



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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POLICY BRIEF

Investing in Early Learning

Since the adoption of our state's Constitution in 1848, Wisconsin has maintained strong support for early care and education. In the last 20 years, Wisconsin has greatly expanded 4-year-old kindergarten and Head Start opportunities, dramatically increased child care assistance for low-income families, continued to build a strong system to serve children with disabilities, and developed a sound regulatory system to protect children in out-of-home care. However, the primary emphasis has been on promoting access to services, with less focus on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for our children.

While access is an essential first step, the quality of the services available to our youngest citizens and their parents varies widely, with only a small portion of our care and education settings meeting the highest quality standards. It is meeting high quality program standards that can deliver on improving school achievement, closing the achievement gap, and giving young children the tools they may need to succeed as adults.

The need for high-quality child care and early education programs continues to grow. Wisconsin has always had a strong work ethic, and 71 percent of our children under age 6 have all parents working. Our working families need settings for their children that are safe, warm and nurturing, and that prepare children to enter school ready to learn.

Why is Early Learning Important?

Recent research, particularly in the area of brain development, confirms that the foundation for a child's intellect and personality is formed by age 5. Research also demonstrates that early

childhood settings that promote healthy development and stimulate early learning help children achieve in school and in life. These benefits are particularly important for disadvantaged children.

Wisconsin should build on its proud history of supporting families with young children by initiating a systematic approach to improving the quality of our early learning settings, helping give all children a foundation for success, regardless of family income. Investing in early learning is both wise and cost-effective for our children, our families, and our economy. According to James Heckman, Nobel Laureate economist at the University of Chicago, investments in high-quality early learning programs have the highest rate of return of any social investment (2008).

Elements of Quality Early Learning Programs

Extensive research has demonstrated the keys to quality early care and education programs:

- Qualified staff
- Favorable child-to-staff ratios and small group sizes
- Parent engagement
- Curriculum carefully planned to maximize positive child development and school readiness
- Safe and healthy environments

Systematic statewide approaches are needed to ensure these elements are strong in programs serving our children, particularly those serving children with disadvantaged backgrounds or disabilities. Wisconsin would make a wise investment by assuring rich early learning environments for Wisconsin's children, supporting families in their efforts to prepare their children for school and life.

Proposals to Improve Early Learning

1. Great Start Early Learning Initiative: A Public-Private Partnership (Cost: \$10 million for biennium)

- To increase the number of Wisconsin Shares children under age 5 in high quality early learning programs
- To engage local communities in assuring their children get the early learning they need to get ready for school

Strategy: This initiative would **establish** quality standards and **assess** program quality; **help programs meet** those standards; and **sustain** quality programs by **rewarding** those meeting the higher standards. Under this proposal, the state would challenge local communities interested in giving kids a great start to match state dollars to improve early education for low-income children served by the Wisconsin Shares program.

Many foundations, United Ways, and business and community leaders understand the importance of early education investments. This initiative gives private funders and local governments a way to jointly support early learning, providing a coherent structure to increase the number of low-income children receiving quality early education in their communities, with clear goals and outcomes, and help the state as a whole improve outcomes and achievement in low-income children.

Rationale: The low-income children served by Wisconsin Shares are precisely the children most likely to be at risk of school failure. Extensive research demonstrates that spending on high-quality early learning programs is a sound investment, producing significant short- and long-term benefits, including achievement in school, reduced need for special education, lower crime rates, and higher earnings.

2. Great Start Home Visiting (Cost: \$5 million for biennium)

Goal: To help new parents and parents with very young children enhance their children's healthy development and early learning.

Strategy: Expand home visiting programs targeted to at-risk children and kids who meet research-based standards.

Rationale: Research indicates that well-designed home visiting programs are effective in improving parent-child relationships and enhancing child development and early learning, particularly when targeted to children at risk, including children with disabilities.

3. Great Start in 4K (Cost: \$1.5 million for biennium)

Goal: To provide early learning experiences by expanding 4-year-old Kindergarten (4K) using a community approach (contracts or agreements with community-based programs).

Strategy: Continue 4K start-up grants and provide incentives in the school formula for school districts to use a community approach to 4K delivery.

Rationale: Research shows that well-designed pre-kindergarten programs improve student achievement and that delivering 4K through community partnerships offers greater options to parents, strengthens community-based early care and education programs, and provides opportunities for inclusive settings for children with disabilities.

4. Great Start Tax Credits (Cost: None in 2009-11; phase in 2011-2013)

Goal: To help families pay for high-quality child care.

Strategy: Establish a tax credit tied to quality, beginning the phase-in with the 2011-2013 budget.

Rationale: Tax deductions and credits help families pay for child care. Incentives for parents to use higher quality child care will increase the number of children in beneficial early learning programs. This approach has been successful in Maine, Vermont and Arkansas.