

pathways... TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHER EDUCATION:

The Current Status of Wisconsin's Child Care Workforce



Surveys Reveal the Profession's Strengths and Obstacles

In March 2010, the Public Policy Forum and Wisconsin Early Childhood Association mailed surveys to 7,191 child care center directors, child care center employees, and family child care providers across the state of Wisconsin. Survey recipients were also given the option of completing the survey online. Surveys were sent to all regulated child care directors, a random sampling of employees from regulated child care centers, and a random sample of certified and licensed family child care providers. All three data sets were gathered from the Department of Children and Families statewide database, included full- and part-day centers, and were geographically representative of the entire population.

The survey asked individuals to answer questions on a variety of topics including education and credentials, experience, job satisfaction, compensation, and child enrollment. A total of 1,425 surveys were completed and analyzed for an overall response rate of 20%. Center directors had the highest return rate of all three subgroups, with 610 of 2,475 (24.6% response rate) completed. Of the 2,676 surveys received by family child care providers, 560 were completed, for a response rate of 21%. A total of 1998 center employees received surveys and 255 were completed, for a response rate of 13%. When determining how well this sample represents the entire population, the margins of error—calculated at a 95% confidence interval—are as

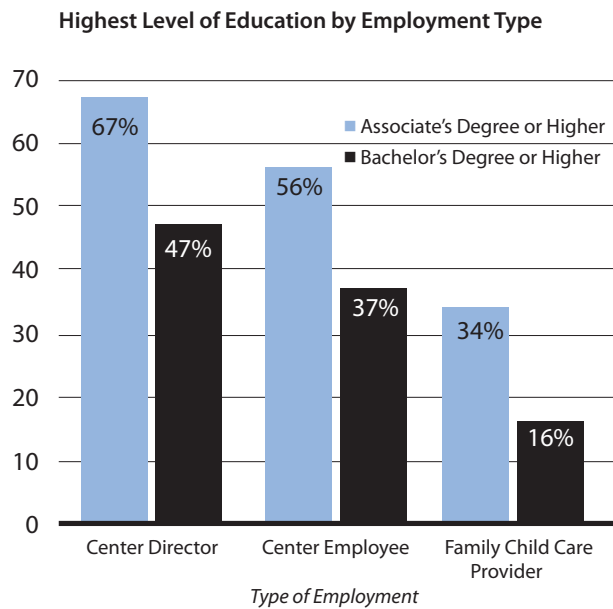


Figure 1

follows: Center directors had a 3.45% error rate, center employees had a 7.95% error rate, and family child care providers had a 3.92% error rate.

Results from the workforce study suggest that Wisconsin's child care professionals:

- are primarily female. Only 1.5% of survey respondents were male.
- are likely to be over the age of 36. The most popular age range, with 56% of responses, was 36-55 years old. Center directors were, on average, the oldest of the three subgroups with 78% over the age of 36. Family child care providers were next with 74%, and 62% of group child care employees were age 36 or older.
- are likely to have several years of experience. Survey respondents had an average of 14.5 years of experience in the field. Center directors averaged 16 years, family child care providers averaged 13.8 years, and group center employees averaged 12.5 years.
- are likely to have their own dependent children to care for. 59% of respondents were parents/guardians of at least one dependent child at home.
- are likely to see themselves staying in the field. 88% of respondents said that they see themselves in the field three years from now. 55% could see themselves in the field in 10 years.

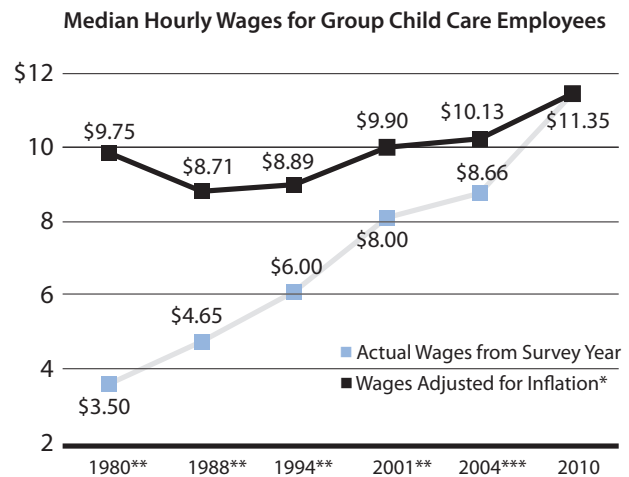
Because our survey respondents averaged such a high number of years of experience, we acknowledge that our survey may represent many of the most committed and educated members of the field.

