

Economic Opportunity Institute Blueprint

WASHINGTON STATE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CAREER AND WAGE LADDER PILOT PROJECT

Evaluation Report of Year 1¹

Summary of Findings

June 2002

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Key Findings

Researchers at Washington State University conducted an independent evaluation of the first year of the Washington State Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder Pilot Program. The evaluation, which compared ladder centers with a control group, verified that the career and wage ladder works to improve the quality of early childhood education by reducing teacher turnover and encouraging child care teachers to receive the education and training they need to make a career in early childhood education:

- The employee retention rate for teachers hired at the beginning of the pilot project at ladder centers was 21% higher than at comparison centers.
- Educational attainment of child care teachers was significantly higher in the ladder centers than in the comparison group.
- Significantly more administrators in ladder centers, as compared to those in the control group, report that employee morale improved from the previous year.
- The average wage (\$8.94) of teachers in ladder centers is significantly higher than that of those in the comparison centers (\$8.41).

Background

Research has shown that the most important factor contributing to high quality child care is the quality and consistency of the caregiver/teacher. Further, research shows a correlation between higher wages and higher quality care and early learning.²

The Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder is a statewide pilot project that incorporates this research to improve the quality of early childhood education. The ladder project links wage

increments to experience, job responsibility, and relevant education and creates a career pathway for early childhood education teachers. As such, it offers a powerful incentive for child care teachers to gain additional education and to make a commitment to the field of early childhood education. At the same time, the ladder serves to professionalize child care work; teachers gain knowledge and self-esteem and early childhood education is transformed from a poverty-generating occupation to one that not only rewards

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the teacher but also has a future. With a well-educated, professional child care workforce, children receive the high quality early care and education necessary for optimal growth and development.

Governor Gary Locke allocated \$4 million in the 1999-2001 biennium and \$8 million in the 2001-03 biennium for the early childhood education career and wage ladder. The pilot project was implemented in June of 2000 with \$3.5 million in funding. Currently, 119 centers (approximately 6.5% of the centers in the state) are participating in the career and wage ladder project, and approximately 1,500 teachers are realizing wage enhancements. The biennium budget allocates \$8 million to continue the project through 2003.

The Study. The study is an independent evaluation of the career and wage

ladder project conducted by a team of researchers at Washington State University. The purpose of the research evaluation is to determine if increases in wages and benefits — based on education, experience, and job responsibility — result in reduced staff turnover and higher educational attainment by child care workers. The design of the evaluation is made up of two groups: all the centers participating in the pilot project and a sample of similar licensed centers selected by the research team. Methods of data collection included: 1) completion of three written surveys across the first year of the pilot project (September 2000, January 2001, May 2001) and 2) telephone interviews with selected participants at the end of the first year. The first survey provided baseline measures. The second and third surveys assessed first-year changes in education, wages, benefits, and retention in the pilot group and tested for similar or different patterns in the control group.

FINDINGS

Wages

Participation in the career and wage ladder has significantly improved the wages of ladder center employees. Average hourly wages at ladder centers were higher than those for comparison centers and even higher in comparison to all centers in the state.

Examining wages by job title shows higher wages for each job title in ladder centers compared to comparison centers. This is a direct result of the value given to experience, education, and job responsibilities created by the ladder's wage increments.

