

Scan of Child Care Consumer Education Websites:

One of the main purposes of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (CCDBG), is “to encourage States to provide consumer education information to help parents make informed choices about child care services and to promote involvement by parents and family members in the development of their children in child care settings.” Each state must have an online consumer education website.

In the current world of technology, a good consumer education service requires a great consumer education website. Parents prioritize certain information when making decisions about their child and youth’s care. From the American After 3PM report, we found that 80% of the parents with a child in an afterschool program believed that location was very important in selecting a program. 78% said hours that meet their needs was important, and 67% said costs were important to their selection. However, the report also indicates that 51% of parents did not agree that information was readily available in their community.

We reviewed all the state child care consumer education websites that were reachable (40 websites) to identify trends, challenges and innovations that support consumer decision-making and usability and performed a research and analysis.



51% of parents in a 2014 America After 3PM survey found child care information for school age programs was not readily available in their community.

Process:

While state CCDGB plans have been submitted to the Office of Child Care, final plans have not yet been made public. We therefore looked across the draft state plans on state websites to locate each state consumer education website’s web address (found in plan section 2.3). During our scan, we were unable to identify some state draft plans, while some others we did identify did not indicate a web address in their draft. In all 40 websites were reachable. While websites often had multiple features and pieces of information about the child care system, to experience a consumer’s feeling, we focused on the one thing most relevant to a parent¹ —the provider directory. For each site, we picked a relatively medium density location and searched for providers in that area.

¹While we use the term “parent” throughout the document, we include this to mean – parents, family members, caregivers, guardians and other parties interested in a child’s care.

Overview:

Through reviewing 40 consumer education websites, we found that the functionality offered by provider directories varied greatly, from what we have called “basic search functions” offered by nearly all states to additional “advanced search” functions some states included to help parents identify more information to inform their decisions.

Building on good basic search functionality, advanced search categories, such as languages spoken by staff, program cost, and details on the environment, can add additional helpful information for parents to navigate and make the best choice for their children.

A strong provider directory requires all the necessary information a parent views as relevant to program selection and an easy to navigate web page. For an example of a comprehensive consumer education search page that allows a customer to identify many attributes important to program choice while remaining easy to navigate, we found Pennsylvania’s provider directory to be commendable: <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/Compass.web/ProviderSearch/Home#/BasicSearch>.

General Findings

Below we detail observations of basic and advanced search functionality across state consumer education websites, where applicable, offer rationales for states to include a particular function, and provide an example of a state where that search function appears as user-friendly:

Basic Search



Name: With this function, parents and community members are able to identify a particular program perhaps the one which a child already attends, one they have passed by in their neighborhood, or one that has been recommended to them.

- *Finding:* Among all the websites reviewed, **39** of them allowed for a search by program name.
- *Recommendation:* We recommend all states offer/continue to offer this service.



Age: Children go through different developmental stages as they grow from infants to school-age. Thus, it is important to have providers offer distinctive quality care that meet children's developmental needs. Besides, parents with multiage children need a directory that help them take care of all children. Ideally, parents can select multiple age boxes to find a provider that serves children in that range, or undertake the search for each child to find individual providers that are the right fit for each child. Search functions that allow parents to select programs that serve "school age children only" may be convenient for parents of older children,

- *Finding:* Among the websites reviewed, **31** websites offer age information, while only **22** offer the ability to search by age/age group.
- *Recommendation:* We suggest that all websites offer the ability to search by age, specifically including a box for school-age only. Example of Arizona's age group and "additional services" search function: <https://azchildcareprovidersearch.azdes.gov/>.



Location: Location function is a crucial element for parents to identify nearby programs. While all sites offered the ability to search by locations, there are some variations in terms of address, zip code, and map functions.



Address/Boundary Area: This function is useful for parents of school-age children and multiage children to locate an afterschool child care program. A county or city search function makes it easy for parents who want to see a broad range of options at a glance. One state (MA) had a "search on my route" function.

- *Finding:* All **40** states reviewed allow parents to search by a specific address or/and by the city/county name. In addition, **2** states allow parents to search by programs near a particular school.
- *Recommendation:* We suggest all states to continue offering an address search function. The additional "search for programs by a school" function will be particularly helpful for parents with school-age children. Example of Michigan's school search function: <http://www.greatstarttoquality.org/> For overall county and city level search functions, consider a drop down menu of county names and an icon based/visual table to allow a searcher to process a lot of key information at a glance. However this function should be in addition to and not take the place of advanced search functions and maps. Example of Tennessee's county level grid: <https://www.tn.gov/accweb/faces/stateMapPage.jsp>



Zip code and distance search: Zip code search allows parents to locate all the providers in a certain area. Additional distance search function allows parents to search the providers located within a certain distance of a zip code/address (e.g. 1 miles, 5 miles, 10 miles).

- *Finding:* **38** websites offer zip code search. To maximize the use of zip code search, some states offer an additional distance search function.

- *Recommendation:* We suggest websites provide zip code search and distance search functions, allowing parents to locate the providers around them more accurately by identifying programs that are close but under another zip code or city range. Example of Georgia's distance search function: <http://www.qualityrated.org/>



Map: A map with the location of child care providers will help parents to understand the location and consider ease of transportation from their home or work to the center or from one child center to another.

- *Finding:* Among the states reviewed, **19** websites offer maps along with the address data. In **17** states, a search would bring up all results in a radius and allow parents to select particular criteria. In the remaining states, this was limited to a pin drop at the site at a singular location after a search.
- *Recommendation:* We suggest websites offer a map with all the providers listed on the result, allowing parents to compare the location of sites visually. Example of Connecticut's map function: https://search.211childcare.org/listings_

- **Advanced search:** Other than name and location, advanced search allows parents to narrow down the providers based on their more specific needs.



