

# Building Quality Child Care Jobs: Model Work Standards in Action

## Introduction

Each day, three out of four children under the age of six are in some form of child care in Wisconsin. The quality of child care matters, and unfortunately there are large amounts of variation in the quality of care that Wisconsin's children experience. Estimates suggest that in Wisconsin only 15 percent of child care centers provide good or excellent care, while the majority of centers provide care that ranges from minimal to mediocre in terms of quality. Furthermore, a full 10 percent of centers provide care that is inadequate and, in many cases, potentially harmful to children.

High quality child care is important in terms of both child developmental outcomes and social outcomes. Time and again, research has found a positive association between high quality care and the happiness, health, and well-being of children. High quality child care also is directly linked to better social interactions among children, increased school performance, and decreased levels of juvenile delinquency.

### Quality Jobs Mean Quality Care

Quality child care is directly linked to quality jobs. Child care centers providing high quality care more often pay higher wages, offer better adult work environments, report lower teaching staff turnover, and have more highly educated staff. Despite these findings, most efforts to improve child care do not address the link between the quality of jobs and the quality of care.

Results from an evaluation of the first two years of the Local Child Care Wage Initiative in the City of Madison and Dane County, Wisconsin, show that annual bonuses, with the amounts determined by education, training, and longevity on the job, influenced the overall quality of care children received. As a result of the Wage Initiative, child care providers reported higher morale, more job satisfaction, and a greater commitment to staying in the field. In turn, the Wage Initiative led to measurable improvements in child care quality, based on nationally recognized standards for evaluating care.

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For more information on child care quality in Wisconsin, see the Wisconsin Child Care Research Project, <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/ece/wccrp.html>.

## Quality Assessment Tools

There are multiple tools available to directly encourage and assure the quality of care that children receive. In Madison and Dane County, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation and City of Madison Accreditation are both used as instruments to ensure that minimum levels of quality are met.

However, although accreditation programs are very important and are useful in many ways, they do not address the important connection between the quality of adult work environments and the quality of care. In an attempt to fill what many perceived as a gap in the quality equation (the omission of quality work environments), Model Work Standards were designed. Model Work Standards are intended as a quality assessment tool to be used alongside the other previously established measures to ensure that both children and adults involved in child care enjoy quality experiences. The Model Work Standards are currently the only tool that specifically focuses on the important role of job quality in improving the quality of care.

*"(Model Work Standards) allowed us to continue to grow as a team and to bring our ideas to the table with thoughtful discussion."*

One of the central ideas behind the Model Work Standards is that, given the right tools, care providers themselves can play an active role in processes that are integral to creating and maintaining high quality work environments. The central goal of the Model Work Standards is to achieve improvements in job quality by creating a supportive work environment, increasing shared decision making and communication, fostering teamwork and cooperation, and encouraging empowerment among child care workers.

## Relationships Matter

A common thread, and a point that should be underscored, is that relationships in the child care industry matter. Much attention is paid to the relationships between child care providers and children, but rarely are the relationships between co-workers, directors, managers, and in many cases board members in child care settings addressed. Several important studies have found that the style of management and the skill and stability of managers or directors make a big difference in staff turnover rates. Furthermore, research shows that skilled and educated staff are more likely to stay at their jobs if they are working with other skilled and educated teachers. This is in sharp contrast to the common practice of hiring a few good people at high salaries and good benefits and surrounding them with poorly compensated and relatively uneducated and untrained assistant teachers.

# How the Model Work Standards Work

**M**odel Work Standards are a process with a series of principles that can be applied to various work settings. What Model Work Standards look like in each case is determined by the specific needs and goals of the child care program in question.

## Principles of Model Work Standards

**Improve Job Quality:** Quality jobs are characterized by, among other things, livable wages and good benefits, clear job descriptions, fair hiring practices, opportunities for promotion, and fair grievance procedures. In addition, quality jobs must also include adequate planning time, opportunities for professional development and training, and support and rewards for development.

To achieve these job quality standards requires the maintenance of systems for communication, such as time for staff meetings and team-building efforts. Creating and maintaining these lines of communication takes time and requires opportunities for responsibility and autonomy among employees. Through these processes, teamwork develops and increased levels of shared decision making and problem solving follow.

