

June 2011



better beginnings

EVERY CHILD DESERVES OUR BEST

UAMS

ARKANSAS DIRECTORS QUALITATIVE
SURVEY REPORT

Executive Summary

The UAMS Evaluation Team conducted a series of interviews with child care directors across the state to discover incentives and barriers to entering and progressing in Better Beginnings. Our team randomly selected participants and non-participants in Better Beginnings and successfully conducted 74 interviews across center-based programs, family child care programs, and school-age programs. We interviewed 41 participating and 33 non-participating providers.

Praise for Better Beginnings

A majority of directors, participating and non-participating, perceive a positive influence of Better Beginnings on their own program or on child care throughout the state. Non-participating directors, even when their knowledge was limited, held a positive perception of state-provided training and believe Better Beginnings will improve the quality of care in participating programs. Participating directors made positive comments about training, the responsiveness of Better Beginnings staff, and the helpfulness of Technical Assistance (TA) for quality efforts. **Participating directors reported benefits of Better Beginnings for their programs, staff, and families.** Financial benefits for programs included availability of grants, increased parent interest in rated programs and improved business practices. Directors also reported improved staff behavior, reduced staff turnover, having better qualified staff, and better staff-child interactions. Benefits for children were improved child behavior and increased opportunities for activities in the classroom; benefits for parents included tax credits and improved involvement.

Concerns and Difficulties with Better Beginnings

While perceived as positive overall, there were also concerns and difficulties with participating in Better Beginnings. **The most frequently reported concerns for non-participants were time requirements and general costs.** Other concerns related to the Environmental Rating Scales and learning environment requirements, perceptions of inadequacies of TA and training, and fairness and reliability of assessment. **Two-thirds of directors in Better Beginnings rated programs reported difficulty with the application and/or assessment process, most often expressing that the requirements were unclear or confusing.** Other difficulties expressed were related to the PAS/BAS, redundant or unnecessary paperwork, time required to complete the application, and difficulties with TAPP.

Suggestions for Better Beginnings

Both non-participating and participating providers were offered the opportunity to make suggestions for improving Better Beginnings. **For all providers, the most commonly suggested improvements were to increase funding and training availability.** In addition to the request for additional funding, participating providers recommended the timing of funding (for instance, prior to rating to get into the system) and payment of vouchers be changed (for example, to increase the number of vouchers or the rates given to providers). Both groups of directors requested greater availability of trainings: in timing, location, and content (usually specific to family child care and school-age providers). **Participating providers suggest greater clarity in the criteria used for ratings.** Nearly one-quarter of the participants commented about assessment process with requests to decrease the pressure related to assessment and improve assessor demeanor and reliability. Other requests were greater availability of TA, expansion of marketing efforts across the state, and more one-on-one support and encouragement.

Provider Uses of Financial Resources

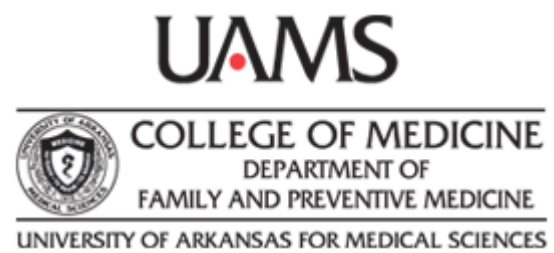
We asked participating directors how they were using Better Beginnings grants. **Grants were most commonly used for classroom materials or to pay for staff professional development training.** Other uses of grant money were playground equipment, college coursework, indoor facilities or furniture, CDA, bonuses for teachers, and other items such as insurance and child assessment tools.

The vast majority of directors of non-participating programs and participating programs stated that additional support would be helpful to them in considering application to Better Beginnings. **Funding for tangible physical needs related to the environment were most frequently reported by non-participating and participating providers:** classroom materials, playground improvements, and indoor facility and equipment improvements. **Directors from both groups of programs also reported the need for financial support to cover increased staff costs,** though directors in participating programs reported greater need in this area. Specifically, directors reported needing funding to cover training and formal education, as well as increased staff wages and benefits.

Recommendations

The director interviews point to potential areas where quality improvement efforts should be focused:

1. **Promote an equitable team approach.** Providers desire greater encouragement and synchronized assistance; they are grateful for opportunities to learn from and network with experienced child care providers and trainers. There are multiple efforts that could be undertaken to set an encouraging tone, help establish relationships between providers and staff, and dispel misconceptions about Better Beginnings: 1) highlight the experience of specialists, technical assistants, and assessors and expand accessibility to those staff through trainings and technical assistance; 2) engage representatives from all types of care in training and promotion efforts; and 3) establish reliability for the overall Better Beginnings rating.
2. **Simplify.** Directors consider the process overly time-consuming. Efforts should be made to use providers' time efficiently. Eliminating multiple verifications and observations of specific criteria and providing an online application are areas where time savings could be derived.
3. **Clarify.** Directors are unclear about multiple aspects of Better Beginnings. Broadly, there is confusion around how Better Beginnings relates to Quality Approval. More specifically, there is continued uncertainty about the process of being rated, and providers want to know why and how assessors make decisions around Better Beginnings and Environmental Ratings. It is also recommended that communication between stakeholders be improved to facilitate sharing of the most up-to-date and accurate information. Greater transparency in the rating process at the overall rating and at the individual assessment level (ERS/Administration Scales), as well as coordinated and timely dissemination of changes that impact providers is encouraged to prevent frustration and perceptions of inequities in the system.
4. **Enhance Financial and Marketing Supports.** Providers in Arkansas are clear in their need for additional financial resources, and interviews lead us to believe that lower funding availability at the highest level of Better Beginnings is a disincentive to progress. Reorganizing the way existing funding is allotted to programs across the levels, providing higher subsidy payments for higher-level programs that serve children at risk, and increasing funding aimed at program staff are financial incentives that could be investigated in Arkansas.



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