



The State of Wisconsin's Early Care and Education Workforce

A RECOMMENDATIONS BRIEF BY



Wisconsin Early
Childhood Association

The [Wisconsin Early Childhood Association](#) (WECA) is grateful to the [Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#) for funding the research completed by [COWS](#) and the [UW-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty](#) on the state of Wisconsin's early care and education (ECE) workforce. The results from three surveys (Teachers, Program Directors and Family Child Care), which complete the Series of Studies of the Wisconsin Early Education Workforce, are deeply concerning and illustrate the long-known but ongoing grave state of Wisconsin's ECE system. In response to key findings, WECA contends it is time for our state to invest in child care as the public good that it is and support a system of care not just financed by working families.

It is disappointing, but not surprising that since the 2015 Child Care Workforce Study was completed by COWS and the UW Survey Center, so little has changed for the ECE workforce. By and large, child care allows parents to work, while supporting the optimal development of our youngest children. A failure to respond to the constant under-resourcing of an ECE system fails the ECE workforce, families, and communities. Child care deserts exist across

much of the state, including nearly 70 percent of rural Wisconsin.¹ ECE professionals are woefully underpaid while doing vital work, and families struggle to access and afford care. Meanwhile, businesses are challenged with finding and retaining workers, and communities suffer social and economic consequences as a result.

We want to be especially direct – the early care and education system was broken long before the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the economic insecurity and challenges experienced by the workforce. The pandemic's effects only make the need for meaningful change more urgent.

It is especially important that we prioritize this workforce now. More than 25,000 Wisconsinites, over 97 percent of them women, are employed in ensuring hundreds of thousands of our children are safe, healthy and having key developmental needs met while their mothers, fathers, and guardians work. These professionals are the workforce behind Wisconsin's workforce. Their contributions are critical to the economic well-being of our state and to both the current and next generation of workers.

That said, key findings from the 2020 Wisconsin Early Care and Education Workforce Reports include:

- **A highly educated and experienced ECE workforce.** Nearly 83 percent of surveyed teachers have some college education or college degree, and more than 27 percent have a bachelor's or post-graduate degree. ECE professionals also are highly experienced – teachers surveyed have been working in the field for an average of 10 years.²
- **Low, unlivable wages.** The median wage for starting ECE lead teachers is \$12.00 an hour (\$24,960 annually) and assistant teachers, \$10 an hour (\$20,800 annually). At this rate, lead teachers are in the bottom 20 percent of all Wisconsin workers' starting wages, and assistant teachers are in the bottom 10 percent. In this sector, educational attainment does not significantly increase ECE wages – the 2019 median wage for all workers in Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree or higher was \$28.70 an hour, compared to just \$12 to \$15 for ECE teachers with similar education.³
- **Lack of access to benefits.** Just 52 percent of ECE programs offer health insurance, and only 20 percent of ECE teachers participate in employer-sponsored health insurance.⁴
- **Serious staffing crisis.** More than 25 percent of ECE teachers reported looking for a new job in the past six months and a near-equal proportion plan to leave the field in the next two years. Half plan to leave in the next five years. This sentiment is driven primarily by the aforementioned strain of low compensation.⁵
- **Loss of family child care providers.** The number of family child care providers fell by nearly 25 percent over the past five years, an especially troubling data point because family child care is where Wisconsin experiences the most provider racial diversity.⁶

Accordingly, it has never been more important to unapologetically support and value the workforce that remains the backbone of the state and nation's entire workforce. The survey findings reinforce what is so obvious – child care is a broken business model with an underpaid workforce serving families who cannot, and should not be asked to, pay more for care.

As a leading expert on early childhood education in Wisconsin for more than five decades, WECA is uniquely positioned to observe the longstanding struggles – and enduring commitment – of the ECE workforce that is vital for healthy child development and a strong, thriving economy. WECA is a partner with this workforce in an abundance of ways – through key programs, education, training, research and advocacy.

Importantly, WECA's experience informs its belief that ECE is essential infrastructure – human and economic – as important as transportation infrastructure of roads and bridges, and therefore critical to the optimal development of Wisconsin's youngest children. When our state's youngest children receive high quality care and education, they grow and develop into healthy, productive adults, they have parents who are able to go to work, and the economy is able to thrive because businesses can function and be profitable. Research on the return on investment (ROI) of quality ECE shows intergenerational, long-term benefits include increased employment, improved health and cognitive and emotional skills, and lower criminal activity and violent crime in male children.⁷

Federal COVID relief funding for ECE remains vital in allowing programs to remain open, paying increased costs of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and sanitation supplies, compensating staff and caring for children of essential workers. As described earlier in this brief, the pandemic exacerbated the economic insecurity and challenges felt by the ECE workforce, but the challenges existed long before March 2020. Aid from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) assisted with supporting providers and families during this particularly challenging time. That, combined with anticipation of the state providing additional support

for child care through its American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Child Care Development Block Grant and Stabilization fund, means Wisconsin will see a combined federal investment of more than \$865 million to support ECE.

