

Family Living Programs

Addressing the Issues of Child Care and Early Education

Situation

High quality early childhood programs are:

Good for business: Child care increases the labor pool, which eases pressure on wages.

Good for welfare reform: Wisconsin's welfare-to-work program couldn't operate without sufficient child care, and studies confirm that adults in W2-type programs retain their jobs longer when the quality of child care is higher.

Good for parents: Child care not only increases family income (by making parental employment possible), it also complements the efforts of parents to do their best in raising their children.

Good for children: High quality early childhood programs lead to greater school success, greater employment as adults, and reduced future arrests, in particular for children from low income households.

Good for taxpayers: High quality, publicly-funded early childhood programs actually save several dollars for every dollar spent, by reducing future costs (for crime and welfare) and increasing future public revenues (higher incomes pay more taxes). Rigorous cost-benefit studies have led Nobel economist James Heckman and others to call for increased public investment in early childhood programs, concluding that their return on investment far exceeds any other economic development program of government.

Response

The private marketplace has failed to produce enough high quality early childhood programs for the state. In response to this gap, UW-Extension faculty have worked to increase both the amount and quality of child care and early education in Wisconsin in five ways:

- **Directly through teaching child care staff.**

For several years we have provided a year-long series of educational programs to Wisconsin child care staff in 40 counties. The program utilizes UW-Extension's cost-saving technologies by hosting the *Better Kid Care* program (created at Penn State Cooperative Extension & Outreach) at county UW-Extension offices, which downlink a video program from a satellite relay, then conduct local discussion groups.

- **Indirectly through train-the-trainer programs.**

UW-Extension Family Living Agents share their resources with Child Care Resource & Referral staff and others who train child care teachers

- **Through distance education.**

Since 1977 we have provided a newsletter to child care programs statewide, bringing them research-based knowledge about best practices. Today the state inserts our quarterly *Child Care Connections* newsletter in its mailing to every one of the 10,500 licensed child care programs in the state. Evaluations show that child care programs use *Connections* articles in staff training, and make changes in their practices based on our articles.

- **Through community development.**

UW-Extension educators have conducted need assessments with businesses and communities, and organized community planning efforts leading to over 100 new child care programs starting in Wisconsin. In most cases these are new businesses that create new jobs as well as making parental employment possible.

- **Through policy-relevant research and public policy education.**

The UW-Extension-led *Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership* provides regular *Issue Briefs* and *Policy Options Papers* to state policy makers. In contract to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, UW-Extension has also conducted evaluations of several major state programs (the Early Childhood Excellence Initiative, the Quality Improvement Grants program, and the Child Care Scholarship and Reward Program), helping the state with an impartial and rigorous viewpoint on which parts of its policies are working as intended, and which are not. UW-Extension is also helping state government to create a data sharing system that will combine child care information from several management systems. The policy and evaluation reports are available online at www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/wccrp/publications.html. Titles include:

- *Alternative Policy Options for Child Care Subsidy Programs*
- *An Evaluation of the Quality Initiatives Program: A Report to the Office of Child Care*
- *Trends Over Time: Wisconsin's Child Care Workforce*
- *Developing a Child Care Quality Rating System: Wisconsin's Approach*

This unit within UW-Extension is completely self-funded through grants and state contracts.

UW-Extension's Unique Capacity

Why do child care staff attend our local workshops? Why do they read our statewide publications? Why does state government seek our expertise, and why did the federal government select us as one of eight national centers to conduct policy research on child care?

- **Knowledge of the content area.**

Our state staff include Ph.D.'s in child development and people experienced in teaching and directing early childhood programs. County educators, with offices in all 72 Wisconsin counties and two tribal nations, translate research into educational programs to address local needs.

- **Capability in adult education and training.**

We think of ourselves as the "adult education" and "applied research" wing of state government. UW-Extension sets the standard for bringing the research-based knowledge of the university to the professionals, practitioners and public who can use it. This is true for both the skill of our county-based educators, and the capabilities of our teaching technologies (e.g., satellite-linked video

networked to every Wisconsin county; statewide radio and computer networks; web-based teaching, etc.).

- **The state-local network.**

Local UW-Extension educators covering every county in the state are linked with university-based researchers in a single organization.

- **Evaluation expertise.**

Our evaluations are rigorous and influential, often published in peer-reviewed scientific and policy journals. We evaluate educational programs for impact and for insights on improvements.

- **We are unbiased.**

In the end, any influence we have depends upon our reputation as fair brokers of research-based knowledge.

Contact

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