Learning Scholarships

Over the next two years, \$40 million will be available to low income families to access high quality care for three- to five-year-old children with the goal of improving school readiness (Appendix A). Scholarships require Parent Aware participation. Funding levels range from \$3,000 for a program that is committed to the rating process to up to \$5,000 for a 4-star program. It is anticipated that as these scholarships enter the marketplace, more providers will sign up to

participate in Parent Aware in response to demand of parents receiving these supports. This summer, there was an increase in ratings of school based pre-kindergarten and accredited child care programs as a direct result of scholarships.

- Higher Child Care Assistance Program Rates for High Quality Child Care Providers
Over time, it is anticipated that the higher child care subsidy rates for rated providers will be a powerful incentive for licensed child care to participate in Parent Aware. Effective March 2014, licensed family child care providers and child care centers who achieve a 3 or 4-star Parent Aware rating will be eligible for higher Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) rates. Providers who achieve a 3-Star Parent Aware rating will be eligible for a differential of 15 percent above the standard maximum rate. Providers that achieve a 4-Star Parent Aware rating will be eligible for a differential of 20 percent above the standard maximum rate.

Challenges

Non-accredited Child care program participation is lagging

While more than 6,000 non-accredited child care programs are eligible to participate in Parent Aware, right now only 183 are rated. Participation of non-accredited child care programs is lagging significantly. The lagging participation rates are notable especially in contrast to the high level of participation among accredited child care programs. **Only 2% of 5,400 eligible non-accredited family child care and 7% of 740 eligible non-accredited centers are rated.** These programs must participate in the Full Rating process.

The successful recruitment of non-accredited child care is imperative to the overall success of Parent Aware, including meeting Minnesota's Parent Aware participation targets outlined in the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. By 2014, most programs eligible for the Accelerated Pathway to Rating process will be rated. Therefore, the federal targets for Parent Aware will need to be met almost entirely by non-accredited child care programs voluntarily participating in Parent Aware. If current trends continue, Minnesota will fall very short of meeting our federal target of having 3,700 programs rated by December 31, 2015.

In addition, while the successes described above have added new incentives during the statewide roll out, a robust supply of rated programs is critical to successful implementation. Without stronger participation of non-accredited child care programs, parents with an early learning scholarship or a Child Care Assistance Program subsidy may not have enough high quality options that meet their needs available to them.

Most importantly, we will fall short of the opportunity to impact school readiness in Minnesota. It is imperative that a critical mass of the more than 12,000 licensed child care programs statewide that serve thousands of children voluntarily participate in building the quality of their program by the time statewide rollout is complete at the end of 2015.

Two specific and actionable gaps currently impeding success are:

1. Recruitment

Child Care Aware, Minnesota's Child Care Resource & Referral system, is funded to provide coaches to work one-on-one with Parent Aware participants. Coaches are specialists in working with child care providers to improve quality and DHS ensures that regular training supports best practices in coaching for these key local-level staff. Currently, these coaches are also responsible for recruiting providers into Parent Aware, an activity that requires skills and time that many coaches do not have. Minnesota, like every other state implementing a Quality Rating and Improvement System, is struggling to find and resource innovative and effective approaches to recruiting licensed family child care and non-accredited centers into Parent Aware.

2. Incentives

Parent Aware is a voluntary system. Therefore, it is critical that providers see the benefits they will reap from investing their limited time, energy and financial resources becoming rated. While recent public policy developments like the Early Learning Scholarships are helpful, these new incentives will not be available to all child care providers. Relatively small resources can provide the incentive that hesitant providers may need to step up for rating. That first step demonstrates a provider's commitment to quality, and is critical to moving our entire early learning system toward higher program quality and ultimately, better school readiness outcomes.