**Build Incentives to Make Things Better:** More centers and providers should be encouraged and rewarded for using tools such as Model Work Standards to improve their workplace environments. Acknowledging child care programs that do strive to provide high quality care and high quality work environments is an important piece of the puzzle.

**Build a Child Care Community:** Child care providers, center directors, staff, and parents are already an important support network for children. At the same time, the child care community is also an important support network for parents. An active and aware child care community can make early child care better for the child care workforce, parents, and children in care.

**Build Awareness of Child Care Challenges:** The importance of quality early childhood education for children and adults, and the link between quality jobs and quality care, should be reinforced as public issues. It is crucial that local government and business leaders understand that workplace challenges in the child care industry need to be addressed for the people who care for our kids, for the parents who rely on caregivers so they can go to work, and for the young children in care.

## The Model Work Standards Process

Creating a plan to achieve the goals discussed above is a daunting task. To help make these goals more realistic, a process has been developed that links them with concrete action at a child care provider level.

The first step in the process is for participants in the Model Work Standards process to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the work environment. This is done by leadership teams of teachers and administrators, who come together to work on these issues. It is important during this phase to discuss the priorities for improvement as well as the cost of proposed changes.

*"Sometimes the little things can make a difference and the staff feel better about their job when the little things are attended to."*

*"We learned how to break down a long term goal to make achievable pieces..."*

Based on the assessment of the work environment and the discussion of priorities and cost, an action plan is then created to organize and implement the necessary and desired changes. It is important at this point to lay out a plan that is attainable given the time and resources allotted. The plan should also include a timeline for completion.

With everyone at a child care program working together to plan and implement improvements in workplace environments, the process encourages teamwork and also helps to build better communication among those involved. Finally, the improvement process encourages the development of leadership skills among participants and contributes to increased levels of commitment assuring that quality work environments can be preserved in the future.

### *A Sample of Goals Set by Model Work Standard Participants*

Increase staff communication and establish a cohesive vision for child care center.

Provide paid sick days, improve staff break room and resources.

Replace a fence so it is easier for staff to put up on a daily basis and is more attractive than the beat-up snow fence.

Enhance education and team building by pooling education dollars allocated to each staff member to attend a national conference together.

Provide better wages and benefits, improve funding relationships with host company, and retain staff.

Ensure that staff have a safe place to put personal belongings, such as a staff room or designated area that is fully equipped with supplies, comfortable furnishings, and access to technology.

Review and revise job descriptions and improve curriculum planning to make it more collaborative.

Strengthen the team-building and communication skills among staff, and bridge the gap in salaries and benefits between contracted and hourly staff.

# Model Work Standards in Action

## South Madison Child Development, Inc.

Prior to applying the Model Work Standards process, South Madison Child Development, Inc. had recently been through the City of Madison's accreditation process. During this process, the lack of space for staff was noticed. The staff and director of South Madison Child Development, Inc. were all excited by the possibility of applying the Model Work Standards process to their center. A meeting with a Model Work Standards consultant took place, and a staff survey confirmed that the need for improved staff space was an issue and a top priority.

*"The Model Work Standards process helped us eliminate a daily frustration the staff was experiencing."*

### Assessment:

"We found the strengths and weaknesses of our program and realized the strong commitment our staff has to the program."

The first steps, taken during the first year of participation by the leadership team, were to identify space, coordinate staff in preparing the space (cleaning), and deciding how to decorate. The Model Work Standards consultant summarized the first year by saying: *"This first project really seemed to boost morale, provided a tangible accomplishment, increased pride, and gave the leadership team confidence."*

### Implementation:

"We learned how to break down a long term goal to make a piece achievable."

In the second year, with the project of creating space for staff complete, the leadership team had to choose a new goal. In order to identify a new goal, the team talked to all the staff and discovered that the staff felt the need for more team-building at work. In the past, staff meetings were shared with other affiliated center sites, but staff at South Madison Child Development, Inc. felt that there was little time for the staff to build relationships within their specific site. Through discussions between the staff and the leadership team, two goals were outlined: to focus on holding monthly staff meetings at the site and to increase team building, specifically by having all staff attend this year's national child care conference together.

Thinking long term, the leadership team decided that they wanted staff meetings to continue after the money from the Model Work Standards project ran out. As a result, they petitioned managers to set up paid time for monthly staff meetings. The board accepted the petition and agreed to provide for paid monthly staff meetings.

