Child Care Benchmarks Low Among States

Report finds much room to improve standards and oversight across nation

A report card that looked at standards and oversight of child care programs across America gives states unimpressive grades overall for regulations governing benchmarks related to child care quality, including staff:child ratios, hiring standards, safety requirements and the frequency of inspections.

Only the Department of Defense, which operates its own child care system, earned more than 90 out of 150 possible points, raising questions about the quality of child care throughout the nation, according to the 2007 report released by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA).

“The results of this report card should be a wake-up call to policymakers,” said Linda K. Smith, executive director of NACCRRA. “With the well-being of nearly 12 million children under age 5 at stake, states need to make sure that children are safe and learning in child care.”

Average Scores Low

The average total score among the states was 70 out of 150 possible points.

The Department of Defense received the highest score – 117 points – and had the highest point totals in both categories. The next highest overall score – 90 points – was given to Illinois and New York. Idaho scored the lowest, receiving 15 points.

No state was ranked in the top 10 for both the standards and the oversight categories.

Pennsylvania earned a total 79 points, good enough for an overall ranking of 15th in the report.

The state earned its highest marks in standards, ranking fourth in that category. It fared poorly, however, in oversight, ranking 40th among all states, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense.

States were scored based on a point system of 100 points for child care standards and 50 for oversight.

To determine the rankings for child care standards, NACCRRA scored states on several aspects of their minimum standards for child care centers. These included staff:child ratio, group size requirements, educational qualifications of directors and teachers, preservice and annual training requirements for teachers, criminal background checks, developmental domains programs must address, health and safety requirements, and parent involvement, communication, and parental access.

For the oversight rankings, states were scored on elements of their oversight regulations, including whether both child care centers and family child care homes are licensed, frequency of inspections, the number of programs for which each inspector is responsible, educational requirements for licensing staff, and whether inspection reports and complaints reports are available online to parents.

NACCRRA said the benchmarks were developed from available research in the field.

Improvements Urged

Among the common problems found among the states were infrequent inspections, deficient safety requirements and low hiring standards for child care center employees.

NACCRRA, as part of its report, recommends that Congress strengthen the Child Care and Development Block Grant to better ensure that children are safe and learning while in child care. The CCDBG...
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is the primary federal funding source for
care in the United States. Under
the block grant, minimum health and
safety requirements for states are ex-
remely broad.

The report also calls on states to
strengthen their standards by taking
steps such as reducing staff:child ratios,
requiring more extensive training and
education of the workforce, and requiring
that child care centers meet 10 basic
health and safety standards.

Pennsylvania’s low ranking in
oversight appears largely due to find-
ings that it does not meet recommenda-
tions for programs-to-licensing-staff
ratios, and that it does not make inspec-
tion reports and complaint reports avail-
able online to parents.

Inspectors in Pennsylvania are
each responsible for an average of 153
child care programs. NACCRRA scores
are based on the recommendation that
each inspector be responsible for no
more than 50 programs.

In Pennsylvania, monitoring visits
of child care centers are done once a
year, according to the NACCRRA re-
port card. The recommended frequency
of those visits is four times a year.

Standards Key To Quality

When it comes to benchmarks
related to child care standards, however,
Pennsylvania earned much higher over-
all marks.

Adequate child care standards are
considered the foundation for ensuring
the quality of early care and education
and creating and maintaining a safe
environment for young children.

“Our practitioner point of view,
standard gives you a clear, concrete
picture of what quality is, so you know
what you are striving for. You know
what it should look like,” said Laurie
Mulvey, director of the Division of Ser-
vice Demonstrations, University of Pitts-
burgh Office of Child Development.

“Without standards, there is a general
sense among practitioners that they want
to be quality, but everybody has their
own ideas about what that is.”

Pennsylvania received its highest
marks in the standards category for re-
quiring parent involvement, communi-
ca tion and allowing parental visits, as well
as for requiring programs to address six
developmental domains: social, physical,
language/literacy, cognitive/intellectual,
emotional, and cultural.

Keystone STARS Helped

Child care advocates and experts
familiar with programs in Pennsylvania
say the state’s Keystone STARS pro-
gram played a key role in raising the
state’s ranking in the standards category.

Keystone STARS is an initiative of
the Department of Public Welfare’s Of-

fice of Child Development and Early
Learning to improve, support, and recog-
nize the continuous quality improvement
efforts of early care and education pro-
grams in the state. It is designed to en-
courage providers to improve the qual-
ity of their programs by offering them
incentives, support, and assistance. Pro-
viders, for example, can earn financial
rewards for achieving up to five levels
of performance standards.

Each level builds on the previous
one and uses research-based best prac-
tices to promote quality early learning
environments and positive child out-
comes. These standards address issues
such as staff qualifications and profes-
sional development, early learning, part-
nerships with family and community,
and leadership and management.

“The standards that we have under
Keystone STARS touch on all aspects
of quality -- everything that the litera-
ture says you should do to improve the
lives of children and their families, help
educate children, and help nurture
them,” said Mulvey. “They pull quality
apart and give providers clear standards
at increasing levels so they keep trying
to get higher and higher.”

references

This report is based on the following publication:

We Can Do Better: NACCRRA’s Ranking of State Child Care Center Standards and
Oversight. March 2007. Washington, DC: National Association of Child Care Re-
source & Referral Agencies. This report is available online at: www.naccrra.org/
policy/scorecard.php

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