

# pathways... TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHER EDUCATION:

## Credit for Prior Learning



**A** growing body of scientific evidence indicates that investments in quality child care and early learning programs result in large, positive economic returns to society. Investing in the education of Wisconsin's youngest children may also be one of the most promising ways to ensure that children are ready to enter Kindergarten and succeed in school and life. Children—especially those from low-income families—who attend high-quality programs are less likely to require special education services, drop out of school, and utilize social welfare programs than their peers.<sup>i</sup> Conversely, a recent study of Missouri's child care programs found that children's social and emotional skills, as well as other aspects of school readiness, actually decreased as a result of attending low-quality programs (see figure 1).<sup>ii</sup>

Nearly every research study done on the quality of early care and education has found that the education and training of early childhood teachers is one of the most important aspects of a high-quality program—perhaps the key to quality. In general, well-educated teachers are associated with greater cognitive and social gains in children, more responsive and active learning environments, and curricula that are stimulating and developmentally appropriate.

*“Caregivers with higher education levels engaged in more positive caregiving and, in turn, the children they cared for showed better outcomes.” —National Institute of Child Health and Human Development<sup>iv</sup>*

ate.<sup>iii</sup> 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 interactions.<sup>iv</sup>

### How Educated are Wisconsin's Early Childhood Teachers?

Although the benefits of highly-qualified staff are well documented, many children enrolled in Wisconsin child care programs are not taught by well-qualified teachers. Often private child care centers and family child care programs, in particular, have low education requirements for staff. Child care is regulated primarily for health and safety, with fairly minimal education requirements for personnel. According to a series of workforce studies conducted over the past 20 years<sup>v</sup>, Wisconsin has seen a decline in the percentage of early childhood teachers with a higher education degree. The most recent study, in 2004, found that only 14% of Wisconsin's providers had a 4-year degree and less than 30% had a 2-year degree or higher (see figure 2).<sup>vi</sup> Even more concerning is that around 40% of all teachers

### Average Gains in Vocabulary for Children in Poverty

Vocabulary gains, as measured by PPVT-4 assessment

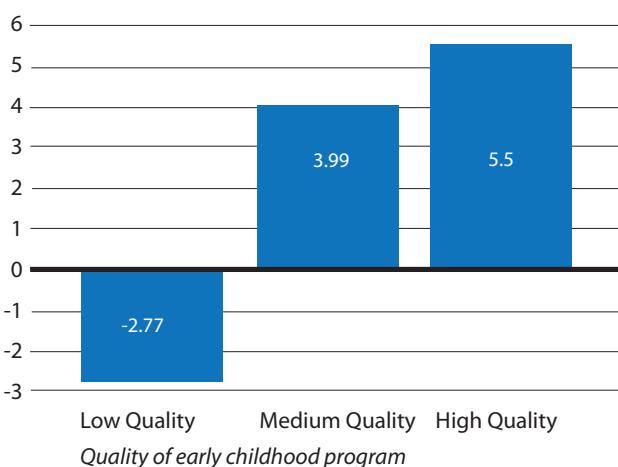


Figure 1 Source: Thornburg, et al. (2009)

who participate in Wisconsin's education database for early childhood teachers, The Registry, don't have any credit-based training at all.<sup>vii</sup>

At present, there are many challenges that contribute to the shortage of highly educated child care teachers. According to the May 2008 data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, child care teachers in Wisconsin earn an average of \$23,000 per year and rarely have any benefits. With such meager wages, it is difficult to attract well-educated individuals to enter and remain in the field. Many early childhood teachers who are already in the field don't enter or complete higher education coursework because of high costs and lack of support. In the past ten years the cost of bachelor degree tuition in Wisconsin has risen by

approximately 84% and the cost of associate degree tuition has risen by approximately 63%. Early childhood teachers, who are often non-traditional students, have found it difficult to navigate a confusing higher education system. Wisconsin has yet to form a clear point of entry into higher education for those working in the child care field.

