

State to apply for early child learning funds
By Mark Pasciak, [Buffalo News](#)
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New York is competing for \$100 million in federal funds to strengthen the education of its youngest children. If the state wins, parents would have access to a comprehensive rating system for daycares and other programs for young children. Teachers in those programs would receive targeted training. And state agencies would coordinate their efforts to better serve young children.

"The results are so conclusive as to what you can achieve with a child at a young age. That's a whole area of missed opportunity," said Regent Robert M. Bennett. "This is a great opportunity for all of us to rally together at the state and local level to do good things for kids."

Experts say money invested in the early years pays dividends down the road. Most estimates suggest that for every dollar invested before a child turns 5, at least \$7 is saved later - on costs such as incarceration, social services and drug rehabilitation.

"Research tells us very clearly that 75 percent of what a child learns, they learn before kindergarten. Nothing parallels what happens to children before they turn 5," said Susan Block, executive director of the Childcare Resource Network. "[Quality programs for young children] is what prevents crime and teen pregnancy and drug abuse."

The Obama administration has made available \$500 million for Early Learning Challenge grants, the latest round in its Race to the Top reform initiative.

Each state can qualify for four-year grants of \$50 million to \$100 million, depending on its relative population of low-income children. New York, along California, Florida and Texas, could be eligible for \$100 million. The application deadline is Wednesday.

In New York, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's office is coordinating efforts among agencies for the state's application. "This initiative will ensure New York's youngest students get the right instruction early on to ensure greater achievement throughout their academic careers," said Joshua Vlasto, a spokesman for the governor. "New York's proposal will expand access to (early learning) programs, especially for the neediest children, and give them a solid foundation for lifelong learning."

Despite the importance of quality programs for young children, parents in New York currently have access to only limited information that enables them to compare programs.

The Office of Children & Family Services posts a searchable database of daycares that indicates basic information such as size and address, along with recent violations.

But there's no simple way for parents to compare the quality of programs.

"If I go to a movie, I'm going to open up the Buffalo News and look at your star rating system. That's for a \$12, two-hour investment," Block said. "And for a child's care, I have nowhere to go for information."

The state recently field tested a rating system called QUALITYstarsNY that would rate programs on a 100-point scale, as well as a five-star scale, based on several categories, such as family engagement, learning environment, and staff qualifications and experience.

Of the 192 programs in the field test - including 16 in Erie County - the average score was 45 points. None earned five stars, according to information posted on the program's website.

Most of the public schools and daycare centers earned three or four stars, while most smaller programs like those run out of a person's house earned either one or three stars.

State officials plan to expand the rating system to include all early learning programs in New York if they win the federal grant.

"I believe for us as a state, it's going to help us have a more uniform understanding and provide us with a format to look at what does quality mean, how do we rate it, and how do we make sure it's attainable by as many kids as possible," said Mary Lavin, principal of the Early Childhood Center at Windermere Elementary in Amherst and president of the state's association of prekindergarten administrators.

The state's application will also include plans for improving the quality of the programs that are available. Staff development would be central to improving programs.

"Parents should come to expect that only the highest-qualified teachers are in front of their children," Bennett said. "We know what works with young children. You've got to have a teacher who is eminently qualified from birth through grade two."

The state's Early Learning Challenge grant application also includes plans to implement a more uniform child assessment system that would evaluate the effectiveness of early learning programs.

And a centralized data system would enable state agencies to better coordinate services for young children. Those familiar with the federal grant program, as well as the state's application, say the proposed changes have the potential to make a significant difference in the long term.

"This is really a huge affirmation that to make sure every kid is college- and career-ready, we need to start with our youngest learners," Lavin said. "If we overlook that, closing the gap is nearly impossible."