

## Early Care and Education Choices, Quality, and Continuity for Low-Income Families

**Project Team:** This Child Care Policy Research Partnership is a collaboration among: Child Trends, University of Minnesota, Wilder Research, RESI of Towson University, Minnesota Department of Human Services, and Maryland State Department of Education.

**Grant or Contract Number:** #90YE0132

**Period of Funding:** 2010-2014

### Project Description.

Maryland and Minnesota are two states that have been leading innovations across early care and education policy and simultaneously investing in research and data infrastructure to ensure that their work is informed by evaluation and new evidence in the field. This project created a Maryland-Minnesota Child Care Policy Research Partnership, bringing together two states committed to examining critical issues in early care and education and using research findings to inform policy with an interdisciplinary team of researchers experienced in conducting studies on subsidy policy, quality improvement strategies, family experiences and children's well-being.

Three cross-state sub-studies serve as the foundation for the work of the Partnership:

**Sub-study 1:** How families seek and process information about early care and education

**Sub-study 2:** How families value and weigh different features of the quality of arrangements

**Sub-study 3:** Factors affecting and antecedents of child care stability/child care subsidy continuity

The studies were developed to build on existing research projects in both Maryland and Minnesota to maximize the investments made in development and data collection and to facilitate cross-state application of the learning.

### Research Questions

#### Sub-study 1:

- How do families describe the process of making decisions about early care and education? What are the milestones in this process?

- What family and community characteristics predict subsidy use and the type and quality of early care and education arrangements chosen?

#### Sub-study 2:

- What are parents' perceptions of family-sensitive caregiving, developmentally appropriate instructional practices, and practices that support children's social and emotional development? To what extent are aspects of quality important to parents?
- Which provider demographic characteristics distinguish those with a greater orientation towards family-sensitive caregiving, developmentally appropriate instructional practices, and practices that support children's social and emotional development?

#### Sub-study 3:

- What child, family, and community factors are associated with changes in arrangements? What factors are associated with stability or infrequent changes?
- While participating in the subsidy program, how long do subsidized arrangements last? How many subsidized arrangements do children have while on subsidy?

### Sample

Minnesota and Maryland samples for this study include families who:

- have at least one child age 5 or younger,
  - and are applicants to the state TANF program.
- The baseline sample in MN was 323 parents; the sample in MD was 289 parents.

### Methods

The sub-studies use mixed data collection methods and rigorous analytic techniques including:

- cognitive testing (to inform measures development);
- longitudinal surveys of low-income parents in Maryland (3 waves) and Minnesota (5 waves);
- in-depth interviews with parents and providers
- event history (or survival analysis) methods using administrative data on subsidy participation (4-5 years of data)
- linked child care subsidy administrative data with parent survey data (MN and MD) and kindergarten school readiness data (MD only)

### **Progress Update**

The Partnership project was completed in September 2014. Key findings from the project include information about:

- profiles of child care decision-making based on time taken, number of options considered and sources of information used
- predictors of child care changes, including how perceived quality and use of subsidies are linked to stability
- parent's perceptions of quality and the match between their "ideal" care and "actual" care
- use and stability of child care payment strategies (e.g., combining subsidies and out-of-pocket payments) over time and links between stability and perceived quality
- predictors of over- and under-reporting of subsidy use (comparing survey and administrative data)
- duration of child care subsidy spells
- exits and returns to subsidies

### **Implications for policy/practice**

Findings from the Partnership can inform discussion and decisions on policies related to child care subsidy redetermination, strategies to promote subsidy stability, consumer education, and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.

### **Implications for research**

The Partnership identified a set of survey items for assessing parents' perceptions of quality that can be

used in new research on quality. The Partnership also conducted a validity study using linked survey and administrative data to assess the impact of data quality on research about the subsidy program. The Partnership also differentiated between different payment strategies to provide a more nuanced picture of how parents pay for child care over time. On these and other topics, the Partnership can spark new work and dialogue among researchers about how best to capture the dynamics and complexities of early care and education in the lives of low-income families.

### **For more information:**

Information about the Partnership and links to products are available at:

<http://mdmnresearchpartnership.com/>

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