

Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines Revision Project: Phase 1 Findings Brief

What We Heard & What Happens Next

In 2025, three state government agencies partnered with Marzano Research to review the [Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards \(WMELS\)](#).

This brief report outlines why this work matters, what we heard, and what happens next. To learn more, visit [Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines Revision Project](#).



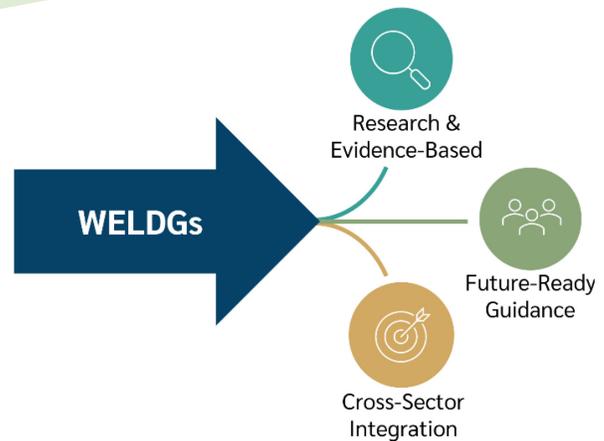
The Update Will Reflect...

- ✓ **USER FEEDBACK**
- ✓ **NEW RESEARCH** in the field
- ✓ **PROMISING INNOVATIONS** from other states

Why This Work Matters

For more than 20 years, the WMELS have helped guide how young children grow and learn across the state. Created and managed through statewide early childhood system collaboration, the WMELS give early childhood programs, educators, and families a shared understanding of how to support children’s learning and development from birth through the early years.

The most recent update in 2017 made the WMELS easier to find and use, but the research behind the guidelines had not been fully updated in many years. Since then, we have learned much more about how young children’s brains develop, how they learn to manage emotions, and how experiences like stress, language, family relationships and well-being, and community factors shape development.





As part of this update, Wisconsin is intentionally shifting from the term *early learning standards* to *early learning and development guidelines*. This change reflects federal language and a broader purpose: providing guidance that supports children’s growth while recognizing the important role of families, educators, and other caregivers across many settings. While the final title will be confirmed later, this brief uses *Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WELDGs)* to describe the next version of the current WMELS.

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF), working with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Department of Health Services (DHS), hired Marzano Research to lead a statewide review of the WMELS. The goal was to make sure the updated guidelines are based on current research, easy to use, and responsive to the needs of all children, families, and early childhood professionals in the state. This work combined a review of research with input from people across Wisconsin who work with and care for young children.

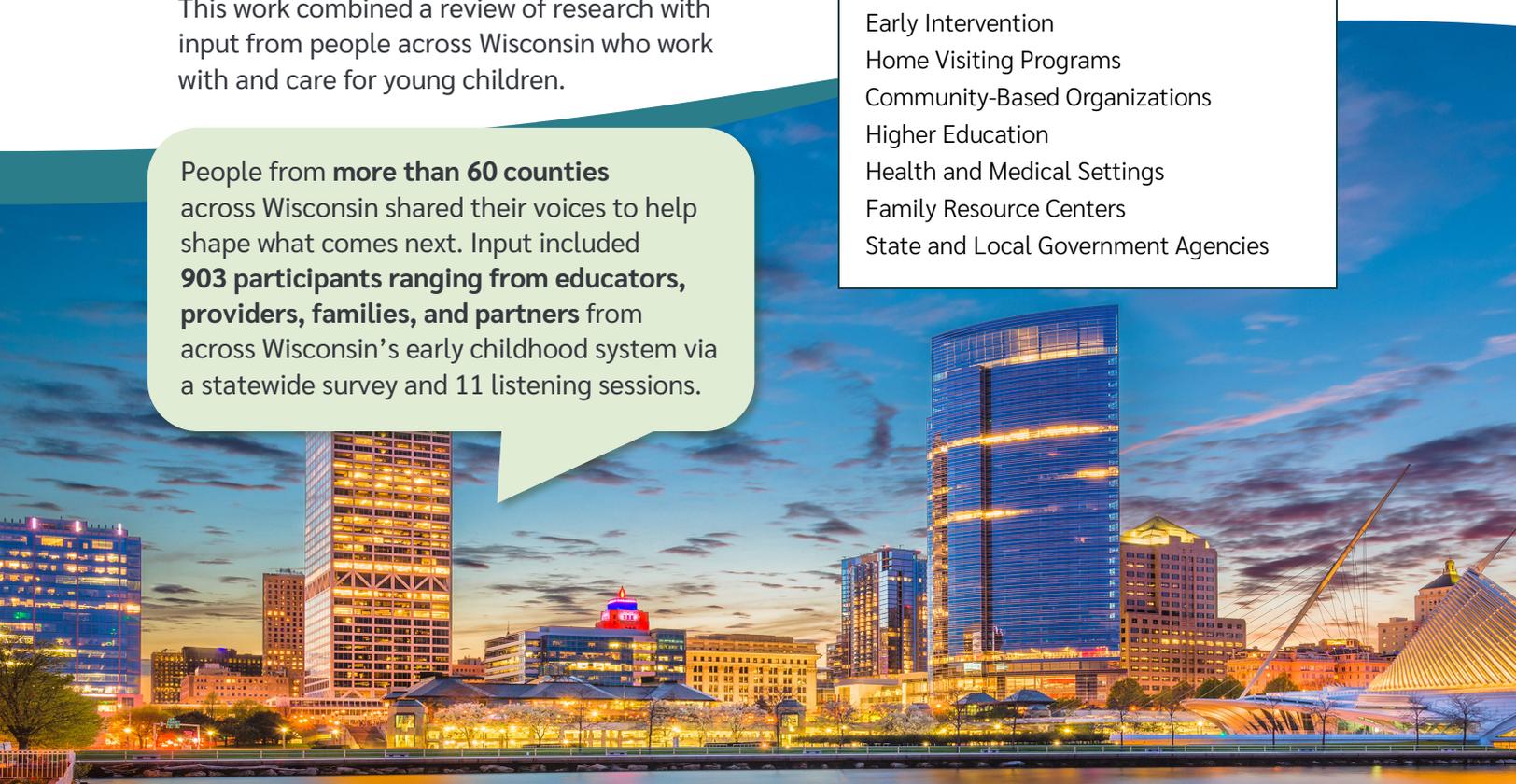
People from **more than 60 counties** across Wisconsin shared their voices to help shape what comes next. Input included **903 participants ranging from educators, providers, families, and partners** from across Wisconsin’s early childhood system via a statewide survey and 11 listening sessions.

