



Brief & to the Point

Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership

Issue Brief No. 15 June 2005

Wisconsin's Early Childhood Excellence Initiative: Was child care quality maintained after state funding was reduced?

Background

State government is interested in child care quality because of its impact on school readiness and children's later development. In particular, children from low-income families are likely to benefit from high quality care, yet research shows that these children are likely to be found in programs with the lowest quality care.^{1,2} This contradiction inspired Wisconsin policy makers to fund a novel approach to improving child care quality in selected programs that served a high density of children from low-income working families.

Early Childhood Excellence Initiative

Wisconsin's Early Childhood Excellence Initiative was first proposed as a one-biennium (1999-2001), \$15 million intervention designed to improve the quality of care in programs that served high numbers of state-subsidized children from low-income families. Grants that averaged \$1,460 per child per year over a 2-year period were provided to selected *Centers for Excellence*. Although the extra funding was not enough to raise the per-child investment to the level received for first-grade children in the public schools, an evaluation conducted after the first 15 months of the Initiative indicated significant improvement in classroom quality, the quality of caregiver interaction, and caregivers' beliefs about children.³ Thus, a modest public supplement to the private child care marketplace produced immediate and significant improvement in quality of care for low-income children.

Despite this evidence of increased quality, when the state was faced with a serious budget crisis in 2001, its investment in *Centers for Excellence* was significantly reduced by well over half for the next three years. This led us to ask: "**Would level of quality in Centers for Excellence fall back to its original level, or would level of quality be maintained, in the face of reduced funding?**"

Multiple perspectives on quality

Evaluation of Wisconsin's Early Childhood Excellence Initiative has focused primarily on global assessments of classroom quality as measured by environment rating scales and subscales (ECERS-R and ITERS).⁵ However, these scales do not measure all components of quality. In this Issue Brief we focus specifically on national accreditation and on other areas related to school readiness.

National accreditation. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and national Head Start Performance Standards represent the highest current standards for child care quality. Programs that meet these high standards not only make a commitment to providing high quality classrooms, they also make significant efforts to employ staff with strong educational qualifications, use a developmentally-appropriate curriculum, have better staff-child ratios, encourage strong partnerships with parents, offer supportive services for families, and commit to ongoing evaluations of children's progress. Only 10% of child care programs in Wisconsin are nationally accredited. ***Did more Centers for Excellence become nationally-accredited over time?***

Language and literacy. From the outset, *Centers for Excellence* placed particular emphasis on language and literacy. They used their resources to purchase books and materials for children, teachers, and parents; to provide speech and language services (including exposure to foreign languages); and to train teachers to implement curricula that promote literacy, writing, and language development. ***Did Centers for Excellence demonstrate improvement over time in language and literacy?***

Research questions for this Brief:

1. What happened to quality when funding was reduced in *Centers for Excellence*?
2. Did *Centers for Excellence* achieve accreditation?
3. Did classroom quality improve in areas that matter most for school readiness?



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Wisconsin Data

Classroom observations were conducted in 24 *Centers for Excellence* in summer 2000, fall 2001, and spring 2004 and in 26 randomly-selected Comparison centers in fall 2001 and spring 2004. The initial impact of the Early Childhood Excellence Initiative was summarized in Brief #7. In the current Brief, we summarize quality of care in these same classrooms three years after funding to 24 *Centers for Excellence* was significantly reduced. Scores from the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) and Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) assessments have been combined as Environment Rating Scale (ERS) scores for each center.

What happened to quality when funding was reduced in *Centers for Excellence*?

Classroom quality

- Quality of care in *Centers for Excellence* classrooms remained significantly higher in 2004 than it had been in 2000.
- Quality of care in 2004 was significantly higher in *Centers for Excellence* than in randomly-selected Comparison center classrooms.

CONCLUSION: Surprisingly, despite a significant reduction in public funding, *Centers for Excellence* maintained their earlier gains in classroom quality for the 3-year follow-up assessment.

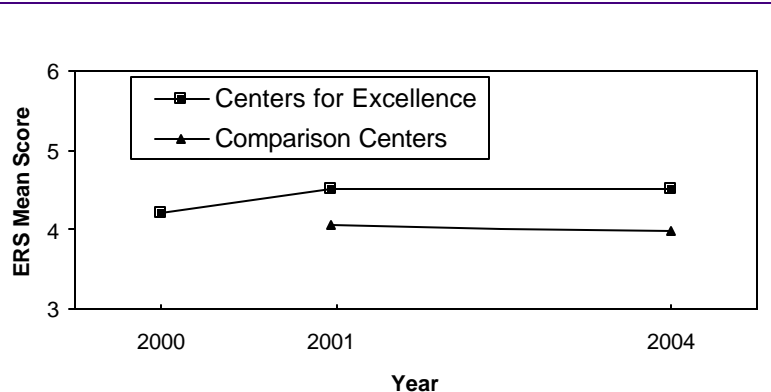


Figure 15. 1 ERS mean scores for Centers for Excellence (n=24) and Comparison centers (n=26) from 2000 to 2004

Did *Centers for Excellence* achieve accreditation?

