



The Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder

Bringing Professionalism to Early Childhood Education

The most important elements of high-quality early childhood education are the compensation, consistency, and education and training of child care teachers.¹ Based on this knowledge, in 2005 the Legislature passed and the Governor signed into law House Bill 1636, the Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder (the Wage Ladder). The Legislature found that "low wages for child care workers create a barrier for individuals entering the profession, result in child care workers leaving the profession in order to earn a living wage in another profession, and make it difficult for child care workers to afford professional education and training. As a result, the availability of quality child care in the state suffers."² The Wage Ladder remedied this social failure, improving the quality of child care by enabling early learning teachers to earn appropriate professional compensation, based on educational advancement and achievement, as well as experience and job responsibility.

Why should our state government worry about early learning?

The first years of a child's life are just as important and worthy as every other year. In fact, the first years create the foundation for a child's health, wellbeing, and social, emotional, physical and intellectual growth. Providing high-quality early care and education is critically important to enable children to learn and savor the building blocks of life. The benefits accrue to young children, as well as to society for development of a participatory democracy, a dynamic economy, and an informed and productive citizenry.

The Poverty-Generating Wages of Early Learning

Teachers and caregivers are the essential providers for high-quality early childhood education. But while the early learning profession can be infinitely rewarding, the job is physically and emotionally demanding and teachers earn poverty-generating wages. As a result, turnover is great, morale is low, professional and educational incentives are few, respect is grudging, and the quality of child care is jeopardized.

The Department of Early Learning's (DEL) 2008 biennial survey of licensed providers³ reported the following statewide average wages for child care center staff:

- ◆ \$9.72/hour for assistants (\$20,218/year)
- ◆ \$10.82/hour for lead teachers (\$22,506/year)

¹ "The Costs of Not Providing Quality Early Childhood Programs" in Reaching the Full Cost of Quality in Early Childhood Programs, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Ellen Galinsky, p. 27; "Quality of Child Care: Perspectives of Research and Professional Practice" in Who Cares for America's Children?, p. 84-107; "Who Cares? Child Care Teachers and the Quality of Care in America" Executive Summary of the National Child Care Staffing Study", p. 12.

² <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?bill=1636&year=2005>

³ http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/LicensedChildCareInWashingtonState_2008.pdf

These wage rates stand in stark contrast to those of kindergarten teachers (\$47,971/year)⁴ and crossing guards (\$15.34 /hour),⁵ while falling desperately close to the minimum wage of \$8.55/hour.

High-quality early learning cannot be achieved or sustained when the bonds between teacher and child are broken because teachers leave their jobs to gain higher paid employment in order to support their own families.

Washington's Groundbreaking Solution

First instituted in 2000, the Wage Ladder created incentives for child care teachers to pursue higher education relevant to early childhood education, and to excel as early learning professionals. Governor Gary Locke allocated \$4 million in 2000 for the Wage Ladder and, recognizing its immediate success, \$8 million for the 2001-2003 biennium. However, the Ladder, which was not codified into state law, was not refunded for the 2003-2005 biennium, due to the shortage of public revenue stemming from the 2002-2003 recession.

In 2005, Washington lawmakers corrected the Ladder's previous suspension by enacting legislation (HB 1636) putting the Ladder into state statute. In 2006, the legislators allocated \$1 million for the Ladder for Fiscal Year 2007. In 2007, the Legislature allocated \$3 million for the 2007-2009 biennium. This funding covers 70 child care centers across the state.

The cost is about \$250 per child per year, and represents a frugal, robust, and evidenced-based intervention that has catalyzed high-quality child care in Washington.

Proven to Improve the Quality of Care

Washington State University conducted a three-year evaluation of the Career and Wage Ladder. Researchers found the Ladder resulted in important and statistically significant improvements in the following areas:⁶

- ◆ The quality of care and teaching in the overall classroom environment
- ◆ Teacher-child interactions
- ◆ Educational achievement and pursuit of education
- ◆ Length of employment and retention of new employees
- ◆ Wages and benefits
- ◆ Employee self-esteem, morale, job satisfaction and sense of professionalism
- ◆ Time off provided by early learning and care centers to enable staff to pursue educational credentials

The Wage Ladder is the only early learning program in Washington found to create statistically significant improvements in the quality of care.

