



## Wisconsin's Path to Shared Prosperity

# Supporting High Quality Early Learning

Children are our best hope for the future and our most valuable resource. But as a society, we are not making the investments in children we should be, especially when it comes to children of color.

We will all benefit when every child gets a great start. Why? Because decades of research has revealed how babies' brains develop and why the early years (0-3) are so incredibly important. And there is a significant return on investment; economists have demonstrated anywhere from \$5 to \$15 saved for every one dollar spent on high quality early childhood education.

Quality early education programs enable parents to work and children to get a great start. It is a win for families, communities, and our whole state. The following changes would improve the well-being of our young children, help their parents participate in the workforce, and boost Wisconsin's long-term prosperity.

### Increase Wisconsin Shares reimbursement rates

State lawmakers should restore funding that has been cut from the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program and allow reimbursement rates to catch up to marketplace rates. Too many parents are now unable to find quality child care providers who participate in the subsidy program. This is because the rates have been frozen for most of the last 11 years, and participation in the subsidy program is down sharply across the state, especially in rural counties. In light of the workforce shortage that is holding back economic growth in our state, it's all the more important to reduce the number of parents who have stopped working because they don't have access to affordable child care.

### Eliminate Disparities in YoungStar

Kids Forward's analysis of Wisconsin's Quality Rating and Improvement System (YoungStar) shows significant disparities in access to high quality (4 and 5 Star)

programs for low-income African American kids. The entire system needs an influx of funding, but particular attention needs to be paid to this issue. Currently there is a least one zip code in Milwaukee that has no 4 or 5 star providers.

### Establish quality improvement grants for child care programs participating in YoungStar

To improve and maintain quality, state policymakers should establish a program of quality sustainability grants to early education programs participating in YoungStar. The grants would support child care programs that are striving to meet higher quality standards and that use a portion of the funds to increase compensation.

### Expand and improve home visiting services, particularly in areas that are underserved, such as rural and tribal communities

High-quality home visitation programs targeted to the

highest risk families have a return of \$5.70 for every dollar invested. The Family Foundations home visiting program in Wisconsin is only reaching a small portion of eligible families. The next budget should expand the program to rural and tribal communities that do not have access to this service and to communities where the need outpaces the availability.

### **Support the early education workforce through tax credits to early care and education teachers**

High quality early child education is widely recognized as critical for enabling children to reach their potential and for promoting a state's long-term prosperity. However, because early childhood educators with associate and bachelor's degrees are paid far less than workers in other professions with the same education level, child care programs have great difficulty recruiting and retaining well qualified teachers. A turnover rate of 36% per year is contributing to a child care shortage that prevents some parents from being able to participate in the Wisconsin workforce. To expand access to child care and improve the quality of early education that children receive, we support the recommendation of the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council to provide a refundable tax credit to early educators.

### **Support infant/toddler teachers around social-emotional learning**

Research shows us that kids experiencing adverse circumstances such as domestic violence, abuse or neglect have lifelong negative outcomes. This trauma is exacerbated by poverty and racism. Fortunately, in Wisconsin, there are trained experts who can help, but there are far too few of them and far too little funding goes toward childhood mental health.