These and other Parent Aware implementation successes and challenges are described in more depth in recent evaluations. For more information, go to:

- Child Trends reports: <http://www.pasrmn.org/>
- Learn Together MN website: <http://unitedfrontmn.org/learntogethermn/>
- MN's RTT-ELC Annual Performance Report: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/performance.html>

Public and Private Sector Alignment

When public policy, public investment and private investment align, children benefit. Strategic private investment in Parent Aware is happening in Minnesota today. Spearheading these efforts are the following foundations:

- Parent Aware for School Readiness and Greater Twin Cities United Way
- Southern MN Initiative Foundation
- Northland Foundation
- West Central Initiative Foundation

See Appendix B for some examples of the exciting work that is happening.

Guidance for the Philanthropic Community

Right now there is an unparalleled opportunity for strategic private investment in Parent Aware. A large majority of accredited child care, Head Start and school based prekindergarten in Minnesota are rated. New and expanded incentives are in place to increase access to Parent Aware rated programs for low-income families. The next challenge is to change the trend in participation of licensed family child care and non-accredited centers. To keep the momentum going, action is urgently needed to set the stage for increased recruitment in 2014.

In order to achieve the goal of getting children ready for kindergarten, state leaders invite and encourage Minnesota's private funding community to consider direct support for getting more child care programs in the Parent Aware pipeline as well as aligning other investments in early childhood with the Parent Aware quality framework. The Minnesota Department of Human Services and its partner agencies within the Office of Early Learning are in the midst of reviewing and strengthening the implementation of funded strategies for recruitment and participation. However, the success of Parent Aware depends on developing meaningful partnerships with foundations, community organizations, non-profit intermediaries, providers, and parents as well as clear and consistent communication. The purpose of the following "menu" of options is to give the funding community a sense of how to strategically focus private investment with the efforts of the public sector.

There are a variety of ways to structure investment. One way is to directly fund the work of organizations currently engaged in implementing Parent Aware. The use of existing systems for recruitment, training and outreach is the most efficient path. Possible partners to carry out this work include:

- Child Care Aware of Minnesota Coordinating Office
- Local Child Care Aware Agencies
- Parent Aware for School Readiness
- Minnesota Initiative Foundations

Critical Time Period #1 -- Now to mid-2014

Focus -- Hard push on getting programs to volunteer for rating, especially licensed family child care providers

Menu of Options to Support Parent Aware Recruitment

Strategy One: Support grassroots recruitment infrastructure

- Provide training to existing and/or new additional Child Care Aware Quality Coaching staff on grassroots recruitment techniques.
- Support new local Child Care Aware recruitment staff to conduct recruitment of child care providers and free up resources for coaching.
- Hire on the ground recruiters to do direct outreach to eligible child care providers, focusing on the benefits of Parent Aware participation.
- Hold focus groups or conduct interviews with licensed family child care providers to better understand resistance and barriers to participation. Use results to inform recruitment strategies.

Strategy Two: Provide incentives for recruitment

- Modest incentives for attending Parent Aware information sessions
- Food at information sessions
- Offer information session in combination with free One-Star training
- Pay provider recruitment bonuses to organizations that successfully recruit providers into Parent Aware.

Menu of Options to Support Quality Improvement

Strategy One: Support free training and materials including funding substitutes or staff time

- Offer required Parent Aware training in alignment with foundation funding goals (i.e. physical health and well-being)

Strategy Two: Provide free approved curriculum and assessment tools

- Replicate successful DHS-funded curriculum and assessment tool mini-grants that supported Parent Aware participating programs in early 2013 in purchasing Parent Aware **approved** tools.

Strategy Three: Support family child care provider mentoring

- Stipends for rated family child care providers to recruit and mentor other family child care providers through Parent Aware
- Support for local family child care provider associations and culturally specific non-profits to mentor providers through Parent Aware rating process
- Stipends for rated family child care providers to speak at recruitment events, trainings, conferences

Critical Time Period #2 -- Now to end of Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge Grant in 2015

Focus -- Sustained recruitment efforts and strategic private investments in quality improvement.

