

**Interviews
by
Carole Cannon
and
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**Report
by
Carole Cannon**

Introduction

It's not a profession – it's your soul. Either you love this or you don't. –

Daycare Center Director

The mini astronauts sat at a semi-circle of a table strapped into their seats, waiting to be blasted into space. Colors and shapes splashed across the walls, numbers and letters chased each other across the floor, and as sunlight spilled into the window, one of the little astronauts squealed, and another joined in, and another...

Actually, these children were strapped into the latest in child care furniture. Their bodies were suspended through holes cut into the table that allowed them to play in one space so their two instructors could keep up with them a little more easily.

In the next room, a few of their younger counterparts slept while a few played in beds as others whined softly. This daycare center was among those that Professional Associates, Inc. visited over a two-month period to capture the stories of child care directors in the East Central Planning and Development District – the area where the state's STEP program was piloted in the fall of 2006.

Professional Associates had the challenge of evaluating the impact of the STEP program for the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative. We asked participating directors detailed questions about their centers and their programs. PAI initially sent out surveys to 80 child care providers. Forty-two directors returned the surveys. From the 42, PAI conducted 20 in-depth interviews with directors, selected to reflect the diversity of the district.

We interviewed Hispanic daycare providers, American Indian child care providers, as well as African-American and white directors. We interviewed female and male directors, husband/wife team directors and directors of small centers, church-based centers, large centers and those located at schools. We interviewed 10 directors who are participating in the STEP program and 10 non participants.

(As we tell their stories, we have changed directors' names to protect their privacy.)

Centers were housed in large shabby buildings or tucked into the corners of churches or nestled in the hills of northeast Mississippi. One was located in a building shaped like two igloos while one was housed in a graceful private school with a sprawling green lawn on a rural road. Some had security cameras and large fenced-in play grounds. Lining the hallways of most were strollers with multiple seats to take little ones for walks. Most were brightly painted and all were filled with light.

Children's laughter ringing out in the crisp fall air as they played on a playground, the wailing of a child who has just had a toy snatched away or the recitation of a group of

kids counting or yelling their “A! B! Cs!” make the music of possibility, compose the score for each community’s success probability.

Directors feel the weight of their responsibility in helping to shape their communities’ future by the way they provide child care today. “I want to do whatever I can to help these kids grow academically, socially and spiritually,” said Joanna, co-director with her husband of two centers in a city in east Mississippi, “so they can be the best people they can be.”

Centers were as different as the people who ran them. Most of them had integrated student bodies and staffs. Some reflected the school’s philosophy of parenting vs. teaching. Some tilted more toward parenting while others stressed teaching. Some tried to balance both. Where these directors came down on the issue of parenting vs. teaching sometimes lined up with what they thought of the STEP program --- whether they participated in it or not.

But the issue directors raised most often was money. Whether directors were participating in the STEP program or not, they said *the* key to increasing the quality of child care in Mississippi is more funding.

“If we had the money,” said Shandra, a director and co-owner with her husband of two centers, “there is so much we could do.”

A Question of Clarity

Trudy McNair has been in the daycare business for more than 25 years. She now keeps the children of the children she kept a generation ago. She doesn’t have to advertise; almost everyone knows the old home that houses her center, almost everyone in this east Mississippi town knows “Miz Mac.”

Trudy was curious about the STEP program. She thought she would become involved and see what it had to offer. She said she enrolled about three years ago. The problem with what she said is that the program wasn’t piloted until 2006. Trudy said she had not been helped like some of the other child care providers in STEP. She said she had been given some supplies and that “some young women had dropped by” her center periodically, but she somehow felt as if she had a second class designation in the program. “I wasn’t given the same standing that others were,” Trudy said, “but that’s fine.”

The help that Trudy said another director received was actually money from the Leaders in Literacy program. Trudy was mixing up several programs and wasn’t really sure what the STEP program was.

The director Trudy referred to was Tessie, a young woman who had worked for her before starting her own child care business. Tessie also found the STEP experience confusing. She said that people kept coming from everywhere, but no one knew where they were from – Mississippi State University or the Barksdale Foundation or STEP. She said two people inadvertently evaluated the same room at her center while others kept asking the employees questions they should have asked her.

Any new program has its glitches, but the STEP program seems to have particular problems with clarity. A number of the directors said they were confused about some parts of the process. Karon, co-director of a church-based center in a rural town, said she thought all licensed child care providers had to participate in the program while another said she thought that enrolling in the program automatically meant that centers would receive some funding.

Some directors said they were confused about why they didn't reach the level they attempted to reach. Others said they did not understand verbal explanations about why they did not achieve higher levels, although they said letters made it clearer.

Some were not clear as to whether they had actually moved to the next level. They said they were expecting to receive some certificate or some official documentation confirming their ranking.

One director seemed to have particular problems. She said she couldn't get information about the different levels. Robbie said her paperwork that proved she qualified for the next step was lost.

Even when changes are made to the program, all the directors seemed not to be notified. For instance, Joanna said she and her husband had complained about the education requirements. She said because they had such a high turnover rate for teachers who worked with infants that they would never be able to move to the next level at their infant center. They said people from the STEP program told them they would prorate the hours so that new staff that had not had time to get the 15 required hours would not keep the center from moving to the next level.

