Child Welfare Education and Research Programs

2010-2011 Executive Summary

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
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, 2011, marks the tenth academic year of operation for the Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates program (CWEB) and the sixteenth 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. Nearly 750 students have graduated from CWEB during the program’s ten 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 the 2010-2011 academic year, over a quarter of the child welfare work force (28%) has been enrolled in a CWEL program.

“Our CWEL graduates have had opportunities for promotion to supervisory ranks and more recently into administration. Our current administrative team is made up largely of CWEL graduates. This includes the deputy administrator, the four service administrators, the administrator for staff development and the policy/QA administrator. They are running the place!!!!!” (Agency director)

“CWEB is GREAT for the state because it provides the child welfare system with QUALIFIED, EDUCATED, SKILLED WORKERS...” (CWEB student)

“Without CWEL, I would probably not have decided to pursue a Master’s degree. The things that I have learned through my MSW studies have already helped me to become a better caseworker.” (CWEL student)

“The CWEL program helped me to ensure that my workers and other staff are learning and utilizing the skills necessary for working with families. I am better equipped to teach and support staff as a result of my CWEL education.” (CWEL graduate)

“I feel that having the support from my home agency was a plus because my director is a product of CWEL and understands that social work practice has a place in child welfare.” (CWEL student)

“The responsiveness and knowledge of the (University of Pittsburgh) staff is definitely what makes this program so special.” (Participating University Faculty)
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 96% of the participating schools, approximately 91% of county agencies, 90% of enrolled students, and 64% 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.

### Participating Schools

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<td>Bloomsburg University</td>
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<td>Bryn Mawr College</td>
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<td>University of Pittsburgh</td>
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<td>West Chester University</td>
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<td>Widener University</td>
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• CWEB and CWEL programs create an educational career ladder for social workers in child welfare.

For the enrolled CWEL students who responded to the survey, 19% received their degrees through the CWEB program. Of this group, all are still working in the agency in which they did their post-CWEB commitment. We have observed this CWEB to CWEL progression pattern for the last four years and it suggests that Rungs 1 and 2 are in place.

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• Graduates of the CWEL program are well-prepared to assume positions of leadership in their agencies. Currently, 18% of Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators are graduates of the CWEL program. An additional 7 CWEL graduates hold Assistant Administrator positions.

“I am a CWEB graduate and am now attending school for my MSW. CWEL has been amazing and given me an opportunity for social change to improve not only myself as a professional but my clients and co-workers around me each and every day. I love it and continue to advocate for caseworkers....”

“County With CWEL Graduate As Current Administrator or Assistant Administrator”

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• **CWEL students contribute to human service programs in both the public and private sector during the course of their graduate studies through active engagement in field work in a variety of agency settings.** County agencies, in turn, benefit from the expanded knowledge that CWEL students bring to the county as a result of their field and classroom experience. CWEL students have been instrumental in improving cross-systems collaboration, educating provider agencies about child welfare mandates and services, and, in some instances, shifting a pre-existing, negative perception of child welfare practice. CWEL students and graduates are participating in the state Program Improvement Plan, chairing committees and contributing to the state-wide effort to improve child level outcomes. Students develop a greater appreciation and understanding of the services, mandates, philosophy, delivery and outcome goals of child welfare provider agencies and programs. All of this occurs as our child welfare students share their expertise and enrich their skills through internships with community and private provider agencies.

**CWEL Field Placement Types**

![2010-2011 CWEL Students Field Placement Types](chart1)

**Permanency Field Placements**

![Permanency Field Placements](chart2)
We are committed to increasing racial diversity in CWEB and CWEL enrollment. According to a 2011 report issued by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, there are more than 27,000 Pennsylvania children living in foster care. Forty-six percent of these children are African American, yet African American children comprise only 11% of the state’s child population. Caucasian children make up 80% of the state’s child population and comprise approximately 52% of Pennsylvania’s foster care population. Within the CWEB and CWEL programs combined, African Americans represent 19% of participants. While the causes and solutions for the disproportionate representation of children of color in the child welfare system are complex, we believe that it is crucial that the child welfare workforce be reflective of the population served. We specifically target recruitment of students with diverse backgrounds at the entry level in order to broaden the racial and ethnic diversity of the child welfare workforce.

A continuing 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 this population’s evolving needs while still ensuring quality education along with financial and academic support.

Demographics of PA Child Population and CWEB/CWEL Participants

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Demographic Characteristics

- African American
- Caucasian
- Other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tr>
<td>PA Child Population</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>CWEB Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>CWEL Students</td>
<td>79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Combined CWEB/CWEL</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA Foster Care Population</td>
<td>52</td>
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1 Statewide Data Package. AFCARS Longitudinal File maintained by Hornsby-Zeller Associates for the PA Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth and Families.
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. Nonetheless, 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. Despite these positive reports, 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 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 aspects, they feel that the climate is more challenging (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 to 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.
• **Keeping Bachelor’s level caseworkers is the most pressing retention challenge.** An important and related retention question is whether CWEB and CWEL graduates remain in public child welfare following their commitment period. To answer this question, we used data on former graduates whose commitment period had ended and had the opportunity for five years of post commitment practice. Survival analyses suggest that 50% of the CWEB graduates leave within 20 months following the end of their commitment, whereas it takes almost 5 years for the CWEL graduates to reach this level. CWEB students are younger, and these workers are more likely to leave their jobs or change professions, move, and change partners. These changes represent expected developmental transitions among young persons beginning their professional careers. However, when we contextualized this information with some of the survey and climate data, we believe that lack of commitment was less about the field of child welfare, and more about their experiences with the bureaucracies and lack of support and career opportunities within their agencies.

**Recommendations**

Educational programs such as CWEB and CWEL prepare and enrich the workforce, but they are only 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 CWEB and CWEL programs through the following recommendations:

• **Increase the 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 currently complete one child welfare course and a public child welfare internship. We are currently in the process of piloting the first of three courses in Child Advocacy Studies in an on-line, hybrid format. This will strengthen the child welfare course options for students and also has the benefit of providing elective options for students outside of social work who receive little, if any, content on child abuse and neglect.
• **Utilize the advanced clinical skills of the CWEL graduates**

Because CWEL students have advanced skills, create specialty positions 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.

• **Include 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.

![Child Welfare Education and Research Programs](image)

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.

• **Incorporate trauma-informed, reflective supervision at the county level**

  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 of child welfare. 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. We believe it is critical to address this issue.

• **Consider 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.

• **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.

• **Continue to promote enrollment in Charting the Course to CWEB students**

  CWEB graduates are better prepared to enter the workforce following completion of their undergraduate social work studies when they have a child welfare internship at a county agency and have begun the competency and skills-based training for new caseworkers. The case management system put in place during the 2009-2010 Academic Year assigns each CWEB student to a Regional Training Specialist at the PA

\(^2\) 45 CFR, Ch. II, §235.63 (a).
Child Welfare Training Program who facilitates enrollment in Charting the Course (CTC) and begins the students’ certification training record. The availability of CTC in an online 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.

- **Provide 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.

- **Mentor 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.

- **Consider the 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.

**References**


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