

December 10, 2008 City of Madison Forum – Economy
Peggy Haack, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association

Intro of myself and WECA

By now most, if not all, of us are fully aware of the research that concludes that investments in early childhood education contribute positively to our economy. What we are just learning is that just as fluctuations in investments in early childhood care and education influence the state of the economy, fluctuations in the economy influence the field of early childhood care and education.

The City of Madison is far from immune to the impact of the economic downturn that is gripping our whole country, as evidenced in a recent Dane County survey of local businesses conducted by First Business Bank. Findings of their survey were presented recently at an economic forum, and include the following: Overall, businesses in our community for 2 consecutive years report that they did not meet their economic expectations, and an all time high of 40% report decreasing sales revenue. And despite the fact that Dane County has the lowest unemployment rate in the state, firms increasing their workforce is the lowest in survey history (this is the fifth consecutive year of the survey). Overall there has been a statistically significant negative change in the number of employees from 2004 to projected numbers for 2009.¹

What does this mean for child care? In these times of economic struggle, children, families and early childhood professionals are negatively impacted in a variety of ways. I'd like to speak briefly to each of these constituencies.

First of all children... here's what we know. Since the year 2000 the state's expenditures on quality initiatives has gone from \$38 million to a current figure of around \$10 million.² We enter into the next budget debate already in a deficit mode. History tells us that the state will do what it can to shore up access to child care through Wisconsin Shares, but access typically comes at the expense of quality. This despite that fact that all evidence

¹ First Business Economic Forum, 2008. Complete survey results available at:
www.firstbusinesseconomicssurvey.com

² Wisconsin Child Care Quality Budget, 1994-2007. Prepared by Jon Peacock, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

points to the fact that quality matters in terms of outcomes for children. Madison is recognized as a leader, not just in our state, but in our country, when it comes to supporting quality. The children here count on you today more than ever.

As for families, the current economy means an increase in family stressors, like job insecurity, depletion of savings, and concern with meeting basic needs. As much as we've worked hard to position child care as "early education", in this economy its function as a "work support" cannot be ignored. In addition, in a recent interview on public radio, the Milwaukee Chief of Police was quoted as saying that the number of reported cases of child abuse is on the rise and he attributes this to the current economy. The Children's Trust Fund, through their Strengthening Families Initiative, believes that good child care is a key prevention strategy. And we would add that it is a role of government to protect its citizens, including its youngest of citizens.

And as for early childhood professionals, on top of their own family stressors, they will likely be asked to do more to ensure stability in children's lives and provide high quality care, and they will be asked to do so with less financial assistance. Some programs will undoubtedly experience fluctuating enrollments or perhaps an increase in demand as more parents find themselves eligible for financial help or participating in re-training programs. Either way, program stability, and ultimately children, pay the price.

As we glean information from the national Invest in Kids Coalition, WECA is working with our national organization (NAEYC) and our local affiliates to encourage our members to send the message to our community leaders and policy makers, such as yourselves, that economic recovery must include significant monies for child care and Head Start. Children after all represent the human capital that will define our future. To the extent that we can partner with the City of Madison to ensure that our local leaders and state legislators get this message, we welcome the opportunity.

December 10, 2008 City of Madison Forum: Social-Emotional Development
Peggy Haack, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association

Intro of myself & WECA

As a statewide organization affiliated with a national organization, we are in a unique position to augment the local conversation around the issues of early childhood education with a perspective from child care providers throughout Wisconsin and throughout the country.

On a national level, a renewed attention to the "social and emotional development of young children" heralds what we believe to be a swing in the pendulum. As a field, our focus had shifted too far away from social-emotional needs of children as "school readiness" assumed priority. It seems the field is now attempting to find the balance. Research, particularly on brain development, has been consistent in documenting that the quality of human relationships, starting with the attachment needs of very young children, is the foundation of early learning.^[1] How do we reconcile that fact with current data that says on average one-third of the child care workforce turns over each year, significantly disrupting relationships that children count on?^[2] We also have evidence that the expulsion rate nationally among pre-kindergarten children in state-sponsored programs is more than 3 times greater than expulsion of K-12 school children, and that disruption caused by young children that can lead to expulsion may be a signal of an undiagnosed learning disorder or developmental delay.^[3] And certainly we know from anecdotal feedback that disruptive behavior impedes learning; in fact the number one reason kindergarten teachers recommend retention is due to delays or problems with social-emotional behavioral development.^[4] It begs the question, "Of those children who are not being served or not being served well in early childhood programs, who is attending to their need for a sense of belonging in a safe and trusting environment?"

Recently, WECA developed a training called "The Changing Landscape of Early Childhood Education." As part of this training we invite child care professionals to reflect on the changes and trends in our field with questions like: What is different for your program today than 5 years ago? What has changed for families? for children? for you?

We've presented this workshop in all corners of the state in our attempt to help those who work directly with children to engage in the change process, to embrace the changes in the field that are a positive force for children and families and to resist those changes that are harmful. No matter where we are, the list looks quite similar and always on the list is something like this:

"Children are more difficult; they have more challenging behaviors and we have more children with identified special needs. Families are more stressed; they are parenting in greater isolation. We are operating with fewer resources but with greater expectations." Also on the list: "There is more pressure for children to be academically prepared; sometimes this happens at the expense of play. There are so many more requirements for being "accountable" for outcomes that we have less time to actually build relationships with children and families."

We hear in their voices the desire to do their very best with children in face of incredible odds. As a professional association serving them, we can say unequivocally that supporting the social-emotional development of children with diagnosed or undiagnosed needs in early childhood programs is about supporting those we entrust to care for and educate them. That support may take a variety of forms, but all of them demand a greater investment in this workforce. They include: accessible and affordable education; professional development opportunities specific to the needs of the children in their care; enhanced compensation to assure greater staff stability; a "place at the table" for direct care providers where decisions are made that impact their work; program flexibility to allow sufficient numbers of staff to plan for individual needs and time for regular communication with other staff and parents; and access to mental health consultants, technical assistance, and substitute teacher pools so that early childhood professionals can give their best to the children.

We believe that the current economic downturn has the potential to either exacerbate the problems facing the child care workforce or illuminate new opportunities for a better future. We hope that we can be part of the continuing conversation with the City of Madison and child care professionals here.

^[1] *Secure Attachment*, 2008. Ounce of Prevention Fund, Chicago, IL

^[2] *Current Data on Salaries and Benefits*. Center for the Child Care Workforce, Washington D.C.

^[3] *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state Prekindergarten Programs*, Walter S. Gilliam Ph.D., Yale University Child Study Center.

^[4] *Putting Developmental Science to Work: Designing Early Childhood Environments that Promote Health Attachment and Social-Emotional Competence in Vulnerable Children*.

Powerpoint presentation by Debra M. Pacchiana, Ph.D. The Ounce of Prevention Fund, Birth to Five Peer Advocates Roundtable, 2008.