Child Welfare Education and Research Programs

2009-2010 Executive Report

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
Executive Report

Quality education and professional preparation are components of an effective child welfare workforce. The Child Welfare Education and Research continuum includes two degree education programs, Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB) and Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL). This year, 2010, marks the ninth academic year of operation for the Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates program (CWEB) and the fifteenth year of operation for the Child Welfare Education for Leadership program (CWEL) in Pennsylvania. These programs are administered by the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth and Families and the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators. The mission of these programs is to strengthen child welfare services to children and families in Pennsylvania by increasing the number of educated professionals and equipping them to deal with the increasingly complex demands of public child welfare practice.

These programs are integrated into the framework of public child welfare throughout the state, with approximately 97% of the counties in the Commonwealth participating in CWEB and CWEL. Over 700 students have graduated from CWEB during the program’s nine years and they have been employed in 58 out of the 67 Pennsylvania counties. CWEL has funded students from 66 counties and twelve Pennsylvania schools of social work on both a full- and part-time basis. As of 2010, almost a quarter of the child welfare work force (24%) has been enrolled in a CWEL program.

“I would not be getting my master's degree without this program... The program has helped to change my mind-set about the troubles families are facing. Overall it has been the best decision I have made in my life.” (Current CWEL student)

“CWEB gave me an advantage in the field of Child Welfare before I entered my term of employment.... I had a huge advantage because I was able to get more one on one help while doing my internship for a year, my supervisor was extremely helpful and showed me how to do things so that I was knowledgeable when I started my term of employment. Child Welfare becomes less stressful when a worker is able to be and feel competent in what they do.” (CWEB graduate)

“To me, the outcome of having educated social workers in the field of child welfare is the most positive element of the program.” (Faculty)

“I have found the CWEL program to be very valuable to the agency when trying to move to a more strength-based approach with children and families.... CWEL grads have had a positive impact on the agency’s management team, add fresh/new/innovative ideas to practice and supervision and challenge other staff to expand their knowledge and practice skills.... CWEB employees also come with better skills and the advantage that they have been at a CYS agency and are not shocked by what our work entails.” (Agency director)
Every year we review our administrative data and survey our key stakeholders to evaluate how well students and graduates feel that they are being prepared for child welfare work. This year we heard from 100% of the participating schools, approximately 88% of county agencies, 92% of enrolled students, and 60% of our graduates about their perception of the effectiveness of the professional education programs. Below are a few key findings from this year’s study:

- **The Title IV-E professional education programs are greatly valued by all of the stakeholders.** Part-time students report that they are practicing new skills at work and full-time students feel privileged to be able to focus on their education. Faculty members in participating schools identify students as highly motivated, and the public agencies view them as valuable employees in their efforts to improve child welfare practices and outcomes.

- **CWEB and CWEL students are valued** by county agency directors who speak very highly of program graduates’ skills and knowledge, indicating that advanced degrees increase the quality of child welfare work. School faculty report that CWEL students add to the breadth and depth of learning in the classroom too, as they tend to bring more “real world” experience compared to other students.

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### Participating Schools

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**PCYA**

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*Department of Public Welfare*

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*University of Pennsylvania*
• CWEB and CWEL programs create an educational career ladder for social workers in child welfare.

Rung 3
• Return to agency for commitment after graduating from CWEL and assume a supervisory or clinical mentoring position in agency.

Rung 2
• Apply to CWEL program post commitment & while in agency and matriculate to full or part-time in CWEL.

Rung 1
• Matriculate and graduate from the CWEB program & employed for commitment period & beyond.

“CWEL is a natural extension of the CWEB program that encourages students to return to school after they have had some practice experience... this is...a huge benefit to students and a much better educational model than going straight from BSW to MSW with no practice experience in-between.”

For the enrolled CWEL students who responded to the survey, 16% received their degrees through the CWEB program. Of this group, more than three-fourths (77%) are still working in the agency in which they did their post-CWEB commitment and the majority are part-time students who continue to work full-time within their agency. We have observed this CWEB to CWEL progression pattern for the last three years and it suggests that Rungs 1 and 2 are in place.