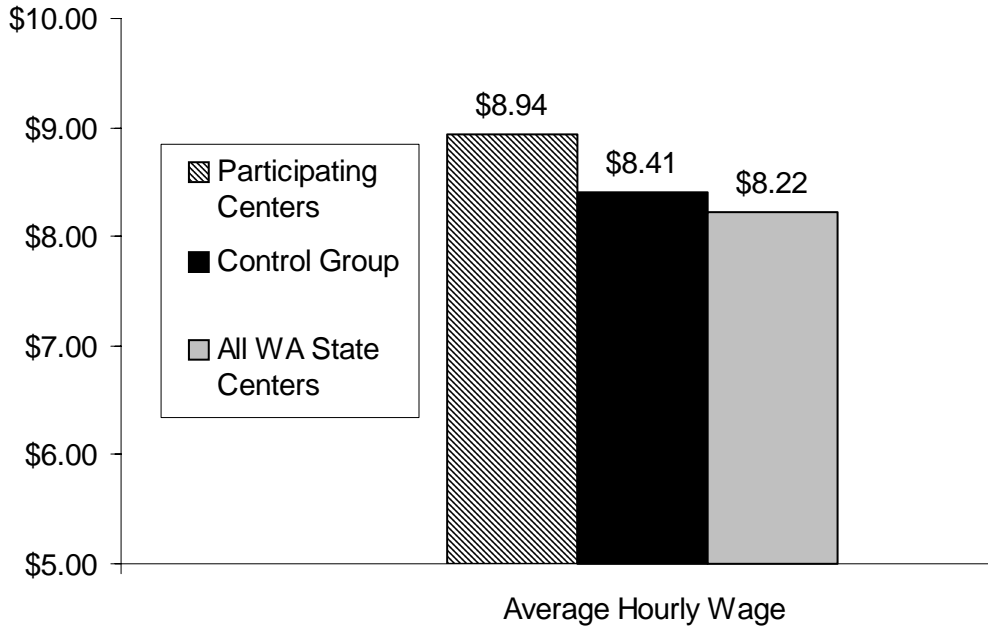
Benefits

Compared to the control group, a higher percentage of ladder centers offer benefits:

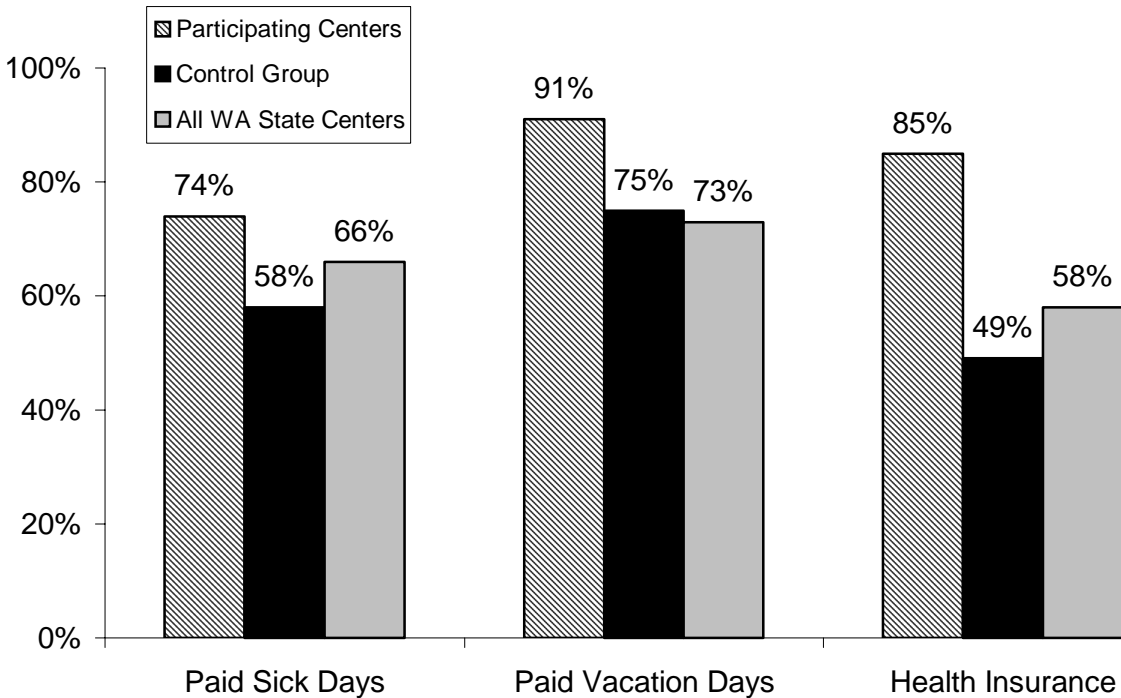
- More ladder centers offer paid sick days (74% vs. 58%).
- More ladder centers offer paid vacation days (91% vs. 75%).
- More ladder centers provide health insurance for their employees (85% vs. 58%).

In addition, ladder centers offer more benefits when compared to all child care centers in Washington.