It would seem that that kind of information would be passed on to all directors, some of whom might be having the same problem. But a month after we interviewed Joanna, Karon raised the same issue.

An important issue that some directors seem to be left in the dark about is that increased participation in the STEP program would ultimately mean that fewer certificates will be available to families since no additional money is going to be put into the voucher pot. Mari, a director of a large center in a rural town, said people from the STEP program told directors this at one of the meetings she attended, and that she didn't "think it was fair." Another director said she didn't know that the number of certificates would shrink as the number of centers receiving higher reimbursement increases. "That would make me uncomfortable," she said.

One director wrote on her survey what others expressed about clarity: “The program needs more up-front planning. It’s almost impossible to create this wonderful daycare without the planning...Lack of knowledge causes confusion, disorganization, loss of focus --- which leads to giving up, too much stress with little support to keep motivation going...How do we get started? What’s next?”

Participating Providers

What factors influenced your decision to participate in MCCQSS?

“I was burnt out on the old curriculum,” Tessie said. “I wanted something new.”

Said Daphne, another director in the same city: “I wanted to raise the level of professionalism of my center.”

Some child care directors said they enrolled because they thought the program would help them improve their center in a number of ways. They said it would help get their staff better trained and that they could find out what they were doing wrong and right.

One child care provider for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, for instance, said she wanted to see how her center compared to other Choctaw centers, as well as other centers across the state. Some said the possibility of more money wasn’t an issue, while others felt the STEP program was a Sophie’s choice. They felt they were in such a financial strain, they had no choice but to enroll in the program. But even those who admitted needing the additional funds said they weren’t sure the amount of money they would receive would be worth the hoops they had to jump through to get it.

For example, one provider who has a large center and a large staff that is unhappy about having to participate in the STEP program said she might see a \$300 to \$500 increase per month when she starts to get the money from having qualified for STEP 2. “That’s not enough to do that much,” said Mari.

According to directors, the increase from Level 1 to Level 2 provides a 7 percent increase; from Level 2 to Level 3 provides a 10 percent increase; from Level 3 to Level 4 provides a 15 percent increase; and from Level 4 to Level 5 provides a 25 percent increase. Parents’ co-pay is subtracted from the amount of the certificate, and the centers are reimbursed the balance, in addition to the percent that corresponds to their level.

Other directors said they could use participating in the STEP program to distinguish themselves from centers that weren’t participating. One director said it was a good “public relations tool”; another said that people from STEP had told her being in the program would give her “bragging rights”, and that parents would know her center was working to provide quality care, as opposed to centers that might not be.

Karon, whose center was the only licensed center in her small rural town, said she isn't comfortable with the idea of dangling participation in the STEP program as an indicator of the quality of a center, however.

What level do you aspire for and how did you make that decision?

A few providers said they planned to shoot for Level 5, but most said they thought Level 3 would be the highest level they could achieve. The primary reason they gave for not being able to move beyond Level 3 was education – both the money and the motivation it would take for their staff to achieve the educational level to qualify for Level 5. As might be expected, the more educated a director and or his or her staff was, the more likely she/he was to believe their centers could achieve Level 5. For example, one director who has a Bachelor's degree and whose daughter is getting her Bachelor's degree, said her daughter plans to join her in opening a second daycare center that she hopes will provide child care 24 hours a day. She was confident she could reach Level 5.

May we discuss the following areas of your center's operation?

- **Administrative Policies**

Most directors said administrative policies needed only to be tweaked, but that even the tweaking involved burdensome paperwork. Directors said they found documenting everything time-consuming, particularly since they are overworked already. Some said they didn't have the staff to get out regular newsletters, while others said they thought they were asked to keep too many folders and document too much.

Larger staffs seem to be able to accommodate paperwork more easily, but most directors said they would prefer to keep it to a minimum.

- **Professional Development**

Some directors used their participation in the STEP program as a way to motivate their staff to become better educated. Most of their staff members attended free training programs provided by the state or by universities. But a few directors say staff members -- particularly older ones -- were not happy about having to get additional training.

One director said would like to try to reach Level 5, but she would have to get a Bachelor's degree, and she didn't know when she could attend school because she put in so many hours at her center.

Karon has a couple of retired teachers on her staff whom she said believe they are too old to return to school. She said she hopes she and her co-director can inspire their staff by example. At the time of the interview, both were about to take their CDA exams.

But they had both been disappointed with the CDA class. “We didn’t even have a textbook,” she said. “And we didn’t find out there was a textbook until three classes before the course ended.”

Karon said that the instructor did not tell them there was a textbook available. She said she found out when a member of the church committee that oversees their center asked to look at their textbook. The committee member has an extensive background in early childhood education, Karon said, and was surprised the course was being taught without a book. Her co-director found the book on line and they bought it for \$35. “We didn’t have it but a few weeks before our test was scheduled. I think we should have been told about the book even if it wasn’t provided.”

Karon said she would not have been ready for the CDA exam if she had not had such a great experience getting her OCY training. She said the quality of training needs to be addressed. She said it is frustrating when employees have to pay for courses that aren’t helpful, often after commuting long distances to take them.

