

RATING EARLY EDUCATION

What do preschool quality, public safety and national security have in common?

They all benefit from investment in accountability, including parents' ability to compare programs for their children.

By JAMES C. BACKSTROM
and TIM KENNEDY

During the next few weeks the Minnesota House and Senate will hear from both parents and children's groups urging support for a successful effort to ensure that more young children start school "ready to learn." First instituted in 2007, that effort brought what's known as a Quality Rating System (QRS) to child care and preschool programs — enabling parents to select programs that offer the nurturing and high-quality teaching their children deserve.

These lawmakers may be a bit more surprised to be hearing from us — one the Dakota County attorney and the other a retired brigadier general. Although we are "unexpected messengers" for sustaining this effort, we both have a personal stake in its success. Nationwide, 7 in 10 state prison inmates do not have a high school diploma. Many will tell you they struggled academically from kindergarten, fell further behind in later grades and eventually dropped out. Meanwhile, 69 percent of Minnesota's young adults cannot qualify for military service because they are too overweight, have a criminal record or cannot pass the military's entrance exam, which tests reading, math and problem-solving skills.

High-quality child care and early-learning programs are a vital first step toward solving these challenges. Study after study shows that participation in quality preschool can lead to a range of positive outcomes, including fewer behavior problems,

improved school readiness, reduced special education, and academic benefits that may last well into elementary school, high school and beyond. This research is based on state programs similar to those offered here in Minnesota, and on two studies that followed children who participated in quality programs in Michigan and Illinois and found that they were far less apt than nonparticipants to become involved in crime and more likely to graduate from high school.

For these reasons and more, Minnesota's law enforcement and retired military leaders are longtime advocates for quality early-childhood experiences. Right now, our efforts are focused on sustaining the QRS system, because it can lead to better outcomes for children while also helping providers to boost the quality of their programs.

A 2016 independent, third-party evaluation found that children in programs that were part of the rating system made significant gains on kindergarten-readiness factors, including early math skills, early literacy skills, persistence, executive function and social competence.

Lawmakers also may be surprised to learn that most preschool teachers and child care center staff are happy to be held accountable for their services. In fact, about 90 percent of rated providers have a positive impression of the ratings. This includes those providing services in centers, homes, public schools and nonprofit organizations.

Support from families for this effort also exists. Thanks to the website ParentAware.org, Minnesota par-

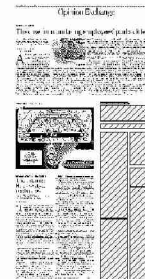
ents can review ratings for individual child care and early-education programs across the state. In its first year of operation, the site had more than 1 million page views. Over the last four years, surveys have shown that parents are increasingly aware of the ratings and that they are more likely to use them as they shop for child care and early-learning programs.

Unfortunately, the rating program is in jeopardy. Minnesota obtained a grant from the federal-state Race to the Top program to cover the program's costs from 2012 to 2016. Now that Race to the Top funding is gone, the state will be forced to cap the number of rated child care and early-learning centers as well as scale back efforts to help providers improve their quality.

As a result, Minnesota's child-advocacy groups are asking the Legislature for a vital investment of \$15 million, which would double the number of rated programs and enable about 36,000 more children to participate in these rated programs. It also would enable programs to purchase evidence-based curricula and invest in teacher training, coaching and other improvements that will enhance the quality of child care and early-learning experiences for Minnesota's kids.

While we both support this request for the sake of public safety and national security in the coming years, we also recognize that it is a smart move for the sake of Minnesota families right now. We therefore encourage lawmakers to heed the requests of Parent Aware and other initiatives so we can build on this success to ensure that more children are well-educated and prepared for productive and law-abiding lives.

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