Average Hourly Wages of Child Care Workers



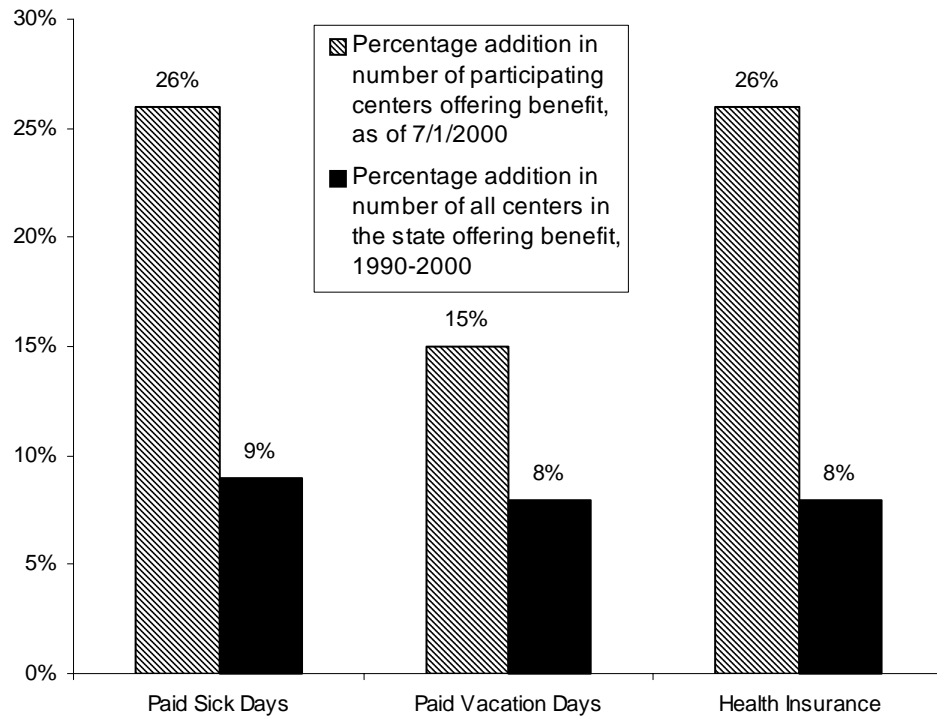
Benefits Received by Child Care Workers



To determine whether participation in the ladder project resulted in a better benefit package for the employees, centers were also asked if these benefits were new as of July 1, 2000. Indeed, the increase in the percentage of ladder centers offering new benefits as of July 2000 is distinctly higher than

that seen for all centers in Washington between 1990 and 2000. For example, over 25% of the centers on the career and wage ladder instituted health insurance benefits as of July 1, 2000, whereas only an additional 8% of all centers in Washington offered health benefits over the entire decade between 1990 and 2000.

New Benefits Added Since Ladder Inception



Retention

Ladder centers showed significantly higher staff retention rates than the control group.

- The employee retention rate for employees hired at ladder centers in the first three months of the project was 57% compared to 47% at centers in the control group.

Education

Educational attainment was significantly higher in ladder centers than in the comparison group.

- Ladder centers had a higher percentage of employees with training specific to early childhood education.
- Participating in career and wage ladder allowed for hiring more highly trained employees to replace employees who left during the first year.
- More employees in ladder centers attended STARS workshops and en-

rolled in ECE college courses than in the comparison centers.

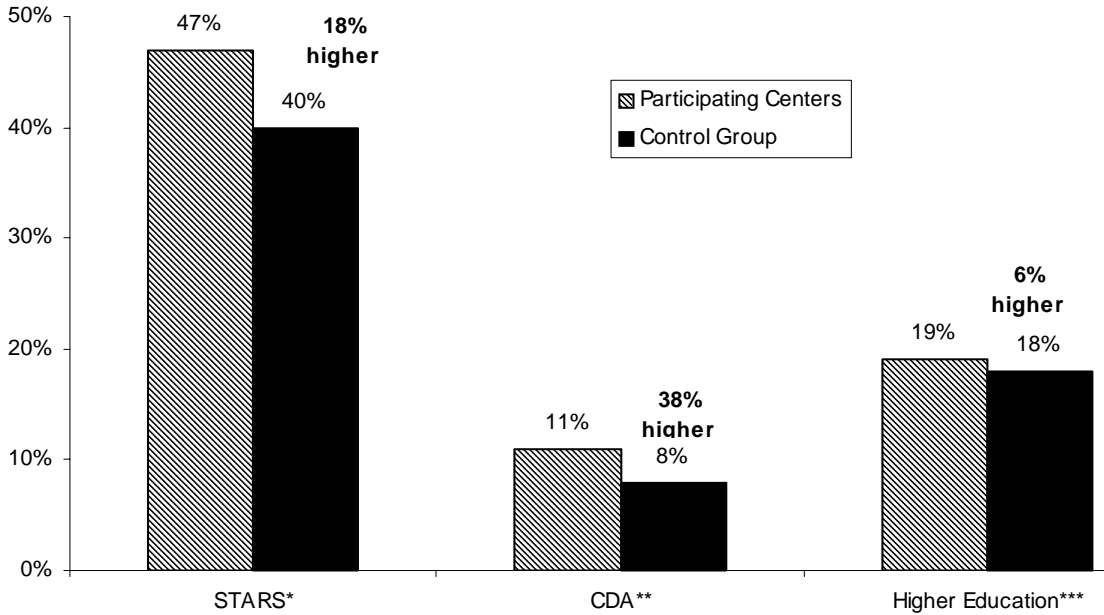
- Ladder center employees were more likely to have education paid for by the center and to receive time off when pursuing education.

