



## First Class in Learning – First Class in Life

### How Washington’s Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder Delivers First-Class Care

#### Executive Summary

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. But a 2005 report by the Economic Policy Institute estimates that 40% of Washington's child care center teachers earn less than 200% of the federal poverty level.<sup>1</sup>

Based on this knowledge, in 2005 the Legislature passed – and the Governor signed – the Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder (Wage Ladder) into law. The Wage Ladder improves the quality of child care by enabling early learning teachers to earn better compensation, based on educational advancement and achievement, as well as experience and job responsibility.

The Wage Ladder is the only early learning program in Washington found to create statistically significant improvements in the quality of care. The cost is about \$250 per child per year, and represents a frugal, robust, and evidence-based intervention that has catalyzed high-quality child care in Washington.

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.

A suspension of the Wage Ladder will jeopardize the professional and educational progress of over 800 early learning teachers across the state. These early learning teachers will lose critical supports necessary to sustain their participation in the early care and education field – and the children in their care will suffer the consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Hezenberger, S., Price, M. & Bradley, D. (2005). *Losing Ground in early childhood education: Declining workforce qualifications in an expanding industry, 1979-2004.*, Summary. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. Summary tables 1-3, p. 9.

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## Washington Pioneers a Solution to Improve Quality and Wages

**The Benefits of High-Quality Early Learning:** The first years create the foundation for a child's health, well-being, and social, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth. Providing high-quality early care and education is critically important to enable children to play, learn, and grow into successful students, productive employees, and engaged citizens. Decreased need for costly educational interventions, reduced crime and drug abuse, better graduation and college-going rates, and increased income levels are just some of the benefits for children and communities proven to result from access to high-quality early learning programs.

**How Poverty-Level Wages Limit Availability of Quality Child Care:** The most important elements of high-quality early childhood education are the compensation, consistency, and education and training of child care teachers.<sup>2</sup> But while the early learning profession can be infinitely rewarding, it is physically and emotionally demanding, and teachers earn poverty-level wages.<sup>3</sup> Turnover is high, morale is low, and professional and educational incentives are few and far between.

The Washington Legislature has 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."<sup>4</sup>

**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. In 2005, Washington lawmakers enacted legislation (HB 1636) putting the Ladder into state statute. In 2007, the Legislature allocated \$3 million for the 2007-2009 biennium, and for 2009-2011 the Legislature split the funding between state funds and federal child care stimulus funds. This funding covers 68 child care centers across the state.

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<sup>2</sup> "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.

<sup>3</sup> The Department of Early Learning's (DEL) 2008 biennial survey of licensed providers reported the following statewide average wages for child care center staff: \$9.72/hour for assistant teachers (\$20,218/year) and \$10.82/hour for lead teachers (\$22,506/year). These wages rates stand in stark contrast to those of kindergarten teachers (\$47,971/year) and crossing guards (\$15.34 /hour), and are desperately close to the minimum wage of \$8.55/hour. See: [http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/LicensedChildCareInWashingtonState\\_2008.pdf](http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/LicensedChildCareInWashingtonState_2008.pdf), Washington State Workforce Explorer, <http://bit.ly/3hXHK9>, Washington State Workforce Explorer, <http://bit.ly/3xterB>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?bill=1636&year=2005>

## Evidence Shows the Wage Ladder Works – Any Cuts Will Be Costly

**The Wage Ladder is a Proven Success:** An independent, multi-year study of the Wage Ladder by researchers at Washington State University found that in comparison to other child care centers:<sup>5</sup>

- Wage Ladder centers provide higher-quality early learning and care.
- Significantly more Wage Ladder teachers pursue additional education and specialized coursework.
- All levels of staff in Wage Ladder centers earn higher salaries.
- Wage Ladder centers have higher retention rates among newly-hired staff.
- Administrators at Wage Ladder centers report higher morale and increase commitment and professionalism among teachers.

**The Wage Ladder Shares Responsibility and Accountability:** 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.

**The Wage Ladder is a Direct Economic Stimulus:** The Wage Ladder improves the wages to low-income workers who immediately spend their earnings in their local economies. Every dollar invested in child care generates from \$1.20 to \$3.00 more in the local economy.<sup>6</sup>

**Cutting the Wage Ladder Will Cost Washington:** 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. The suspension of the Wage Ladder would 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.<sup>7</sup>

Such a cut will also likely decrease morale, decrease motivation to seek further education and training, and, will very likely push many of the best teachers and caregivers for our young children out of the early learning profession. Most critically, it would imperil the quality of care and education for the 7,000 children for whom these teachers care.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/CareerWageLadder\\_2004.pdf](http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/research/docs/CareerWageLadder_2004.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> 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\\_qNiDYJ:government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/powerpoint/cwb%2520research%2520mtg%2520april%25202003l.ppt+louise+stoney+child+care+wage+multipliers&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=pub-noaccount](http://209.85.173.132/custom?q=cache:0KXxw_qNiDYJ:government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/powerpoint/cwb%2520research%2520mtg%2520april%25202003l.ppt+louise+stoney+child+care+wage+multipliers&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=pub-noaccount)

<sup>7</sup> \$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."