

A Five-Star Plan for Preschool, Child Care

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NEW YORK - Movie-lovers look for a four-star review by a film critic. Gourmets search for five-star restaurants. Soon, parents seeking a good preschool or child-care center may have a similar quality-rating system.

Amparo Sadler, Central Islip, says her two-year-old granddaughter would benefit from such a system - like one that recently underwent field testing around New York - if it were to go into effect, as hoped, in 2012.

"It's a great idea to let people know where a pre-school is - what level they're at. I think it's a marvelous idea. I don't know why somebody didn't think about this years ago."

The concept has actually been under development for more than six years in New York and more than 20 other states. In New York, the voluntary quality rating and improvement system is called QUALITYstarsNY. Backers of the system are concerned that state funding for it is endangered, as Albany struggles with a \$9-billion deficit.

Mark Manas, a retired New York City schoolteacher, says not only would parents be helped by a standard rating system, but child-care providers would, too.

"It would lead schools and programs of lesser quality to aspire to raise themselves up and get into this program, in order to get some funding and attract more parents. If you have strong incentives and controls and regulations, then you'll be providing the right services. It's a win-win all around."

Last year, some 240 family child-care homes, Head Start programs, pre-Ks and child care centers in 13 New York communities took part in a field test of the rating system. One of its leading backers, Dana Friedman, compares it - in a broad sense - to rating restaurants.

"Essentially, we're trying to create a Zagat's for child care. Not only will there be indicators that programs can use to improve their quality, but there will also be more information for parents."

She says the results of the field testing are being evaluated and refinements are being considered. A 2012 rollout is anticipated, assuming the necessary funding falls into place.

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