



# Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition

Disability Rights Wisconsin ♦ Madison Area Accredited Early Childhood Association  
Milwaukee Child Care Alliance ♦ Parents Plus ♦ School Administrators Alliance  
Supporting Families Together Association ♦ Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health  
Wisconsin Association of School Boards ♦ Wisconsin Child Care Administrators Association  
Wisconsin Council for Exceptional Children - Division for Early Childhood  
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families ♦ Wisconsin Early Childhood Association  
Wisconsin Family Child Care Association ♦ Wisconsin Head Start Association

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## **Testimony, Audit of Wisconsin Shares Joint Legislative Audit Committee, February 19, 2009**

The Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition strongly supports an audit of the Wisconsin Shares program. The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel's recent investigative reporting on fraud in the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program has led to calls for a re-examination of the program. The Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition supports serious efforts to detect and prevent fraud. We would like to see efforts to reduce fraud as part of a larger quality assurance and improvement effort in the program that is long overdue. We also believe an audit could stimulate a new look at Wisconsin Shares. We believe that it is time for a systematic effort to assure that all children served by the program receive nurturing care and early learning opportunities that prepare them for school and beyond.

### **Response to Fraud**

Clearly, it is imperative to address fraud and error in the subsidy system to ensure appropriate stewardship of taxpayer dollars and to restore public trust. Our Coalition endorses a careful review of Wisconsin Shares, including an audit of the program, as several legislators have advocated. The last audit was in 2001, and the program has grown substantially since then.

We also believe that the consolidation of child care functions in the Department of Children and Families offers opportunities for state licensing, county certification, and state and local staff to work together more efficiently to prevent and detect fraud. Stronger oversight and enforcement will not only help ensure that public dollars are going where they were intended, but also deter others from fraud. However, we need to be careful that new fraud prevention measures do not have the unintended consequences of denying reasonable access for parents or damaging already economically fragile child care providers.

### **Wisconsin Shares: An Essential Support to Families**

The Coalition strongly agrees with the Journal Sentinel editorial that lack of affordable child care is an impediment to work, and that subsidies are necessary for low-income working families. Wisconsin ranks third in the nation with 72 percent of children under 6 having all available parents in the workforce. With regulated child care often costing between \$7,500 and \$11,000 annually for one child, decent child care is often prohibitively expensive. Wisconsin's low-income families are working in record numbers, and many of them can afford to work *only* with the help of Wisconsin Shares. Today, over 60,000 children from 34,000 families receive child care assistance from Wisconsin Shares.

### **A Needed Focus on Child Development**

The recent report on fraud is disturbing not only because of the misuse of public funds. It is particularly disturbing to see children used as pawns in a money scam. If a child is seen as a dollar sign rather than a

precious developing person to be nurtured and educated, then that child is at risk of being de-humanized in other ways. The children from low-income families served by Wisconsin Shares have higher risks for poor health and educational outcomes. These children are especially in need of a warm nurturing child care setting with a focus on early learning, working in partnership with families to enhance their child's growth and development.

### **Quality Matters**

The Coalition supports a balanced approach to fraud prevention, detection, intervention and prosecution coupled with investment in building quality in Wisconsin Shares settings. We further believe that policy discussions need to be about quality as well as access and affordability, as all these elements are necessary for our children and families. In fact, the better we are able to link the priorities of access and quality, the more we may be able to assure positive early learning and development, and the greater our confidence that children are receiving appropriate services.

A strong body of research tells us that early investment in a child's early learning and development has one of the highest yields of any social investment, particularly when targeted to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. As we take a step back to re-examine the Wisconsin Shares program, a focus on quality early learning opportunities is more essential than ever. A strong quality rating and improvement system would result in more on-site oversight of child care programs, better-qualified staff, more engaged parents, and vibrant early education programs. Wisconsin Shares needs as intense a focus on enhancing early learning as on helping parents work.

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