

A Longitudinal Evaluation of the Child Welfare Education Program

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Child Welfare is a critical Oregon public service. With just over 10,000 victims of child abuse in Oregon in 2015, complex stressors experienced by families, and limited community resources available to help them, it takes an increasingly skilled workforce to keep children safe from maltreatment and preserve families. In recognition of the challenges facing the child welfare system, the Oregon Department of Human Services and the Portland State School of Social Work have developed a University-Agency based partnership called Child Welfare Education Program (CWEP). This program incentivizes current and potential DHS Child Welfare employees with resources to pursue a social work degree, towards the goal of graduating professional social workers who utilize their knowledge and skills in child welfare organizations. The CWEP provides participants with tuition support and an enriched child welfare-focused social work education (e.g., customized child welfare field placements and seminars), in exchange for the student's commitment to repaying their tuition support through employment in a child welfare agency for an agreed period of time. The program focuses on providing specialized educational programming and tuition support to promising current employees, and is also used as a means to recruit potential new employees from the social work student body into Oregon Child Welfare.

The purpose of this evaluation was to answer two primary questions “Are we getting the results we want from this program?” and “Where can we improve?” The evaluation was conducted over a five-year period of time and utilizes administrative, survey, and interview data to determine:

1. Participant rates of graduation and payback completion,
2. Graduate perspectives on the educational program,
3. Participant's post-graduate employment experiences in child welfare settings,
4. Five-year retention rates for CWEP participants who took employment following completion of their educational program, and
5. A comparison of retention rates for program graduates with a non-equivalent comparison group of DHS employees who did not participate in the partnership program between 2006 and 2015.

We found many areas in which the partnership excels, as well as areas for consideration and potential improvement. The program is a University-Agency partnership, and we look forward to ongoing discussions with Oregon Child Welfare, school leadership, and our own staff to find ways to continue to strengthen the child welfare workforce and improve our ability to prepare those who serve Oregon's children and families.

Findings

Admittance into School of Social Work:

Admittance into the Graduate School of Social Work is highly competitive. We found that over a five year period of time, 90% of DHS applicants to the CWEP program were accepted into the school. CWEP recruits were admitted into the school at a rate of 71.3%.

These finding would indicate that Child Welfare employed applicants to CWEP are likely to be admitted into the MSW program. There are no programmatic recommendations related to this finding.

Graduation Rates:

Results from the evaluation found that over the life of the program, CWEP successfully graduated 90.2% of its participants, with 6.8% withdrawing from the CWEP while continuing their education, and 3% withdrawing from the school of social work altogether.

The program has been highly successful in helping CWEP students successfully obtain their social work degree. There are no programmatic recommendations related to this finding.

CWEP recruits obtaining employment with Child Welfare:

The design of University-Agency Child Welfare partnership programs vary across the country. Some partnerships only allow students to participate if they are already employed in child welfare at the time they apply for CWEP participation. Others partnerships guarantee employment for their recruits. In Oregon, DHS employees must work in their agencies for two years to be eligible for CWEP participation. Recruits are not required to have prior child welfare experience, and are not guaranteed child welfare employment following graduation. Recruits must apply for positions within a 70-mile radius of their home. The partnership provides resources and supports to help recruited participants obtain child welfare employment at the time they graduate from their social work program.

Between 1997-2015 we collected payback information on 128 recruits and 126 employees. If a graduate repaid a portion or all of their tuition obligation through child welfare employment, we counted them as post-graduate child welfare employees. Using this approach, a total of 73 recruits (57%) took employment in child welfare following graduation from their program. A total of 107 DHS employees (84.9%) returned to post-graduation employment following graduation. DHS employees took post-graduation employment in Child Welfare at significantly higher rates than recruits. In the post-graduation survey of program participants, recruits reflected frustration that they were not guaranteed Child Welfare employment, had to search for work outside their community, and were competing against child welfare employees for the same position.

Of note is that only slightly over half of the recruits into child welfare successfully obtained Child Welfare employment.

Child Welfare Education Program Impact

We surveyed program graduates and asked detailed questions about how graduates of the program felt their social work education and specialized CWEP supports prepared them for the work of child welfare.

Respondents gave high ratings for the impact of the CWEP on their educational and future employment experiences. They reported the program provided them with a “unique educational opportunity” and had a “positive impact on their professional development.” They strongly agreed that the program will help them contribute to the field of child welfare, and felt the program should be made available to more child welfare employees and recruits.

