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Promising Practices

Key Strategies to Educate Public Child Welfare Workers and Improve Child Welfare Systems

Joan Levy Zlotnik, Mary McCarthy, and Katharine Briar-Lawson review research and evaluation findings on public agency–university partnerships to educate public child welfare workers and the impact of such partnerships on workforce retention.

Recent targeted workforce improvements have sought to address caseload size and the child welfare staffing shortage by increasing the number of undergraduate and graduate social work students specially educated for public child welfare practice. These improvements occur primarily through university–agency partnerships that educate social workers with enhanced curricula, field education, and training. At present, about 40 states are involved in professional education partnerships, most supported by Title IV-E₁ training funds, federal grants, and state funds.²

Because minimum requirements for frontline child welfare staff vary from state to state, university–agency partnerships also differ. As these partnerships become more common, interest in documenting their outcomes continues to grow. Attention has begun to focus on understanding the linkages between social work education, workforce improvements, and the quality of child welfare practices.

Research and evaluations of university–agency partnerships indicate that retention of workers with both graduate and undergraduate social work degrees is higher when employees received tuition support for social work education.³ In Kentucky, Barbee⁴ found that special preparation for public child welfare practice through the Bachelor's in Social Work program supported employee retention and improved permanency outcomes for children and families.

A recent systematic review of retention studies finds that personal and organizational factors intertwine to impact retention. Workers with the lowest level of education and less relevant education are the most likely to leave.⁵ Studies in several states indicate that each worker's personal commitment to child welfare is an important factor in retention. Educational programs add value by providing workers with the necessary competencies and an increased commitment to the job.⁶

Several states have embarked on multiyear university–agency partnerships to address the staffing crisis in child welfare. One such partnership is the Social Work Education Consortium.⁷ Launched 5 years ago, the Social Work Education Consortium partners the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, New York's 57 county commissioners, New York City's Administration for Children's Services, and the deans and directors of graduate and undergraduate social work education programs at public and private universities.

The partnership provides funding for child welfare staff to pursue graduate social work degrees. Studies are underway to assess the retention and promotion pathways of these graduates. In addition, a pilot project is underway with workers in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Unit (TANF) pursuing bachelor's degrees in social work. They will receive tuition support and upon graduation will be eligible for promotion into child welfare positions.

Meanwhile, seven regional groups are addressing local goals for workforce

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professionalization and stabilization. In two regions, examinations of how workers transfer and infuse new knowledge and skills from graduate social work programs and in-service training into their practice are underway.

So far, New York's research affirms that high-performing child welfare systems require more than just trained social workers.⁸ Effective organizational structures and supervisory skills are also essential for supporting good practices. Four years of research with 24 high- and low-turnover child welfare systems have led to a pilot organizational intervention designed to improve workforce retention. In the ongoing intervention, five agency-based design and improvement teams have been established. The teams, comprised of workers, supervisors and administrators, examine policies, procedures, and practices that impact worker retention and then recommend action strategies designed to improve those organizational and supervisory factors which negatively impact retention. Eventually, control group comparisons will be made. The study probes each worker's intent to remain on the job and perception of organizational and supervisory factors related to retention.

As the New York example demonstrates, evaluating workforce issues is a complex task. Special journal issues, presentations at social work education and research conferences, websites, and the recently convened Child Welfare Workforce Development and Workplace Enhancement Institute all contribute to the effort to document workforce improvements. Future work must include research that examines child welfare outcomes in relation to the many dimensions of workforce and workplace issues, creates integrated practice models and training programs, and supports policy improvements to ensure staff capacity that will best meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families.

¹ Created as part of Public Law 96-272, Title IV-E entitlement training funds are available to states to train public child welfare staff who work for the state or local agencies that administer the title TV-E state plan or those preparing for employment in those agencies.

² The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides an online clearinghouse of Child Welfare Workforce and Training Resources at nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/profess/workforce.

³ Briar-Lawson, K. & Zlotnik, J. L. (Eds.). (2002). Evaluation research in child welfare: Improving outcomes through university-public agency partnerships. *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 15(3/4); Briar-Lawson, K. & Zlotnik, J. L. (Eds.). (2003). Charting the impacts of university-child welfare collaboration. *Journal of Human Behavior and the Social Environment*, 7(1/2).

⁴ Barbee, A. (2005). *Child welfare workforce development and workplace enhancement institute*. [Conference presentation]. Crystal City, MD: Children's Bureau.

⁵ Zlotnik, J. L., DePanfilis, D., Daining, C., & Lane, M. M. (2005). *Factors influencing retention of child welfare staff: A systematic review of research*. Washington, DC: Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research.

⁶ Zlotnik, J. L., DePanfilis, D., Daining, C., & Lane, M. M., 2005.

⁷ Funding for the Consortium is provided by a grant from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. Commissioner John J. Johnson. Contract # CO24153

⁸ Lawson, H. A., Claiborne, N. (2005). *Retention Planning to Reduce Workforce Turnover in New York State's Public Child Welfare Systems: Developing Knowledge, Lessons Learned, and Emergent Priorities*. Albany, NY: Social Work Education Consortium.

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