

Family Child Care in Delaware Stars: Lessons from the Family Child Care Exit Study



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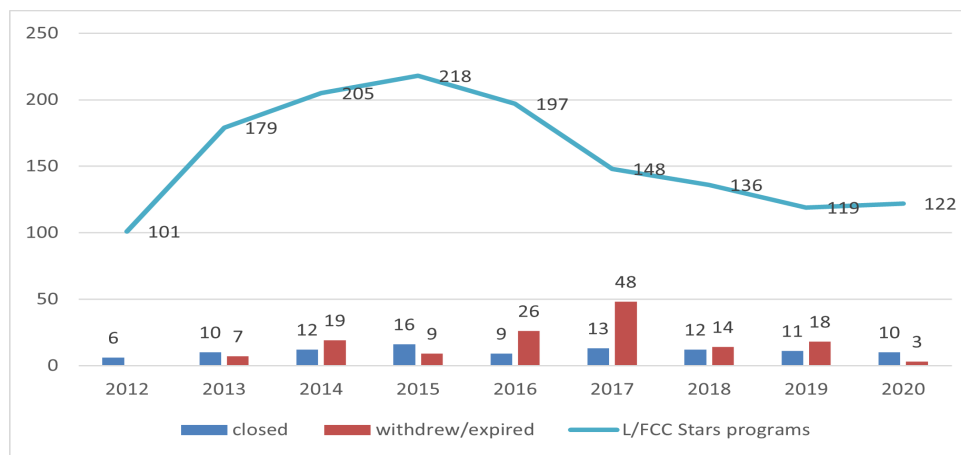


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Introduction to the Family Child Care Exit Study

National data suggests that 1 million paid early childhood professionals care for children in their homes through regulated and registered family child care.¹ However, state systems often struggle to reach out to these caregivers and offer support that is needed. Integrating family child care into QRIS is integral to equity in early childhood, especially given that care in this setting is often provided to families and communities that are furthest from opportunity.² In Delaware there has been a decline in the number of licensed family child care (FCC) and large family child care programs (LFCC) that participate in the state's QRIS (Delaware Stars). The decline is twofold: (1) programs closed and stopped serving children, or (2) programs withdrew from the QRIS but remained open and licensed. This study examined those programs that withdrew or expired from Stars but remained open and licensed, in an attempt to understand why they left the QRIS.

Family Child Care Program Exit from Delaware Stars Over Time



Sample

We first compared programs that exited to those that remained in Stars in terms of program type (FCC vs. LFCC), area deprivation index (ADI), licensed time (in months) and receipt of purchase of care. Results showed that programs that were licensed longer were more likely to exit.

A total of 104 FCC programs who were previously in Stars and either withdrew or expired between 2012 and 2020 were contacted for surveys. These were early childhood professionals that withdrew from Stars but were still licensed by the state and serving children in their home at the time surveys were administered. On average, they spent about 35 months in Stars and the bulk of programs that withdrew were Star Level 1 or Star Level 2 when they left (90%). Additionally, 39% of early childhood professionals were located in risk areas³ and 88% were FCC programs (compared to 12% LFCC).

Eighteen early childhood professionals of varying backgrounds completed the survey. Nearly 40% had a high school diploma or less and nearly 30% had a BA or specialized training in early childhood. Roughly 40% identified as White and 30% identified as Black or Hispanic. Additionally, 40% of respondents had household incomes of more than \$65K. All professionals were at least 30 years old, and about 40% were over the age of 60. Further, roughly 85% of the sample had been working in the early childhood field for over 15 years.

¹National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team. (2016). Characteristics of home-based early care and education providers: Initial findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE). OPRE Report #2016-13, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

