

Recruiting and Retaining Low-Income Child Care Workers in Wisconsin:

**The Wisconsin Child Care Mentor Project Evaluation
A Summary of the Findings**

**Center for the Child Care Workforce
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Acknowledgments

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The Center for the Child Care Workforce is a nonprofit, research, education, and advocacy organization committed to improving child care quality by upgrading the compensation, working conditions and training of child care teachers and family child care providers.

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In the Fall of 1998, two years after Wisconsin had begun implementing state welfare reform legislation that served as a model for the federal law, the Center for the Child Care Workforce conducted an evaluation of the Wisconsin Child Care Mentor Project (WCCMP) at the request of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. The WCCMP was designed to address the twin challenges of providing work opportunities for current and former welfare recipients and building a stable supply of child care services to meet the growing demand created by welfare reform. The findings of this evaluation are of interest as policymakers assess the impact of welfare to work initiatives, specifically those in the arena of child care employment.

At the heart of the WCCMP was a belief that providing training, support, and modest incentives to new and existing child care staff could build the supply of services and improve the skills of child care workers. Specifically, WCCMP, which was implemented in five communities across Wisconsin was designed to meet three objectives:

- promote work opportunities for current and recent W-2 (welfare) participants and other low-income people, by assisting these job seekers in identifying, obtaining and keeping child care jobs
- increase the supply of child care center teaching staff and family child care providers to meet the expanding demand for services created by W-2,
- improve the quality of child care services by pursuing a two-fold strategy: 1) increasing the opportunities for entry-level teachers and providers to upgrade their caregiving and teaching skills by participating in ongoing formal education and on-site mentor training, and 2) retaining skilled personnel through advanced training and financial rewards for providing one-on-one and on-site mentoring training to new teachers and providers.

The Department of Workforce Development hoped that the WCCMP would contribute to growth among the ranks of entry-level teaching staff and providers available to care for the state's young children, while promoting educational opportunities for these same incoming staff. By turning to senior staff to provide onsite mentoring of entry-level staff, in exchange for a stipend, WCCMP sought to reward and shore up the commitment of better trained staff who have been found to offer higher quality care. The expectations for this Wisconsin program were high. Our assessment of the program ultimately revealed that while it did not deliver the expected outcome of bringing in current (at that time) W-2 participants into the child care field, many of the newer teachers already employed in child care, who did participate in the WCCMP had a history of receiving welfare benefits in the previous five years, and thus were more broadly part of the target population.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The WCCMP state pilots, which were located in Dane, Fond du Lac, Kenosha, Milwaukee, and Racine Counties, and operated by community collaboratives, comprised of a resource and referral agency, job center (agency responsible for coordinating and housing Wisconsin's TANF or W-2 services at the county level), a credit-bearing training institution, and a planning team, were modeled on a five-year program in Milwaukee that had operated with considerable success in training and supporting entry-level staff. These particular counties were selected in large part because they had a high concentration of W-2 recipients at the start of the initiative. The community mentor projects shared five key program elements:

- an instructor-led mentoring seminar with a common curriculum in which mentors build upon or improved their mentoring skills,
- an instructor-led joint protégé/mentor seminar with a common curriculum,
- on-site training in the protégé's and/or mentor's classroom or family child care home,
- college credit for mentors' and protégés' classroom and on-site work.
- stipends in recognition of mentors' work with protégés.

In the Fall of 1998 after a short recruitment period, mentors gathered together in seminars led by community college instructors to develop adult learning and other skills that would help them in their work with protégés. Recruited in the fall and winter, protégés were joined with their mentors for a joint spring mentor/protégé seminar, while meeting onsite periodically either in their center or with their mentor throughout this semester. The community collaboratives, charged with implementing the program received \$40,000 each from the state, and were expected each to provide \$5,000 of matching funds. The average cost of the program per participant was \$2,817, excluding the community matching funds.

EVALUATION DESIGN

CCW designed the evaluation of WCCMP to assess the extent to which the goals of the Department for Workforce Development were met by investigating the following questions.

1. Is the Wisconsin Mentor Project reaching W-2 and low-income entry-level teaching staff and providers, and positively influencing their job tenure and professional development, as well as the quality of care they are providing?
2. Is the Wisconsin Mentor Project attracting more experienced child care teachers and providers to be mentors, and influencing their professional development and commitment to a child care career?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Wisconsin Mentor Project as assessed by program participants, collaborators and stakeholders?

To adequately answer these questions, CCW aimed to capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives about the Wisconsin Mentor Project among mentors and protégés, project staff, collaborators and other stakeholders. Members of these groups assessed the program differently and these distinctive perspectives informed the findings of the evaluation. Reasoning that each informant's experiences and perspectives would change over the course of the project, we collected information during three phases: Fall/Winter 1998, prior to the joint mentor/protégé class (Time 1); in March 1999, with on-site visits (Time 2); and in June 1999, at the conclusion of the joint mentor/protégé class and 1998-1999 project (Time 3).

