

EVALUATING CHILD CARE: TENNESSEE'S STAR-QUALITY PROGRAM



Child care licensure and regulation in Tennessee changed dramatically in 2000, when the General Assembly passed comprehensive reform legislation following several fatal incidents involving child care agencies. The reform legislation called for a new system to enable parents to make informed decisions when choosing child care and encourage the improvement of out-of-home child care. The Department of Human Services, in association with the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, designed the new system, which became effective in 2001. The new system included

two primary components:

- 1. Report Card** – *required* of all licensed agencies, the report card is designed to inform child care providers, parents, and the public about a child care provider's quality and regulatory compliance.
- 2. Star-Quality Program** – a *voluntary* program for all licensed agencies designed to recognize practices above and beyond minimum licensing standards. Participating providers can receive a rating of one, two, or three stars and qualify for financial and regulatory benefits.

Public Chapter 724 (2006) asked the Comptroller's Office to evaluate the Star-Quality Program. The Comptroller's Office conducted a statewide survey of child care providers and interviewed various stakeholders in preparing the report.

Report Findings:

- Although a majority of survey respondents believed the Star-Quality Program's purpose is clear, respondents were divided on whether the program has improved their care quality
- Survey respondents identified programmatic strengths and weaknesses
- Some child care providers qualify for ratings not reflective of typical practices by significantly altering operations on their evaluation day
- DHS lacks a policy allowing providers to correct their assessment scores short of appealing them, which most respondents have never done, and the department no longer provides agencies with a free copy of the Star-Quality Program's evaluation instrument
- DHS discontinued child care improvement grant funding, reducing providers' ability to address identified weaknesses
- Child care reimbursement rates lag behind the current cost of providing high-quality care
- The Star-Quality Program's early childhood evaluation scale may not be the most appropriate instrument for determining a child care provider's eligibility as a pre-kindergarten site
- Parents may not fully understand the program's components and purpose
- Amendments to DHS transportation rules and regulations have improved children's safety but posed significant costs for some survey respondents
- The loss of state transportation subsidies had a disproportionate impact on survey respondents from Memphis because providers in this area of the state serve a large number of certificate children and provide most of the child care transportation in Tennessee. However, most respondents reported they still provide transportation despite the subsidy loss

Recommendations:

- The General Assembly may wish to fund an increase in child care provider reimbursement rates
- The Department of Human Services should:
 - Restore child care grant funding, in whole or in part
 - Supply child care providers with free copies of the assessment instrument and enhance efforts to inform providers of opportunities to review their scores
 - Create opportunities for child care providers to correct their evaluation scores
 - Continue evaluating the effectiveness of joint visitations by licensing and assessment staff
 - Make the eligibility standards for all pre-kindergarten sites more consistent in collaboration with the Department of Education
 - Conduct a statewide survey of parents to evaluate their familiarity with the program

View the full report at <http://www.comptroller.state.tn.us/cpdivorea.htm>

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