

Great Start Series: Policy Brief #6

The Unique History of Four-Year-Old Kindergarten in Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

September 2010





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy brief is a publication of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. Dave Edie, Early Education Policy Analyst at the Council, was the primary author.

The Council thanks Jill Haglund, Early Childhood Consultant at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), and Jim McCoy, former DPI Consultant, for their extensive help in piecing together the history of 4-year-old Kindergarten in Wisconsin—most of the content of this report is from materials they developed or researched.

The paper was produced with the generous support of the Birth to Five Policy Alliance, the Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation, and the Celebrate Children Foundation.

Contents

Introduction	3
History Overview	3
The Early History: 1840s – 1920s	4
• 1848: Education for 4-Year-Olds in the Constitution	
• 1856: The First Private Kindergarten in the U.S.	
• 1873: The First Public Kindergarten in Wisconsin	
The Declining Decades: 1920s – 1970s	6
Resurgence and Rapid Expansion: 1980s – 2010	7
• State Aids to 4K Reinstated and Adjusted: 1984 & 1991	
• Rapid Growth: 1996-2010	
• Close Call: 4K Funding Threatened in 2001 and 2003	
• Community Approaches to 4K	
• Quality of Wisconsin 4K	
Implications for the Future	11
Appendix: An Abbreviated History of Kindergarten (4k and 5K)	12
References	14

Great Start Series: Policy Brief #6

The Unique History of Four-Year-Old Kindergarten in Wisconsin

Introduction

Wisconsin has a proud tradition of progressive innovation, largely due to Robert La Follette and the Wisconsin Idea, a concept that emerged among Wisconsin leaders in the early 1900s. The Wisconsin Idea encourages a strong connection between research knowledge, the informed involvement of its citizenry, and the democratic process in forming sound public policy, and it has led to, among other things, groundbreaking legislation regarding the income tax, worker's compensation, unemployment compensation and campaign finance.

But even before the Wisconsin Idea, the state was already an innovative pioneer in 4-year-old Kindergarten (4K). Schooling for 4-year-olds was envisioned way back when Wisconsin was becoming a state; in fact, education for 4-year-olds was part of Wisconsin's Constitution in 1848. As universal public 4-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K) continues to expand across the state, many are not aware that 4K has a history going back over 160 years. The first kindergarten in the United States was founded in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1856, shortly after the first "kindergarten" was opened in Germany in 1837 by Friedrich Fröbel.

We notice that if children are not given the care which takes their stage of human development into consideration, they will lack the foundation for the task ahead in school and for their later lives in general"