• Graduates of the CWEL program are well-prepared to assume positions of leadership in their agencies. Currently, 19% of Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators are graduates of the CWEL program.

County With CWEL Graduates As Current Administrator or Assistant Administrator
• Despite the struggling economic recovery, 86% of the CWEB secured employment within seven months of graduation.

• One trend is the increase in part-time matriculation by students. Part-time students have the challenge of managing the work/life/school balance and may have limited field placement options and fewer choices in coursework. They are also at greater risk of dropping out of school. Full-time students have greater choice, but face a sometimes difficult transition back to fulltime employment. While continuing to monitor this trend, we are exploring additional ways to meet the changing need while continuing to provide financial and academic support.

• The perception of agency work climate by CWEB and CWEL graduates has been rated as moderate. The climate surveys among program graduates have been administered and results analyzed for nearly 10 years, spanning graduates of the program as far back as 1995 (Cahalane & Sites, 2008). Results show stable trends of child welfare work environments. Many graduates report feeling accomplished, committed, and invested in the work that they do. However, the rating of program graduates on the climate of their work environment is moderate, at best. They report a high degree of commitment, personal accomplishment and investment in their work. However, the work climate has consistently been rated as moderate at best, and this has been stable over time (Cahalane & Sites, 2008). Common areas of work climate strain are role overload—feeling unable to accomplish what is needed —and lack of opportunities for promotion. In addition, graduates' climate ratings did not improve when considering the amount of

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time that they have spent in the child welfare workforce. While still regarding public child welfare practice positively, seasoned workers rate the climate similar to less experienced workers, and in some cases, they feel that the climate is more challenging in some aspects (routinization and role conflict).

The consistency of agency work climate as perceived by multiple samples of program graduates over time suggests that the work climate in Pennsylvania is stable, and not influenced by a large degree by individuals or where they are working. Therefore, interventions that target problem areas such as "role overload" and "opportunities for advancement" may not need to be individualized to a particular agency or region.

**Recommendations**

Educational programs such as CWEB and CWEL prepare and enrich the workforce but they are one component of an overall strategy for educating and retaining a quality workforce. The federal government has stepped up its efforts through the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, regional implementation and technical assistance centers, and Quality Improvement Centers for progressive initiatives. There is evidence that climate does impact child level outcomes: A study using a national sample of child welfare agencies confirms what has long been suspected—caseworkers who provide services in a child welfare system that have more engaged climates are more likely to provide a better quality of service (Glisson, 2010). In partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth and Families and the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators, we are committed to extending the reach of the CWEL and CWEB programs through the following recommendations:

**Addition of a doctoral-level CWEL option**

This option can provide an additional research arm for the Commonwealth and further our mission of establishing evidence-based child welfare practice across the state. Research at the doctoral level would make an even greater contribution to the Commonwealth and the field through the development of “practice-based” researchers. Finally, it would provide one more “rung” on the career ladder for child welfare professionals who desire an advanced degree while remaining committed to the field.

**Inclusion of additional social work degree programs in Pennsylvania as they become accredited**

Pennsylvania has many remote areas that have a shortage of professionals in specialized services, such as social work, child psychiatry and nursing. Increasing the number of participating CWEB and CWEL schools would allow for greater student access, reducing student commuting time and decreasing program costs. The map below shows the PA schools of social work currently participating the CWEB and CWEL programs.
Consideration may also be given to including the fourteen private, accredited undergraduate social work programs in Pennsylvania in the CWEB consortium. This offers the potential to double the CWEB enrollment, would provide educational opportunities to a larger network of students interested in child welfare, and would develop a greater pool of eligible employees for the counties.

