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Report: High-Quality Child Care Growing in Wisconsin, But Access Varies Widely

YoungStar Program Rates Providers Receiving State Child Care Subsidies

MILWAUKEE—More low-income children are receiving top-rated child care than five years ago, according to a report from the nonpartisan, independent Wisconsin Policy Forum.

While the report finds considerable improvement statewide, it cautions that the availability of top-rated child care still varies widely. This is especially true in Milwaukee County, which has seen gains in high-quality care but still lags behind most of the state.

In the report, “Guiding Stars: Child Care Quality Ratings Are Improving, But Progress Is Uneven,” WPF researchers examined ratings for child care providers participating in the Wisconsin Shares program, which provides subsidies for low-income families.

The state’s YoungStar rating system ranks child care providers from one to five Stars, based on measures such as safety, staff education, learning environment and curriculum, and developmentally appropriate programming. The state uses a “carrot and stick” approach, paying no subsidies to one Star providers, slightly reduced subsidies to two-Star providers, and additional subsidies to those rated four or five Stars.

As of July, nearly three out of every four children in the Wisconsin Shares program statewide were receiving care from providers rated three Stars or above, up from 56.1% in 2013. Nearly half (47.2%) were receiving care from 3-Star providers, while 27.2% were in high-quality programs rated four or five Stars.

The report found regional differences in the quality of care available. As the state’s two largest counties, Milwaukee and Dane had the most top-rated providers, but other, smaller counties had much higher proportions of high-quality providers. Dane’s share ranked third (42%), behind Vilas (67%) and Bayfield (60%), while in Milwaukee County, only 13% of the providers received four- or five-Star ratings.

“With the exception of Dane, the counties with the highest concentrations of high-quality providers have small numbers of regulated care options, with 10 total providers or fewer,” the report noted. Five counties – Crawford, Florence, Kewaunee, Menominee, and Pepin – have no high-quality providers.

Milwaukee County has a higher proportion of one-, two-, and three-Star providers than the rest of the state, and a lower share of four- and five-Star facilities. Roughly one-fourth (23%) of Milwaukee County children are in high-quality programs compared to a third of those in the rest of the state.

The report suggests this may be due to a higher number of home-based family care providers, which typically receive lower ratings, than in other parts of the state (53% in Milwaukee, compared with 37% in the rest of the state). Other communities, especially Dane County, tend to have higher concentrations of group child care centers, which typically have larger staffs, more resources, and more extensive programming and, as a result, these centers tend to receive higher quality ratings.

Still, the report found Milwaukee County has progressed at a faster rate than the rest of the state since 2013 in moving children into high-quality care. The number of children in four- and five-Star programs in Milwaukee County tripled in the five years (1,693 to 6,077), while only increasing 37% in the rest of the state (4,513 to 6,184.) Meanwhile, the share of children receiving high-quality care in Milwaukee County more than doubled (9.4% to 23%).

“While progress in Milwaukee County has been strong, it has been playing catch-up with the rest of the state,” the report notes.

Planned changes to the rating system’s educational requirements may make it easier for providers to advance from two Stars to higher ratings beginning in 2019-20, but curriculum and evaluation requirements may make it difficult for family providers to move beyond three-Star ratings.

The complete report can be found [here](#).