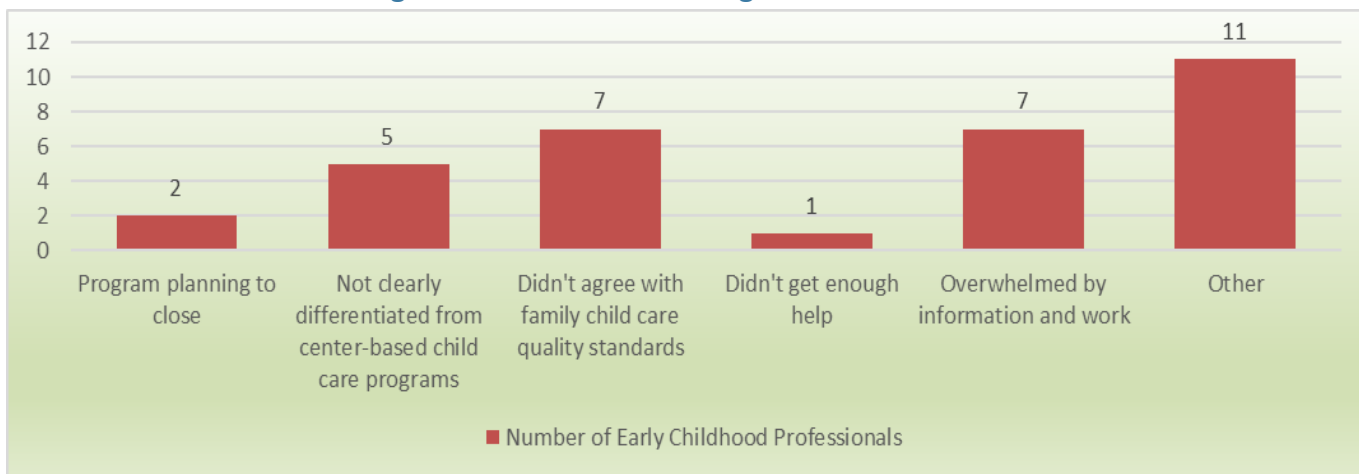
²BUILD Initiative. *Engaging Family Child Care in QRIS (June 2019)*. QRIS 3.0 Tools and Resources.

³Risk areas include Western Wilmington, W. Sussex, S. Dover, Center City Wilmington, E. Sussex, Wilmington (River Area), S. Kent/N. Sussex, and Georgetown.

Highlights from FCC Surveys

Surveys asked FCC professionals about their reasons for previously joining Stars, supports they received, and challenges they encountered. They were asked to rate, from 1 to 5, their perceptions of specific supports, challenges, and reasons for joining Stars. The following figures present results from survey responses. Multiple responses from an individual were permitted.

Figure 3. Reasons for Leaving Delaware Stars



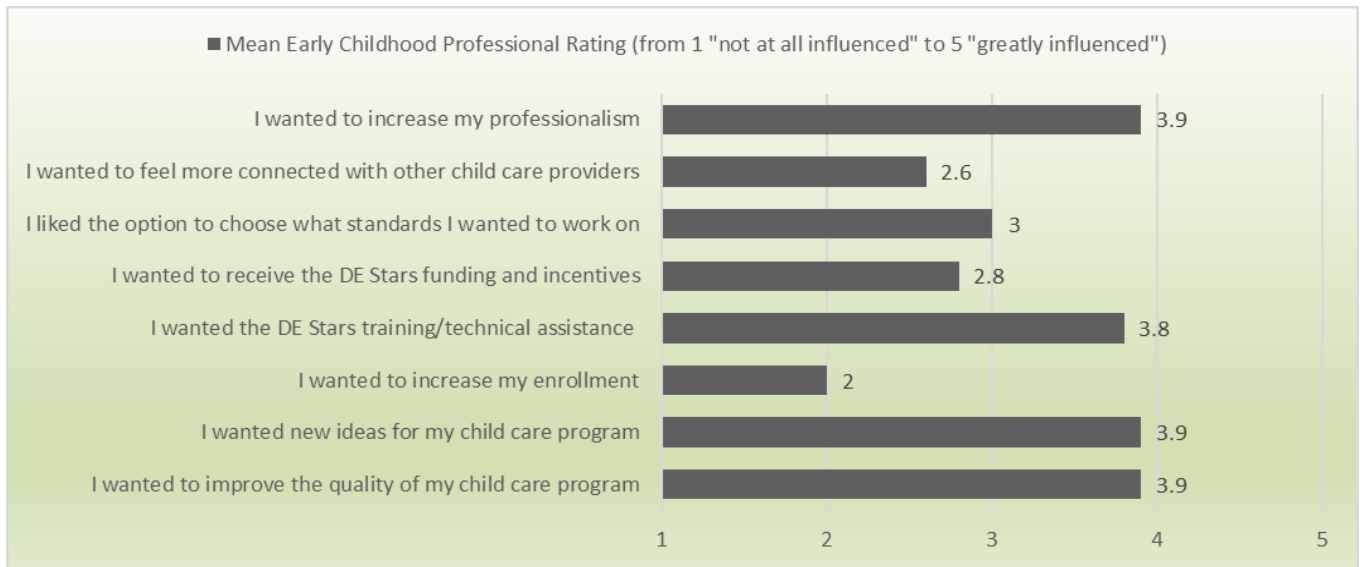
- Early childhood professionals most frequently left Stars because they were overwhelmed by the amount of information and work or did not agree with the family child care standards.
- Additionally, 'other' was coded most frequently, indicating that there was not a single common reason early childhood professionals gave for leaving. Examples of 'other' responses included not being a good fit, changed their mind, or that Stars did not apply to them.