Menu of Options to Support Parent Aware Recruitment

For foundations adopting funding guidelines for early childhood programs that align with and support Parent Aware, specific requirements for these early childhood programs might include:

- Require participation in Parent Aware and/or a specific star rating level in order to receive or maintain a grant award over time.
- Require funding be used in alignment with Parent Aware Indicators and Scoring. For example, require that programs use Parent Aware approved curriculum and assessment tools.
- Require that child care program employees enroll in the Minnesota Center for Professional Development Registry, a requirement for Parent Aware participation and a way of supporting individual employee professional development.
- Strongly recommend that rated programs display Parent Aware marketing materials.

Menu of Options to Support Quality Improvement

Grants for training:

- Require all trainers be approved by the Minnesota Center for Professional Development
- Require that all training be approved by the Minnesota Center for Professional Development
- Require that training meet the requirements for Parent Aware training content.

Grants for intermediaries:

- Require that grant recipients help child care providers meet Parent Aware requirements

Critical Time Period #3 -- Long term (post-2015)

Focus -- Insuring private investments support and align with the State's infrastructure for Parent Aware

Determine interest in a work group on how Parent Aware will grow over time.

Next steps:

- Determine interest from funding community in Parent Aware sustainability
- Determine convener
- Determine frequency of convening

Parent Aware Evaluation

Parent Aware is undergoing rigorous evaluation funded by Parent Aware for School Readiness and the Greater Twin Cities United Way. An evaluation is one of the requirements of the federal Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant. Child Trends, as the external evaluator, is conducting evaluation activities from 2012 to 2016 and issuing regular reports and briefs to inform implementation. In addition, the Department of Human Services contributes to annual reports on Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant performance measures.

For private partners supporting Parent Aware, outcomes of funded activities may be relatively straightforward to measure:

- Do participation rates in Parent Aware by licensed family child care and non-accredited centers increase?
- Do ratings of Parent Aware participating programs increase over time?

Indeed, progress on these two measures of success will not only impact the quality of early childhood programs and children's school readiness in Minnesota. Progress will also strengthen Minnesota's Parent Aware evaluation by ensuring a larger sample size of programs participating in and children benefiting from participation in Parent Aware-rated programs.

How DHS and the Office of Early Learning Can Partner with Private Funders

Contact: Nara Topp, Quality Rating and Improvement System Specialist at nara.topp@state.mn.us or 651-431-4880.

Appendix A: Early Learning Scholarship Implementation Plan

Purpose

Early Learning Scholarships provide income-eligible families funding to support their child's attendance at a high quality early learning setting of their choice in order to improve children's success in kindergarten and beyond.

Goal of Plan

- Provide children prior to kindergarten entrance who have high needs with access to high-quality early learning opportunities.
- Build upon lessons learned from previous scholarship pilots.
- Establish infrastructure for growing and sustaining a comprehensive early learning system in Minnesota.

Proposed Distribution Plan

Distribution regionally, reaching all of the Governor's 13 Economic Development Regions.

Determining Factors for Distribution among Regions:

- Percentage of poverty based on kindergarten Free and Reduced-Price Lunch
- Existence of a Priority School in the community
 - Priority Schools are Title I schools identified as the five percent most persistently low-performing Title I schools.
- Existence of current state-funded Early Learning Scholarships (totaling 460 scholarships)
 - The communities receiving Early Learning Scholarships in fiscal year 2013 were Becker, Blue Earth, Clearwater, Pine, and Nicollet counties; Wayzata school district; the cities of Duluth, Minneapolis, Saint Paul and Willmar.
- Cities of the First Class
 - Minneapolis
 - St. Paul
 - Rochester
 - Duluth

Distribution in each region will include:

- A balanced and fair distribution based on poverty indicators for the Metro and Greater Minnesota
 - Equaling approximately 4057 total scholarships per biennium, reaching approximately nine percent (9%) of children in need
- Scholarships will be administered in Tiers
 - Tier I: 3-4 star rated Parent Aware will receive \$5000
 - Tier II: 1-2 star rated Parent Aware will receive \$4000
 - Tier III: Participation Agreement in Parent Aware will receive \$3000