- Friedrich Fröbel, 1844

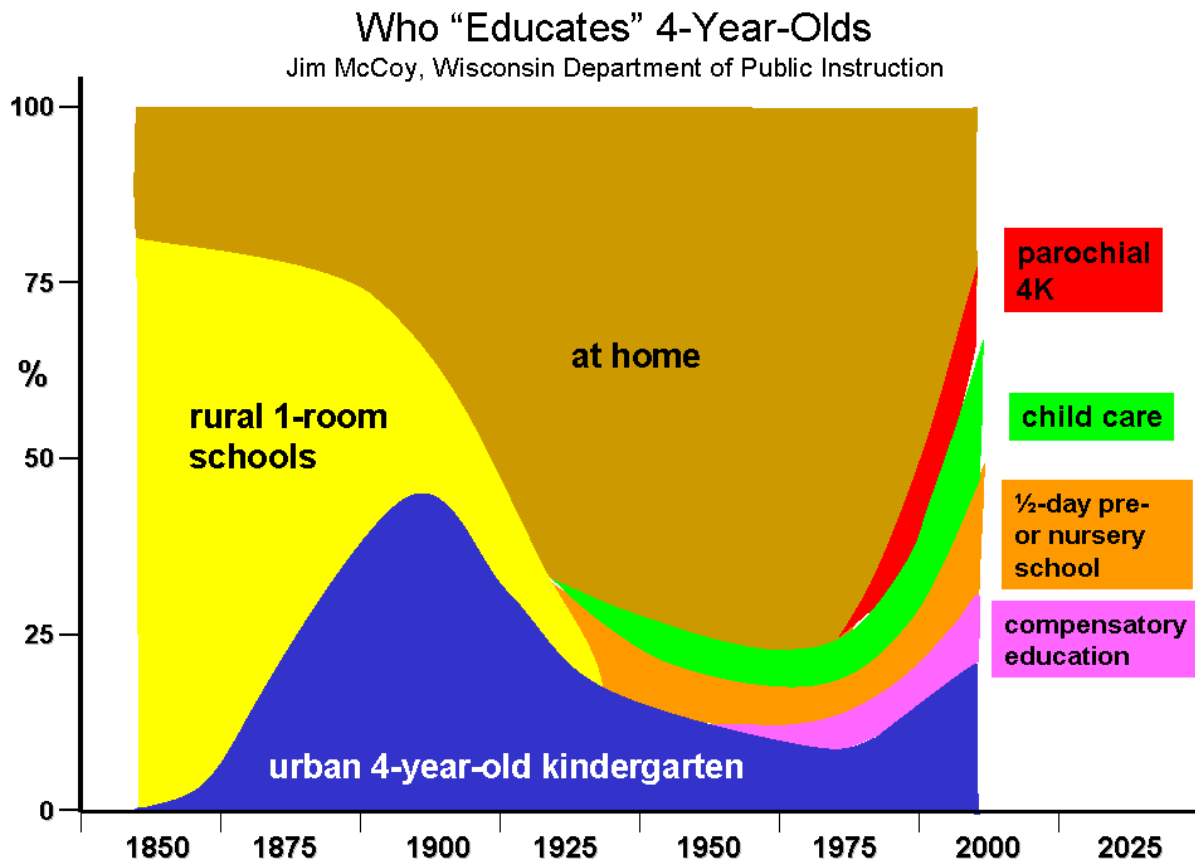
Modern scientific research has strongly reinforced many of Fröbel's theories on early development over a century and a half later. This paper explores the rich and unique history of 4K in Wisconsin, from its innovative beginning, the early growth in the 1800s, the decline from 1900-1980, and the resurgence in the last 30 years.

History Overview

An intriguing historical overview of how 4-year-olds were educated in Wisconsin-- from 1850 to 2000-- was developed by Jim McCoy, a former DPI Consultant, who did extensive investigation on the history of 4K. He developed a graph (see Figure 1) that provides a broad picture of the percentage of 4-years-olds in different education and care settings over time. He estimates that

over 75 percent of 4-year-olds were educated in rural one-room schools in the mid- to later 1800s. By 1900 urban 4-year-old kindergarten was serving nearly half of the state’s 4-year-olds, but out-of-home education declined dramatically by 1925 and stayed fairly stagnant until a surge beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, by 2000 once again over 75 percent of 4-year-olds were in a variety of out-of-home early care and education settings: public 4K, parochial 4K, child care, half-day preschools, and compensatory education.

Figure 1



By 2010, over half of Wisconsin’s 4-year-olds were in public 4K. The next sections will look more closely at the trends over time from 1850 to 2010.

The Early History: 1840s – 1920s

1848: Education for 4-Year-Olds in the Constitution

Wisconsin may be the only state that included education for 4-year-olds in its original Constitution. Article X, Section 3 of the 1848 state Constitution called for the establishment of district schools, which “shall be as nearly uniform as practicable, and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years.”¹ The waves of German immigrants

who came to Wisconsin in the 1800s almost certainly influenced the inclusion of early education in the Constitution, bringing the ideas of the German kindergarten movement begun by Fröbel. According to Department of Public Instruction (DPI) records, it was common for 3- and 4-year-olds to attend one-room schools in the 19th century in Wisconsin.

“...schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20 years.”

- 1848 Wisconsin Constitution

1856: The First Private Kindergarten in the U.S.

The first kindergarten in the United State was founded in Watertown, Wisconsin by German-born Mararethe Meyer Schurz in 1856. It was based on Fröbel’s work that she had learned about in Europe. Her husband Carl Schurz became a prominent statesman, supporting Lincoln in his bid for president in 1860, and serving as a general in the Union Army during the Civil War.^{2 3} Below is a photo of Watertown’s first kindergarten.