Despite the field's lack of formal credit-based education obtainment, many providers have accumulated several years of relevant experience and many hours of non-credit based training. In fact, Wisconsin's center-based providers have accumulated an average of 164 hours of non-credit based training, and licensed family child care providers have earned an average of 190 hours<sup>viii</sup> (see figure 3). This experiential learning often addresses many components found in credit-based educational courses. Therefore, although many providers have not completed credits, they may have learned many of the same skills and concepts as those who have.

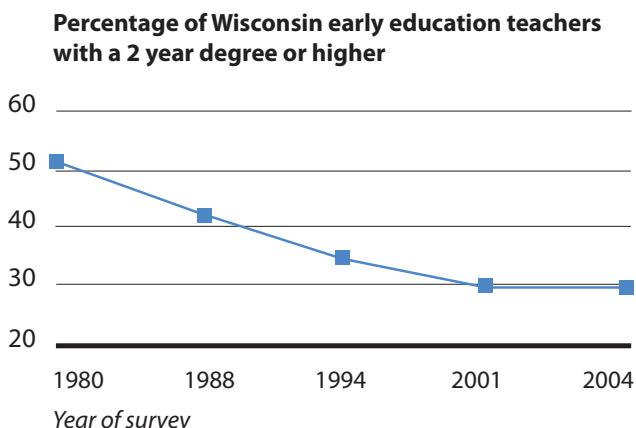


Figure 2 Source: Roach, et al. (2005)

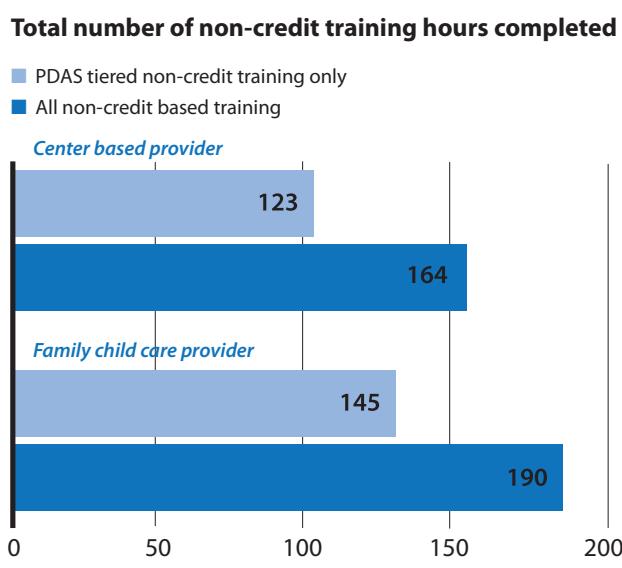


Figure 3 Source: The Registry. (2010)

### Credit for Prior Learning as a Pathway to Higher Education

One critical pathway that can be used to increase the number and percentage of child care teachers with a two- or four-year degree in the field is to offer credit for prior experiential learning. Institutes that offer credit for prior learning award degree credit(s) to individuals who can demonstrate relevant skills and knowledge that they have previously acquired through non-traditional schooling, work or other life experiences. Credit for prior learning can help child care teachers and providers ease into the sometimes confusing higher education system. A recent study by the Council for Adults & Experiential Learning (CAEL) found that credit for prior learning can significantly advance individuals' progress towards a degree.<sup>ix</sup>

This is important, not only to improve child care quality in the state, but to meet changes in qualifications and requirements in the field. The demand and legal requirements for increased educational qualifications of the early childhood workforce is on the rise. For example, recent federal legislation has mandated that at least half of all Head Start or Early Head Start teachers must hold a baccalaureate or advanced degree by 2013. Assistant teachers must hold or be enrolled in an associate credential relating to child development by the same date. In Wisconsin, public school 4-year-old kindergarten teachers must have four-year degrees, as do special education teachers serving children ages 3-5 and special educators in the Birth to 3 intervention program. Child care staff lag far behind in their education levels.