"I think that experience should be a contributing factor. I may not have my degree, yet, but I have been doing this for 17 years, and in this field, experience matters over a piece of paper."

Education of Wisconsin's Workforce Rises

Multiple research studies done on the quality of early care and education have found that the education of ECE professionals is one of the most important aspects of a high-quality programⁱ. In general, well-educated teachers are associated with greater cognitive and social gains in children, more responsive and active learning environments, and developmentally appropriate curriculaⁱⁱ. Moreover, those early childhood teachers with two- or four-year degrees in early education offer significantly higher quality learning environments to young children, with a strong emphasis on responsive interactionsⁱⁱⁱ.

According to the results of the 2010 workforce study, many Wisconsin providers have already earned either two- or four-year degrees. Not surprisingly, center directors had the highest level of education, followed by center employees, and family child care providers. 67% of center directors have a two-year associate's degree or higher, and 47% have a four-year bachelor's degree or higher. Of the center employees, 56% have obtained an associate's degree or



*Inflation was calculated using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI-U change for Jan of the survey year through Jan 2010. **From Adams, D. et al (November 2003) ***From Roach, M. A. et al. (2005)

Figure 2

Average Annual Wages for Group Child Care Center Directors

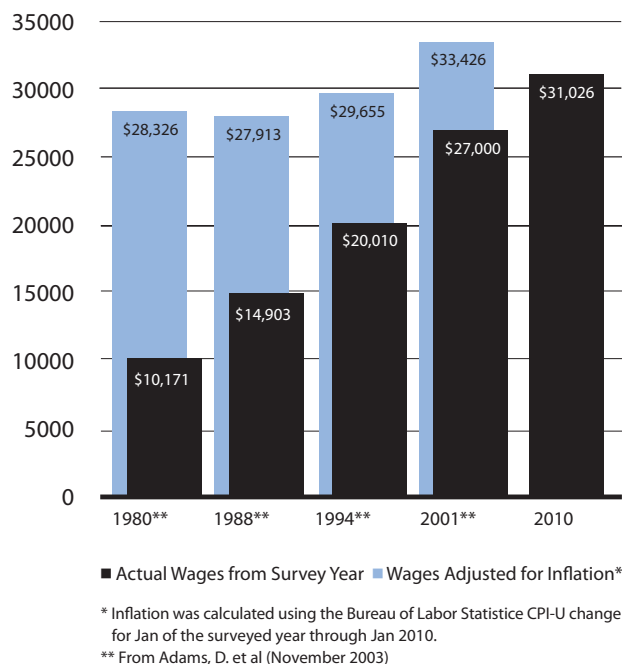


Figure 3

Average Annual Net Income for Family Child Care Providers

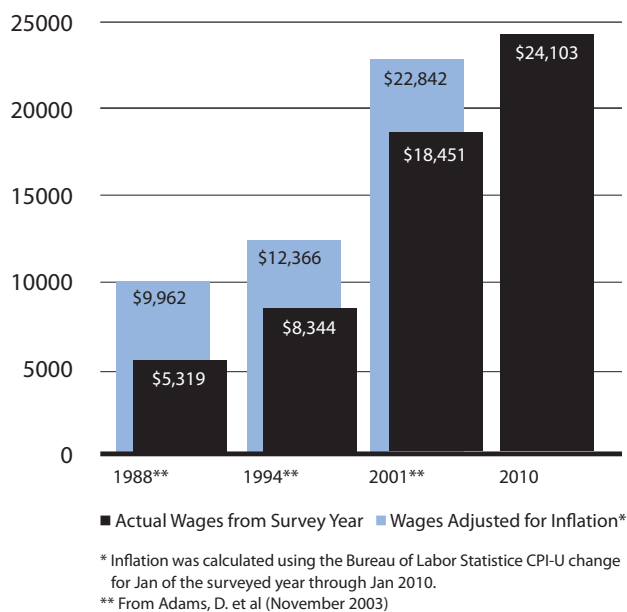


Figure 4

higher, while 37% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. 34% of family child care providers have an associate’s degree or higher, but only 16% have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher (see Figure 1). These levels of education are significantly higher than previous workforce studies have found. It is encouraging to see the increasing levels of higher education found across the child care workforce, but there is still room to improve.