Accreditation

- By 2004, 22 out of 24 *Centers for Excellence* were either nationally-accredited or meeting Head Start Performance Standards.
- Percentages of accredited *Centers for Excellence* and Comparison centers were about the same in 2000 and 2001; however, by 2004 significantly more *Centers for Excellence* than Comparison centers achieved these high standards.

CONCLUSION: Because national accreditation often takes several years to achieve, no increase in the number of accredited *Centers for Excellence* was seen in 2001, but a dramatic increase was observed by 2004.

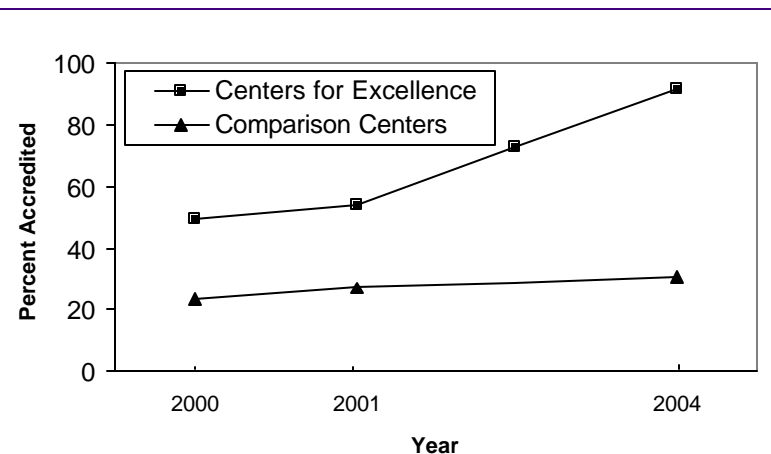
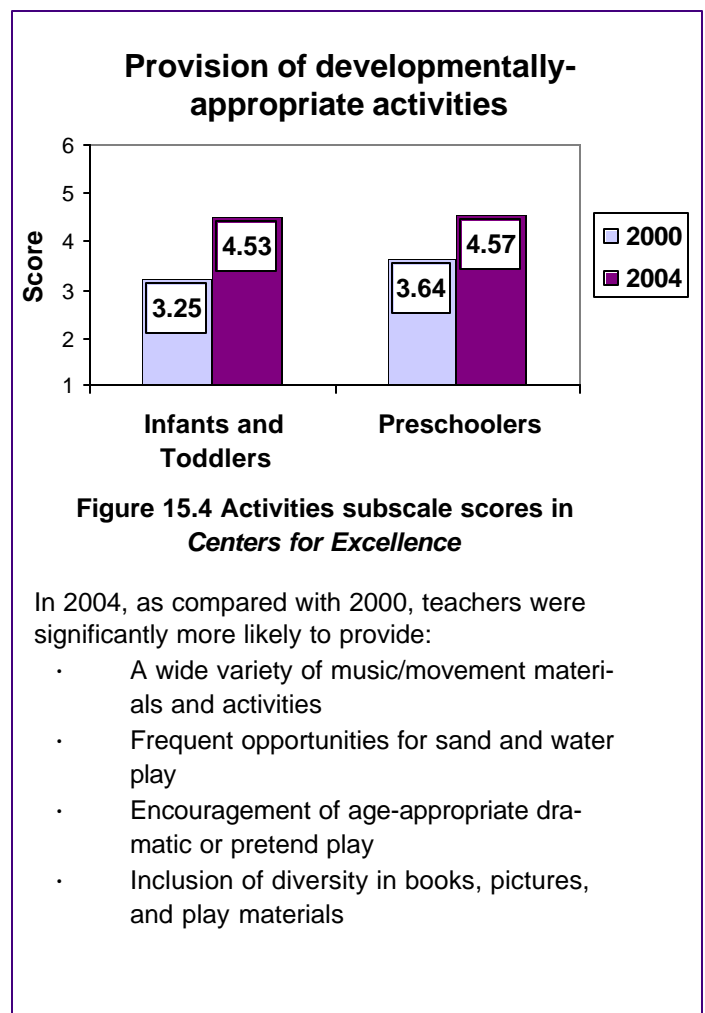
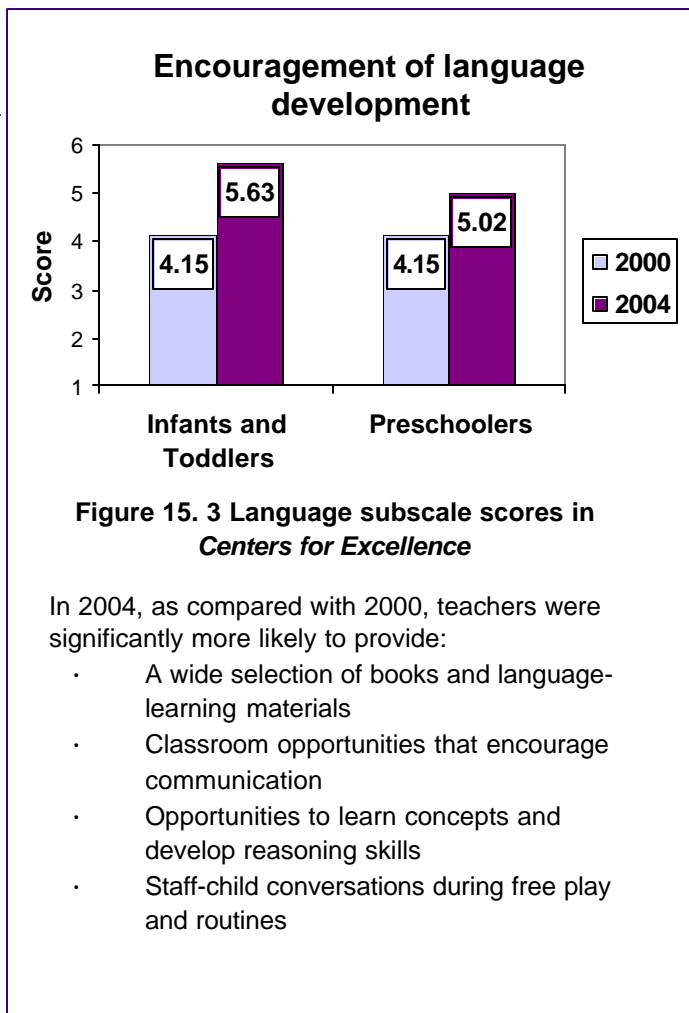