Support from both Governor Tony Evers and the Wisconsin State Legislature also has been important as we move toward a more sustainable future for ECE. The state's Joint Finance Committee swiftly moved to approve COVID relief funds throughout the pandemic to quickly get needed support to ECE programs across the state. Moreover, the Legislature in the last budget cycle authorized increasing the child care share subsidy rate to 65 percent of market, which has meant more money to support low-income families in paying for care and, in turn, more support for ECE programs. In addition to relief funds designated by the federal government for child care, Governor Evers allocated an additional \$50 million in Wisconsin's CARES Act funding to support the ECE system.

ECE is a **public good** that requires **sustained public funding** for the sake of healthy child development and economic stability and growth. Federal and state COVID relief support continues to be critical but are short-term stop gaps for a larger, long-term issue: the chronic under-resourcing of care for our youngest children.

Therefore, WECA recommends the following to permanently transform ECE in Wisconsin:

- Sweeping state and federal investments after pandemic relief funds are exhausted to ensure ongoing stability of ECE in Wisconsin;
- Establishing compensation and benefit parity commensurate with education for the ECE workforce with elementary and secondary education to retain the qualified and passionate staff our children deserve;
- Ensuring diversity and racial equity in ECE programs to help all Wisconsin communities thrive;
- Investing in and expanding programs that assist with educational opportunity and rewarding professionals for commitment to the field, including T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood[®] WISCONSIN and the REWARD Wisconsin Stipend Program.

WECA recommends sweeping state and federal investments after relief funds are exhausted to ensure ongoing stability in this critically important sector. The relief funding cannot be one-and-done investments, or the state will experience deepening strains on its fragile system of care. The child care system knows what is needed, the state knows what is needed, our communities know what is needed, and policymakers have heard what is needed: substantial public investments to repair this long under-resourced system.

"We can no longer ask those caring for our children to work for unlivable wages and face their own food insecurity. We can no longer look to parents to pay more for care when the cost is already burdensome. And, we can no longer ask employers to experience the burden of their workers – parents – struggling to find and maintain child care," said Ruth Schmidt, WECA's Executive Director.

"It is time to come together and take meaningful action to solve an issue that's been lingering and escalating for years."

The Wisconsin ECE Workforce Reports confirmed this need with a striking reality – wage growth in the ECE sector remained lower than other low-wage jobs despite the influx of increased public funding for the ECE system as part of federal and state COVID relief.⁸

WECA recommends moving the ECE workforce toward compensation and benefits in parity with elementary and secondary educators. Research shows early care and education is vital for child development, making compensation for those working with our youngest children critical. ECE providers should be able to focus on children and not their personal financial concerns. The Wisconsin ECE Workforce Reports indicate the 2019 median wage for workers with bachelor's degrees or higher was \$28.70 per hour, compared to \$12 to \$15 for ECE teachers. Regardless of education level, ECE teacher wages are below the 2019 state median wage for workers with a high school degree – \$16.91 per hour compared to \$10 to \$11 for an ECE teacher.⁹

This reality, coupled with low availability of and participation in benefits, like health insurance and retirement, makes prioritizing fair and equitable compensation critical moving forward. While there has been an increase in the availability of health insurance and retirement benefits, participation remains low compared to other industries. Just 52 percent of programs offer health insurance, and just one in five teachers participate in employer-sponsored plans. Cost puts health insurance out of reach for many ECE teachers. In addition, just 53 percent of programs offer a retirement plan with an employer contribution regardless of worker contribution, according to the Wisconsin ECE Workforce Reports.¹⁰

The wage reality also is harsh for family child care providers, who, when accounting for number of children in care and total hours worked, make \$7.46 an hour, which barely exceeds Wisconsin's minimum hourly wage of \$7.25. These providers also struggle with access to benefits, like health insurance and contributing to retirement.¹¹

Most striking is food insecurity. One in five family child care providers say they are worried food – that is, food for themselves and their own families – may run out during the month. That is shameful and unacceptable.¹²

Despite experiencing unlivable wages, Wisconsin's dedicated ECE professionals have continued to work tirelessly with commitment and heart because their passion is caring for and developing children – passion WECA sees in its daily work and a fact provided in the data: More than 80 percent of child care center teachers say they work in ECE because it is their career.¹³ This career is vital for the healthy development of our youngest children, as research shows the first five years of life are the period of most rapid brain development. In short, well-prepared, supported, and compensated ECE professionals, in turn, develop well-prepared, supported and healthy children.¹⁴

The ECE system, as it stands, is no longer sustainable. This is illustrated by the substantial number of professionals working in group child care saying they either have started looking for a new job or plan to leave the field over the course of the next five years. Why? Lack of appropriate compensation, benefits, and available advancement opportunities. It is not surprising that family child care providers, too, are contemplating leaving the field over the next five years despite their deep passion for children, child development and their work.