Staff Professionalism and Morale

- 88% of ladder center directors believed that the quality of teaching and care had improved. Because ladder centers were able to pay for more highly trained teachers, they benefited from the additional skills new staff brought with them.

- 92% of ladder center directors said that the ladder increased staff professionalism. Because staff were rewarded for increased training and education, they improved their professional skills in working with children and their parents. In addition, directors noticed that staff took more leadership in planning activities and administration.

Educational Achievement

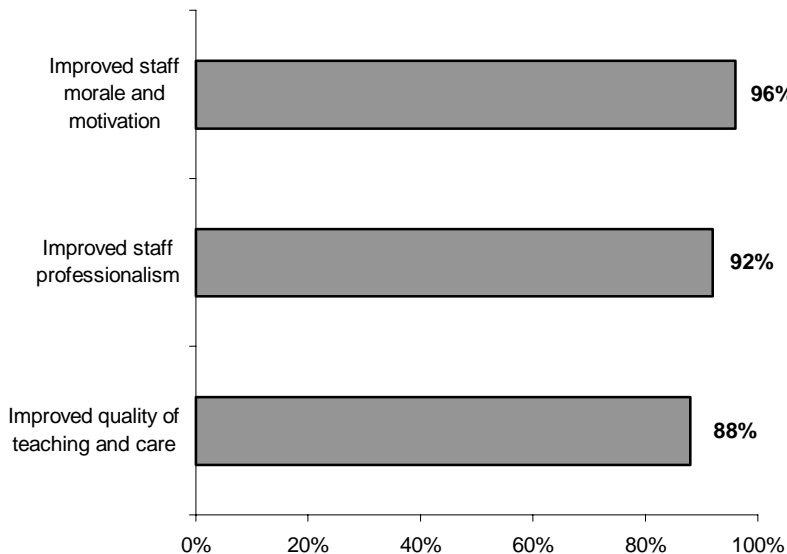


* Washington State Training and Registry System (STARS) is a career development and training system for individuals who work in child care, early education, and school-age care.
 ** Child Development Associate (CDA) credential
 *** Early Childhood Education credits/degrees from institutions of higher education

■ 96% of ladder center directors said that morale and motivation had significantly improved at all levels of staffing. Directors reported that staff saw the ladder as outside validation of the importance of their work. Some direc-

tors reported that staff were beginning to view child care as a career, seeing it for the first time as a profession that provided a living wage and benefits and required specialized knowledge.

Director Perception of Improvements



CONCLUSION

The independent evaluation conducted by academic researchers quantifies wage and benefit data. Early childhood education teachers in the career and wage ladder program are earning more and receiving more benefits than those in the control group. In the case of wages, early childhood education workers in the career and wage ladder earn on average almost \$1,500 more a year than child care workers throughout the state and over \$1,100 more a year than child care workers in the control group.

Since the ladder's inception, Governor Locke, state officials, and the Economic Opportunity Institute have been hearing more qualitative responses from teachers and directors across the state. In thousands of communications, center directors, teachers, and parents relate that the career and wage ladder has improved the quality of children's care and education, improved staff morale, reduced turnover, and prompted more teachers to take on training and education and invest in their jobs as careers.

The quantifiable differences between the participating centers and the control group of centers are already apparent and likely to grow over the course of the evaluation. They reveal that a systematic project of rewarding experience, education, and job responsibilities with a matrix of wage steps creates an atmosphere in the participating centers that is an effective catalyst for professionalizing the child care workforce and thereby improving quality of care.

The data collected from center directors as part of the Washington State University study along with the evidence compiled by the Economic Opportunity Institute from interactions with directors, teachers, and parents provides a picture of what Washington state's licensed child care would look like if the Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder were expanded to cover all licensed centers in the state. The wage and career ladder is a successful program that is creating **a professionalized, well-compensated, and highly educated workforce that is delivering high quality care and education for the children of Washington.**◆◆

Endnotes

¹Washington State Child Care Career and Wage Ladder Pilot Project Research and Evaluation Final Report Phase 1, February 2002. Principal Investigators: Brenda Boyd, Ph.D. and Mary R. Wandschneider, M.A. Washington State University Department of Human Development.

²See "Then and Now: Changes in Child Care Staffing, 1994-2000", Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, Howes, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley, 2001. Highlights, p. 2 and 4.