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Policy Brief #2: Parent Perceptions of Child Care: How do Nebraska Parents Rate Their Child Care and Child Care Subsidy Options?

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PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD CARE: HOW DO NEBRASKA PARENTS RATE THEIR CHILD CARE AND CHILD CARE SUBSIDY OPTIONS?

Findings from the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium show that parents who use child care subsidies in Nebraska lose subsidies more than parents in other states.

Number 2

policy brief

Background

In 2000, university researchers at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Iowa State University, University of Kansas, and the University of Missouri, and state child care and early education program partners in four states (Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska) initiated the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium (MCCRC). The focus of the Consortium's work is to conduct a multi-year study on a range of issues associated with child care quality and conditions. Across the four states, a stratified random selection of 2022 child care providers participated in a telephone survey conducted by the Gallup Organization, representing licensed child care centers, licensed family child care homes, registered child care homes, and subsidized care license exempt family and (in one state) license exempt center care. Providers responded to questions about background and practices often associated with quality. Of the providers responding to the phone survey, 365 were randomly selected for in-depth observations to assess quality. In Year 2, 1325 parents (256 from Nebraska) in these centers were asked to complete a survey about their child care and 629 (166 from Nebraska) parents who used subsidies completed phone interviews about their child care.

Policy Recommendations

When formulating policy regarding the well-being of children, policies should function to enhance both the care and education of children. Therefore we recommend that child care policy makers should:

- Reduce the discontinuities in subsidy use. Too frequent means testing may be leading to discontinuities in children's experiences and for parents and providers. Be particularly careful in changing subsidy payments among parents of infants where discontinuities may be particularly harmful.
- Improve access to subsidy payments. Examine the subsidy system to make it more user friendly.
- Require minimal quality in settings where child care is purchased through public pay. Require at least 4 assets among every provider receiving public pay subsidies. Infants are particularly vulnerable to poor quality care.
- Work to ensure that all providers have 4 or more assets to increase the chance of minimal quality care. Parents want quality for their children above every other value for child care and Nebraska should help to ensure they receive the quality they think they are getting.
- Remove impediments to accreditation as an incentive to quality in Nebraska: Change the payment schedule so that center-based and home providers who are accredited may receive a bonus for accreditation regardless of market rates. Such a practice is followed in Missouri.
- Inform parents about what it means for a provider to have a license. Parents are misinformed about guarantees in place for quality through licensing.

What Did We Learn From Parents Who Receive Child Care Subsidies?

- Parents who were receiving subsidies rated highly the importance of the provider having a license. Across the Midwest, 86% of the parents whose provider did not have a license thought their provider was licensed.
- Even before eligibility was reduced due to state budget cuts in July 2002, Nebraska parents significantly more often reported losing subsidies than parents from other states. These Nebraska parents also reported more problems keeping subsidies, finding them easy to apply for, and that they had fewer choices for child care than parents from neighboring states.
- After eligibility was reduced, Nebraska parents who had been receiving subsidies and were contacted by phone were significantly less likely to report that receiving subsidies enabled them to work and earn a living; that subsidies were reliable; that subsidies were easy to apply for and keep and that the payments were too low and that the parent couldn't afford the co-pay. Consistent with the earlier mail survey, Nebraska parents contacted by phone were significantly more likely to lose subsidies than parents from other states (46% vs. 37% from next highest state).
- When parents lost subsidies, 44% had to take the child out of the child care he/she was in; 31% changed hours and moved the child to another provider; 25% quit their job or a spouse quit a job.
- Parents of infants who were using center-based care were the most vulnerable when subsidies were lost. Parents of infants were significantly more likely to quit their jobs when subsidies were lost.
- Parents who receive subsidies valued quality above every other feature about child care. Next valued were wanting a warm and loving provider; emphasis on learning; having a license; the building and grounds; flexible hours and the provider's training and credentials. Providers in Missouri were more likely to value the provider being accredited than those in Nebraska.
- Parents who received subsidies were positive about their providers on average but were less likely to rate their providers highly than parents who did not receive subsidies (76% vs. 81% of all parents). Nebraska parents were no different from those from other states in ratings of quality practices, except that subsidy receiving parents in Nebraska thought that viewing too much television was a problem more than did parents in other states.
- Subsidy receiving parents of infants in centers were least happy with child care: they were less likely to think the child was safe; that the provider was happy to see the child; that they trusted the provider to care for their child; that the provider wanted to care for children; that they'd had a conference with the provider; and that conditions are dirty.

The Principal Investigators of the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium are: Kathy Thornburg (Missouri), Helen Raikes, Brian Wilcox, Carolyn Edwards, and Julia Torquati (Nebraska), Susan Hegland and Carla Peterson (Iowa), and Jean Ann Summers and Jane Atwater (Kansas). Funded by HHS Child Care Bureau and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.