We also surveyed program graduates who were employed in child welfare for a year following graduation from their educational program. When respondents completed the survey they were asked to reflect on the educational experience and its impact on their current work. These respondents felt that their social work education had positively impacted their ability to work effectively with child welfare involved children and families, helped them make more informed decisions, and positively impacted their ability to collaborate with co-workers and community partners. Respondents were neutral regarding the impact of the CWEP experience on helping them manage the stress of child welfare work.

Respondents reported the educational program helped them develop a well-rounded perspective about their work and helped cultivate empathy for the children and families they serve. These graduates also felt the education helped their engagement skills with their clients, and in one instance reported their social work education had helped protect them from burnout.

Survey responses to questions about the quality and relevance of social work coursework suggest that in general, participants felt neutral to positive about the role of coursework in preparing them for child welfare practice. Areas in which students rated their preparation most highly were: child development/functioning, knowledge of cultural issues in child welfare practice, importance of social and cultural diversity, and the impacts of structural racism and oppression in child welfare practice.

With respect to field education, respondents felt the field experience provided them with a deeper understanding of child welfare practice, complimented classroom learning, and equipped them with the knowledge and skills they need for a career in child welfare. Respondents reported that a diversity of field activities the most effective strategy to prepare participants for child welfare practice. The quality of the field placement depended in part on the level of instructor involvement, as well as the ability to obtain hands on skills in multiple areas of child welfare practice. Participants who reported having an excellent experience reported their field instructors were involved and provided them with new learning opportunities. In almost all instances, respondents reported the field instructor/supervisor was a critical component of the social work educational experience, and a critical part of preparing the participant for post-graduation employment.

Survey responses also suggest the CWEP seminars helped enrich the participant’s educational experience. These seminars provide participants with opportunities to discuss their child welfare field placements with other CWEP students, and to help integrate classroom and field learning

through a child welfare lens. Respondents felt the CWEP seminars provided an opportunity to discuss the realities of child welfare practice and discuss their child-welfare specialized educational experience.

CWEP seminars were overwhelmingly positive for those who attended in person. Respondents in distance locations reported a substantively different experience than those who participated in person, reporting technical issues related to internet connectivity, volume, and engagement.

Overall, respondents were positive regarding their academic program, field experience, and CWEP supports, and felt the social work education prepared them for their work in child welfare. Students reported that more child welfare specific coursework and electives would be helpful in preparing them for the realities of child welfare practice.

The partnership should continue to ensure students have engaged field instruction and opportunities for diverse experiences in their field placement. We would recommend increasing the availability of child welfare electives, particularly for distance sites. Development of on-line child welfare and case management electives could be helpful in this area, in addition to the use of adjunct faculty to support course delivery across the school.

CWEP Employee Retention:

A desired outcome for the CWEP is that students complete their tuition repayment obligation through work within a public or tribal child welfare agency, and ideally remain for longer periods of time than the agreement requires. The typical repayment period for a CWEP graduate is between 1-3 years.

Between AY 2009-2010 and AY 2014-2015, the CWEP graduated 105 program participants. DHS child welfare has successfully retained 60% of these CWEP employees. Retention rates during this time were compared for program characteristics (BSW and MSW, Portland and distance location), and individual characteristics (child welfare employees and recruits, male and female, white and non-white). Across all comparative analysis, no significant differences were noted in rates of retention according to individual and program characteristics.

CWEP and General Workforce Employee Retention

To determine if CWEP graduates are retained at greater rates than the general child welfare workforce, we compared retention rates for a random sample of DHS employees hired between 2006-2015 to CWEP participants who graduated and took employment in child welfare during the same period of time. Over this 9-year period of time, CWEP participants were retained in their agencies at a rate of 59.2%. Within the general employee pool, the retention rate was 59.4%. There were no significant differences between CWEP graduates and the general DHS employee pool on rates of employment retention.

National Rates of Employee Retention

To help contextualize the results of our retention analysis, we examined child welfare retention rates nationally. A 2004 workforce study by the American Public Human Services Association (2005) found that across 43 states, the average turnover rate for CPS workers was 22%, and 15.1% for protective service workers. A synthesis of turnover by Sage (2010) found turnover

rates across states to vary, from 9.5%-44%. The US Government Accountability Office (2003) found turnover rates of 30-40% annually. The CWEP and DHS exit rates are comparable to those found by the GAO (2003), whereas the exit rates for Oregon and CWEP are approximately 18%-26% higher than the turnover rates found by the APHSA (2005).