Most directors are worried about the labor pool. They say they can’t find and retain the quality of staff they need. Staff is often unstable, particularly among those hired to work with younger kids. One director wrote in her survey: “The major thing that stands in the way for our center to provide higher quality child care is finding adequate workers. So many people want to work at a child care center, but they quickly learn it is not just babysitting. If you do find qualified staff (someone with training or a degree in early childhood education), it is very hard to pay them an adequate salary. I have found that in order to keep your good employees, you must keep them happy and sometimes that is financially impossible.”

Another director wrote: “With most daycares paying minimum wage, you can sometimes only reach staff off the street. Therefore, it becomes even more difficult to be selective.”

Low pay and no benefits make it difficult for directors to motivate their staffs, they said, including convincing them to get additional training or more education.

Some directors said that finding educational and training opportunities in their area is challenging. One director said her town was “geographically challenged,” and that it is difficult for her staff to physically go back to school because training requires such a long commute. And some training is only offered during the day when some directors say they can’t spare their staffs.

- **The Learning Environment**

Some directors said they had been helped a lot in this area; others said they were doing well already. Most of the required changes included adding particular items, like sand and water tables and rugs with numbers and alphabets or creating a dedicated space for kids to learn individually. Other directors said they added items like books about people from various backgrounds and dolls that reflect diversity in cultures.

- **Parent Involvement**

Most directors reported that it was difficult to get time with parents. Some said the required yearly parent conferences might keep them from achieving a level. Some said that parents did not participate in anything except holiday dinners and programs where their kids performed. Most said parents didn't want to attend special parent nights where they would just discuss a child's progress. Directors said they gave parents notes and spoke to them as they picked up or dropped off their children. Some directors said parents didn't help kids with homework and acted as if the centers were babysitting services.

Some directors said they were pleased with their parents. They said were supportive, willing to volunteer and even helped the center raise funds.

- **Evaluation**

Most directors had some way of evaluating their children and staff. Most evaluations were built-in to their curriculum. Most centers evaluated students at least once a year while a few tested them twice. Most teachers were evaluated at least once a year during a one-on-one session.

But a few directors said they have informal talks with their staff about improvements they need to make. Karon, a co-director at a small center, said she knows she should do a more formal review, but just hasn't put one in place.

Do you currently have a quality improvement plan; what are the major items in that plan?

Directors had quality improvement plans that addressed issues that STEP evaluators told them needed correcting, along with other items they had planned to change even before they started participating in the program. Items on the plan included making playgrounds safer, adding shelves, putting down rugs and buying tables, puzzles and books.

Has an Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) ever been completed on your center? If so, when and what were the findings? Were all quality improvements addressed? If not, why?

Some directors did not provide us with scores, either because they didn't have them at their fingertips during the interview or couldn't find them and didn't remember them. The scores we obtained ranged from 2.5 to 5.75.

How comfortable do you feel about your ability to attain and maintain all the requirements of MCCQSS?

All of the directors said they felt *very* confident they could maintain the level they had achieved or were shooting for – even those few who said they would try to reach the Level 5. But their confidence might be built on the fact that most directors said they were only going to try to reach Level 3.

How are you handling the up-front costs associated with improving quality?

In handling up-front costs, most directors got resourceful. It was helpful when a director or his or her spouse has special skills, like carpentry. One couple said they have saved several thousand dollars by building shelves themselves. They said they even rescued some carpet from a car accident to wrap shelves for their center's toddler room.

Other directors said husbands have done some of the required work on their center's structures. Others say they barter with licensed contractor friends to do work for them. Those who had had substantial work done said they would have had to struggle financially if they had not had someone to do the work at cost or at least at a cut rate. The husband and wife directors who did much of their needed work themselves said they would have had to take out a loan if they had had to pay for the work.

One director did borrow \$18,000 to build a roof and add a room to her center that STEP evaluators said she needed. She said she also had to help employees with expenses associated with getting training, and that she couldn't afford it. She dropped out of the STEP program and was struggling financially. At one point in the interview, she broke down and cried while she talked about her plight.

But others, like centers located in churches and those that are part of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, have major work paid for by their church and their tribe.

What specific costs have you incurred in addressing quality issues?

Costs that centers incurred ranged from \$100 to over \$5,000. Most centers fell somewhere in between. Most have had to build shelves, work on playgrounds, paint, create or improve learning centers. Some have purchased puzzles and books and rugs. One center will have to build a \$2,000 canopy to shade its playground.

Non Participants

What factors influenced your decision to not participate in MCCQSS?

Most directors said the amount of up-front money they would have had to spend prohibited them from participating. One director had planned to participate in the program when she filled out PAI's survey, but by the time we conducted an in-depth interview, she had decided not to enroll. She said when STEP evaluators told her all the items she needed to purchase and the repairs she needed to make, she just didn't have the money to participate. "We just can't afford it," said Letti. "I don't even take a salary myself, and we're just barely scraping by."

Paperwork was another reason non participants gave for not enrolling in STEP. Two directors said they would love to get into the program because they thought it would be beneficial. Both had attended informational meetings, but decided they could not possibly keep up with the required paperwork. "It's to the point," said Aretha, "that I can't put one more thing on my plate. But I would love to have professionals come in here and evaluate us."

