



LEADERS IN EARLY LEARNING

Innovating Child Care Licensing and Quality Standards

Exploring the WeVision EarlyEd Initiative for Minnesota

Child Care Licensing and Quality Standards: A New Approach for Minnesota

Minnesota's child care licensing system and its Quality Rating System, Parent Aware, are currently in the process of being revised and modernized. This has created an opening for a complete rethinking of the approach the state is taking to the regulation of early care and education programs in Minnesota.

Current Challenges

The existing system in Minnesota faces several issues:

1. **Overreliance on Licensing:** The current system regulates not only health and safety, but also aspects of quality, professional qualifications, and day-to-day behaviors of educators working in programs.
2. **Regulatory Complexity:** The Child Care Center Rules & Laws book spans 335 pages, while the licensed family child care book has 190 pages—many more pages than other regulated entities. This complexity is driven by the use of licensing as the sole regulatory mechanism and results in a significant "time tax" on providers.
3. **Quality is Not Currently a Baseline Expectation:** Currently Minnesota relies on a patchwork with some quality standards poorly covered by licensing and others voluntary as part of Parent Aware.
4. **Fragmented and Confusing for Parents:** Parents face significant challenges in navigating this system, struggling to find clear information about available options and often making difficult choices.

Proposed Framework

In the new framework, Early Care and Education Programs (ECEPs) would be regulated programs which would include all contexts of care, regardless of building. Legal, unregulated trusted caregivers, similar to family, friend, and neighbor care, would present additional options for families.

A three-part approach would address the current challenges:

1. **Streamlined Licensing:** Focus state licensing on core health and safety requirements, including facility safety, basic health and hygiene, ratios, minimum staff qualifications, and background checks.
2. **Industry-Led Quality Standards:** For regulated programs (ECEPs), shift to using quality standards from recognized professional associations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), among others. Use accreditation processes for quality assurance instead of a state system like Parent Aware.
3. **Unified Standards and Support:** Apply consistent standards across all regulated programs (ECEPs), regardless of building type or funding stream. Provide support teams with expertise in licensing, program operation, and child development to assist all ECEPs in meeting these standards. Acknowledge the value of family, friend, and neighbor (trusted caregivers) and other unregulated care as a part of the larger system of care.

Potential Benefits

This new framework offers several advantages:

1. **Focus on Quality:** By reducing compliance tasks, providers can dedicate more time to quality improvement and professional development.
2. **Regulatory Relief:** Providers would experience a reduced regulatory burden while maintaining essential health and safety standards.
3. **Equitable Treatment:** All ECEPs would be held to the same standards and receive equal support, ensuring consistent quality experiences for children. Legal, unregulated care would be validated as an option for families.
4. **Take the Burden of Quality Off Parents:** By making quality a baseline requirement of all regulated programs (ECEPs) and shifting to accreditation as the quality standard, parents could focus on finding care that satisfies their individual family needs, desires, and interests.

Moving Forward

Minnesota is at a crossroads in the child care quality and regulatory landscape. We could continue to tinker with what exists, or we could choose to rethink our approach and begin a transformation. The system of licensing and quality standards is no longer serving the needs of children, families, and providers and the focus on regulated providers is leaving a key segment of the field out. Through collaboration across the system, a new approach could bring us closer to a more ideal system that would take the needs of all the key actors into account.