



## **The Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder**

### **History**

First instituted in 2000, the Early Childhood Education Career and Wage Ladder (the Ladder) sought to improve the quality of child care by supporting the career goals of child care workers, based on policy research indicating the most important elements of high quality early childhood education are the compensation, consistency and education of child care teachers.

The Ladder created incentives for child care teachers to pursue higher education relevant to early childhood education, and to excel in their chosen field of work. Governor Gary Locke allocated \$4 million of surplus funds from low-income assistance programs in 2000, and \$8 million for the 2001-2003 biennium, to the program. Approximately 125 centers were included in the Ladder, covering about 1500 employees who cared for 15,000 children. The Ladder was not refunded for the 2003-2005 biennium, due to recessionary impacts on spending.

In 2005, Washington lawmakers enacted legislation (HB 1636) putting the Ladder into state statute. In 2006, the legislators allocated \$1 million for Ladder for Fiscal Year 2007. In 2007, the Legislature allocated \$3 million for the 2007-2009 biennium. This funding covers 70 centers across the state. The cost is about \$250 per child per year, and represents both a frugal and robust intervention to catalyze high quality child care in Washington.

### **Current Design**

The Career and Wage Ladder is based on a wage matrix developed and published by the state, with wage increments determined by education, experience, and job responsibility.

### **Educational Increments**

The education steps are designed to enable advancement over a reasonable period of time, in consideration of teachers' work schedules and family responsibilities. A full-time employee that progresses from a Child Development Associate credential to an Early Childhood Education certificate (a community college credential approximate to one year of community college work) receives a wage bump of 50 cents per hour – approximately \$1000 annually.

Teachers are rewarded with wage increments for:

- STARS training
- Child development associate credential
- Early childhood education certificate
- Associate's degree in early childhood education
- Bachelor's degree in early childhood education

(Note that the wage ladder also includes intermediate credit increments between these educational mileposts.)

## **Longevity and Responsibility Increments**

An increase of one year of experience at the same child care center results in a 15 cent per hour increase in wages, or about \$300 annually for a full-time employee. A promotion from Assistant Teacher to Teacher results in a 50 cent increase in hourly wage, or about \$1000 annually.

## **Qualifications**

To participate in the Ladder, child care centers must agree to:

- Adopt the Career and Wage Ladder matrix developed by the state as a floor for wages (merit pay on top of the Career and Wage Ladder is accepted and encouraged).
- Enroll state-subsidized low-income children into at least 10% of available slots.
- Provide employees a minimum of 12 days paid leave (vacation, sick, and/or holidays) each year.

## **Participation**

There are now too many centers interested in participating in the Career and Wage Ladder, so the Department of Early Learning uses a random draw to select centers to participate.

## **Who Pays?**

- Washington State pays for incremental wage increases based on education.
- Child care centers pay for wage increments based on job responsibility and experience.

## **Program Evaluation**

Washington State University conducted a three-year evaluation of the Career and Wage Ladder. Researchers found the Ladder created important and statistically significant improvements in these areas:

- Educational achievement and pursuit of education
- Length of employment and retention of new employees
- Wages and benefits
- Employee self-esteem, morale, job satisfaction and sense of professionalism
- Time off provided by early learning and care centers to enable staff to pursue educational credentials
- The quality of care and teaching in the overall classroom environment
- Teacher-child interactions

## Questions and Answers

### 1. **What evidence shows that use of the Career and Wage Ladder improves child care and early learning?**

The Washington State University evaluation conclusively states that quality of care is significantly higher in Career and Wage Ladder centers than in comparison centers.

Using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised and the Caregiver Interaction Scale as assessment tools in direct observation of childcare teachers, the evaluators found statistically significant increases in the quality of early learning and care in the pilot centers, specifically in both overall classroom environment and teacher-child interaction.

Both measurements found the quality of care to be better at career and wage ladder sites than comparison sites. This is the only early learning program in Washington in which statistically significant improvements in child care have been documented.

### 2. **Does the Career and Wage Ladder prohibit merit pay increases?**

No. State legislation specifically states, "The adoption of a child care career and wage ladder shall not prohibit the provision of wage increases based upon merit."

The Career and Wage Ladder sets the minimum pay levels for early childhood education teachers. Centers are allowed and encouraged to compensate their employees above the floor that the career and wage ladder provides. Many do so.

### 3. **Does the career and wage ladder infringe on supervisor responsibilities or rights for hiring, firing, and employee discipline?**

Not at all. The career and wage ladder has no impact on the traditional management/labor responsibilities and relationships. The career and wage ladder grants no legal rights in these areas, with the exception of setting a threshold for wages, much as Washington's minimum wage law sets a threshold for compensation.

### 4. **How many centers would likely be interested in becoming part of the Career and Wage Ladder?**

Demand is outstripping funding allocated for the Ladder – in fact, the Department of Early Learning uses a random drawing to select new centers to participate. Both the Economic Opportunity Institute and the Department of Early Learning receive calls or emails from interested center directors every week.

### 5. **What would it take to bring the career and wage ladder to scale?**

The Office of Financial Management estimates an investment of about \$20 million a year in public funding would include all interested centers and pay for wage increments based on education.