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Wisconsin Council on Children and Families Position on YoungStar

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) strongly supports the YoungStar proposal for a child care Quality Rating and Improvement (QRIS) system. We urge the Joint Committee on Finance to approve the basic YoungStar plan and budget set forth by the Department of Children and Families.

We appreciate the Department consulting with WCCF and the Early Learning Coalition as staff developed the proposal. We support a process for the Department to work with child care stakeholders on the details of the five-star system YoungStar system.

We believe that improving the quality of child care in Wisconsin is a top priority, and that setting quality benchmarks tied to incentives and resources to help child care programs improve is an effective approach. Wisconsin has been a national leader in child care and early education for decades, but in the last 7 years the budget for quality child care has declined to less than a third of what it was. We are falling behind other states in our efforts to support quality child care.

The administration's proposal calls for a system that advances and recognizes quality programs. In the wake of disturbing incidents of fraud, Wisconsin needs a quality assurance system to ensure that vulnerable children have the early learning experiences that prepare them for school and beyond. Wisconsin Shares needs to do more than just park kids in available child care slots.

We believe that the proposal for a child care quality improvement system is an essential next step to make sure tax dollars are spent wisely. We believe that the \$10 million proposed is necessary to establish an effective QRIS that will bring quality assurance measures to the state's \$400 million Wisconsin Shares investment.

There are strong reasons why a QRIS should be implemented in Wisconsin:

- 1. Quality Matters:** The low-income children served by the Wisconsin Shares system are at potentially high risk for difficulty in school and beyond. Extensive research demonstrates that investment in high-quality early learning programs is a sound investment, producing significant short- and long-term benefits, including achievement in school, reduced need for special education, lower crime rates, and higher earnings, with particularly strong results for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The QRIS proposal is an important step in the right direction.
- 2. Accountability:** The system will provide oversight and accountability that Wisconsin Shares funds are being used appropriately. The state should get a higher return on its investments by insisting on higher quality services. Higher payments will go to higher quality, and low quality will not be tolerated.

- 3. Information for Parents:** The proposed system will provide families with more information on which to base their decisions about where to send their child for care and early learning. With better information, families can make more informed choices.
- 4. Quality Improvement:** The system provides badly needed quality standards for the child care field to strive for, and provides essential support and incentives to help them get there.
- 5. Community benchmarks:** The quality standards established in the system will serve as benchmarks for communities and the state to measure the effectiveness of child care programs. The proposal includes a mechanism for local communities to develop public-private partnership to raise the quality bar for our children.

Information from Other States

We know that 20 states already have statewide QRIS programs for child care, and evaluations are encouraging:

- **Missouri:** A 2009 university study of Missouri's system found that programs with higher ratings were linked to children's gains in social/emotional and early literacy, and programs with low ratings actually had negative affects on child development.
- **North Carolina:** In the ten years from the establishment of North Carolina's QRIS, child care programs meeting high quality standards (4- or 5-star ratings) increased from 20 percent to 56 percent. Over 80 percent meet 3-star standards.
- **Pennsylvania:** A study of Pennsylvania's Keystone STARS system shows that it reversed a trend of declining quality in the state. Nearly 80 percent of Pennsylvania's child care centers now participate, and in 2008 over 25 percent of participating programs moved up at least one star level in the 4-star system. Since 2003 Pennsylvania's QRIS system has played a major role in doubling the percentage of children served in high-quality settings—from 20 percent to 40 percent.
- **Oklahoma:** An evaluation of Oklahoma's "Reaching for the Stars" program found a significant increase in the quality of programs serving subsidized low-income children.

We think Wisconsin should be state number 21.

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