- At Time 1 CCW researchers interviewed the state coordinator and community coordinators. We also collected written survey information from mentors at the conclusion of the mentor seminar.
- We conducted a site visit at Time 2 to meet with participants and stakeholders. Research activities included: focus group discussions, observations of mentor/protégé seminars, observations of mentors and proteges in the child care classroom, and attendance at a state-wide meeting of project staff, participants, collaborators, and other stakeholders. Additionally we collected written survey information from proteges, with the assistance of community coordinators who interviewed proteges individually.
- At Time 3 CCW researchers interviewed the state coordinator and local coordinators. We collected written survey information from mentors and protégés at the conclusion of the mentor/protégé seminars.

PROTÉGÉ FINDINGSⁱ

Finding 1

The Wisconsin Mentor Project attracted protégés who had been in the child care field for several years, yet over half remained in entry-level positions, primarily, because they lacked sufficient education to advance. Protégés increased their child development qualifications through their participation in the Wisconsin Mentor Project.

- The typical protégé held assistant or aide positions; and had worked in the child care field for 3.7 years, for 1.4 years in their center, and 1 year in their current position.
- The Wisconsin Mentor Project provided close to half of protégés with their first college credit-bearing training in child development. Forty-three percent of protégés had achieved a high school diploma as their highest form of education prior to their participation in the college credit-bearing mentor/protégé seminar.

Finding 2

The Wisconsin Mentor Project recruited low-income protégés, many whom had past experience with W-2 and other public subsidy programs.

- Nearly two-thirds of protégés had formerly received some form of public assistance in the past.
- Approximately one-third of the protégés had accessed cash aid, Medicaid, child care, and/or food subsidies within the last year. An equivalent percentage of protégés had drawn on these forms of public assistance more than one year ago.
- The typical protégé is a parent with an average of 1.8 children, and has a median annual household income of \$20,000. Only one-fifth of protégés who participated in the Wisconsin Mentor Project lived in household with incomes above \$40,000.

Finding 3

Recruiting protégés and mentors proved to be more difficult than local projects had anticipated.

- Initially, community coordinators targeted their recruitment efforts to protégés who were job seekers or who were new to child care employment. In the end, all but one of the protégés was currently employed in a child care setting when they joined the Wisconsin Mentor Project. Still, the number of protégés recruited fell short of the number of projected participants.
- W-2 (Wisconsin's TANF program) and other low-income job seekers demonstrated little interest in child care employment opportunities, even with the subsidized educational benefits that becoming a protégé promised. Outreach to Job Centers did not yield protégés candidates. At the time of the program's implementation, most of these Wisconsin communities had job openings in jobs, such as factory work, that offered higher salaries and benefits than those offered in child care employment.

Finding 4

Although they increased their educational background in early childhood education by participating in the WCCMP, most protégés did not receive a raise or bonus from their centers after they had successfully completed the project.

- Only thirty percent of protégés received raises or a bonus in recognition of their increase in child development qualifications from their center. One-fifth of protégés received a promotion. Because most of the projects did not reward the protégés for

their participation with cash bonuses or other salary enhancements, their employers were the sole source of financial reward.

MENTOR FINDINGS

Finding 5

The Wisconsin Mentor Project succeeded in attracting mentors committed to child care teaching and to supporting the professional development of novice teachers. The experience of working with protégés reinforced mentors commitment.

The Wisconsin Mentor Project attracted mentors who had been, on average, in the child care field for 10 years, and employed in their centers for 6 years. In an occupation characterized by high staff turnover, mentors have been stable, holding an average of only two jobs over five years.

Finding 6

Mentors participating in the Wisconsin Mentor Project are mid-career level teachers, many of whom are intent on acquiring more formal child development training. The Wisconsin Mentor Project provided them with an opportunity to build their skills.

- In the last statewide survey conducted in Wisconsin in 1994, teachers were almost evenly split between those with BA's and above and those with AA's. A small percent had earned some college. Mentors are more likely to have some college or an AA degree as their highest educational attainment. Mentors in the Wisconsin Mentor Project are investing in their education: 30 percent were pursuing degrees in child development or a related subject at the end of the mentor/protégé seminar.

Finding 7

The Wisconsin Mentor Project, which rewards mentors for their work with protégés with a stipend, offers recognition and compensation that many mentors would not otherwise receive.

- Mentors, who have median annual household incomes of \$30,000, view the stipend as helpful, and a small percentage of mentors rely on the stipend to meet their financial needs. Many mentors reported after the conclusion of the program that their participation would be contingent on receiving compensation. One said, *I would definitely try it again because it's a good experience but I found it to be a lot of work. I don't think that I'd continue without a stipend.* Only one-third of mentors were compensated by their employers in recognition of successful completion of the Wisconsin Mentor Project.