⁴<http://www.workforceexplorer.com/cgi/databrowsing/occExplorerQSDetails.asp?searchCriteria=elementary+school+teacher&careerID=&menuChoice=occExplorer&geogArea=5301000000&soccode=252021&search=Explore+Occupation>

⁵<http://www.workforceexplorer.com/cgi/databrowsing/occExplorerQSDetails.asp?menuchoice=localAreaPro&soccode=339091%20%20%20%20&geogArea=5301000000>

⁶ http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/CareerWageLadder_2004.pdf

A Well-Designed and Effective Program

The Wage Ladder is based on a wage matrix developed and published by the state, with wage increments determined by education, experience, and job responsibility (from 15 to 50 cents per hour). The steps are designed to enable advancement over a reasonable period of time, in consideration of teachers' work schedules and family responsibilities. A full-time child care teacher that progresses from a Child Development Associate credential (12 credits) to an Early Childhood Education certificate (45 credits) receives a wage bump of 50 cents per hour – approximately \$1,000 annually. The state is responsible only for the wage increments for educational achievement.

A Proven Economic Stimulus Program

The Wage Ladder creates a direct and non-bureaucratic transmission of wage increments to low-income workers who immediately spend this money in their local economies. Every dollar invested in child care generates from \$1.20 to \$3.00 more in the local economy.⁷ But the suspension of the wage ladder will decrease the already low salaries of hundreds of early learning professionals across the state, shrinking annual consumption in the Washington economy by at least \$3 million.⁸

Suspension Endangers Washington's Commitment to Quality Care

The Wage Ladder legislation was passed by the legislature and signed into law by the Governor. Now the Governor proposes to zero out funding in the 2009-11 budget for the Wage Ladder. This will imperil the professional and educational progress of 1,000 early learning teachers and caregivers across the state. These early learning teachers will lose critical supports necessary to sustain their participation in the early care and education field. In a time of great economic distress, now is not the time to cut the pay of some of Washington's most valuable and still undercompensated workers. Such a cut will likely decrease morale, decrease motivation to seek further education and training, and, most critically, push many of the best teachers and caregivers for our young children out of the early learning profession. The governor's proposal jeopardizes the quality of care and education for the 7,000 children for whom these teachers care.

With the Wage Ladder, early learning educators gain economic security and professional education, just the ingredients needed for high-quality early education and care. If we value our children, we will value their teachers and caregivers, not less so, but especially so in this recession.

⁷ Child Care as Economic Development: Theoretical and Empirical Challenges, Child Care Bureau Research Meeting, April 8-11, 2003, Washington, DC, Mildred Warner, Ph.D., Louise Stoney.
http://209.85.173.132/custom?q=cache:0KXxw_qNjDYJ:government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/powerpoint/ccb%2520research%2520mtg%2520april%25202003.l.ppt+louise+stoney+child+care+wage+multipliers&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=pub-noaccount

⁸ \$1.5 million decrease in funding for the wage ladder results in a negative multiplier of minimally \$1.5 million for a total of \$3 million absented from the Washington state economy.

Dawn loved working in early childhood education – but she couldn't afford it

By Alex Stone, EOI | Sept. 10, 2008

Dawn Cofone was only 16 years old when she began working with children at Spokane-area childcare facilities. So in the early 90's, she began attending classes and training sessions to learn more about how to foster the education and development of the children in her care.

She worked hard and went to school, often full-time. But between school tuition and her meager salary, Dawn and her husband were struggling to pay the bills.

"At the time I was making roughly seven dollars an hour and barely surviving, with my husband also working full time with any overtime he could get his hands on," she said. "And this is when my husband came to me and pointed out the obvious. I could make more money and have less stress doing anything else."

Despite his steadfast support over the years, Dawn's husband of fourteen years could no longer encourage Dawn to continue in a career that could not financially support their growing family, no matter how personally rewarding it was. Dawn had come to a point when she had to choose between her family and 'her kids'.

"At this point what could I say?" said a heartbroken Dawn, "I wrote out my resignation...I was not just leaving a job, I was abandoning the children and teachers that had become my family."

But the director at Dawn's childcare facility gave her hope. She had been working for several months to get Dawn's facility on the Career and Wage Ladder, a policy to help teachers increase their education and stay in the field with wage incentives.



All children benefit when their teachers have access to professional training and adequate compensation for their work.

She asked Dawn to give her one more month. "It was a compromise that I was willing to make," Dawn said – but in the meantime she began to pursue other fields and stopped attending early childhood education classes.

"I had to be honest. Although I loved working with children it would never pay enough to live on."

But just two weeks later the director called Dawn. Their facility had been approved for the Career and Wage Ladder. "The next paycheck I received, I was surprised with over a three dollar-an-hour raise. It was the answer I had prayed for."

Dawn, able to stay at her childcare facility, was financially rewarded for her experience and training in early childhood education and is now the assistant director.

"I know that if it were not for the Career and Wage Ladder and a very supportive husband, I would not have the privilege of working with families and children today."