



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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Investing in Early Learning

Wisconsin has a strong history of support for early care and education. Our state's 1848 Constitution made a commitment to early education. In the last 20 years, Wisconsin has greatly expanded four-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 emphasis has been on access to services, not high-quality learning experiences for our children.

While the progress made is commendable, the quality of the services available to our youngest citizens and their parents ranges widely, with only a small portion of our care and education settings considered high quality.

Wisconsin has always had a strong work ethic. Sixty-six percent of our children under age 6 have all parents working. Our working families want 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 confirms that 85 percent of a child's intellect and personality is formed by age five. Research also demonstrates early childhood settings that promote healthy development and stimulate early learning help children achieve in school and in life, with particularly positive impacts on disadvantaged children. Unfortunately, the access of children and families to high quality early learning experiences is unduly influenced by the wealth of the communities they live in. 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 all children to have a foundation for success, regardless of family income. Investing in early learning is 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 education programs have the highest rate of return on any investment.

Elements of Quality Early Learning Programs

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

- Qualified staff
- Small staff-to-child ratios and group size
- 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 in programs serving our children, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with 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. Improve Qualifications of Teachers and Providers

The educational qualifications of adults providing care and education to young children is a key to quality. Research confirms that well-qualified teachers and providers form warm, nurturing relationships with children and establish effective

early learning opportunities, providing the foundation for early learning. Research also shows that coursework in child development combined with technical assistance enhances the skills of those working with young children and improves early learning. This proposal provides scholarships and training opportunities for teachers and providers, combined with salary supplements for qualified teachers.

Governor Doyle's budget proposes a \$1.2 million per year increase in scholarship funding. WCCF and the Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition support the Governor's proposal, and support an additional \$2.3 million per year to bring scholarship funding back to where it was in 2001-03.

2. Establish a Statewide Quality Improvement System

Statewide quality improvement systems for child care programs are designed to provide a mechanism for measuring and improving the quality of early care and education programs. WCCF and the Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition support establishment of a Quality Rating System (QRS) focused particularly on programs serving low-income children funded by Wisconsin Shares, the state child care subsidy program.

A quality rating system that provides parents with the information they need to make good choices and offers fiscal incentives to improve quality has great promise in transforming the quality of child care settings. QRS provide a benchmark for measuring progress in improving early learning settings for children, both at state and local community levels.

Research from other states that have well-designed quality rating systems shows promising increases in child care quality on a broad scale. For instance, North Carolina has increased the percent of child care programs meeting high-quality standards from 20% to 80% over 13 years, using a quality rating system plus additional resources to improve quality.

WCCF and the Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition support Governor Doyle's proposal for

a child care quality rating system. We believe the proposal would be enhanced by the creation of a statewide network of technical assistance for early care and education practitioners, with a strong emphasis on integrating children with disabilities into settings with non-disabled peers.

3. Expand 4K Options

Four-year-old Kindergarten (4K) helps all children be prepared for school, regardless of what families can afford. Our proposal for 4K expansion recommends an increase in community collaboration among public schools, child care programs, Head Start, private preschools, and programs serving children with disabilities or special needs. A recent study of collaborative 4K in Wisconsin found benefits for children, families, public schools, and non-public early care and education programs.

Our proposal also would provide start-up grants to help school districts cover the expenses of the first two years of a 4K program. Experience over the last decade has shown that initial costs of implementing 4K have been a significant barrier to many school districts.

Recent research of pre-kindergarten programs in five states by the National Institute for Early Institution Research shows that state-funded preschool programs with qualified teachers produces significant gains in children's learning and development, across all income groups.

Governor Doyle has proposed a start-up fund to help school districts begin 4K programs, with preference to districts planning with community-based delivery models. WCCF and the Wisconsin Early Learning Coalition support the Governor's start-up proposal, and also support fiscal incentives in the school aids formula to promote "community approaches" to 4K delivery.

Cost Analysis

Phasing in implementation of these three early learning proposals is estimated to cost \$6.6 million in the first year of the biennium and \$10.7 million in the second year.