**Consideration of an additional component to the CWEL program in order to recruit new employees for the counties**

Currently, only CYS employees are CWEL program participants. The additional component would allow the CWEL program to admit persons who have never worked in a county CYS before, but who have been adequately trained and have the same length of work commitment that is currently required of CWEL participants. The provision in the federal Title IV-E regulations which permits the training of persons “preparing for [public child welfare] employment”\(^2\) provides this opportunity. A principal advantage of this additional component is cost savings.

\(^2\) 45 CFR, Ch. II, §235.63 (a).
Increase depth of undergraduate child welfare curriculum among schools through the development of a certificate in Child Advocacy Studies in collaboration with the National Child Protection Training Center
Undergraduates in the CWEB program currently complete one child welfare course and a public child welfare internship. We are in the process of developing the first of three courses for the Child Advocacy Studies certificate in an online, hybrid format. This will strengthen the child welfare course options for students and provide elective options for students in other degree programs who receive little, if any, content on child abuse and neglect.

Continue to promote enrollment in the CWEB program in order to provide a professional career ladder
The CWEB program is an effective way to introduce well-educated and trained child welfare workers into the workforce. Because many counties have hiring freezes for caseworker positions, the CWEB program has had to be careful in terms of balancing enrollment with position openings. Nonetheless, it remains one of the most promising aspects of creating a skilled workforce. After fulfilling the legal work commitment, CWEB graduates are able to apply to the CWEL program. This provides a unique opportunity for enriching the child welfare workforce through advanced social work education.

Increase accessibility of Charting the Course to CWEB students
In collaboration with the PA Child Welfare Training Program (CWTP), a case management system was put in place during the 2009-2010 Academic Year in order to facilitate CWEB student enrollment in PA’s competency and skills-based training for new caseworkers. CWEB students are assigned to a CWTP Regional Training Specialist who facilitates enrollment in Charting the Course (CTC) and begins the students’ certification training record. Due to the challenge of coordinating individual student schedules with training sessions, the availability of CTC in an on-line format will permit CWEB students to complete all of the modules during the course of their senior year in school. This will benefit both the students and the county agencies. CWEB graduates will be better prepared to enter the workforce following completion of their undergraduate social work studies and they will qualify for immediate certification as a caseworker.

Transition support and ongoing connection among CWEL graduates
CWEL graduates are a group of well-educated and trained professionals who feel positive about their skills and ability to work productively with families, but are skeptical about the opportunities available to them in a career in child welfare. CWEB graduates have the hope of promotion and the opportunity to continue their education by continuing in CWEL—but no such educational opportunity exists for CWEL graduates. Full-time CWEL students also report that transitioning back to their agencies full-time can be difficult. To address these issues, we are suggesting a formal program starting with a “transition seminar” for second semester full and last semester part-time graduates; this seminar will provide them transition support and an opportunity to interact and make contacts with other CWEL participants.
Mentoring of CWEB graduates

Mentoring opportunities for CWEB graduates by CWEL graduates (particularly male, Hispanic and African American) can help with their transitions into the workforce and recruitment into the CWEL program. Many CWEB graduates speak of the positive impact that mentoring by a more experienced child welfare worker made on their professional development, especially their sense of competence in managing complicated tasks and responsibilities.

Utilizing the advanced clinical skills of the CWEL graduates

Because CWEL students have advanced skills, create positions similar to those of nursing clinical specialists in order to capitalize on their expertise. A repeated theme among CWEL graduates is the satisfaction that comes from new challenges and opportunities for leadership within child welfare, and the frustration and discontent that results from no recognition of their advanced skills and abilities. Our retention research with long-term graduates has shown that opportunities to utilize advanced skills can often make the difference between staying within public child welfare or seeking new opportunities.

Incorporation of trauma-informed supervision

Current students and graduates speak poignantly about needing supervisory and peer support to manage work-related stress, and of the impact of secondary trauma upon their ability to remain in the field. Process-oriented supervision, with a focus upon the impact of secondary trauma, is a concrete way of supporting the workforce and assuring that workers have the capacity to remain committed to child welfare.

References


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