Fredrick owned a center in a larger city. He wants to expand to provide child care 24 hours a day, and he says he needs the help he thinks STEP could provide. He attended a couple of meetings, "but just haven't had the time to pull together all the stuff I need to pull together to kick it off."

But most non participants said participating would be too restrictive, that they didn't need anybody telling them what to do. They said the state's licensing requirements are enough. Even those who say they could use the money that participating in the program could potentially bring thought their autonomy was more important.

"I wouldn't want any more rules," said Layla, co-director with her husband of a small-town center, "and I know Rob wouldn't. He kinda has his own way of doing things and I'm not sure how well they would fit."

Child care providers who have been in the business for decades are very clear about wanting to do things their way, not the state's way. "I have a way of doing things," Trudy said, "and my employees can tell you, they just about have to do things Miz Mac's way."

Some thought programs like STEP put too much emphasis on academics. Trudy said kids need parenting, often because their parents don't have time to do it. She now keeps the children of some of the parents she kept when they were children. She said these children need stroking and holding and hugging and not so much math and science. She said there will be time to compete when they get to school.

Another daycare owner agrees. Willow said her staff has to do a lot of parenting because parents these days are too busy. She pushes her children academically, she said, but likes having the freedom to choose what her directors and teachers do.

Most non participants also thought they were already doing a good job. Willow was thrilled when an attorney parent and her children's maternal and paternal grandparents visited all the centers in the area and selected hers. "She told me I was hands down the best center in town."

That seems to be all the validation Willow needs. She feels that she is providing the community a service, and that she has earned a reputation for doing it well. She is not looking for more rules. "It's a daycare center," she said, "not a military school."

What would be required in order for you to participate?

Most directors said up-front money would be required.

Do you currently have a quality improvement plan and what are the major items on that plan?

Most non participants did not have a formal plan; they made what they thought were necessary improvements, based on experience, discussions with staff or training.

Has an Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) ever been completed on your center? If so, when and what were the findings? Were all of the quality improvements addressed? If not, why?

None of the non participants have had an ERS recently, if ever.

We asked providers what their observations regarding quality improvement in child care in Mississippi were, and all 20 of them said the most significant negative impact on quality daycare is unlicensed homes. And 18 of them said the key to enhancing quality child care is providing centers with more money.

It's A Jungle Out There

When it happened, people in the small rural town were angry, saddened, incredulous. They couldn't believe something like this could happen. They couldn't believe someone would let something like this happen. Some people were moved to action.

"That's why we started this daycare center at the church," said Cassandra, the director, who also is a minister. "We never wanted anything like this to ever happen again. Someone keeping a child at a home stuck a bottle in its mouth and left it in a swing. The baby strangled to death."

Having a child die is daycare providers' worst nightmare. This child's death occurred in an unlicensed home. And while death is certainly rare, most of the directors we interviewed were so concerned about what could happen to some children that they said the single biggest deterrent to increasing quality child care in Mississippi is unlicensed homes. Directors were passionate about the fact that they believed children could be in physical danger – whether from unsafe conditions or lack of good nutrition or in jeopardy academically --- because they felt these unregulated homes were at best babysitting services and at worst – they didn't know what.

Providers generally made a distinction between homes where people kept a few kids who were related to them and homes that kept larger numbers of unrelated children. Directors said they got their information from parents who had either left their children in one of these homes, knew parents who had or explored that possibility themselves.

In the town where the child strangled, unlicensed daycare is pervasive, according to Cassandra, largely, she says because there are too few licensed centers. "We have a waiting list," she said. "We have a small center; we can only serve so many families. There is definitely a need here for more quality daycare centers."

Karon, a co-director of a center in a town where her church-based daycare center is the only licensed provider, called one unlicensed home "the Jungle." She said she has been told by parents that at least 30 kids stay at the home at any given time and that they don't receive the best care.

"This is not sour grapes because I'm worried about competition," said Karon. "I would love to have more licensed daycare centers. We need them. But we don't need people out here doing whatever they want to do."

The owner of "the Jungle" used to have a licensed day care, said Karon, who has been in the business for more than two decades. She said she and her co-director hear stories about kids being spanked at "the Jungle," regularly fed bologna sandwiches, and that they are being taught nothing whatsoever. Karon said she has asked parents why they would leave their kids at such a place and was told because it costs \$40 a week and that is all they can afford.

Several parents have told her they wanted to bring their older children to her center, Karon said, but that "the Jungle" owner has invoked a rule that parents could only leave their kids with her if they leave all of their children there. If this rule exists, it is especially troubling, she said, because it seems to target her center, which does not take infants. "It's a matter of space," said Karon. "The church doesn't have the room."

Parents who were going to scrape together the money to send their older children to a more structured program that could ready them for school could not do that if they could not afford to place their younger children at the licensed center, as well, Karon said. "What are these parents supposed to do?"

Letti, a director in a larger town said she, too, is concerned for the safety of the children in unlicensed homes. She said that one parent who inquired about fees at her center complained that her child, whom she left at an unlicensed home, was so dirty when she picked her up each day that her clothes were black. This center also charges \$40 a week, Letti has been told by parents, some of whom said they couldn't afford to pay any more.

Shandra, a director in a smaller town, was extremely upset about unlicensed homes. She and her husband own a center in the East Central Planning and Development District, but they also own one in neighboring Rankin County. Shandra has run centers for the past 11 years, and says that the problem with unlicensed homes is troublesome in both areas.

