



The median wage among Wisconsin child care workers is just \$8.66 per hour.

The turnover rate among state child care workers is 40 percent annually.

Just 29% of teachers in full-day child care centers had an Associate's Degree or higher in 2004.

Wisconsin Shares is the state's program to help low-income families pay for child care. Annual budget of roughly \$315 million. Serves roughly 53,000 children each month.

Wisconsin Shares ranks among top performing states in terms of wait lists, co-pays, eligibility and state payment rates, according to the National Child Care Information Center.

Just over half of Wisconsin's school districts offer 4-year-old kindergarten, covering 32% of the state's 4-year olds.

Early Childhood Education

Improving Early Childhood Education

By the time a child reaches age three, 85 to 90 percent of his or her core brain structures have already been formed. Without regular stimulation and nurturing, normal brain development can be stunted, placing children at great risk of falling behind emotionally and intellectually. Providing high quality care to children from infancy is essential to avoiding this risk, and helping to prepare Wisconsin's youngest residents for success in education and, eventually, the world of work.

Roughly 75 percent of young children in Wisconsin are cared for regularly by someone other than a parent – in day care centers, homes, preschools and Head Start programs around the state. While some of these settings provide a safe and enriching learning environment, many do not. Poor compensation for child care workers combined with a lack of incentives to ensure the provision of high quality care mean that not all children in the state are getting off to the best possible start.

Investing in the quality of care our kids receive in the early years may have the highest long-term pay-off of any economic development program. The state of Wisconsin has been a leader in some programs for children, but there is much more that can be done to strengthen the quality of care that our children receive.

1. Keep Wisconsin Shares strong. For many low-income families, child care costs would be out of reach without the assistance of the state's subsidy program, Wisconsin Shares. The program provides about \$315 million annually to help cover child care costs for approximately 53,000 children from some 32,000 families each month. A 2004 report by the National Child Care Information Center found that according to criteria based on wait lists, co-pays, eligibility and state payment rates, Wisconsin's subsidy program ranks among top performing states.

Currently, families must have an income below 185 percent of poverty (\$29,772 for a family of three in 2005) to be initially eligible for the program, but can continue participation until their income exceeds 200 percent of poverty. Wisconsin Shares requires parents to provide co-pays based on family size, income, and the type of child care setting they select. Co-pay levels cannot exceed 12 percent of a family's income; typically parents pay about 10 percent of the cost of care. Unlike many other states, there is no waiting list for Wisconsin Shares – all eligible families receive subsidies. The lack of waiting lists and broad reach of the program are two reasons that it ranks so highly in the nation.

This standing is, however, in jeopardy, as the state responds to budget shortfalls in the program. On the table are proposals to increase co-pays, lower the income eligibility level, lower payment rates to child care providers and institute waiting lists to save money in the program. To support low-wage

Providing Health Care for Child Care Workers in Rhode Island

In 1997, the Rhode Island legislature made history by becoming the first state to offer comprehensive health and dental coverage to in-home child care providers. The program not only extended benefits to a vulnerable segment of the population, but also helped establish higher standards that would help make positions in the child care industry more attractive (the subsidy was later extended to center-based child care workers as well). As a result of the health care legislation, the number of child care providers living in poverty in Rhode Island dropped substantially; between 1998 and 2002, the poverty rate for participating child care workers fell from 44 percent to 15 percent.

A detailed account of the Rhode Island initiative by Public/Private Ventures can be found at www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/206_publication.pdf.

Build a stronger wage floor and provide incremental wage gains for various education and experience: This would send a strong signal to potential child care workers that the state is serious about early education and attracting more qualified workers. A wage minimum could be supplemented by a program which awards additional subsidized wages on the basis of education, tenure, and responsibility.

Extend health care insurance to more workers: This could be done, as has been proposed, by expanding BadgerCare, the state's health insurance program for low-income families, to cover child care employees without children of their own (and therefore not currently eligible for BadgerCare). This would provide thousands of child care workers with affordable health insurance, and could help attract new, qualified workers to the field.

- 4. Expanding 4-year-old kindergarten programs.** Another approach to improving quality care for Wisconsin's young children is to expand 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) programs. When such programs are designed in close collaboration between high quality early childhood education providers and school districts, the resources help build quality of care and education and ensure that more kids are ready to learn when they get to kindergarten. While the curriculum is often "play-based" the investment reaps serious rewards. Collaboration between schools and providers ensures that the curriculum and teaching resources are sufficient to meet standards and that the schedule and location can meet the needs of families and children in our communities.

Currently, 56 percent of Wisconsin's 426 school districts offer 4K, and 32 percent of the state's 4-year-olds are enrolled. Although the number of school districts offering 4K is steadily increasing, the current number of participating 4-year-olds in Wisconsin is small compared to some other states. Oklahoma, for example, is considered a national leader on universal 4K and enjoys a participation rate of over 90 percent. Wisconsin spent \$95.6 million on 4K in 2005-06, roughly two-thirds of which came from the state, with the remaining coming from local school districts. About \$4,552 was spent on each 4K student enrolled in Wisconsin. (For more information on 4K statistics in Wisconsin and around the country, see *The State of Preschool 2006* by the National Institute for Early Education Research.)

Make funding available to school districts interested in instituting 4K: The state can provide the financial resources to enable school districts to build 4K programs if they choose. In fact, Governor Doyle's 2008-09 budget does just that, by providing \$3 million to help school districts with 4K start-up costs. Such investments could help demonstrate Wisconsin's commitment to high quality early education, and, by expanding 4K in the state, bring Wisconsin closer in line with national leaders on this front.

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