Distribution of Scholarships

- Eligible children will be able to access Early Learning Scholarships in two ways:
 - Pathway I: Early Learning Scholarships awarded directly to eligible children through regional Early Learning Scholarship Administrator Offices
 - Pathway II: Early Learning Scholarships awarded to children through a designated four-star Parent Aware rated early learning setting of their choice

Use of Scholarships

- Scholarship funds can be used to serve additional children, increase a child's duration in a program, support continuity of services and cover parent co-pays, rates not covered by the Child Care Assistance Program, and other fees, including transportation.
- Programs are encouraged to layer these funds with other existing resources in order to increase access and services for children with the highest needs.

Administration of Scholarships

- Scholarships will be locally administered in each region. The scholarship office in each area will work with families to complete the application and set up scholarship payments with the program.
- A four-star Parent Aware rated program that has scholarship eligible children enrolled in or on a waiting list for the program beginning in July, August or September may notify the commissioner. The commissioner may designate a predetermined number of scholarships for that program and notify the program of that number.
- Scholarships are awarded for a 12-month period. A child may not be awarded more than one scholarship in a 12-month period.
- A child receiving a scholarship must complete developmental screening within 90 days of first attending an eligible program.

Appendix B: Examples of Current Funded Activities Aligned with Parent Aware

Parent Aware for School Readiness and Greater Twin Cities United Way

Providing early support for Minnesota's successful Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant, Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR) and Greater Twin Cities United Way -- joined forces to support Parent Aware's evaluation conducted by Child Trends, a national research organization. Periodic reports by Child Trends provide information that is invaluable to making strategic adjustments to the implementation of Parent Aware. In addition to funding the evaluation, both entities fund other significant Parent Aware efforts. PASR markets ratings to parents and providers statewide. Greater Twin Cities United Way also supports the Accreditation Facilitation Project which is supporting 350 child care centers in the nine-county metro area in becoming both accredited and Parent Aware rated.

Southern MN Initiative Foundation

The Quality Family Child Care Program increases the number of family child care providers who become Parent Aware rated or are in the process of becoming rated. This will be accomplished by joining and leveraging relationships, organizational competencies and resources. The partner organizations will provide trainings, one-on-one consulting, and mentorship to family providers. The result will be an increased number of children in family child care provider settings with increased school readiness.

The Northland Foundation

The Northland Foundation, in partnership with the Mardag Foundation, is coordinating with Child Care Aware Region 3 to implement the *Parent Aware Pathways Initiative*. This three-year collaboration is made possible by the generous funding of the Mardag Foundation. The goal of this Initiative is to increase availability of and access to quality early care and education to ensure school readiness of young children in St. Louis County. This initiative infuses \$375,000 of private investment to strategically bolster public investment in Parent Aware on the local level to increase participation in Parent Aware, help parents understand the importance of quality care, and increase the number of trainers.

West Central Initiative Foundation

West Central Initiative, the Early Childhood Initiative coordinators and Region 4 Child Care Aware staff, with funding from the Sheltering Arms Foundation are bringing Parent Aware information to our communities. Through this project we are hosting a community informational and planning meeting about Parent Aware in each of the nine counties and White Earth Reservation; inviting curriculum and assessment companies to share their products as vendors during early childhood conferences in the region; and hosting two larger scale trainings on curriculum and assessment.

The community meetings are intended for a diverse group of early childhood partners to attend together. The goals of the meetings are for partners to come together, learn about Parent Aware together and make a plan on how best to implement Parent Aware, improve quality, and align the PreK-3 work in their counties. The outreach for more information and training on Parent Aware aligned curriculum and assessment came directly from early care and education providers. Adopting a curriculum and assessment tool was deemed as the biggest barrier for many who were interested in becoming Parent Aware rated and receiving a 3 or 4-star rating.