More than once she and her husband have paid for their employees' OCY training and had them quit and start unlicensed daycare centers, Shandra said. "We don't do that any more."

Directors say these centers undercut their fees by as much as half and that some parents had to use them because they were all they could afford. These directors say they are angry and confused about why nothing has been done about these centers. They say they know some of them have been reported to the Mississippi State Department of Health, the state agency that licenses daycare centers.

Karon said the licensing specialist who inspects her center had told her there was nothing the state could really do. She said she was told that the Mississippi State Department of Health can't force unlicensed home owners to even let them in, and that the department is restricted to urging these providers to apply for a license.

Karon and others see these homes almost as part of a dual system – separate and unequal. She thinks it's ridiculous that the health department cites her for what she feels are insignificant items, but lets unlicensed centers be run with impunity.

"If they can come into my center -- where we're trying our best to feed our kids healthy meals and get them ready for school -- and point out a cobweb in a corner of my ceiling, they could spend some time on these unlicensed homes," she said.

Shandra agrees. "I just don't understand why they aren't penalized," she said. "If we're trying to do what we're supposed to do, but they don't have to, they won't. If all the health department does is knock on the door and tell them, 'you need a license,' they're not going to get a license."

Since Professional Associates' goal was to gather information about the directors' perception of daycare in the state, we did not seek to verify independently the stories they said parents shared with them. All of those who shared stories were reluctant to give the names of unlicensed center owners and we, of course, did not push.

PAI did, however, interview officials with the Mississippi State Department of Health about unlicensed homes. Officials said that a home has to apply for licensure if it keeps more than five unrelated children. They say they do get complaints about unlicensed homes and do visit them, but they don't keep records of the numbers of calls they receive so they don't know how pervasive unlicensed child care is.

If someone at an unlicensed home did not let MSDH officials in, they could call law enforcement to gain entrance, officials said. Unlicensed homes are given information about applying for licensure and meeting state guidelines, but whether they are fined is decided on a case by case basis, officials said.

Given this information, it is unclear how effective the health department is at attempting to enforce licensure guidelines or even in following up on reports of unlicensed homes. But it is clear that directors believe them to be a severe problem. Beyond the physical danger, one director of a large center in a rural town says she also is concerned that unlicensed centers don't do anything to prepare children for school. Mari said she has had parents to pull their children from her center after she has raised her fees and placed them in unlicensed homes.

"Once they see that their children are just being babysat and that they're not going to be ready to compete once they go to school," she said, "almost 80 percent of them bring them back here if they can."

Some directors say that the familial support families have been able to depend on in the past is no longer available for some. Grandparents who used to keep kids are now working longer themselves, so relative care might not be an option. This, along with poor wages -- particularly in rural areas where jobs are scarce, puts some parents in the position of having to leave their children in less than ideal situations. Directors say infants and younger children are particularly at risk because some licensed centers don't take the youngest children and others have long waiting lists.

Willow, a director at a center in a small town, said she has had children who were crack babies with special needs. Some of them live with grandparents who are struggling to keep them in daycare. "If they have to pull them out, where will they go, back to parents who are doing drugs?"

Directors believe the state needs to aggressively address what they see as a crucial issue. Said Letti: "There should be consequences for them that don't get their licenses."

We Need Money

Letti, a director in a medium-sized city, has to try to explain to some of her children why they don't have the same supplies others kids have. She uses the ABECCA curriculum, but says she can only provide the workbooks for students whose parents can

afford to buy them for \$45 a year. “Right now, I only have two students with the workbooks.”

Letti said that although she creates comparable worksheets for the other students, some of the older kids ask why they don’t have the workbook. She said she tries to explain that their parents can’t afford them. “Sometimes that works and sometimes it don’t,” she said. “Some of them still have that look on their face – like why can’t I have that? It breaks my heart.”

Ninety percent of the directors said that money is the number one thing needed to improve the quality of child care in the state. More money could be used to do everything from raise pay for employees and provide benefits to expand centers to provide child care 24 hours a day.

Letti said she had looked for grants and even had an acquaintance who was familiar with education grants helping her look for money. “He tells me there’s no money out there.”

Shandra, a director who owns two centers said she also is disappointed that she hasn’t been able to find any grants. “We got a grant back in 2000-2001,” she said. “We were able to do a lot of things for our centers. We bought supplies and fixed a roof. But I haven’t been able to find anything recently.”

For one director whose daycare center is part of a private school she and her husband run, money is always a concern. Aretha says that a donor helps her program tremendously by donating \$650 a month. “It might not seem like much, but I can use it for anything I want.”

Some centers have fundraisers, selling everything from Krispy Kreme donuts to cakes, while others say fundraisers haven’t worked for them.

Most child care providers say they are reluctant to raise rates even though they need money. In fact, few of them report doing so in the past few years. They say they are mindful that the clientele they serve often can’t afford higher rates, and they try to consider that.

But Aretha points out that people seem to find the money to spend on the things they want to spend it on, and believes parents who can afford to pay for child care should. “It hurts my feelings,” she said “when parents say they’re going to have to pull their child because we raised our rates when they find the money to buy these big SUVs and get their hair and nails done. But they don’t want to pay a few more dollars a week for their child.”