1873: The First Public Kindergarten in Wisconsin

The first public kindergartens in the state began in 1873 in Manitowoc. The kindergarten was started by Charles Frederic Viebahn, a German-educated principal of the First Ward School. Viebahn was influenced by Fröbel, and was committed to the kindergarten concept. According to a history of Manitowoc and Two Rivers, in a few years “every public school in the city had a kindergarten program for its youngest students and Manitowoc was known in educational circles for the success of its endeavors.”⁴



Kindergartens expanded to many Wisconsin communities in the late 1800's, typically limiting enrollment to 4- and 5-year olds. The photo above is of a Watertown kindergarten in 1895. It appears to include a wide age range, including the very young children in the front row. In 1898 the Wisconsin Legislature passed a law formally permitting school districts to establish 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten, and in 1919 state statutes allowed local taxes to be levied for kindergarten programs.

The Declining Decades: 1920s – 1970s

Even though legislative authority had provided clear authority for school districts to establish 4K programs and levy taxes to cover the costs, the period from 1920 to 1980 marked a waning of the 4K movement that had flourished in the 1800s and peaked in the 1890s. According to DPI records, one-room schools became a thing of the past, and the kindergarten movement had been replaced by a change toward grade level structures and a new focus on higher grade levels, partially in efforts to increase high school attendance.⁵ For a significant part of the twentieth century, the predominant view across the nation was that the best place for most children below school age was with their mothers in their homes.

By 1980, only six districts were offering public 4K.

In 1927, state financial aids were established for 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten, but by 1940, only a handful of districts retained 4K—most of them in Milwaukee and the southeastern part of the state. In 1949 the state legislature passed a bill establishing that 4K students were counted as a 0.5 full-time equivalent pupil for state school aids, providing fiscal support to local school districts. But attitudes about 4K had changed, and in 1957 the legislature repealed 4K aids. By 1980, only six districts were offering public 4K using local funds.⁶

However, from 1940 to 1975 other early care and education programs were emerging outside the

public school system. The nursery school movement in Wisconsin began to grow in the 1970s. Child care surged during World War II, and then began a steady expansion in the 1970s, largely tied to workforce or welfare considerations. Head Start was launched in the 1960s as a compensatory education program to combat poverty. But public 4K didn't begin to re-emerge until the 1980s.

Resurgence and Rapid Expansion: 1980s – 2010

State Aids to 4K Reinstated and Adjusted: 1984 & 1991

The state legislature decided to reinstate state school aid to local school districts for 4K a quarter century after financial support for public 4K had been repealed. The change probably had to do with growing awareness of the importance of early development -- boosted by research on early development, fueled by the Head Start and nursery school movements, and influenced by demands from families who wanted 4K. The 1984 bill also included state school aid for full-day 5-year-old kindergarten, probably in reaction to the growing number of mothers entering the workforce.

A task force on 4K appointed by the DPI Superintendent in 1980 reported that the overriding advantage of reinstating 4K was that early education would be available to all children of all social and economic groups. But it's interesting that the majority of the task force did *not* endorse reinstating 4K, noting several disadvantages, including negative impacts on Head Start and private child care and nursery school programs. But four years later, in 1984, the political decision was made to bring back state 4K funding. However, the report to the Superintendent and the later 1989 Decker Task Force report planted the seeds for the "community approach" to 4K that developed later. The "community approach" emphasized the need for collaboration and coordination between public schools and community-based early care and education programs.

Under the school funding formula adopted in 1984 and adjusted periodically, school districts that decided to offer universal 4K shared the cost with the state, based on a formula that measured each district's ability to cover costs. Children were counted as a 0.5 full-time equivalent in drawing down state equalization aid. In 1991, the legislature added an additional fiscal incentive in the formula for districts to engage in outreach activities with parents and families. Sheboygan Superintendent George Longo and Principal Jeanne Bitkers successfully lobbied DPI and the legislature to help fund outreach to parents of 4K students, with help from communities like Stoughton and Plymouth.

Rapid Growth: 1996-2010

4K expanded at an extraordinary rate beginning in the 1990s. The numbers of school districts offering 4K jumped from 72 to 335 from school year 1996-97 to 2009-2010 (see Figure 2). As of the 2009-10 school year, 80 percent of districts were offering 4K, serving 38,000 students, 53 percent of the 4-year-olds in the state.⁷ Wisconsin was ranked sixth among the states in the percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled in state prekindergarten in a 2009 report by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER).⁸ 4K enrollment doubled between the 2002-03 school year and the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 2

Trends in 4-Year-Old Kindergarten

The number of Wisconsin school districts offering 4-year-old kindergarten, 1996-2010 and
The number of Wisconsin school districts using the Community Approach, 2001-2010

