

WHAT WOULD IMPROVE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN WISCONSIN?

Listening to underserved families and child care providers

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As part of the **Preschool Development Grant*** with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, the CommNS led a team of researchers in 2020 to understand the perspectives of primary caregivers of young children and child care providers from five demographic populations in Wisconsin: Hmong, Latinx, Black or African American, Indigenous or Tribal, and rural white.

Through interviews, caregivers and providers shared their experiences and thoughts on early care and education (ECE) in Wisconsin, including perceptions of access, affordability, and quality of ECE, workforce needs and priorities, as well as potential solutions to ECE issues in the state.

In the following list we lift up what these caregivers and providers said would make the biggest difference to them for better ECE in Wisconsin.



12 Things That Can Improve Early Care and Education in Wisconsin

1. Make child care more affordable

Families want and need ECE to be more affordable. This may be possible through easier access to financial assistance and expanding subsidies through Wisconsin Shares, or extending the model of free public education to ECE.

2. Increase the financial stability and wages of ECE providers

To be financially stable, providers need funding for facilities, staff benefits, and living wages. Providing benefits and higher wages retains ECE staff and allows providers and their families to thrive. Financial support for facilities improvement allows providers to improve indoor and outdoor spaces; purchase items such as toys, books, and technology; and offer high-quality and nutritious meals and snacks.



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3. Recruit, retain, and support providers that represent the cultures, heritages, and races of the families they serve

Families and providers want diverse ECE staff and leadership to reflect their own family backgrounds and to support children's positive sense of identity, as well as support children's appreciation and understanding of others. This could be achieved by funding educational and professional development opportunities for underrepresented providers, supporting professional networks and connections, fostering an inclusive work environment, building strong staff relationships, and more equitable pay and benefits.

4. Make child care locations more accessible to families, especially those without vehicles

Many families want more convenient access to ECE providers. For some this means more affordable transportation options (like free or discounted bus passes) to providers. Others want ECE offerings closer to their family's home or work. Employer-provided and co-located ECE can make arrangements easier, save families time, and support improved mental health.

5. Increase the number of ECE providers who can accommodate variable work schedules

Many parents work jobs that have variable hours or do not fit a nine-to-five weekday schedule. These

families would like providers to offer early morning, evening and weekend hours, as well as flexible hours for those who don't have regular schedules. Providers also noted the value of a substitute directory to help them find replacement care when needed.

6. Compensate family and friends who provide care to children

For many, other family members and friends are the preferred option for child care. Not only is family-and-friend care a convenient and trusted option for many families, but also one that often supports children's identities and heritage language development. Caregivers believe these family members and friends should receive payment for the work that they're doing and without the burden of having to obtain a family care license.

7. Provide more support and child care options for children with disabilities

Families want more providers who can accommodate the varied needs of children with disabilities. Providers caring for children with disabilities want to see more support, like community navigator or caseworker services that can help guide them through programs, like Birth to 3 and public school therapy. Both families and providers would like access to further training and education in caring for children with disabilities.



8. Invest in anti-racist and culturally-relevant curricula, resources, and practices that reflect families and their traditions and languages

Families want to see their cultural traditions and language reflected in the care their children receive. Families want ECE to feel like an extension of the family, offering a safe and anti-racist environment that supports the bonds between child, family, and community. Caregivers want to see more invested resources and enhanced policies and practices to integrate families' languages and customs, support diverse providers, embrace intergenerational and other culturally-relevant care, and advance anti-racism.



9. Expand child care practices beyond teaching and basic needs to care for children and families as a whole

Families and providers want to see ECE attend to children's full development including physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual development. Caregivers and providers also think that ECE can play a role in ensuring prenatal care for mothers, trauma-informed care for children and parents, connecting families to community resources, and providing coordination and transition support to the public school system.

10. Make child care information and education more accessible for families through websites, agencies, and community navigators

Families want accessible information about child care resources, provider options, and financial assistance. This could be done through an enhanced, comprehensive website accessible for people with diverse abilities and has information in multiple languages, or through multilingual community navigators with diverse backgrounds. Some caregivers would also like better access to education on topics like child development, trauma-informed care, children with disabilities, or starting a child care business.

11. Ease the process for providers who participate in licensing and child care quality ratings

Providers want child care licensing and YoungStar participation to feel less burdensome, especially for new providers. Providers say this could be done by engaging mentors early in the licensing process, along with multilingual technical support staff of diverse backgrounds. Providers also believe it is critical to examine the current system for racial or cultural biases and to revise current regulations to better reflect the needs and lived experiences of providers.

12. Nurture trust between providers and families through strong relationships and communication

Families and providers recognize trust as a critical aspect of quality child care. Trust can be enhanced

by good communication, meaningful parental involvement, shared sense of community and values, efforts to align home and child care routines and practices, and more transparency around child care tuition and what those funds support.



Researcher's Notes

***The Preschool Development Grant** - Birth to Five (PDG) was a one-year federal grant that supported the state of Wisconsin in the completion of a needs assessment and a strategic plan to improve early care and education (ECE) in 2020. The needs assessment examined ECE accessibility, affordability, and quality, and workforce needs and challenges in a comprehensive, equity-focused manner for Wisconsin's most vulnerable, underserved, and rural populations. The Wisconsin Department of Children & Families (DCF) contracted with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies (CommNS) to support one piece of the needs assessment. As requested, the CommNS led a team of researchers in a qualitative study to understand the experiences and perceptions of primary caregivers and child care providers from five demographic populations in Wisconsin: Hmong, Latinx, Black or African American, Indigenous or Tribal, and rural white. In individual interviews, caregivers and providers shared their thoughts on early care and education in Wisconsin presently, including perceptions of access,

affordability, and quality; workforce needs and priorities; and the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and providers.

We began with deductive coding, examining the findings from the standpoint of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) Preschool Development Grant framework – Accessibility, Affordability, Quality, and Workforce – and the DCF Equity and Inclusion Framework to ensure a critical systems lens. After completing the deductive coding using the Preschool Development Grant framework, our analytic approach then shifted to incorporate inductive coding - looking for additional themes suggested by patterns within the interviews.

Coding and the presentation of themes involves a portrayed simplification of lived experience. As such, it is important to recognize that interviewees are more complicated than what is presented here, with each individual's experience different from each other's, whether of the same demographic group or not, and that no individual's experience can represent the entirety of experiences for others of a particular shared background. Additionally, it is important to remember that these themes intersect and interweave with each other (e.g., one's socioeconomic experiences are further influenced by one's racial experiences), rather than have a distinct influence in one's life.

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