WHO SHARED INPUT

- Educators
- Program Leaders
- Family Child Care Providers
- Health and Mental Health Professionals
- Home Visitors
- Higher Education Faculty
- Coaches
- Technical Assistance Providers
- Families
- State, Tribal, and County Staff
- Special Education Professionals

WHERE THEY WORK

- Public Schools (4K–Grade 1)
- Center-Based Child Care
- Home-Based Child Care
- Head Start and Early Head Start
- Early Intervention
- Home Visiting Programs
- Community-Based Organizations
- Higher Education
- Health and Medical Settings
- Family Resource Centers
- State and Local Government Agencies



What We Heard

Strong agreement on what to keep.

Participants consistently shared that the WMEELS' strengths include focus on play, strong relationships, whole-child development, and family partnerships and well-being. They were clear that the goal is to update and improve the guidelines, not replace them.

Content needs to be updated.

Participants pointed to missing or outdated guidance in areas such as children's self-control and problem-solving skills, supporting children who have experienced stress, early reading and math learning, inclusion and neurodiversity, play, supporting family partnership and well-being, and children's use of technology and media.

The guidelines need to be easier to use.

The biggest challenge is how the information is organized and accessed. Participants want materials that are more visual, easier to navigate, and available in digital formats.

Families want clearer information.

Families value the guidelines when programs share them, but they want simple, age-based tools that help them understand their child's development and support learning at home.

Alignment is important.

Educators and program leaders want the guidelines to connect clearly with other tools and frameworks they already use, so the WELDGs feel like a helpful guide rather than an extra requirement.

Recommended Enhancements

Wisconsin's current guidelines are built on strong and widely shared values. The seven recommendations below are meant to keep what works while updating the guidelines to better reflect current research, how programs operate today, and the needs of the people who care for and support young children and families. Together, these recommendations guide the next phases of writing and gathering feedback on the updated guidelines.



Modernize the guiding principles.

Keep the focus on play, strong relationships, whole-child development, and family partnerships, while updating the language to better reflect today's research and Wisconsin's communities.



Clarify who the guidelines are for and how families are involved.

Design the guidelines mainly for the professionals who work directly with young children and families, while clearly recognizing families as essential partners in children's learning and development and acknowledging the strong connection between family well-being and child development.



Make the guidelines easier to use.

Use clear writing, visuals, and a digital-first format so the guidelines are easier to find, understand, and use across different programs and settings.



Strengthen the areas of learning and development.

Keep the five learning and development areas but make connections across ages clearer and include important ideas such as self-control, problem-solving, supporting children who have experienced stress, and supporting children who speak more than one language.



Update content to reflect what we know today.

Refresh guidance based on current understanding of brain development, early reading and math learning, health and well-being, inclusion and neurodiversity, play, and children's use of technology.



Simplify appendices and expand digital supports.

Make supporting materials easier to search and update, and link to online resources that help programs put the guidelines into practice.



Clarify age guidance from birth to age five.

Keep a single birth–5 learning path that connects to K–12, while adding clear age-related reference points to help users find information more easily without setting rigid expectations.

Gratitude and Acknowledgements

Thank you to the families, early childhood professionals, educators, advisory group members, and partners across Wisconsin who shared their time, ideas, and experience.

This work is led by the Department of Children and Families in partnership with the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Health Services, with support from Marzano Research.

What Happens Next

Phase 2 will focus on writing the updated guidelines with input from educators, partners, and families and gathering feedback to make sure they are easy to understand and use. Phase 3 will include a public review period, as well as final publication and translation. Next, roll-out and implementation efforts will include sharing the guidelines through clear communication, accessible digital tools, job-based learning supports, and tailored professional learning opportunities across the state. There will be a multi-year transition for users to have time to be trained on the new ELDGs prior to implementing them in their work. These phases are planned together so the guidelines are practical and ready to use when they are released.