Year	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Districts	72	85	99	115	138	166	180	189	208	235	257	283	319	335
Community Approaches						3	7	10	19	31	48	58	87	100

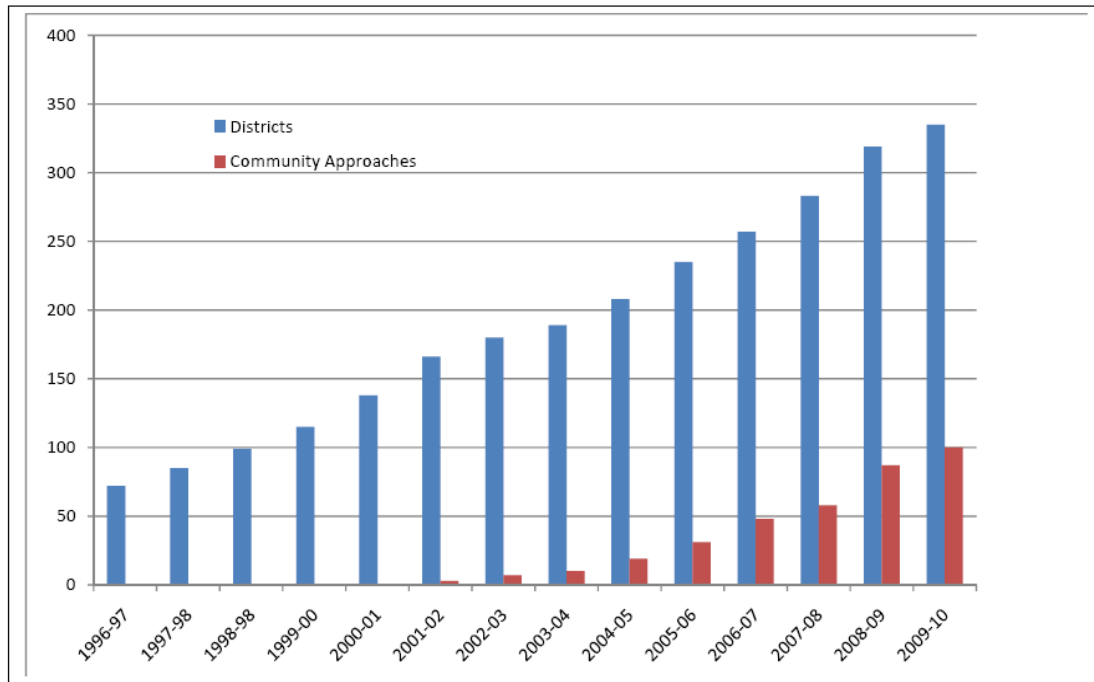


Figure 2 also shows that by 2009-10, 100 districts (30 percent of districts with 4K programs) used “community approaches” to 4K delivery. The community approach to 4K delivery involved collaboration with community-based programs like child care and Head Start.

There were several other influences that drove the expansion of 4K from 1996-2010, including:

- Continued support of parents who wanted 4K in their districts
- Extensive new research on the benefits of preschool and early investment
- Interest in inclusive settings for 4-year-olds with special needs being served by public schools
- School districts seeking additional state funding as enrollments declined

Close Call: 4K Funding Threatened in 2001 and 2003

In two consecutive biennial budgets (2001-2003 and 2003-2005), the Legislature completely cut funding for 4K from the Governor’s budgets. However, in each case, the Governors (first Republican Governor McCallum and then Democratic Governor Doyle) used their veto power to

preserve the policy of providing state school aid for 4K students.

Community Approaches to 4K

In 2001 the La Crosse school district launched an innovative preschool partnership, providing 4K in child care and other community-based centers. Milwaukee Public Schools had earlier sent public school teachers into child care centers. The LaCrosse approach, however, offered three service delivery models for collaboration, and led to several other urban areas to adopt a “community approach,” eventually including Beloit, Eau Claire, Green Bay, Janesville, Kenosha, Oshkosh, Racine, Sheboygan, Stevens Point, and Wausau. Currently, 100 school districts use the community approach to 4K.

Community Approach to 4K

“Community approaches bring together community leaders representing business, schools, child care, Head Start, parents, recreation, and parent education to explore the issues and develop community-based approaches to 4K. They are finding new and innovative approaches that may be school-based or community-based. For example, some communities have 4-year-old kindergartens located in a variety of settings including elementary schools, licensed child care centers, and Head Start programs. One approach has school teachers and support staff providing the 4K program in established community programs. In another approach, the school district contracts with established programs that have DPI-licensed teachers on staff to provide kindergarten.”