## Existing Credit for Prior Learning Programs

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) in Green Bay has an “Experienced Teacher Fast Track” that awards credit for prior learning, as part of their Early Childhood Associate Degree Program.<sup>x</sup> This is an option for early childhood teachers with 5 or more years experience who have worked with children of various ages and needs. Students in the program must create a detailed portfolio with physical documentation of prior learning. **Credit is then awarded for learning, not for experience.** College credit can be earned by reviewing transcripts received through The Registry, showing completed credit and credentials, test-out exams, and/or challenge essays. Students must demonstrate proficiency in the NWTC Early Childhood program outcomes.

Minnesota’s Metro State University offers credit for prior learning for a Bachelor’s Degree through their Early Childhood Assessment Program. The goal of their program is to “bridge non-credit training to higher education through prior learning *assessment*, higher education *articulation*, and the early childhood and school-age *career lattice*.<sup>xii</sup>

The Aspire Institute report on higher education in the ECE field recommends “(T)hat states create standardized credit for prior learning policy based on the CAEL standards and national best practices.” Credit for prior learning values experience and prior knowledge and educational attainments. “While the ultimate educational goal is a college degree. We encourage providers to start with college classes that directly impact their work with children.”<sup>xiii</sup>

## Policy Implications and Possibilities for Wisconsin

If the educational level and expertise of early childhood teachers is a key to quality, Wisconsin officials and advocates should consider supporting and implementing a standardized statewide system for credit for prior learning in the early education field. A system of credit for prior learning is an opportunity to recognize the current skill and knowledge level of Wisconsin’s early childhood teachers while opening a pathway for these teachers to obtain more credit-based education. We believe that an effective system would be uniform across all institutes of higher education and potentially include the following elements:

- A uniform course for portfolio creation
- A common assessment tool for competencies to decide when/if credit can be awarded
- A clear step by step process for students to follow



- A uniform set of eligibilities (hours or years in the field, etc.), standardized requirements
- Credit for prior learning options for more than practicum courses
- Adequate training and professional development provided to personnel involved with assessing students
- A multi-faceted system with assessments, observations, meetings, references, etc.
- Funding to financially compensate personnel involved with assessing students
- Scholarship support for students pursuing credit for prior learning to address the cost of credit(s) awarded, course tuition (if applicable), and other associated expenses

If created, Wisconsin’s credit for prior learning system should also build on current efforts that are taking place to improve teacher qualifications. Wisconsin already has in place- or is planning on implementing- several programs and systems that make progress in this area. These include: The Registry, the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Wisconsin scholarship program, the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) aligned competencies, and a child care Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

**1. Build on The Registry.** Since its inception in 1991, The Registry has been acknowledging and collecting credit-based and non-credit based qualifications of providers from across the state. Providers who participate in The Registry are awarded certificates verifying that they meet entry level and continuing education requirements (as defined by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families) and documenting what specific training and education they have completed. Based on this information, providers are assigned a level of The Registry’s career ladder. A provider with higher levels of education will be assigned a higher Registry level. Employees from over 1800 Wisconsin child care centers are currently participating in or have (in the last 5 years) participated in The Registry. If a provider is a

member of The Registry, institutes of higher education can use the data to help determine what types of experiential learning the provider has completed and in turn what credit could be awarded. Consequently, those who are awarded credit for prior learning could potentially move up The Registry's ladder.

**2. T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Wisconsin scholarship program.** The T.E.A.C.H. program provides credit-based educational scholarship opportunities for early childhood teachers, family child care providers, directors and administrators who work in regulated settings. Since its inception in 1999, T.E.A.C.H. has provided around 6,850 scholarships to over 4,040 early childhood teachers to attend credit-based courses. The T.E.A.C.H. program has a variety of scholarship models that early childhood teachers can choose from to meet their needs. If a system of credit for prior learning is implemented in Wisconsin, a new T.E.A.C.H. scholarship model could be created to assist teachers as they go through the process. This model would pay for a portion of the cost of a credit for prior learning portfolio course and/or the cost of credits earned from experiential learning. Minnesota's T.E.A.C.H. program has recently added a credit for prior learning scholarship model to address this issue for Minnesota's child care workforce.