Schedule: Parents need child care services mostly because they face a time conflict of taking care of their children. However, not all schedules are regular. For instance, a parent of a school age child who works only mornings may have the ability to pick up an extra shift in the afternoon. This parent will need a provider that offers child care from 4pm to 6 pm. A very specific tool that can easily navigate the schedule of operation hours will be really helpful under this circumstance.

- *Finding:* Among the websites reviewed, **29** websites provide schedule information to the consumer. This can include allowing parents to

search over summer, school breaks, overnight, occasional evenings, early morning and other periods where parents may find themselves in need of child care. **16** websites offer the ability to search by specific hours directly.

- *Recommendation:* We suggest all websites offer clear schedule search functions to help parents easily locate the providers that fit their schedule and specific needs. In addition, the result may be more useful if the option on website allows them to search by specific times and specific days (e.g. "4pm-6pm on Tuesday"), rather than a vague period (e.g. "afternoon"). Example of Kentucky's schedule search function: <https://benefind.ky.gov/KCCPS/ChildCare/ChildCareAdvancedSearch>.



Language: The ability of program staff to communicate in other languages can be a large benefit. Child care programs in other languages could promote child care access and quality care. Therefore, the ability to search by languages facilitates the child care selection process.

- *Finding:* While **12** websites provide languages information to consumer, **9** of these websites offer the ability to search by languages.
- *Recommendation:* We suggest websites to have language information searchable, because it would be far less convenient if parents have to check providers individually. Example of Indiana's language search function: <http://ccmis.dhs.state.ia.us/ClientPortal/ProviderSearch.aspx>.



Financial: For many families, the cost rate is a determining factor of program selection. Therefore, it is necessary to have financial information, such as payment rates, available on the provider directory.

- *Finding:* While **15** states have the financial information available, only **4** of them offer the ability to search. Half the websites list the financial supports that parents can use at the program (e.g. Sliding Scale, DHS Participation, Subsidy Participation).

While the other half shows the actual rates for different groups of children.

- *Recommendation:* We suggest websites have both financial program information and actual payment rate information available at the same time. Additionally, it could be helpful if payment rates were searchable. Example of Georgia's weekly rates search function: <http://qualityrated.org/>.



Environment: Environment information is important for children with special requirements. This includes categories like "no pets", "smoke-free", "sports field", "wheel chair accessible", "pool", "video surveillance", etc. Environment options provide consumers information in advance and saves parents time from some unnecessary field visiting. On the websites, it will be easier for parents to compare if a few standard options are listed, and providers can check a box if additional services are provided.

- *Finding:* Among the websites reviewed, **7** of them offer this type of environment information, while **3** of them offer the ability to search by environment when looking for providers.
- *Recommendation:* We suggest websites to at least have environment information listed on the provider detail page. If possible, the ability to search by environment will be preferred. Example of Georgia's environment information: <http://families.decal.ga.gov/ChildCare/detail/37570>.



Transportation: Parents, especially parents with school-age children, need transportation information to know how their children will transfer from school to their child care facility (e.g. bus, escort from/to school). Working parents who are sending their school-age children to child care facilities often cannot pick their children up at 3pm. Therefore, having transportation information available not only simplifies parents' searching process, but also reduces potential safety issues and parents' concern. Some providers list which schools they will

transport students from at the end of the school day for afterschool care.

- *Finding:* Among the websites reviewed, only 4 offer transportation information.
- *Recommendation:* We suggest that all websites at least have transportation information available on the provider detail page. Example of Pennsylvania's transportation search function which lists which schools the program will transport students from: <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/Compass.web/ProviderSearch/Home#/AdvancedSearch>.

Additional Observations

In our scan we also came across a few variations in sites that, while too unusual to separate into a category for all sites, are interesting to highlight for the impact they could have on the user. We classified them below into barriers and potential features.

Barriers

- **Mandatory registration/form:** There are a few websites that require consumers to register or submit a form before entering the search page. This process requires consumer to fill out a long form with complex procedures, which could turn the consumer away if they do not wish to spend the time to complete the registration process.
- **Multiple websites:** According to the information in the state plans, there are a few states that lists more than one consumer education website. One of the websites is most likely to be a new quality care website and the others are old ones. Multiple websites could confuse the consumer in terms of which one to use. Also, if consumers continue to use the old ones, they might lose access to lot of information, including quality care.

- **Type of care:** Child care can take place in family home care, family center care, and child care centers, and specifically in settings such as pre-school care, head start centers, school-based care. Often you can also search by licensed programs—however the definition of licensed exempt programs is not always obvious. In states where some school age programs are exempt (as for example certain programs operating within a public school building) we wonder if this may be confusing. We would like to see clear explanations of any exemptions and any licenses especially where the search provides the ability to limit to licensed providers. Missouri for example explains which programs fit in their license exempt category: <https://webapp01.dhss.mo.gov/childcaresearch/searchengine.aspx>.
- **Inaccurate results:** Some websites seem to aim to have a wealth of information but when you apply the search functions the software still has quirks. For example, one allows you to search by school-age, but the list that comes up includes programs that list “school-age” as N/A since the words school age still appear on the page. We expect there may be many glitches like this as these well-intentioned systems roll out that will only be captured by continuing to seek feedback from the end user.

Potential features to consider

- **Surveys:** Some websites offer a survey that collects information regarding quality care. This could be a good feature for states to improve their services. If the feedback survey is about the consumer education website itself, its best to bring up the page after the consumer has been browsing for a while—not in the beginning of their search.

In summary

As states roll out their consumer education websites, we hope that continued engagement with parents and consumers as well as sharing innovations and best practices across states will help these sites to be the most effective tools they can be for informed decision making around one of a parents’ most important and impactful choices, quality care for their children.

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