- DPI Advisory to school districts, February 2008

Potential and realized advantages of the community approach to 4K were spelled out in a report by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families:

- Reducing the negative impact on child care providers that may result if new or expanded 4K programs take away a significant part of the market for other preschool programs;
- Creating relationships between private preschool programs and the schools, which can help improve coordination across the education system;
- Bringing additional funding into the early education system, as 4K programs yield additional state and local funding for early education;
- Improving quality, if all the quality factors are put into place, by increasing teacher qualifications and parent involvement, and by reducing pupil-to-staff ratios; and
- Addressing the needs of working families in a more coordinated way.⁹

Many districts that went to a community approach to 4K saw it as a win-win proposition--for the schools, for the early care and education community, and for children and families.

For the first time in this community, almost all agencies affiliated with birth through 8-year-old services have come together at the same table to consolidate efforts, realize joint goals, and plan future initiatives.

-Oshkosh planner for a community approach to 4k, 2005

A large percentage of districts adding 4K programs in the last 10 years used the community approach. They were assisted by 4K coaches made available through the state, planning grants from WCCF in 2004-2006 (financed by the Joyce Foundation), and 4K start-up funding available 2008-2011 from the legislature -- with a strong priority given to districts with community approaches. In some districts, the public schools have become a catalyst for improving early learning and development throughout their community. The 4K coaches have continued to play a significant role in helping school districts plan for successful 4K programs, engaging the community in a collaborative planning effort.

Wisconsin's combination of a strong, stable funding source (the school funding formula) and the impressive attention to building "community approaches" to 4K delivery, combined with its early history, makes it a unique state for pre-kindergarten education.

Quality of Wisconsin 4K

With a system with strong local control, the quality of 4K programs likely varies widely. Wisconsin has taken extensive steps to assure effective educational experiences for 4-year-olds. Wisconsin has developed detailed Model Early Learning Standards as a guide to early care and education practitioners. 4K teachers must have a Bachelor's Degree and an appropriate teacher license with DPI. A significant revision of the approach to continuing education was intended to help teachers improve their skills.

A review of 4K quality by the National Institute for Early Education Research in 2009 found that Wisconsin met 5 of 10 quality standards examined: early learning standards, teacher degree, teacher specialized training, teacher in-service, and monitoring. Each standard had to be met statewide, which is difficult in a system like Wisconsin, where districts traditionally have had significant autonomy. Key quality standards that were not met uniformly statewide included staff-child ratios (standard - 1:10 or better) and qualifications for assistant teachers (standard - Child Development Associate credential or equivalent).

Wisconsin was part of a five-state study of early education programs in 2003-2004 by the National Center for Early Development and Learning. The study showed that Wisconsin 4K students were above the national average on three of the four academic skills assessed. Both poor and non-poor students attending 4K programs in Wisconsin gained language and social skills.¹⁰

Implications for the Future

1. Universal 4K Statewide

Wisconsin is heading toward universal 4K for all children, with over 80% of school districts offering 4K. Public policy should focus on sustaining the gains in 4K, while helping more districts begin 4K programs through coaching, technical assistance, start-up grants, and incentives.

2. Evaluation of 4K in Wisconsin

Wisconsin has had rapid growth of 4K in the last few years, with enrollment doubling since the 2002-03 school year. It is an appropriate time for an independent evaluation of 4K, both school-based and community approaches. An evaluation could look at the quality and effectiveness of 4K programs, assess the impact of community approaches, and identify 4K strengths and weaknesses that districts can learn from.

3. Schools as Leaders in Early Learning

Some schools districts have taken leadership roles in helping to improve the early care and education opportunities throughout their communities. A future direction should be to try to replicate best practices across the state.

4. Quality Control for 4K

School districts in Wisconsin operate with local control over many features of 4K. Concerns have been raised for several years about staff-to-pupil ratios in some districts where the number of children per teacher and group size far exceed child care licensing standards or recommendations from leading early education organizations. Wisconsin should explore requiring more stringent staff-to-pupil requirements or develop incentives for districts to finance better ratios, such as expanding the SAGE program to 4K.

