

Child Welfare Education and Research Programs



2024-2025 Executive Summary
School of Social Work
University of Pittsburgh



Child Welfare Education and Research Programs

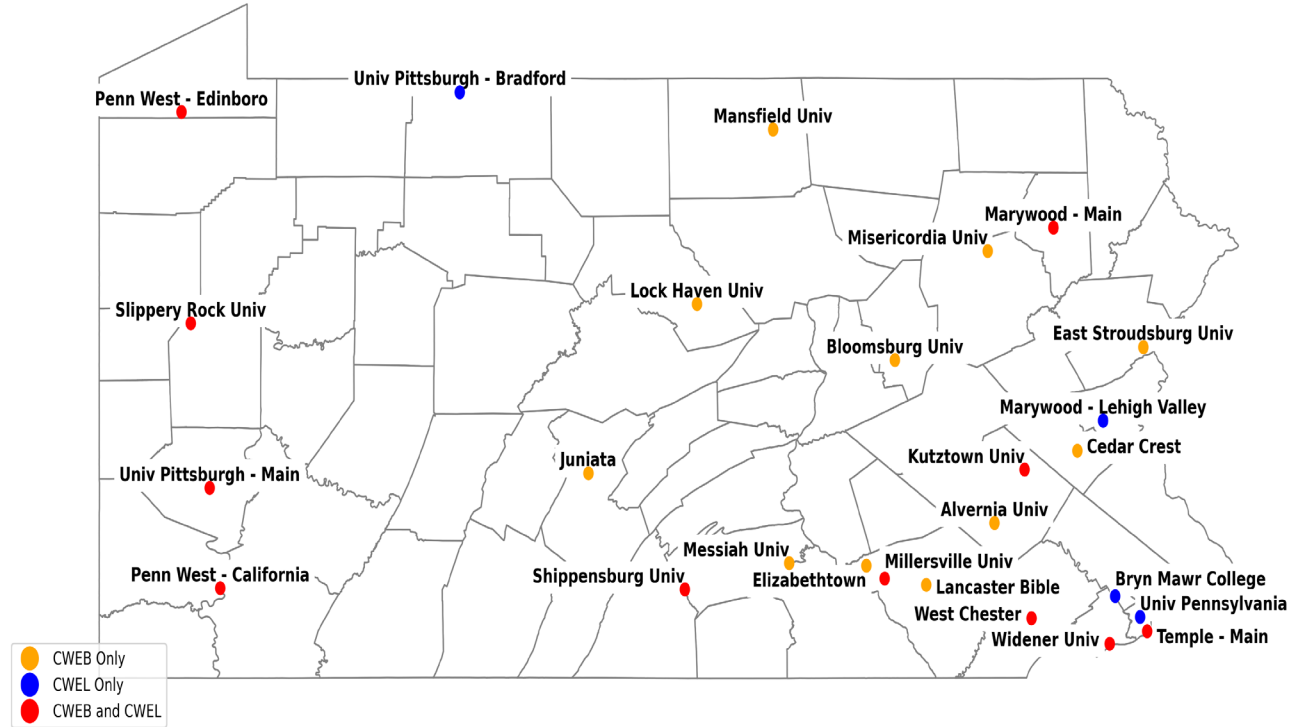
Mission: Strengthen child welfare services to children and families in Pennsylvania by increasing the number of educated professionals and equipping them to deal with the increasingly complex demands of public child welfare practice.

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

Administered by:
University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work

Child Welfare Education and Research Programs
Participating Schools

Updated: 08/26/2024



Highlights:

CWEB:

- 24th Academic Year
- 1,433 Graduates
- Employed in 94% of Pennsylvania counties

CWEL:

- 30th Academic year
- 1,795 Graduates
- 19% of Pennsylvania child welfare workforce

- 99% county participation in CWEB/CWEL programs
- 44% of counties benefit from CWEL leadership
- Many current child welfare trainers/consultants are CWEL graduates
- 9 CWEB graduates occupy high-level agency leadership positions

Profiles in Excellence:

A CWEL student received the 2025 Kim and Larry Davis Student Research fund award from the University of Pittsburgh. This award is granted to MSW students who show excellent ability to participate in research-informed practice or practice informed research. The student was nominated for this award because of her extraordinary ability to apply CBT techniques in her practicum and her ability to approach each case with cultural humility and a trauma focused lens.

A CWEL student received the 2024 Permanency Leader Award. The agency tracks the number of children that achieve permanency on each worker's caseload either through adoption or reunification with their biological parents. The student successfully achieved permanency for 10 children on her caseload in 2024, which earned her the 2024 Permanency Leader Award through Westmoreland County's Children's Bureau.

A CWEB graduate received the Temple BSW Outstanding Senior Undergraduate Student for the 2023-2024 school year. This honor is awarded to a Temple senior who "excelled in leadership, service, and scholarship throughout their Temple career." The graduate was active in the Big Brothers Big Sisters Independence, was the community service coordinator for Temple's National Social Work Honor Society, and was active in the Philadelphia community. The student says "I hope to continue to serve the Philadelphia community as best as I can beyond my time at Temple."

