

# Child Welfare Education and Research Programs



2023-2024 Executive Summary  
School of Social Work  
University of Pittsburgh



## Child Welfare Education and Research Programs

Mission: 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.

Degree programs: Child Welfare Education for Baccalaureates (CWEB)  
Child Welfare Education for Leadership (CWEL)

Administered by:

University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work



University of  
Pittsburgh

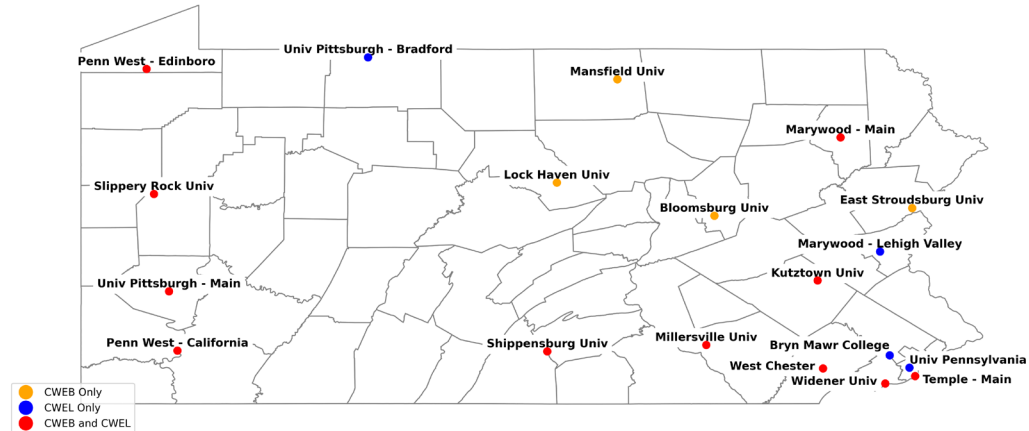


pennsylvania  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES



Child Welfare Education and Research Programs  
Participating Schools

Updated: 11/15/2023



### Highlights:

#### CWEB:

- 23rd Academic Year
- 1,397 Graduates
- Employed in 93% of Pennsylvania counties

#### CWEL:

- 29th Academic year
- 1,743 Graduates
- 19% of Pennsylvania child welfare workforce
- 99% county participation in CWEB/CWEL programs
- 45% of counties benefit from CWEL leadership
- Many current child welfare trainers/consultants are CWEL graduates
- 12 CWEB graduates occupy high-level agency leadership positions



## Challenges in the Field of Child Welfare

- Racial disproportionality continues to be a challenge in the field of child welfare. A December 2024 report by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children discussed the disproportionate amount of Black and White children who received valid GPS allegations when compared to the amount in the general population.<sup>1</sup> To combat this issue, the CWEB and CWEL programs work to ensure that the workforce is reflective of the population served with 20% of participants in each program identifying as African American.

<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (2024). State of the Child 2024 – Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.papartnerships.org/report/state-of-the-child-2024/>

- Recruitment and retention of child welfare caseworkers continues to be a challenge, Staff vacancies puts additional pressure on remaining caseworkers by increasing their caseload.
- Undergraduate enrollment has decreased significantly in the past several years nationwide. This trend makes it difficult to attract new students into the field of social work and the child welfare profession through CWEB.



## Programmatic Areas of Improvement

- CWEL graduates wanted more electives available and spoke about approved electives not being offered at their schools or electives that may be useful not being approved by CWEL.
- Part-time CWEL students struggle with the workload of full-time work, part-time school and family responsibilities.
- CWEL students and graduates talked about struggling to find appropriate practicum placements.
- CWEB students reported conflict between Zoom meeting times and their internship schedules.

## Solutions to Child Welfare Challenges

- The CWEB program initiated a series of BIPOC recruiting sessions to gain more interest in the program with people of color. Partnering schools of social work have implemented unique ways to attract new students into their programs and increase diversity. Strategies include coordinating with their diversity offices to invite students to attend social work classes, establishing articulation agreements with local community colleges to provide an easy pathway for finishing a BASW/BSW degree, and improving the climate on their campuses.

- County administrators have made concerted efforts to reduce the vacancy rate in their agencies by providing retention bonuses and investing in job and skill development for staff.
- PennWest University received a two-year grant to provide direct admissions to high school students through the Niche platform.<sup>1</sup> CWERP added seven additional undergraduate programs to the CWEB consortium in the 2024-2025 academic year to increase the number of caseworkers entering the workforce.

<sup>1</sup> Aiken, M. "PennWest, Two Other Pa. State Universities Begin Directly Admitting Students to Bolster Enrollment." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 22 Nov. 2024, [www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2024/11/21/pennwest-direct-admissions-enrollment-niche/stories/202411210126](http://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2024/11/21/pennwest-direct-admissions-enrollment-niche/stories/202411210126)

## Solutions to Student/Graduate Concerns

- The CWEL program reviews syllabi from participating schools of social work to increase the number of approved electives.
- While full-time work and part-time schooling for CWEL students remains a challenge, allowing work based field placements reduces some of the burden for this group of students.
- Seven CWEL graduates requested and received reimbursement for the social work licensure exam. CWEB graduates are encouraged to participate in the licensure exam reimbursement as well.
- For the 2024-2025 academic year, new topics for the CWEB Zoom meetings were created to address interests and concerns of CWEB students.