A major concern among all directors is attracting and keeping the quality of staff they need because they can’t afford to pay competitive salaries. Some of them don’t even

take salaries themselves. Pay for teachers range from minimum wage to \$11 an hour. Only the two Choctaw child care centers offer employees benefits.

Mari said she feels horrible that she can't pay her staff well, especially since she offers no benefits. "I try to do nice things for them – like let them off for personal days, and things like that, but that's not the same as having benefits."

She said that one of her teachers drives 100 miles a day to work with her one-year olds, and that she is a phenomenal teacher. "I'd put her one-year-olds up against my other three-year-olds any day," she said. But she can only afford to pay this miracle worker \$7 an hour. "She left me once," Mari said, "but she came back."

Mari is one of a few directors who acknowledges that a main reason she considered enrolling in the STEP program was because of the money. She said she is in a tight financial spot. Her husband and son, who did repairs and other work for the center, have both been deployed. She said she now has to pay for most of the work they could do for free. She usually has a number of children on the certificate program, but this year, seven were dropped from the program. One family didn't get their paperwork in, even though they've been in the program for years. Mari said. "They have four kids, and I haven't gotten a penny since October."

Another of her families with three kids also failed to get their certificates renewed. Mari said she has sometimes been able to intervene when families are late with paperwork, but this year workers who renew certificates took a hard line.

While most directors say the certificate program has served them well, one director said she lost 30 children who had certificates this year. "We're struggling," said Shandra, the director and owner. "We're thinking about downsizing."

In all 30 cases, parents did not get their paperwork in on time, Shandra said. In the past, she and her husband have helped parents to complete their paper work and have constantly stayed on them to get it turned in on time. This year, she said they asked parents to take on more responsibility, and 30 were not approved for vouchers. Shandra said the fact that she asked parents to do more for themselves was only part of the reason she lost so many students. "I've just got some slothful parents," she said.

Another director said she always has at least one deadbeat parent each year. Willow said she has to write off large amounts of money each year for families that don't pay. At the end of 2006, she said one family owed her \$1,800. She is reluctant to dismiss kids from her program because of money because she said it would be bad for the center's reputation. The word that would get out into the community would be that she threw a kid out – not that the family owed money.

But every now and then, a parent honors a financial obligation that Willow had written off. "One parent called me and said she knew she owed me money, but that she

didn't have transportation and couldn't bring it to me," Willow recalled. "She said I could come and get it, and she told me where she was. She gave me \$750. I was so surprised. But that's the exception."

One non participant wrote on her survey: "We try to help lower income families. Our fee is *very* low. By doing this, we do not have a lot of money to spend on building our centers – such as art, sand and water (tables), laminating machines.

But Karon said directors know going in that this is not a money-making business. "If you're counting your money up at the end of the month, thinking you might come out ahead," she said, "you won't; you might not even break even."

Despite the fact that directors know what a difficult business providing child care is, a few of them want their children or relatives to follow them into it. Layla said she is already grooming her junior-high-school-aged daughters. Shelia said her daughter, a senior in college, plans to come into the business with her. Eventually, they plan to offer child care 24 hours a day. Another director, Fredrick, is trying to convince his nieces to join him in his business. He also wants to provide child care 24 hours a day.

"You can't just trust anybody with kids – especially if you keep them overnight. But with your family --- it's different. Plus, I'm trying to get them to invest in a family-owned business.

A Model for Success?

Photographs celebrating Choctaw culture line the walls. Little ones are dressed in Choctaw regalia or pose in pageant clothes or march in parades on American Indian Day. Signs identifying items are posted in both English and Choctaw --- water fountain, *oka ayohko*.

This center was one of two that PAI visited that are under the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Most of the staff of both centers is fluent in English and Choctaw. The tribe wants its children to be steeped in Choctaw culture, but confident in their American heritage.

The directors of the two Choctaw centers were the only two of 20 directors who did not mention money as a major issue for their child care centers. These programs are funded by the tribe, and they seem to have more access to resources than any of the other centers. They could well be a model for the rest of Mississippi's centers to emulate.

Joyce, the director at one of the Choctaw centers, decided to participate in the STEP program because she wanted to compare her center, not only with the other seven Choctaw centers in the state, but with all centers across the state. This center is a Level 2, but Joyce said she only has a few items to tweak before it should qualify for Level 3. "I think we're doing a good job," she said, "but there's always room for improvement."

Housed in a brick building with shiny floors and lots of windows, the center is near the Community Gym. The building features a parent room for conferences with teachers or for luncheons. There also is a large kitchen and rooms for infants, toddlers and older children.

Joyce said her staff is usually stable. Everyone at least has a GED while three staff members have associate degrees. Three teachers began a new program this fall offered by Jackson State University. They will be working toward their Bachelor's degrees afternoons and nights.

Starting pay at this center is \$9 an hour. Each additional degree brings a 3% increase in pay. Most teachers at this center currently make \$11 an hour. Each year employees are given a 3% to 5% cost-of-living raise, subject to approval by the tribe.

Substitutes are paid \$6.45 an hour – slightly more than the \$6 entry level jobs at area casinos, Joyce said. The staff has several paid holidays, health and dental insurance and a 401K plan that kicks in after a year of employment.

