Case Insight: The Making of Pennsylvania's Consumer Education Website

Through the Afterschool Alliance scans of state Child Care Development Block Grant Consumer Education websites, we found that Pennsylvania's website offered a particularly clean and clear design and contained a great deal of useful information.

To better understand the process of developing a strong consumer education website, we conducted an interview with Marci L. Walters, the administrative officer with the Department of Human Services in the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, to discuss the process of creating their current consumer education website.

The timeline of Pennsylvania's consumer education website began in 2008. The state had been working with a hired IT contracted vendor for the Child Care Resource and Referral agencies that were performing the on the ground work of connecting families to the right resources for quality child care since 2002. In 2008, they used the vendor to help design a statewide website. At that time, Internet was becoming more and more popular, so this website provided additional help to consumers. However, the first version was nowhere near "comprehensive"—it was a supplemental resource offering only regulated child care provider's information.

In 2007 Pennsylvania established the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). This office combined most services to young children under both the state's Department of Human Services and the Department of Education. In addition to licensed child care, OCDEL oversees programs such as Head Start, state funded pre-K, evidence-based home visiting, family support services, Early Intervention birth through kindergarten, and school-age child care providers up to age 15.

By 2010, OCDEL expanded the website to add information on other early learning programs – i.e. no longer solely about regulated child care providers. The next significant change that led to today's site happened in 2016. By 2016, as smartphones became a part of people's daily life, the Office moved to make the site mobile friendly, allowing the site to adjust itself accordingly on different devices. Data from OCDEL show this was an important change as most users now access the site through a mobile device.

The popularity of the user-friendly mobile system may be attributable in part to the design thinking process used by the state. OCDEL included end-users (parents and families) in their mobile-site development process. The office has a designated parent engagement coordinator who worked to engage parents in providing feedback during the systems design process and included parents in end user testing before putting the website in use.

So how did the state decide what options to allow parents to search for? In addition to direct contact with parents, Pennsylvania relied on two great resources to help them decide what search functions that should be available on the site to help parents find what they were really looking for in a program. First, they have conducted research and collected data regarding parents' searches for child care since 2002. Second, they worked with their CC&R agencies, who directly communicate with parents. These agencies have a broad understanding of parents' needs for child care based on what parents come in to centers communicating they want in a program.

After determining what data parents were looking for in their child care search, the Office needed to develop a system for collecting that data from the providers. For Pennsylvania, the basic demographic information of regulated child care providers can be easily accessed through the state's certification office. However, additional provider information that parents were looking for such as financial (payment rates), transportation, activities, languages, and etc are not included in that system. Therefore, to collect this additional information, Pennsylvania set up a provider self-service portal that allows providers to provide, upload and update additional information. If the providers choose not to use self-service portal, the CCR&R agencies' staff who providers can contact to update information for them. In addition to having all this data for parents to use the Office has also recognized its ability to use the data in statewide system to detect potential gaps in access and improve their services. Perhaps the most important step in having a strong comprehensive website, is to ensure consumers use it. To increase website users, the Department of Human Services conducted a series of marketing enhancements from 2015 to 2016. They have used social media, like Facebook and Twitter, to advertise their new website; they are coordinating with DMV licensing centers to display an informational video showing potential consumers how to use the website; they have displayed video through other agencies and programs for low-income families, like SNAP, to attract users; they have also sent out information in monthly E-newsletters to increase awareness of the new features. The enhancements, their efforts have paid off, as the volume of the website has increased significantly.

Pennsylvania's consumer education website history makes it clear that building a comprehensive website requires a comprehensive process including: attention to research and consumer-based design thinking to develop and continuously improve the website, creating systems to collect and showcase the comprehensive information available on the website, and an intentional focus on marketing strategies developed to increase users. The insights into this process have helped showcase some of the work it takes to support families in a state as they make important choices for the quality care of their children birth to age 13 and beyond.