## Online Learning:

- CWERP has offered CWEL students the ability to complete their degree program online through partnership with Millersville, Shippensburg, Temple and Widener universities.
- The newly merged PennWest University (including Edinboro and California University of PA) has transitioned all their graduate studies into an online format, allowing more students across the state to participate in a graduate degree program.
- Although online programs provide great benefits to CWEL students not living near a campus-based program, there are some challenges inherent with online learning.
- CWEL online learners may need to acquire internship sites in their local jurisdiction on their own.
- Online classes may require synchronous learning.
- Online learning is not for everyone. Some students struggle with technology and finding a distraction-free study environment.
- County administrators may view online learning as a way for child welfare staff to obtain their graduate degree without a disruption to their full-time jobs. However, online study is just as rigorous as campus based learning and requires a significant time commitment.
- Given the increase in online learning programs, the CWERP program began surveying those participating in online learning regarding their experiences.
- Overall, online CWEL learners rate their learning ability positively. However, their connectedness is rated lower and may indicate the desire for more in-person exposure to classmates and professors.

## Practicum Experiences

- CWEL graduates recognize that the time they spent in their practicum exposed them to the different positions in a child welfare agency and the many tasks a caseworker completes on a daily basis.
- CWEL graduates discuss the value having a longer internship and how it allowed them to feel more comfortable entering the child welfare workforce.
- CWEL graduates emphasize how the Foundations of Child Welfare trainings coupled with their time at their internship sites provided them opportunities to practice skills before being hired into a child welfare agency.
- CWEL graduates speak about how working with substance abuse, mental health, and immigration populations gave them new skills, insights, and resources to help their county child welfare agencies work with families that may cope with these issues.
- CWEL graduates who complete a work based field placement experience a different aspect of their agency which gave them a deeper appreciation for how different units work toward the same goals.
- CWEL graduates are challenged to work outside their comfort zones in their internship placements, which give them new insights into different areas of social work.
- CWEL graduates emphasize that their internships allow them to see the hard work required of the parents and children involved in child welfare.

## Program Evaluation:

Annual review of administrative and survey data to evaluate how students/graduates perceive their preparation for child welfare work

### Highlights:

Response rates:

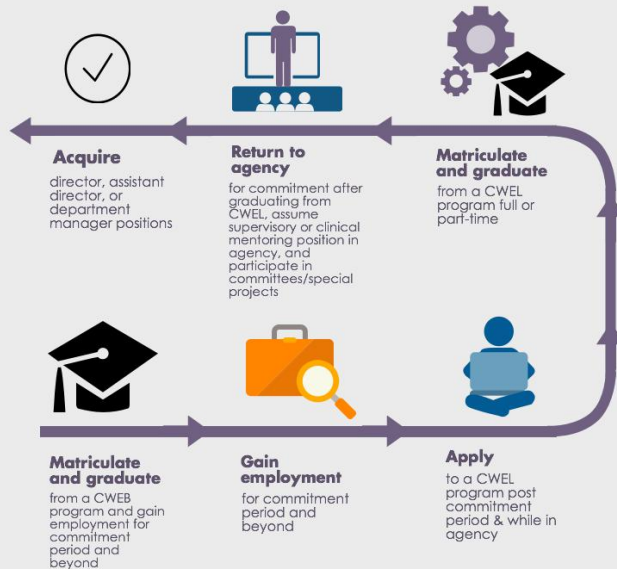
- County Administrators: 63%
  - School Administrators: 53%
  - Current Students: 58%
  - Graduates: 44%
- 7% of CWEL students during the 2023-2024 AY had participated in the CWEL program
  - 83% of CWEL students remain in the agency where they completed their post-CWEL commitment
  - Of those who completed a survey, 86% of CWEL graduates and 95% of CWEL graduates remain employed in child welfare services one-two years post graduation



### Major Findings:

- CWEL students and graduates rated items regarding the ability to utilize new skills, their degree allowing them to contribute to child welfare, and opportunities for advancement in their county child welfare agencies significantly higher than CWEL students and graduates.
- Regarding organizational culture, CWEL graduates rated Teamwork, Morale, Information Flow, Employee Involvement, and Meetings significantly higher than CWEL graduates. School agency administrators had high satisfaction ratings for the overall program administration and the CWEL/CWEL specific items.
- County administrators were satisfied with the CWEL/CWEL programs and noted that CWEL graduates were more prepared to carry a caseload when compared to other new hires.