Most teachers are older here; daycare work usually attracts older workers, Joyce said. "Younger people just aren't that interested," she said. "They can go to the casinos and get a waitress job that pays \$8 an hour plus tips."

But child care also attracts people who want more than a job. "I used to work at the casino, but this opportunity fell into my lap," Joyce said. "The more I worked here, the more I liked it."

Joyce observes her teachers each month and evaluates them twice a year at the same time that children are evaluated.

The biggest problem she has is getting parents involved, she said. "We're working on that," she said. While they will attend dinners and programs, they don't show for parents' meetings, she said. "They say they don't have transportation, but we provide transportation."

Perhaps the most significant difference between Choctaw centers and other child care programs is that the staffs certify parents on site. The fee is \$40 per week on a sliding fee scale; whatever parents don't pay is refunded to the center. A parent has 30 days to notify the center of a change in financial status. If a parent becomes unemployed, she/he has 60 days to find a job or come up with the entire \$40 each week. If they can't pay, the child is dismissed.

Joyce believes the rules are fair. "There are enough jobs around here that they can find one in 60 days; if they don't, then they don't need a place to leave their child."

Like the other Choctaw daycare center PAI visited, this one displays photographs of its children celebrating their culture. Lila, its director, has been with the center for 33 years. She also directs the Head Start program, with which the child care center shares a building.

Lila started volunteering at the center when her children attended. Then she applied for and got a teacher's aid position, and later became a teacher. Lila was always being tapped to be interim director, she said, "so they started telling me I should apply." She became director in 1980, and after a long run, plans to retire in five years. "I lobbied for this building, and now that I got us into it, I can start thinking about retiring," she said.

The center is located next to a health care center and has two playgrounds – one for younger kids, the other for older ones. Lila monitors every room and hallway on the security screen that sits right in front of her desk. Even when she has a brief conversation with her assistant – she switches to Choctaw – she never stops looking at the screen, constantly changing the images so she can get a closer look from different perspectives.

This center also is a Level 2, but Lila says she sees no reason why it can't reach Level 5. "We were shooting for five, but we didn't get it," she said.

Now, Lila says she will just take it one level at a time. She was motivated to enroll in the STEP program to improve the quality of her center, she said. She particularly wanted to motivate her staff. She said STEP evaluators said the staff has to work on some hygiene issues like washing their hands before they put out snacks and letting kids wash their hands after they came in from outside. They also must stop giving the children copies so often and encourage them to create art themselves.

Here, starting pay is \$7 or \$8 an hour depending on a teacher's experience; employees receive dental and health insurance, as well as a 401K plan after a year of employment. Teachers here also receive merit pay, Joyce said.

Lila said her center had to budget more than \$5,000 to qualify for STEP 2. They had to buy rugs, diaper changing tables, puzzles, books and shelves. The most expensive item was a canopy to shade one of the playgrounds.

Each center has a budget, and has to submit its expenses to the tribe for approval. If the tribe's money is tight, then some items might not be approved. But this year, Lila said she expects to get everything she has requested.

The tribal centers have cultural curriculums with built-in evaluations. They keep track of students' performances to make sure they're prepared for school, Lila said, but at this center, teachers from the school also sit in on the daycare classes of older kids who are about to transition into school.

This center certifies its parents on site, as well, and the fee also is \$40 a week. Lila says her biggest challenge is her parents, especially younger ones. “There are so many teenage parents now,” she said.

ANALYSIS

The real impact of the STEP program might not be felt a while. While most participants report being impressed overall with the program or at least with certain aspects, most say the program should provide up-front money and cut back on the cumbersome paper work. Directors participating in the program say the money they could be eligible for might not be worth the trouble.

The financial impact that the program has will depend on the type of center and the number of children in the certificate program. For instance, a church school that needs costly structural changes to participate in the STEP program could get those changes paid for by the church, while private centers could not.

One director offered a solution. “They should reimburse us based on the type of centers we are,” Mari said. “If you’re a big private center like mine that has to pay all of your own bills, you should get more than a center at a church.”

If the STEP program’s goal is to help increase the quality of daycare, it seems punitive for the program to require changes that will result in centers having to come out of pocket with large sums of money that could be difficult for them to recoup.

Most of the directors we interviewed said money was not the reason they participated in the program, but they all said up-front should be provided if the program is going to require costly changes. In fact, directors said they could use more money period. If they have to incur costs to increase the quality of their centers, their strained financial situations will only be exacerbated.

Some directors say their centers barely get by. Others say they can only stay in the child care business because their spouses work in other professions. “We’ve been blessed,” said Willow, “that my husband has had a good job all these years.”

STEP program administrators should consider what centers have to spend to comply with their requirements or they risk creating a situation where some centers can’t participate even if the staffs want to.

Letti had planned to participate in the STEP program at the time she filled out PAI’s survey, but by time we conducted the interview with her, she had changed positions. “When they came out and told us all the things we needed to do, we just couldn’t afford it,” she said.

Even though she doesn't pay herself a salary, Letti was willing to try to participate in the program. But she has no way to raise the funds, she said. At \$90 a week for infants, her rates are as high as she thinks the market will bear right now, and she says most of her fundraisers have done poorly.