DISCUSSION

The assessment of the WCCMP provides interesting insight into the challenges facing child care training programs geared toward TANF recipients, as well as highlighting the need for scholarships, stipends and professional support in meeting the needs of the current child care workforce, given the structure of child care employment. Although the protégés who ultimately participated in WCCMP were low-income and had past experience with public assistance, no protégé fit the mold of the W-2 job seeker that the Department of Workforce hoped to attract into the child care occupation. That entry-level staff were low-income and had relied on public assistance is not surprising, unfortunately, given the low compensation of child care teaching, but the absence of interest on the part of TANF recipients raises questions about the relevance of this kind of training program for the TANF job seeker. In a strong economy when other better paying jobs are available, current welfare recipients seeking to gain economic independence for themselves and their families may pass up even an appealing opportunity to gain no-cost training and support in favor of a better starting wage and benefits. Potential protégés were difficult to recruit across the board, suggesting that this logic may hold for potential job recruits not receiving TANF benefits.

For the primarily working poor protégés who participated in the WCCMP, the lure of no-cost education and professional support which ultimately could lead to a promotion and better pay was attractive. In some cases, protégés were staff who had been employed in child care teaching for 5 years or more and yet had not progressed above the assistant level, suggesting that the WCCMP was filling a void of affordable training and mentoring in their communities. In some cases, protégés lacked basic supplies and materials in their classrooms that allowed them to implement what they were learning in their seminar and onsite in the mentor's classrooms. One of the community programs budgeted for a classroom material fund for protégés to use to enhance their classrooms, which while expedient, only underlines the scarcity in which so many child care staff work. The modest economic support offered by the WCCMP as well as the opportunity to learn from their colleagues and instructors was highly valued by most protégés.

Protégés, who did not receive cash stipends from the WCCMP in most of the community, also unfortunately did not receive bonuses or raises from their programs in recognition of their completion of the seminar. Many child care centers lack salary schedules and/or sufficient funds to reward staff for their educational achievements. So, while increasing their education will help protégés in the long-term qualify for jobs requiring more education that should pay a higher salary, there was no immediate reward, which may undercut their commitment to the child care occupation.

Mentors, unlike protégés, were relatively easy to recruit to participate in the WCCMP. Experienced mentors valued the opportunity to come together with other senior teachers from centers in their community, and they appreciated the stipend they received in recognition of their work with protégés. The WCCMP countered the isolation that

many teachers feel in an industry in which practitioners have relatively little time to work with colleagues to plan activities, innovate practices with young children, and realize professional opportunities. While most of the programs had no problem recruiting more experienced staff and providers, identifying mentors who met the initial educational requirements of their programs proved much more difficult. In some communities, mentors ultimately were required to have completed no more than two early childhood development courses, required by state licensing to teach in the Wisconsin child care classroom. Mentor's lack of educational qualifications and experiences, in some cases, complicated their relationships with protégés by undermining their confidence in their ability to advise, particularly protégés who had several years of experience themselves already in the classroom.

Few mentors received a raise or bonus from their center in recognition of their completion of two semester-length courses. Although senior staff tend to be more likely than entry-level staff to receive the modest raises child care centers can afford, improvements in education are not systematically rewarded by most child care programs. Mentors, whose median household incomes averaged \$30,000, were typically members of moderate income households, and thus salary enhancements would prove very welcome and support continued involvement in this important project.

In summary, the Wisconsin Child Care Mentor Program, by underwriting the cost of ongoing education and providing modest financial incentives made a crucial contribution to the training and support of entry-level and mid-career level child care employees in five communities in Wisconsin. Child care employers, who rely largely on parent fees for funding their programs, typically have very limited resources to reward employees' educational credentials and support staff retention and ongoing training through wage increases. There is a tremendous need for programs like the WCCMP in the child care field to help teaching staff gain the education that will provide them with opportunities for modest economic advancement from, for example, an assistant to teacher position. The ability of WCCMP to recruit new staff into child care center employment, particularly those who have been dependent on public assistance, however remains limited, in large part because of the nature of child care employment, which is typically low-wage and without benefits. Programs which desire to recruit TANF recipients for child care employment will likely need to provide more intensive support and longer-term training to allow participants to access jobs in child care with higher pay and benefits.

ⁱ These findings are based on the data collection methods detailed in the evaluation design section. Three mentor/protégé seminars, and 2 mentor/protégé on-site training sessions in child care classrooms were observed during the site visit. Additionally 6 focus groups were conducted with separate groups of mentors and protégés in three communities. Response rates to the written surveys were as follows: Time 1 Mentor Survey = 89% (N= 31), Time 2 Protégé Survey = 83% (N=30), Time 3 Mentor Survey = 57% (N=20), Time 4 Protégé Survey = 31% (N=10). Surveys with lower response rates were augmented by the selective collection of additional data.