A CWEB student attended The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors conference in March to present a poster explaining Child Death Review teams and a social worker's role in preventative practices toward child fatalities. The poster's main goal is to strengthen fatality prevention, increase awareness of risk factors for child fatalities, and suggest reforms to protect vulnerable children and increase the effectiveness of child death review teams. The student delved into the gaps in child death review teams and suggests improvements through multidisciplinary collaboration, evidence-based policy, advocacy, and ethical frameworks.

A CWEL student was nominated and received the exceptional graduate student in the MSW program award at PennWest University. The student was invited to speak about her experiences in the MSW program and her future career goals with other students, PennWest faculty, and representatives from the Council of Social Work Education as part of PennWest's reaccreditation.

A CWEL graduate was one of the recipients of the 2024 PA Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network's Permanency Teamwork Recognition. This award is given to county children and youth agencies and courts that work collaboratively to accelerate a child's path towards permanency through adoption, kinship care, or legal guardianship. The graduate worked tirelessly with seven other individuals in Berks County and their efforts were rewarded with this recognition.

Challenges in the Field of Child Welfare

- Racial disproportionality continues to be a challenge in the field of child welfare. A 2025 report by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children discussed that Black, Hispanic, and multiple race children had higher CPS referrals including substantiated reports of abuse and neglect as well as valid GPS allegations.¹ 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.

¹ Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (2025). State of the Child 2025 – Pennsylvania. Harrisburg, PA: author. Retrieved from <https://www.papartnerships.org/report/state-of-the-child-2025/>

- Recruitment and retention of child welfare caseworkers continues to be a challenge, Staff vacancies puts additional pressure on remaining caseworkers by increasing their caseload.
- Although undergraduate enrollment has increased in the majority of CWEB's partnering schools of social work, this does not guarantee an increase in social work students or those interested in participating in CWEB.



Programmatic Areas of Improvement

- CWEL students and 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.
- CWEL graduates wanted more information and training regarding the licensure exam.
- CWEB students and graduates reported conflict between Zoom meeting times and their internship/class schedules.
- CWEB graduates wanted more clarity on when to start applying for jobs at child welfare agencies.

Solutions to Child Welfare Challenges

- The CWEB program believes that families involved in child welfare would greatly benefit if the workforce is representative of the population they serve. To this end, the CWEB program and our partnering schools of social work are recruiting students who best reflect the characteristics of the families involved in child welfare. CWEB conducts an annual recruitment specific to BIPOC students and partnering schools of social work are targeting diverse high schools to increase interest in social work.
- County administrators have made concerted efforts to increase the retention of qualified staff by providing mentors for new staff, instituting a lunch group to provide support and education to new hires, offering retention bonuses, and creating onboarding programs to help new staff adjust to child welfare work.
- Partnering schools of social work are reaching out to potential students by participating in high school college fairs, discussing social work as an option during their university's freshman orientation, and promoting CWEB to prospective students and guardians.

Solutions to Student/Graduate Concerns

- The CWEL program reviews syllabi from participating schools of social work to increase the number of approved electives.
- Previous CWEL student meetings focused on preparing for the licensure exam. This meeting was recorded and is shared with CWEL graduates requesting that information. Fifteen CWEL graduates have participated in the licensure reimbursement offered by CWERP.
- For the 2025-2026 academic year, Zoom meetings are held twice: the beginning of the Fall and Spring semesters.
- The hiring process is reviewed with students during the Spring Zoom meeting. In the 2025-2026 academic year, this information was also shared with the partnering schools of social work.

Online Learning:

- CWERP offers online MSW programs through Millersville, Shippensburg, Temple, Widener and PennWest universities (including Edinboro and California University of PA). The University of Pittsburgh began an online MSW program in the 2025-2026 academic year and is an additional option for CWEL students. These online programs enable those interested in CWEL and not near a campus-based program an opportunity to fully participate in the CWEL 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, which may translate into time away from the job.
- 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 shadowing other workers and carrying their own caseload with supervision allowed them to apply what they were learning in the classroom to the field.
- CWEL graduates discussed the value of their supervisors in helping them learn the tasks and responsibilities of a child welfare caseworker.
- 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 their internship supervisors provided mentorship and gave the graduates space to reflect on their practice and grow clinically and professionally.
- 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 appreciate the ability to complete their internships in agencies that work closely with child welfare. These experiences promoted collaboration and networking between the graduate and the internship agencies.
- CWEL graduates emphasize that their internships allow them to engage families in a more therapeutic way which pushed them to apply more trauma informed and strength-based practices in their work.