If all centers are being held to the same standard, but the cost to participate is different, an unlevel playing field could be cultivated.

Tying the financial incentive to the certificate program also means there will be disparities in the way centers are reimbursed. The number of certificates each center has could vary from day to day as a child drops out to attend school or Head Start or a family doesn't get paperwork in on time for a certificate to be renewed.

Those centers with more children will gain the most financially, but even their incentives could be unstable. And in cases where the certificate program itself does not work effectively, daycare centers could suffer. For instance, Robbie said her parents were sometimes told that paperwork for their children's certification had been lost. She said she even had trouble getting information sometimes.

Joanna said her center had trouble with the staffs for certificate programs in other districts when she had kids to transfer from other towns. She said workers had been rude and unhelpful, and that it had taken a lot of effort to get certification.

The STEP program also is being rolled out at a time when the economy is faltering, the minimum wage has been raised and when school systems and Head Start programs are taking kids at increasingly younger ages. Some centers are being hit hard and might decide to participate in the program when they would in better financial times not have. A quality assurance program should appeal to people all of the time and be accessible and workable for everybody who is eligible to participate.

For instance, most directors knew about and liked the state's Partners in Quality program, another voluntary program designed to help centers who work with families who receive certificates. Most were clear about what it did and said it was helpful. They appreciated that it provided some supplies. This is an example of a program that can help raise the quality of centers without costing them.

Aside from late paperwork that cost centers certificates, there is the lure of free public school and Head Start. "If you give parents the option of paying for child care or sending their child to public school for free, what do you think they will do?" a frustrated director asked.

Parents with vouchers could take their kids out and send them to free public schools, but centers are hit harder when parents who pay full fees do so. The certificate program reimburses at a month's delay, but parents who pay their entire fee pay up front or in the same month. Some centers depend on that immediate money.

Mari is struggling so much this fall that she has applied to participate in the federal food program for the first time. She has always been eligible because she has always had children with vouchers, “but I never really needed to before,” she said.

After her husband and son were deployed, she has had to pay for the work they could do for free, and she has lost seven kids who had certificates. Mari is one of the directors who said money was a large incentive for her to enroll in the STEP program. Her center is at Level 2, and she says that it looks like she will receive \$200 to \$300 more per month – too little money for all she needs to do, she said.

No director interviewed by Professional Associates had been rated higher than Level 2. If the formula for reimbursing centers at Level 2 is 7% of what the state reimburses for each child with a certificate minus their parents’ co-pay, the centers will not be reimbursed much unless they have a large number of children on the certificate program.

Several directors report spending up to \$5,000 to meet requirements for a Level 2. One director borrowed \$18,000 to fix her roof and add a room to her center. Even with most of their children on vouchers, it will take a while for those centers to recoup their funding. The question becomes, is it worth it to participate in the STEP program?

For those centers for which money was an incentive, the reward does not seem to match the amount of work required to get that money.

And even after some centers have incurred debt, STEP money could be elusive. For instance, some directors reported having no children on the certificate program this year, even though they have had them in the past. Those centers that have spent a good deal of money to meet STEP requirements could possibly not receive any money for a year or for as long as they have few or no children on the certificate programs.

Shandra, the director whose center lost 30 children with certificates this year, was so disappointed with the program that she said it would almost take a miracle for her to enroll again. She said she thought she had the requirements to be ranked a Level 5 and was told she was a Level 1. She said she would only consider reenrolling if she had a large enough number of children on certificates to make it worth her while.

While most of the directors said they decided to participate in the program to improve and increase the level of training of their staff, they realize that education could be costly.

One of the biggest challenges directors face is attracting and retaining quality staff. Clearly daycare staffs should be well-trained. As evidenced by the tragedy that Cassandra shared, it could be a matter of life and death. And the same people who are often available to work at fast food restaurants are also the only ones available to take care of children. Directors were very concerned about their labor pool. The most desirable employees could generally not be hired for minimum wage.

Finding the funding to help educate staff could be an important factor in recruiting more centers to participate in the STEP program, and certainly in providing an incentive for them to try to move beyond Level 3. The program might explore ways to provide stipends for teachers and staff willing to return to school. STEP might partner with community colleges or universities like Jackson State that already receive funds to train and educate the state's workforce.

To be successful in the long run, the STEP program cannot cost centers more to raise their level of quality than not to do so. Centers need money and staff training at minimum costs. So far, directors say the program is costing them money. Some have said participating in the program doesn't seem worth it, but they are willing to give it more time. Others say they have benefited significantly from enrolling in the program.

As Mari pointed out, centers have different needs, and might need to be compensated differently for the incentive to be enough of a motivation for them to participate. Program officials might also look to reward centers that provide special child care services. For instance, a center that provides child care 24 hours a day might be compensated at a different rate because they provide a needed service that requires extra liability.

Or a center like Letti's which provides a range of options for parents might be compensated differently. Letti offers a drop-in service for parents who need emergency care for \$20 a day and she provides temporary care by the week for \$25 a day.

Most importantly, STEP program officials should listen to what child care providers say they need, and try to tailor the program to accommodate them.

At any rate, as the STEP program is rolled out in other districts in the state, it will take more time before its impact becomes clear.