**3. Build on the WTCS aligned core competencies and uniform articulation agreements.** One of the goals of a statewide comprehensive early childhood care and education system is uniformity and accountability in training and professional development. Fortunately Wisconsin has developed a solid framework for this through the "Wisconsin Core Competencies" in nine different content areas. The 16-college Wisconsin Technical College System has also completed articulation agreements with seven UW campuses and one private four-year institution.

**4. Implement an effective Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).** In January 2010 Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle proposed YoungStar, a new quality rating and improvement system for Wisconsin child care programs.

YoungStar sets a five-star rating system for child care providers based on education, learning environment, business practices and the health and well being of children. The QRIS could incentivize providers to begin down a path of credit-based education by formally recognizing those who complete a credit for prior learning course. The QRIS would link higher payments to higher quality for programs that receive funding from the state's Wisconsin Shares programs, a subsidy program to help low-income working families pay for child care. ■

<sup>i</sup>Rolnick, A.J., & Grunewald, R. (2007, January 4). *Early intervention on a large scale*. Education Weekly, 26(17), 32, 34-36.

<sup>ii</sup>Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>iii</sup>Partnership for America's Economic Success. *Long-Term economic benefits of investing in early childhood programs: Proven programs boost economic development and benefit the nation's fiscal health*. [www.partnershipforsuccess.org](http://www.partnershipforsuccess.org)

<sup>iv</sup>Thornburg, K.R., Mayfield, W.A., Hawks, J.S., and Fuger, K.L. (October 2009). *The Missouri Quality Rating System School Readiness Study: Executive Summary*. Center for Family Policy & Research, University of Missouri. Columbia, MO.

<sup>v</sup>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).

<sup>vi</sup>National Research Council (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy. Bowman, B.T., Donovan, M.S., and Burns, M.S., editors. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>vii</sup>Roach, M.A., Adams, D.A., Riley, D.B., and Edie, D. (2002) *Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership Issue Brief #8: What characteristics relate to child care quality?* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension.

<sup>viii</sup>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.

<sup>ix</sup>Adams, D., Durant, D., Edie, D., Ittig, M., Riley, D., Roach, M., Welsh, S., and Zeman, D. (2003). *Trends over time: Wisconsin's child care workforce*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension.

<sup>x</sup>Roach, M.A., Adams, D.B., Riley, D.A., Edie, D., and Kim, Y. (2005). *Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership Issue Brief #16: What do we know about the workforce in child care centers?* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension.

<sup>xi</sup>The Registry. [www.the-registry.org](http://www.the-registry.org).

<sup>xii</sup>The Registry. Report created 4/8/2010 using data on record with The Registry. Data sample: all persons listed on Registry data who have ever received a certificate within an expiration date after 1/1/2007. [www.the-registry.org](http://www.the-registry.org)

<sup>xiii</sup>Klein-Collins, R. (2010). *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Chicago, IL.

<sup>xiv</sup>Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. [http://www.nwtc.edu/academics/ProgTeamSites/EarlyChildhood/Documents/Fast\\_Track\\_Handbook.pdf](http://www.nwtc.edu/academics/ProgTeamSites/EarlyChildhood/Documents/Fast_Track_Handbook.pdf)

<sup>xv</sup>Metro State University. [http://www.metrostate.edu/msweb/explore/cps/departments/ecap/success\\_stories.html](http://www.metrostate.edu/msweb/explore/cps/departments/ecap/success_stories.html)

<sup>xvi</sup>Washington, V. (2008). *Role, relevance, reinvention: Higher education in the field of early care and education*. Boston: Wheelock College.

*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.*

**Spring 2010, Volume 1.**

**Wisconsin Early Childhood Association**

744 Williamson Street, Suite 200  
Madison, WI 53703  
800.783.9322 | [wisconsinearlychildhood.org](http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org)

**WeCa**

Wisconsin Early Childhood Association  
*Because small lives get bigger*

**Wisconsin Council on Children and Families**

555 West Washington Avenue, Suite 200  
Madison, WI 53703  
608.284.0580 | [wccf.org](http://wccf.org)