Program Evaluation:

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

Highlights:

Response rates:

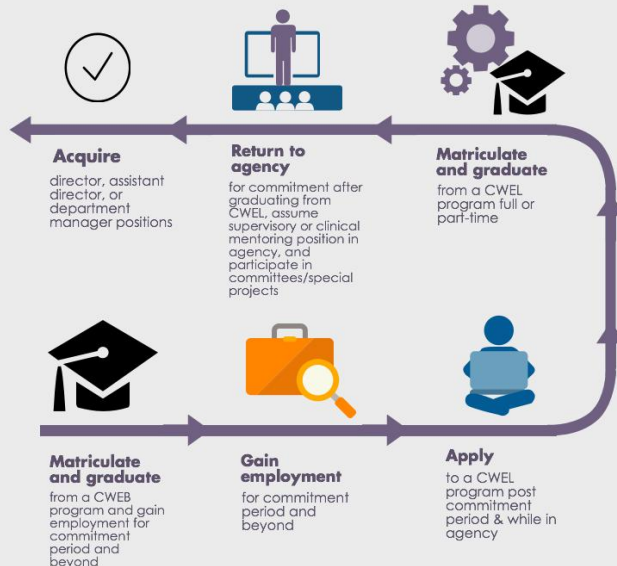
- County Administrators: 83%
 - School Administrators: 66%
 - Current Students: 58%
 - Graduates: 46%
- 7% of CWEL students during the 2024-2025 AY had participated in the CWEB program
 - 80% of CWEL students remain in the agency where they completed their post-CWEB commitment
 - Of those who completed a survey, 88% of CWEB graduates and 96% of CWEL graduates remain employed in child welfare services one-two years post graduation



Major Findings:

- CWEB students were significantly less likely to use the handbook to answer questions than CWEL students.
- CWEB graduates had significantly less children on their caseloads when compared to CWEL graduates.
- County administrators were satisfied with the CWEB/CWEL programs and noted that CWEB graduates were more prepared to carry a caseload when compared to other new hires.
- School administrators were satisfied with the CWEB/CWEL programs noting that the students were high-caliber and are dedicated to the field of child welfare.

CAREER PATHWAY



Quotes from Participants:

“CWEB provides a more comprehensive education in child welfare for students entering that field. It gives the student{s} who have participated a head start in the career and helps with job security...” (CWEB Current Student)

“CWEL has allowed me to enhance the way I communicate and interact with the families I serve. It has provided a solid foundation to enact macrolevel changes to better improve the lives of our county. ” (CWEL Long-Term Graduate)

“It gave me a great opportunity to explore my love for children and families. I learned so much more than if I had entered the field on my own. The support of the CWEB staff and program was instrumental in my success.” (CWEB Recent Graduate)

“Students enrolled in the CWEL program not only benefit financially but they participate in specialized training throughout their MSW program advancing their knowledge and skills in public child welfare. Offering students this opportunity to advance their skills in this area of practice supports the child welfare workforce to better address the challenges families experience. We are fortunate to be part of the team that supports the ongoing skill building of public child welfare employees.” (School Administrator)

“Both programs are great child welfare programs. It allows for learning, growth and with supporting others. I hope to see the program continue and expand...” (County Administrator)



Overall Recommendations:

Increase availability of accredited social work programs:

- Seven new schools of social work joined the CWEB consortium during the 2024-2025 academic year. These schools added an additional 13 CWEB students/graduates who will be entering the workforce.
- The University of Pittsburgh added an online MSW program for the 2025-2026 academic year, increasing opportunities for CWEL students not near a campus-based program.

Transition support and ongoing connection among CWEB and CWEL graduates:

- CWEB graduates participating in the post hire interviews with the contracted interviewer benefit from the additional support and feel that the interview impacted their decision to stay in child welfare after their commitment year.
- CWEL graduates participating in the return to work interviews are challenged to use their new skills in novel ways.

CWEB Recommendations:

Address issues that arise in the transition to employment:

- CWEB graduates are contacted by a contracted neutral third party 90 days after hire and every three months after until their commitment is complete.
- The contracted interviewer notifies the CWEB/CWEL Agency Coordinator of any graduates that are struggling in their agencies for further outreach.
- The contracted interviewer provides CWEB graduates with an additional level of support and guidance regarding areas of the work where they might be feeling overwhelmed.

Increase county participation in the CWEB program:

- School-county-program collaboration in the practicum process, including the use of the CWEB Internship Guidance tool jointly developed between county agency staff and CWEB program staff.
- Presentations at PCYA & CCAP meetings in addition to other workgroups addressing recruitment/retention/workforce issues.
- Collaboration with counties through CWEB information sessions that include CWEB program faculty and staff, Practice Improvement Specialists and Regional Resource Specialists from the Child Welfare Resource Center.

CWEL Recommendations:

Increase county agency support for part-time students:

- County agencies are encouraged to provide flexible scheduling, modified work assignments, and opportunities for practicum work outside the agency.
- When difficulties arise involving a particular student, the county is actively engaged in problem solving and solution-building using a teaming model.
- The CWEL program actively enforces a part-time academic load for part-time students. Part-time students may not assume full-time study, regardless of the source of tuition/fee payment, while participating in the CWEL program to complete school sooner.

Supervision and mentorship of CWEL 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.
- CWEL graduates are asked to brainstorm ways they can mentor/lead others in their agency during the follow-up interview protocol.



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