

QUALITY MATTERS CAMPAIGN

Campaign 180

AN OVERVIEW OF QUALITY IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION (VERMONT)

This overview of quality in early care and education was prepared to follow the FrameWorks Institute's recommendations about the *order* in which we make our points. Data and statistics are woven in throughout the document. For the most part, it is a shorter version of the Coalition's Policy Brief.

- For more information on the FrameWorks Institute's approach to early childhood messaging, see the two documents on messaging (introduction and expanded) prepared by the Kids Are Priority One Coalition.
- If you need more specific data than is provided here, consult the Coalition's resource list.
- If you would like help thinking through how to present and/or talk about the data provided here, contact Kim Friedman, Campaign Director, at (802) 348-9879 or kfriedman@svcable.net.

Introduction

The future prosperity of our society will be determined by the health and development of our children. The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follow—and getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix them later. With “71% of Vermont children under five years old...in the care of someone other than their parents for at least part of the day,”¹ the stakes are high.

Vermont's Commitment to Quality

There is now a strong science base to help us make smarter decisions and invest more wisely in programs that promote healthy child development. Vermont has built on that knowledge base by developing, implementing and promoting the **Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS)**. This voluntary quality rating and improvement system helps consumers make informed decisions about which early care and education program in which to enroll their child. STARS also provides early childhood educators and programs with concrete and specific benchmarks for measuring quality. It offers early childhood educators a means for improving quality by moving along a quality continuum. **National accreditation systems**, such as those offered through the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Family Child Care, also provide another quality “seal of approval.”

The goal is to bring such ways of measuring quality to scale so all consumers are well informed and all early childhood programs have a means for moving up a continuum of quality. However, in 2010 only 25% of eligible early care and education providers hold a certificate at any level with the Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS), and only 5.2% of Vermont's programs are nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Barriers to Providing High-Quality Early Care and Education

Several factors impede efforts to provide high-quality early care and education in all communities in Vermont and across the country:

- ***Insufficient training and education of the early childhood workforce:*** Many early childhood educators have difficulty accessing professional development opportunities due to geographic distance and/or out-of-pocket costs. Furthermore, institutions of higher education are not always equipped to meet the needs of existing early childhood educators who want to further their education, thus leaving providers without the means to meet higher educational standards.
- ***Lack of consistency among caregivers/teachers:*** Parent fees (which represent about 60% of total revenue in the early care and education system) cannot possibly cover all the costs associated with providing high-quality early care and education, which in turn results in low wages with few prospects for a pay increase as one moves along the career ladder. Low wages, coupled with limited benefits (if any), make it hard to attract and retain qualified staff. The concomitant high turnover undermines children's healthy development, which depends on consistent relationships with the adults in their lives.
- ***Ratios and group size that exceed recommended standards:*** While better than some states, Vermont's ratios and group sizes for regulated early care and education programsⁱⁱ fall short of standards recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.ⁱⁱⁱ However, ensuring that a family

child care provider or a center-based provider is caring for an age-appropriate number of children is expensive. While the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program helps children from low-income families pay for child care, state budget constraints mean that income eligibility guidelines are set too low for moderate-income families to qualify for child care assistance. Yet most moderate-income families cannot afford to pay for high-quality early care and education services without financial assistance. Many early care and education programs are reluctant to invest in higher quality if they know doing so will make their program unaffordable to families in their community (higher quality costs more).

- **Inadequate facilities:** The size, location and condition of the facilities in which early care and education programs are situated are also benchmarks of quality. Vermont boasts some beautiful facilities and a Building Bright Futures Facilities Fund, administered by the Vermont Community Loan Fund, to help programs upgrade their facilities. However, in 2010 the Vermont Community Loan Fund received requests totaling \$196,740 but only had \$69,745 available for facility grants.
- **Insufficient regulatory oversight:** Program oversight also influences the quality of early care and education services. While "...Vermont is ranked number 4 [in the nation] for the strength of its child care regulations," it is ranked 44th for its "...ability to provide adequate oversight to child care programs, including routine inspections."^{iv} While the recommended licensor caseload is 1:50 (one licensor/50 programs), Vermont's licensor caseload is 1:199 (1:319 when legally exempt providers are included).^v High caseloads make it difficult for licensors to visit programs regularly and provide ongoing technical assistance and support.
- **Large unregulated sector:** Informal child care arrangements often work very well as an alternative to regulated early care and education. However, chronic shortages of accessible, affordable quality child care often force parents to rely on informal, short-term child care arrangements. These short-term situations undermine children's ability to bond with a caregiver, thus compromising healthy child development. While Vermont currently has no way of determining exactly how many children are cared for through informal child care arrangements, national estimates suggest that 15.6% of children under fifteen are in non-relative care (in the child's home, a provider's home, a family child care program or with another non-relative).

Solutions

Numerous organizations are working to find ways to address these barriers. For example:

- The **Building Bright Futures State Council** has been tasked by the legislature's House Human Services Committee to examine ways to overcome the barriers to achieving higher levels of quality, cost out the needed increased investment and develop recommendations for how to pay for that investment. Building Bright

Futures' Professional Preparation and Development Committee is also working to improve the quality of early care and education in Vermont.

- Many **Building Bright Futures regional councils** have undertaken community-based strategies for addressing the need to improve quality. (This is a good place to make a pitch for your own council's work in this area.)
- Through its *Quality Matters Campaign*, **the Kids Are Priority One Coalition** is pursuing its policy recommendations, which are focused on increasing resources to early childhood educators and programs as well as ensuring that minimal quality standards are met statewide. (See the Coalition's Campaign 180 talking points for details.)
- Part of the Vermont Business Roundtable, **Pre-K Vermont** is working to expand access to affordable, high-quality early education for three and four year olds.
- **Vermont Early Educators United** is working to win legislative approval to form a collective bargaining unit that would permit early childhood educators to negotiate with the state of Vermont on numerous aspects of Vermont's early care and education system, including quality.

Kids Are Priority One is Vermont's statewide early childhood coalition that mobilizes organizations, individuals and businesses to ensure a good start for all children.

ⁱ Permanent Fund for the Well-Being of Vermont's Children, A.D. Henderson Foundation, and the Vermont Community Foundation, *Understanding Vermont: Early Care and Education*, 2010, p. 6.

ⁱⁱ Specific information on ratios and group size can be found at http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/cdd/care/Early_Childhood_Program.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ NAEYC's recommended ratios and group size can be found at: www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/Teacher-Child_Ratio_Chart_9_16_08.pdf.

^{iv} Vermont Child Care Advisory Board, *Child Care: 2010 Legislative Report*, p. 2. http://clients.marketing-partners.com/vtccab/pdf/ccab_leg_rept_10.pdf

^v Ibid.