Figure 4. Challenges Encountered with Delaware Stars



- The challenge noted to be most difficult for early childhood professionals was making changes based on Stars standards.
- Participating in observations and receiving financial support were noted as not very difficult. However, due to their relatively short time as Stars participants, most of these early childhood professionals did not undergo a structured observation or receive any financial assistance.

Figure 5. Reasons for Initially Joining Delaware Stars



- The top 3 things that influenced early childhood professionals' decisions to join Stars were wanting to improve the quality of their programs, wanting new ideas for programs, and wanting to increase professionalism. The desire to increase program enrollment had very little influence on FCC decisions to join Delaware Stars.

Figure 6. Ratings of Delaware Stars Supports



- Regarding supports, mean ratings were highest (i.e., early childhood professionals most strongly agreed) for ease of getting in touch with their technical assistant. In contrast, early childhood professionals generally disagreed that Stars supported their independence and ability to make decisions.

Highlights From In-depth Interviews

Early childhood professionals described a high-quality FCC program as being clean, warm, communicative, and conducive to learning. They listed strengths of FCC such as high levels of engagement with families, flexibility with schedules & payments, child-centered learning approaches, and a kind & respectful environment. Barriers to improving quality included limited staff, physical and time limitations, enrollment regulations, financial issues, and lack of support. Positive experiences with Stars were noted as increased enrollment, TA assistance, and the ability to purchase new materials.

The main challenges noted were overwhelming paperwork, stress of meeting performance standards, disagreement with standards and TAs, and having to use the Stars-approved curriculum. Early childhood professionals would have liked to see team partnership, more individualized & positive feedback, and more financial support. They also expressed that they would like to be evaluated based on children's experiences and outcomes and some shared that teachers behave differently at the time of verification and assessment. Early childhood professionals recommended more flexible standards, online training, more feedback from TAs, and to establish a collaboration with the National Association for Family Child Care.

Conclusions

Despite the small sample available for this research, findings are valuable as Delaware Stars moves forward with QRIS revision efforts and continually working with family child care programs. Early childhood professionals mentioned a number of reasons that compelled them to join Delaware Stars, such as a desire to improve quality and professionalism and obtain new ideas for their programs. They also noted a number of strengths regarding Delaware Stars, such as comfort with and support from their technical assistants, useful trainings, and support in improving overall program quality. However, the overall theme that emerged across both survey and interview findings is that L/FCC professionals do not find Delaware Stars standards flexible enough to allow them independent decision-making regarding their programs, thus prompting them to withdraw from the QRIS over time.

It is also worth noting that the majority of these early childhood professionals were Star Level 1 or Star Level 2 when they withdrew from Delaware Stars. Therefore, it is possible that family child care professionals are less likely to withdraw from Delaware Stars once they are a Star Level 3 or higher. To explore this slightly, we looked at all L/FCC programs that are currently in Delaware Stars at a Star Level 3 or higher and calculated the amount of time they were Star Level 1 and Star Level 2 before moving up to Star Level 3. The average amount of time it took for current L/FCC programs to move up to Star Level 3 or higher was 20 months. Thus, one additional implication of these findings is that there may be some programs that get "stuck" and need a different type of support than what is generally provided. This is a significant implication especially given that nearly 40% of L/FCC programs are currently SL1 and SL2. Follow up surveys or interviews with FCC professionals that ask questions about FCC experiences at different Star Levels may be useful to shed light on these possibilities.

About the Authors:

Jessica Francis: Jessica has served as the Research and Evaluation Manager for the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood since 2018. Prior to coming to the Institute she served in various roles at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University and also worked for the Chicago Public Schools. Her research is focused on classroom quality and internal organizational effectiveness. Jessica holds a Ph.D. in Child Development from Loyola University Chicago and Erikson Institute.

Jing Tang: Jing currently works as a Research Scientist at Child Trends. She recently completed her Ph.D. in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Delaware. While at UD, Jing worked as a Research Assistant at the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood from 2015-2021. Her research aims to improve the quality of early child care settings and ensure families' equitable access to high-quality child care programs. Specifically, Jing studies quality disparities in child care, parental child care decision-making processes, and the child care workforce. Jing was formerly a Mandarin teacher in different early child care settings.

Rena Hallam: Rena Hallam is a Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences and also serves as Director for the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood. Her research focuses on strategies for improving quality of both center-based and family child care environments with an emphasis on the design and implementation of state systems and policies.



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