The goal of team building through all staff attending a national child care conference was more complex. In order for this to happen, the center would need to shut down for a day and funding would have to be arranged.

### ***Organizing:***

"If staff feel strongly that there is a need for change to better their work environment, their voice can be heard and acted upon when done in a collaborative fashion."

The staff at South Madison Child Development, Inc. worked together to develop a proposal for attending the national conference and presented it to the center's board. The proposal included sharing information with the other affiliated centers upon return from the conference through presentations. To address the issue of costs, the staff agreed to pool their professional development funds in order to attend the conference. Usually professional development funds are used individually for attending classes, conferences, or training. In this case, the staff decided that collective use of the funds would contribute to individual staff members' knowledge and training, team-building activities, and outreach and connections with other child care centers.

### ***Shared Decision Making:***

"Shared decision-making created miracles in the workplace!"

When the board members turned down the proposal for all employees of South Madison Child Development, Inc. to attend the national child care conference, the staff met again and decided to adopt the new goal of having all the staff attend the national child care conference the following year. This new goal represented a compromise between the teaching staff, administration, and board, and the teaching staff had a significant role in identifying objectives and formulating plans for how to make this goal a reality next year.

### ***Empowerment:***

"The process is as valuable as the product."

Since implementation of Model Work Standards, the staff at South Madison Child Development, Inc. is now involved in making decisions on many levels that affect their workplace environment, and they feel that they can make a difference. With staff more involved in decision making, management has become accustomed to accepting shared decision making as a workplace reality.

# Model Work Standards and Family Providers

Family child care makes up a large part of the child care industry. As a profession, family child care has made enormous strides, shifting from a strictly hourly job to one characterized by contracts with parents and a “small business” mind set. Despite many positive changes in family child care, however, many problems persist. Poor compensation, overwork, and tenuous business climates all place stress on people working in family child care settings. Furthermore, many family providers face difficulties in charging the true value of their services, making and maintaining contracts with parents, and procuring adequate rest and vacation time.

Model Work Standards for family providers are based on the same principles outlined above and follow the same process. Special attention is paid to setting, collecting, and increasing fees, creating and modifying contracts, and financial planning. These tools are important for achieving both a high quality learning environment for children and a high quality work environment for adults.

Feedback from family providers who applied Model Work Standards to their businesses shows many positive gains. Several participants achieved the goal of establishing retirement accounts for the first time. Other participants made changes to their physical space; one added an office for the first time, while another moved into a larger home with more space for the children in her care. Finally, several family providers used the Model Work Standards process to create and implement firm contracts with parents. In each case, the Model Work Standards principles and process were central to creating a higher quality adult work environment for family day care providers.

## Conclusion

There are many important issues facing child care, and the sheer number of factors that require attention can at times seem daunting. While concerned groups of teachers, parents, advocates, and community leaders continue to work on the larger issues in child care, Model Work Standards offer an opportunity for teachers, staff, center directors, managers, and family providers to enact positive change in their work environment. Creating high quality work environments lowers turnover, makes child care work more rewarding, and increases the quality of care for children.

The centers and family providers in Madison and Dane County that put Model Work Standards into action in their child care settings made clear that there are many different ways to intervene and improve the work environment. From increases in wages and benefits, to improved staff communication, to more funding for career development, to better staff meeting space, Model Work Standards proved a useful tool for creating better adult work environments. Giving teachers a real say in how their work is structured is a significant accomplishment.

The process of implementing Model Work Standards also has had a positive effect across the board for centers and family providers. By coming together to identify problems, creating leadership teams, prioritizing possible solutions, identifying costs, and enacting plans for direct improvements, participants learned valuable skills. In many cases, quality improvement projects have continued after Model Work Standards funding was over. In many more cases, the fact that a group of people came together to make changes to their work environment has resulted in systems of communication that are now essential for creating and maintaining high quality work environments.

For more information, see the Center for the Child Care Workforce website: [www.ccw.org](http://www.ccw.org).

For more information on the Local Child Care Wage Initiative in Madison and Dane County and for reports on issues relating to quality early childhood education, see [www.cows.org/current/childcare.asp](http://www.cows.org/current/childcare.asp).