The recently passed YoungStar, Wisconsin’s quality rating and improvement system, awards more than a third of the possible points a program can earn based on the educational qualifications of staff. Because of these requirements, there will likely be an increased demand from the child care field for credit-based education, particularly from providers wanting to obtain an associate’s degree in early education. Many of these providers have already accumulated several years of relevant experience and many hours of non-credit-based training. Comments from the workforce study reveal that providers believe that this experiential learning is just as valuable as credit-based learning and should be recognized in a more formal way. By creating a statewide system of credit for prior learning in the Wisconsin Technical College System, college credit (and partial fulfillment of the requirements for an associate’s degree) could, in some cases, be awarded based on experiential learning (see our *Pathways to Early Childhood Higher Education: Credit for Prior Learning*^{iv} brief for more information).

"My sincere hope is that quality programs will mean decent, realistic, higher wages that will attract quality child care workers!"

Low Wages for the Workforce Continue

The child care field is often associated with low wages and few benefits. Not surprisingly, early care and education has been found to be one of the lowest paying professions in the United States^v. Because of factors like low compensation, highly-qualified providers—although immensely beneficial to young children and their families—are increasingly difficult to attract, support, and retain within the child care field.

According to the workforce study, current median wages in the field are: \$13.85 per hour for center directors, \$11.35 for group child care teachers, and \$8.10 for family child care providers. When evaluating past workforce

studies^{vi}, it appears that wages, when adjusted for inflation, continue to rise slowly for group child care teachers (see Figure 2). Figures 3 and 4 show the average annual salaries over time for center directors and family child care providers. Wages for center directors have decreased by 7.6% from the 2001 level, while wages for family child care providers have increased by 5.5% since then.

While the increases in wages are encouraging, there is still a long way to go before the child care workforce achieves economic justice.

- These increases don't match the increase in professional demands that have been placed on this workforce (e.g. individual child assessments and adherence to model early learning standards).
- Wages are not comparable with professionals in public education, even when professional qualifications and job responsibilities are similar.
- Current wages may support self-sufficiency, but they are not sufficient for raising children without support from another wage-earner.
- And perhaps most significantly, affordability for parents continues to limit efforts to improve compensation despite a program's link to quality.

Note on comparisons over time: Survey methods, sample sizes/populations, and return rates on this and all previous Wisconsin workforce studies have varied from one another. Because of these variances, we can't be certain that comparisons over time are exact or that they are evaluating the same sample populations.

"This is a very challenging field with very little compensation. I wish I could offer more to the employees who work here. Some of them deserve more than I can give them financially."

Less Turnover in the Field, Retention Initiatives Help

Previous studies in Wisconsin and across the nation have found that child care providers leave the field at an alarming rate, often because of the profession's low compensation and inadequate support for professional development. The loss of experienced providers is troublesome, but more devastating is the negative effect turnover has on young children.

"I think there are some very good centers, but [they] need financial help to be able to get staff higher education in such a low paying field. T.E.A.C.H. scholarships do help."

Data from the workforce study shows that 491 centers responded to survey questions regarding turnover. Of the 5,216.5 full-time employees that were working in these centers in January 2009, 1,081, or 21%, of them left within the year. This 21% turnover rate is a significant drop from previous Wisconsin workforce studies, which found the turnover rate ranged between 35% and 45%.

Although a variety of factors are likely responsible for this change (no other job availability due to the recession, different survey methods used, etc.), programs that have been created to address retention surely have made a positive impact. Of the 340 survey respondents who had received a T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Wisconsin scholarship, 90% said that it encouraged them to stay in the field. Likewise, of the 465 respondents who had received a R.E.W.A.R.D.™ Wisconsin stipend, 81% agreed that it persuaded them to remain in the field. 61% of respondents who had not received a R.E.W.A.R.D. stipend indicated that a monetary supplement would entice them to stay in the field.

Center directors were also asked to indicate what they believed was the common reason for staff to leave their employment. The top five responses include:

- 173 directors chose "wages too low"
- 67 directors chose "changing fields"
- 62 directors chose "family issues"
- 58 directors chose "job duties too demanding"
- 50 directors chose "returning to school"

The turnover rate for family child care providers in Wisconsin cannot be accurately measured in a single study. A longitudinal approach is needed to calculate a reliable rate. However, this study found that 75% of the





496 providers who entered the date they began working at their current family child care business had been in their position at least three years.

“I would like to express my concern about lack of emphasis among policymakers on relationship-based care ... the abysmal turnover in the mainstream child care world is harming children.”

More and Varied Professional Development Options Desired

Despite low compensation, many child care providers do stay in the field because they value and enjoy the important work they do. These providers often have difficulty accessing career counseling, training, or higher education to enhance their work. The increasing costs of higher education and training opportunities, along with the lack of a formal child care professional development system, contribute to this workforce challenge.

