

Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five

Wisconsin's Early Care and Education Workforce

Executive Summary

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Wisconsin Department of
Children and Families

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This executive summary examines Wisconsin's Early Care and Education (ECE) workforce and the impact of COVID-19 on the field. It combines findings from three reports describing results from three surveys administered during 2020 and 2021.

- [Directors of regulated group ECE programs](#) (late 2020),
- [Teachers employed at center-based group ECE programs](#) (late 2020 to early 2021), and
- [Family providers](#) (spring of 2021).

The surveys were prepared for Wisconsin's Department of Children and Families by the UW-Madison Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) and the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP), in partnership with the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (WECA) and the UW Survey Center. Survey questions focused on workforce characteristics, wages and benefits, intentions to leave the field, the use and knowledge of professional development programs, and the impact of COVID-19 on child care operations.

Impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a notable impact on ECE operations including declining enrollment (and the associated diminished tuition income) and increased work intensity (e.g. more time spent cleaning).

Average enrollment declined for child care providers following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Center-based program enrollment declined from an average of 59 children prior to COVID-19 to 46 children. Family providers saw a 17 percent decline from an average of 6 to 5 children in their care.

While center-based programs saw a decline in enrollment, only about a quarter attributed the decline to local COVID-19 regulations. However, this varied by region, where programs in the Southern and Southeastern reported a higher impact of public health mandates. The primary drivers of enrollment decline were reduced demand for child care and difficulties recruiting and retaining teaching staff.

Both family providers and center-based directors relied heavily on COVID-19 resources available through local health departments, the Department of Health Services, and the Department of Children and Families.

Workforce Size

From 2015 to 2021, the number of center-based lead and assistant teachers increased by 9 percent (from 19,530 to 21,206) while the number of family providers decreased by 25 percent (from 2,664 to 1,995). The decline in family providers is a long-standing trend in Wisconsin; Family providers now represent only about 9 percent of the overall ECE workforce.

Demographics of Workforce

The ECE workforce is almost entirely female, with high levels of education. Eighty-three percent of center-based teachers and 82 percent of family providers have some level of higher education.

Family providers are slightly older and more racially diverse than center-based teachers: 68 percent of family providers are white with a median age of 51, whereas 83 percent of center-based teachers are white with a median age of 34¹. A large share of family providers identify as Black (21 percent), up from 13 percent in 2015. A slightly higher percentage of center-based teachers speak a language other than English (15 percent) compared to family providers (12 percent).

Wages, Benefits, and Job Tenure

In 2020, the median hourly wage was \$12.99 for center-based teachers and the equivalent of \$7.46 for family providers. The wage for family providers, estimated based on a typical 60-hour work week, is just above the federally-required minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. With low hourly wages, most family providers rely on additional sources of income. The most frequently reported sources are a spouse's income (61 percent) and a second job (20 percent). Moreover, 27 percent of center-based teachers and 20 percent of family providers indicated being worried that food might run out in their household by the end of the month.

ECE professionals have a long tenure to the field, with a median of 15 years' experience for family providers, a median of 7 years' experience for center-based teachers.

Only one fifth of center-based teachers receive health insurance through their employer, although slightly over half of teachers work in programs that offer it. About one fourth of family providers purchase their own health insurance. An additional 38 percent of family providers receive insurance through their spouse/partner's employer compared to 26 percent of center-based teachers. Twelve percent of center-based teachers and 8 percent of family providers have no health insurance.

ECE professionals relied extensively on public benefits; indeed **26 percent of center-based teachers and 34 percent of family providers reported that they (or someone else in their household) were enrolled in either BadgerCare or Medicare, and 14 percent of all ECE professionals benefitted from FoodShare.**

Turnover and Retention

The majority of center-based teachers (8 out of 10) report that they work in ECE because it is their chosen career or profession. These results point to a high level of commitment to the ECE field.

¹ In some instances, the Teacher Report presents age and experience as means, rather than medians. For comparability across reports, we present age and experience of center-based teachers as medians, which was provided by the authors.

Although teachers reported working in their current ECE program for an average of 5 years, 22 percent of them reported being at their job for less than one year, suggesting a high degree of turnover. Low wages and challenging working conditions seem to be contributing to high turnover levels and intentions to leave the field. For instance, 22 percent of center-based teachers reported that it was very or extremely difficult to live on their household income and 27 percent worried that their food might run out by the end of the month.

A substantial percentage of ECE professionals (39 percent of center-based teachers and 42 percent of family providers) reported “feeling used up by the end of day” a few times per week or every day.

Within the next five years, 50 percent of center-based teachers, 66 percent of center-based directors, and 37 percent of family providers plan to leave the ECE field. For family providers and center-based directors, over half who intend to leave the ECE field plan to retire.

For ECE professionals who reported planning to leave for reasons other than retirement, the most frequently reported reason was to find a job that pays more, with more benefits, or with more opportunity for advancement.

T.E.A.C.H. and REWARD Programs

Wisconsin’s T.E.A.C.H. and REWARD programs support professional development and compensation for the ECE workforce. Participation rates in each of the programs were lower for center-based teachers than family providers. Awareness of the programs was also lower for center-based teachers than family providers.

For the T.E.A.C.H. program, 14 percent of the center-based teachers participated in the program and 38 percent never heard of the program. In comparison, 28 percent of family providers participated in the T.E.A.C.H. program and 21 percent never heard of the program.

For the REWARD program, 20 percent of center-based providers participated in the program and 62 percent never heard of the program. In comparison, 30 percent of family providers participated in the REWARD program and 46 percent never heard of the program.

Conclusion

Wisconsin’s ECE teaching workforce is growing slowly and shifting from family to center-based employment. ECE professionals of all program types bring diversity, experience, and education to the field. The extremely low wages coupled with a lack of benefits directly impact the noticeably high turnover in the ECE workforce despite the stated desire to stay in the field. Wisconsin must act to celebrate and support ECE professionals to stabilize the workforce and ensure our state’s children are well cared for.