## CAREER PATHWAY



### Quotes from Participants:

"The CWEL program sets future social workers up with success in future leadership positions. The program gives all passionate child welfare employees an opportunity to further their education and advance in their occupation." (CWEL Current Student)

"The CWEL program was very helpful, and I cannot imagine entering the field of Child Welfare without the year of internship experience preceding it. Child Welfare is a tough field to work in, and it is so easy to doubt yourself as a new worker. I am thankful for the exposure I had before entering the field as a full time caseworker." (CWEL Long-Term Graduate)

"The education that the program provides is very positive and robust with a lot of learning opportunities for individuals. CWEL is child welfare specific which is positive. The program also provides an opportunity for professional development and professional connections. I have utilized connections and relationships with professors to help in my CYF career." (CWEL Recent Graduate)

"{CWEL} Students get an excellent learning experience and it has increased the quality of service in the child welfare system." (School Administrator)

"CWEL and CWEL are excellent programs providing unique opportunities for Agencies and employees. The financial incentive is very good as well as the professional development opportunities." (County Administrator)

A Pitt CWEL Student was nominated for the Excellence in Social Work Practice Award. This award recognizes Master's students who demonstrate exemplary commitment to their social work professional development. The student was nominated because of her "stellar academic performance (4.0!) and contributions to peers both in school and at the agency have been exceptional."

A PennWest:Edinboro CWEL student and Clarion County CYS employee, received a "Heard Something Good" certificate from her county after the Punxsutawney State Police notified the agency of the student's professionalism in her interactions with them during an abuse investigation. The county also benefits from her participation in the self-care committee. This committee works to incorporate self-care and stress relief activities at the office.

A 2021 CWEL graduate, has been awarded one of the 2024 SWAG Awards (Social Worker Appreciation of Greatness). The SWAG Awards honor the "heart work" of local social work heroes that is often unappreciated and unrecognized. The goal of the annual SWAG awards ceremony is to recognize social workers in the Greater Pittsburgh Area who exemplify servant leadership through their commitment to promoting advocacy, social justice, generational healing, and building stronger communities.



A Pitt CWEL student from Allegheny County was awarded the Darrell P. Wheeler Student Resource Award, recognizing students for outstanding efforts in service to school, university, and/or community. In the email the student received it stated: "Students like you represent the heart of the school, and it is our goal to assist you in obtaining the highest quality of graduate education possible. University donors help make this happen by ensuring students receive financial support through training fellowships, tuition awards, and student resource funds."

A Long-Term CWEL Graduate received the Fab 40 under 40 award from the New Pittsburgh Courier. This award acknowledges local African American professionals for their leadership, achievements, and community service. The graduate has extensive experience in the field of social work including managing hospital social work departments and working as a clinical social worker. Her leadership and community service make her an excellent recipient of this award!



### **Overall Recommendations:** **Increase availability of accredited social work programs:**

- Approval was granted to expand the CWEB program on July 11, 2024. Meetings were held with the additional seven schools joining the CWEB consortium throughout the 2023-2024 academic year. CWEB students were welcomed into the new CWEB schools in the 2024-2025 academic year.
- Slippery Rock University welcomed their first cohort of CWEL students in the 2024-2025 academic year.
- Bloomsburg University received full accreditation from CSWE in June 2024. Bloomsburg will welcome CWEL students in the 2025-2026 academic year.

### **Increase the caliber of the PA child welfare workforce at the front door.**

- Continue to advocate at the county, state, and federal level that salaries must be adequate to compensate for the demands and responsibility of public child welfare jobs
- Develop specific county child welfare casework classification within the State Civil Service System

### **CWEB Recommendations:**

#### **Improve successful job placement following graduation**

- Assistance by CWEB/CWEL Agency Coordinator in identifying county casework vacancies, facilitating referrals for interviews, and counseling regarding employment.
- Follow-up protocol with CWEB grads to help with transition from student to full-time caseworker and identify graduates struggling through the commitment year for further outreach from the CWEB/CWEL Agency Coordinator.

#### **Improve leadership and professional development skills**

- Students encouraged to develop leadership and self-care skills during their academic/field experience.
- Graduates are encouraged to register for the BSW licensure exam. Reimbursement for a portion of the exam cost is available to graduates.
- Detailed information regarding the CWEL program is presented to CWEB students in the last Zoom meeting of the academic year to promote enrollment into master's level study.
- CWEB graduates expressing interest in CWEL during the follow-up protocol will be sent information for CWEL information sessions.

### **CWEL Recommendations:**

#### **Continued focus upon agency working environment and opportunities for graduates to use their expanded skills and abilities within the agency and at the state level**

- Targeted intervention with agency supervisors and administrators; collaboration with CWRC Practice Improvement Specialists/Regional Teams.
- CWEL graduate involvement in ongoing organizational effectiveness/ CQI processes within counties.
- Inclusion of CWEL graduates in state-wide practice and policy initiatives.
- Inquire about graduate's interest in participating in panels, as CWRC trainers or in CWRC work groups during follow-up protocol.

#### **Supervision and mentorship of CWEB program participants**

- CWEL graduates are encouraged to provide supervision and mentoring to CWEB students/graduates at their county agency.
- County agency directors are encouraged to utilize CWEL graduates as practicum instructors, task supervisors, and mentors to CWEBs.



Published by  
**Child Welfare Education and Research Programs**  
**School of Social Work**  
**University of Pittsburgh**  
**2009 Cathedral of Learning**  
**Pittsburgh, PA 15260**

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