



Column For Week of: **March 30, 2009**

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Childcare Ratings Could Cause Hardship for Rural Communities

One of the issues that we are constantly working on in the Legislature is improving education. It is important that Missouri students receive a classroom experience that provides them with a solid foundation for the future. This session, much of the focus has been on early childhood education where children learn before they even enter an elementary school. A bill proposed this year would implement a quality rating system for these childcare facilities. While I agree with the principle of the bill, I have some serious concerns about how this specific legislation would negatively affect rural Missouri.

Senate Bill 4 would require the development of a quality rating system (QRS) for all licensed early childhood and before- and after-school programs in this state. The five-star system would rank providers based on factors including the education level of staff and the resources available at the facility. The quality rating would be available to parents and would also serve as a funding mechanism, allowing providers with better ratings to receive higher funding.

While I am supportive of helping Missouri families find safe, quality early-childhood programs for their children, I also understand that the childcare options available in rural areas are not the same as those available in urban and suburban areas. Many parents in our communities rely on small operations that do their best to make sure that the children that come through their doors get a quality experience. These facilities serve low-

to middle-income families and meet the licensing guidelines outlined by the state. I am concerned that these licensed providers could be put in an unfair situation by QRS.

I have received calls from childcare providers throughout the 16th District. Some of the larger facilities with more resources are in favor of the system. However, smaller facilities, many of which charge less than the state average for childcare, have contacted me with concerns that QRS would require them to make changes that would be hard to afford. These changes would require them to raise their rates—a move that would hurt the children they are working to serve and teach. Worse yet, these providers might have to close their doors rather than receive an unfavorable rating that would unfairly label their facility as sub-standard because of an unavailability of staff or affordable resources in the area.

With children throughout the state sitting on waiting lists in order to start at licensed facilities in their area, it is hard for me to support a measure that could lessen the number of licensed providers available to Missouri families. If there were enough facilities to meet the present need in our area, my decision on this legislation could be different, but that is not yet the case. I will work to ensure that these resources are available to children throughout Missouri, that we continue to hold facilities in this state to the high standards already in place, and that the childcare facilities in our areas are treated fairly.

Contact Me

As always, I appreciate hearing your comments, opinions and concerns. Please feel free to call me in Jefferson City at (573) 751-2108. You can also write to the address listed below.

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