Compensation and benefits are not only strains for current ECE professionals – they also create a key recruitment challenge and strain on the future of the industry in the struggle to hire new teachers. A recent survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) shows nearly 80 percent of Wisconsin programs are experiencing staffing shortages with low wages as a key recruitment challenge. The survey, completed by more than 600 Wisconsin child care programs, also shows more than 75 percent of the state’s child care programs are experiencing staffing shortages, 50 percent of those working in child care less than one year indicating they would be leaving the field, and another 17 percent saying they may close their program in the next year, which would mean the potential loss of 780 programs across the state.¹⁵

Given the full scope of challenges in the ECE sector, **WECA recommends ensuring diversity and racial equity in ECE programs to help communities thrive.** This should be true at all levels of care – family child care, and teachers and program directors in group child care centers. This is especially critical because of what the data illustrates about family child care providers and group programs. While we have seen an increase in the diversity of family child care providers, we have seen a significant lack of diversity in those in leadership roles in group child care programs – with family child care providers the lowest wage earners in the field and program directors the highest earners.¹⁶

According to the Wisconsin ECE Workforce Reports, 21 percent of family child care providers are Black and 7 percent are Hispanic/Latino. The proportion of Black providers in particular substantially exceeds the overall Black population share in Wisconsin – more than three times, in fact. The proportion of

Hispanic/Latino providers also is greater than the overall population share in Wisconsin. Additionally, there is linguistic diversity in family providers, with 14 percent teaching in a language other than English and, by extension, serving as a vital resource for children in their preferred language.¹⁷ Since the 2015 workforce study, we have seen a 13 percent increase in the diversity of family child care providers. These are all great assets and strengths of the family child care portion of the ECE system.

It is equally critical to note, then, the 25 percent decline in family providers since 2015 because it means a decline in racially and culturally sensitive care for Black and Brown children.¹⁸

Additionally, the family child care provider data shows the strain of low compensation and benefits. The data shows an increasing trend of family providers looking to leave the ECE field. The data shows family child care providers experience their own food insecurity.

Because family child care providers are more racially and ethnically diverse, the data also shows these are not only economic issues – they also are equity issues and need to be addressed accordingly.

It is critical that workforce studies gather race and ethnicity data, like that provided in the recent Wisconsin ECE Workforce Reports. Even broader data will allow us to dig more deeply into the considerations and implications of these trends, their impacts on the field and how we can move toward a more equitable ECE system.

Finally, WECA recommends investing in and expanding programs that assist with educational opportunity and rewarding professionals for commitment to the field. Higher education for early childhood educators can contribute to increased quality care environments for children but tuition rates create a barrier to access. T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® WISCONSIN, launched in 1999, provides higher education scholarships to professionals who work in regulated early childhood and school-age care settings. The REWARD Wisconsin Stipend Program, established in 2001, provides salary supplements for educational attainment and longevity.

T.E.A.C.H. provided scholarships to 935 early educators working in 391 group programs and 126 family child care providers from July 2020 through June 2021. T.E.A.C.H. Scholars continue to indicate their appreciation for this valuable program, with 100 percent indicating they would recommend the program to their peers and 98 percent of their employers saying they would recommend it. During the most recent fiscal year, REWARD sent 2,340 stipends to 1,486 individuals working at 951 unique child care programs, with an average stipend of \$268 sent every six months.¹⁹

Both programs continue a very low turnover rate, illustrating each fulfill their mission to support and foster educational attainment and retention in this vital sector. Combined together, they are essential complements to sweeping public investments in ECE.

"We have a timely opportunity to forever change the early care and education system for the better," Schmidt said. "The right investments – substantial ongoing public investments which directly support the early childhood workforce – are vital for families, businesses and our communities to thrive. It is time for Wisconsin to act."

When investments are made in early care and education, children, families, businesses, and communities benefit.

What is good for children – and the adults who care for and educate them – is sound public policy.

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weca Wisconsin Early
Childhood Association

2908 Marketplace Drive., Suite 101
Fitchburg, WI 53719
800-783-9322
wisconsinearlychildhood.org

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