Increasing the retention rate of CWEP graduates and the workforce overall is a shared commitment, and requires considering the factors that impact retention and how those factors can be addressed.

Factors influencing CWEP graduate retention and performance

Our survey results found the following factors influencing employment retention:

- Limited opportunities for advancement: More than half (63%, n=17) of survey respondents had applied for a new position within child welfare after obtaining their MSW. Of those who applied for a new position, just under one-half (47%, n=8) were hired into the position.
- Work demands: Respondents reported the amount of paperwork requirements for the job impact their ability to conduct meaningful social work practice with their clients. Respondents reported feeling overwhelmed with the size of their caseloads, and felt that working within the court system without legal representation is both a disadvantage and complicates their job responsibilities.
- Organizational Culture: As trained social workers, many respondents felt that the work they were doing was inconsistent with what they envisioned themselves doing once they had their degree.
- Organizational Support: Workers who had found peer or supervisory supports felt this helped buffer against the effects of burnout and their intention to leave child welfare.

These results echo national findings concerning workforce retention in child welfare. Graduates value the ability to make a difference with families, although they do not feel they are making an impact in their work. Quality of supervision and peer support were reported to be effective in managing the more traumatizing aspects of the work; respectful leadership and supportive organizational culture were associated with retaining child welfare staff. We look forward to robust discussions with our agency partners and social work faculty to find ways to attend to these considerations in the years to come.

Summary

The shared goal of a skilled, professional child welfare workforce will be realized through collaborative work across the agency, school of social work, the CWEP, and the individual student. Evaluation results identify areas where this collaboration is working, and areas where collaborative improvements are indicated. The recommendations that follow have arisen through prior discussions with our DHS partners and are supported both by our own program evaluation work as well as prior research in other states.

Selection, Admission, and Graduation

The CWEP program is doing well in graduating participants who are committed to a career in child welfare. Existing program supports regarding selection of applicants, admissions, and

student support while in school appear to be working, and recruitment and selection efforts should continue to be refined as needed.

Placement in positions

Only slightly over half of the recruits are obtaining employment in child welfare following program graduation. As reported in the findings, graduates without prior agency experience are having trouble finding positions. In addition to increasing supports to recruits seeking employment (e.g., mock interviews, coaching, etc.) it may be worth discussing whether a guarantee of trial service employment for successful program graduates is a viable option for Oregon Child Welfare.

Retention

We are not meeting our goals related to the long-term retention of CWEP graduates. The findings show that CWEP graduates are no more likely to be retained in their agencies than the general child welfare work force (approximately 60% retained). Participant comments suggest they are being impacted by many of the same factors found in the literature as associated with turnover in the child welfare workforce. Factors influencing retention found in this evaluation include feelings of being overwhelmed, organizational stress, lack of opportunities for professional advancement, workload, and inconsistent supervisory and peer support.

Recommendations

1. Create a 'bridge position' specifically assigned to mentor and support staff seeking employment, or negotiating the return to work.
2. Enrich curriculum (field and or classroom) content on working successfully within the agency culture as a contributing professional.
3. Continue to recruit program participants from the ranks of management and supervision, so there is program awareness at all levels of the agency, and so that supervisory practices are strengthened.
4. Develop opportunities to advance professionally – either as supervisors, or in specific positions that might tap advanced professional knowledge and skills, such as an advanced case worker designation. While this would not (could not) be restricted to MSW graduates, it could be a pathway for retention of many caseworkers who seek to remain with the agency, and desire to be a part of positive change.
5. Even if a formal position cannot be created, offer specific opportunities to contribute to agency and practice advancement, tapping the desire of many CWEP graduates to give back and contribute to the field.
6. Continue to work on aspects of agency culture associated with retention (supervision, transparency of communication, opportunities to advance and contribute, supportive environment for those doing stressful work).
7. Consider a larger investment in BSW (recruitment level) preparation. One theory (to be tested) is that BSW level preparation may be a better fit for case management work and BSW graduates may be likely to stay in case management positions for a longer period of time before desiring advancement.

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