

QUALITYstarsNY plan to rate early childhood sites would help kids and their parents

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Monday, October 04, 2010

Whether you're looking for a five-star hotel, a four-star restaurant or a "thumbs up" Saturday night movie, there's no shortage of reviews that rate their quality.

But if you're shopping for a preschool or daycare for your child, you're on your own. More likely than not, you'd rely on a word-of-mouth recommendation from a neighbor or friend.

That would change with QualityStarsNY, a system of giving "star" ratings to early childhood providers. It's being field-tested in 13 communities around the state, including Onondaga County, in sites that run the gamut from at-home care to Head Start to nursery schools to school-based pre-kindergarten.

New York state already regulates these programs. Parents can feel reasonably confident that if their child care site is licensed, their kids are being cared for in a safe environment. But licensing says very little about whether children are being well-prepared socially, emotionally and intellectually for the years of schooling ahead of them.

Peggy Liuzzi, executive director of Child Care Solutions, gives an example. State regulations on administering medicine to children fill nine pages, but regulations on curriculum fill just one page.

QualityStarsNY would start all licensed providers at one star. Then they could earn points based on the learning environment, parent engagement, staff qualifications, and leadership and management.

With a rating system in place, early childhood providers would see a path to improvement and would get the training and technical support to get there. Consumers would have a rational basis for choosing a provider, instead of a gut feeling or word of mouth.

But let's not lose sight of the bottom line: our children.

"Quality improvement leads to better outcomes," said Anne Mitchell, co-founder of the Alliance for Early Childhood Finance, who has studied star rating systems in other states. In the states with the longest track records, students are performing better in school, Mitchell said. In Onondaga County, the United Way's Success By Six program has been beating the drum for better early childhood education. QualityStars NY shows the way to improving the patchwork system we have. What remains is for the holders of the purse strings in Albany to realign current funding streams to take the system from the testing phase to the implementation phase.