The results of the workforce study suggest that providers do want to get more education and training in early education. In response to the question “If I could change one thing about my job...,” respondents chose professional development opportunities as the second most popular choice after wages/benefits (see Figure 5).

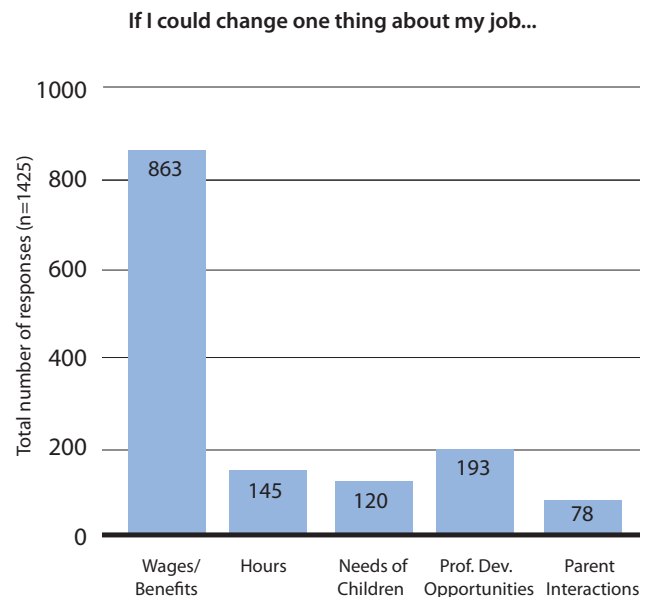
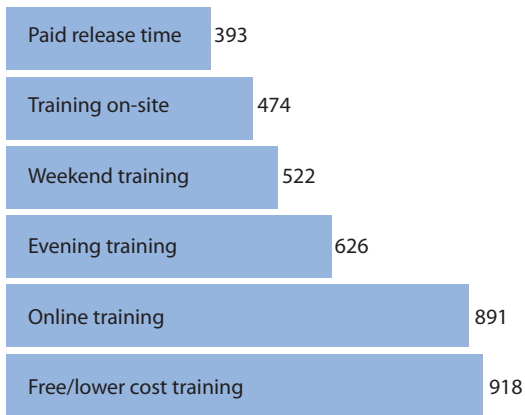


Figure 5

Professional Development Opportunities



Total number of responses (n=1425)

Figure 6

Survey respondents were also asked which professional development opportunities would be most beneficial, and were able to check as many options as they desired. Free or lower cost training was the most popular selection, followed by online training options. Figure 6 shows the top six choices for future professional development opportunities.

These findings are encouraging, as they show that in general providers do want to continue to improve the quality of care they can provide through professional development opportunities. Several barriers currently exist, however, and early education professionals often struggle to fulfill their desire to improve. A professional development system that addresses the barriers and includes the options selected by survey respondents will be beneficial to providers, families, and children.

"The pay in this field is low and that stops teachers in the field from taking courses to better themselves. People still look at us as babysitters not professionals."

A complete report highlighting all of the survey's results will be published separately.

This policy brief series was produced with the generous support of the Joyce Foundation.

This policy brief is a publication of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families and the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, written by Erin Gernetzke, Daithi Wolfe, David Edie, and Jeanette Paulson.

Fall 2010, Volume 3.

ⁱ The Carolina Abecedarian Project, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1999): <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/ells-04.pdf>

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ⁱⁱ Barnett, W. S. (2003). Better Preschools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications, *Preschool Policy Matters*, 2. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

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ⁱⁱⁱ Edie, D. (2007). *Making the grade: Making the case for well-educated, well-trained teaching staff in early care and education*. Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. Madison, WI.

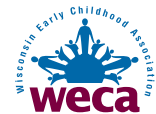
^{iv} Gernetzke, E., Wolfe, D., Edie, D., & Paulson, J. (2010). Pathways to higher education: Credit for prior learning. Wisconsin Early Childhood Association and Wisconsin Council on Children & Families. Madison, WI

^v Nelson, J. (April 2001). *Why are early education and care wages so low? A critical guide to common explanations*. New York: Foundation for Child Development.

^{vi} Adams, D., Durant, D., Edie, D., Ittig, M., Riley, D., Roach, M., Welsh, S., and Zeman, D. (November, 2003). Trends Over Time: Wisconsin's child care workforce. Madison, WI: UW-Extension.

Wisconsin Early Childhood Association

744 Williamson Street, Suite 200
Madison, WI 53703
800.783.9322 | wisconsinearlychildhood.org



Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

555 West Washington Avenue, Suite 200
Madison, WI 53703
608.284.0580 | wccf.org