Figure 15. 2 Percentage of Centers for Excellence (n=24) and Comparison centers (n=26) that were nationally-accredited or met Head Start Performance Standards

Did classroom quality improve in areas that matter most for school readiness?

The two subscales that showed the strongest improvement over time in *Centers for Excellence* for preschool-aged and infant/toddler classrooms were “encouragement of language development” and “provision of developmentally-appropriate activities.” It is these two areas that may have the greatest impact on children’s school readiness.



Policy Implications

1. This study demonstrated the positive value of public grants to supplement early care and education programs in the private marketplace. The state-funded evaluation made it possible to demonstrate increases in the quality of care in these programs serving high numbers of children from low-income families.
2. Researchers were surprised to find sustained quality after funding was continued at a significantly reduced level. It appears that once programs have had the resources and incentives to achieve high quality they may make every effort to maintain it, suggesting that investments to improve child care quality may have surprising staying power.
3. Providing special funding to a select group of early care and education programs, rather than making funding available to all programs, may seem inequitable, however, the Excellence Initiative has provided an opportunity to determine the importance of high quality standards.

End Note: The next *Issue Brief* introduces a “Data Mapping Tool” for assessing Wisconsin child care.



Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Cooperative Extension/Family Living Programs
432 North Lake Street, Room 301
Madison, WI 53706-1498

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Issue Brief #15:

Wisconsin's Early Childhood Excellence Initiative: Was child care quality maintained after state funding was reduced?

University of Wisconsin-Extension (UWEX), Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Child Care Section, and Wisconsin Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Network have joined in partnership to assess the quality of child care for low-income children.

Leaders in the Research Partnership include Mary Roach, Diane Adams, Dave Riley and David Edie (UW-Extension). Data analyses are conducted by Jason Bierbrauer and Yae Bin Kim. "Brief & to the Point" is produced by Deb Zeman.

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We are grateful to the child care programs and providers who enthusiastically responded to our research requests, and we dedicate our findings to the young children in Wisconsin who depend upon high quality child care for their "good beginnings."



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