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Quality of child care continues to improve

The quality of child care in Richmond County exceeds state standards, according to data released by the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC). In some instances, the quality of care exceeds the state's high performing standard. The data is part of NCPC's annual assessment of county programs.

In Richmond County, more than 1,280 children are enrolled in child care, including full-day care and after-school care.

The average star rating for pre-kindergarten child care facilities is 3.46 in Richmond County, which exceeds the state standard of 3.25, according to the state report. In 2002, the average rating was 2.51. Regulated pre-school child care programs are rated from one star to five stars, based on quality of the educational program and level of teacher education.

Subsidized child care placements exceed the high performing standard with an average of 3.83 stars and 67 percent of children in four- or five-star facilities. In 2002, the average rating for subsidized placements was 2.63 stars.

"We are thrilled with the latest report," said Martha Vance Brown, executive director of Richmond County Partnership for Children. "Child care professionals and Partnership staff work diligently to improve the quality of care for our county's children.

"Our county has many dedicated child care providers who spend countless hours and dollars to continually

enhance their programs to best serve the children and their parents."

Star ratings are a valuable tool for parents as they choose a child care facility for their child, Vance Brown said. Numerous national studies have shown that children who receive high quality child care at an early age are more likely to graduate from high school, be employed at age 40, commit fewer crimes and own their homes.

In addition to the quality of child care, Richmond County also exceeds the state standard in the availability of child care. The county has 91 percent of the needed child care spaces, exceeding the state standard of 90 percent, and 100 percent of the needed subsidized spaces, exceeding the high performing standard of 97 percent. In 2004, Richmond County had just 80 percent of the needed child care spaces.

Partnership for Children programming also exceeded the state's standards in family support, with parenting skills reaching 95 percent, matching the state high performing standard. In health care, the county surpassed the state's high performance standards in early intervention and in use of primary health care.

"Although the Partnership strives to exceed state standards, the impact of programming on our children is far more important than the number," Vance Brown said. "Our partner-driven programs are excellent and make a huge, lifelong impact on our children. Each year, the quality of programming improves."