5. School Readiness Data

Wisconsin school districts vary widely in whether and how they assess school readiness when children enter kindergarten or first grade. With the level of state investment in early learning and development, Wisconsin should consider standardizing school readiness assessments statewide. Other states have done this, and they are able to track back to children's preschool experiences statewide.

Clearly Wisconsin has been a national leader in 4K, from its early days to its recent expansion of 4K statewide, with one of the most unique histories in the country. The drafters of the state Constitution and the pioneers that started the nation's first kindergarten would be astounded at where we've come. Mr. Froebel would be proud of the reach of his kindergarten legacy.

Appendix: An Abbreviated History of Kindergarten (4K and 5K) in Wisconsin

1848: Wisconsin Constitution included education for 4-year-olds

1856: First private kindergarten began in Watertown

1873: First public kindergarten opened in Manitowoc, Wisconsin (serves 4- & 5-year olds)

1898: Wisconsin legislature permitted schools to establish 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) and 5-year-old kindergarten (5K)

1919: Legislatures allowed local taxes to be levied for kindergarten

1927: State financial aid established for 4K & 5K

1949: 4K & 5K counted as 1/2 pupil for state aids

1957: Legislature repealed 4K aids

1973: Legislature required districts to provide 5K

1980: DPI Task Force studied 4K

1984: Legislature reinstated 4K aids & allowed 5K aids for full day

1984: Legislation passed to allow school districts to establish, contract for or provide prekindergarten or kindergarten

1989: Decker Task Force recommended statewide plan for comprehensive early education, child care and family services; established local early childhood councils based on school district boundaries; increased roles for schools to involve parents; made changes to existing legislation to promote collaboration; collaboration between schools, child care, Head Start and families; and increased access to higher education programs

1990: 21st Century School Commission - School Readiness Committee made recommendations related to school foundation for early childhood (mandated full day 5K and 1/2 day 4K, mandatory kindergarten attendance, Head Start expansion); education market plan; interagency coordination (commission on children and families and state department cooperation); established community foundation for early childhood systems (councils, schools role in assisting with community based services); foundations for student success (ungraded primary units, reduce adult/child ratios, incentive grant, communication, promote understanding of diversity); interrelation of social and educational policies (food programs, child/family policies, education health partnership); parent education (access, resource centers, school-parent communication, family leave, parent conferences); and required community service credit for high school students

1991: State Budget Bill created Student Readiness Study Committee that made recommendations on central point of access for parents, community needs assessments, schools role in readiness, partnerships with parents, state-agency leadership and assistance to communities

1991: Legislature allowed 4K 20% time outreach to parents

1992: Governor's Commission on Families and Children collaboration subcommittee recommended collaboration among agencies and programs at the state and local level

1994: First of three early childhood summits brought state departments and related associations to the table. These meetings led to the development of early childhood care and education guiding principals and the creation of the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (WECCP)

1995: Joint Legislative Council established Special Committee on Child Care Economics that proposed legislation including establishing local early childhood council grant program; authorization for school boards to lease space, contract for, or provide prekindergarten or kindergarten; and state transportation aid to transport children from school to child care

2001: Legislature addressed proposal to increase 4K aid to full day. The final vote reduced funding for districts operating 4K programs. Former Republican Governor McCallum vetoed these provisions.

2001: WECCP report identified opportunities for government action including development of common vision, mechanisms for communication, promoting quality standards, developing data systems, and addressing professional development

2002: National Governors Association Grant to Build Public and Political Will for Early Childhood Care and Education addressed and made recommendations related to collaboration, improving access and quality, developing a state level infrastructure, promoting a seamless system of services for children birth to age eight, improving professional development, generating public awareness, supporting community service delivery, and ensuring sufficient funding

2002: WECCP developed proposal for children's agenda

2003: The Pew Charitable Trusts funded planning grants to promote 4K and community approaches

2003: Legislature again voted to cut funding for districts operating 4K programs. Current Democratic Governor Doyle vetoed these provisions

2004: The Pew Charitable Trusts funded implementation grants to promote 4K and community approaches

2007: Legislature passed \$3 million in start-up grants for 4K, with priority for collaborative approaches

2009: Legislature continued 4K start-up grants: \$3 million in year one of budget, and \$1.5 million in year two

2009: Governor signed bill mandating kindergarten in Wisconsin

Source: Jill Haglund, DPI (minor additions)

-
- ¹ 1848 State Constitution, from Wisconsin Historical Digital Collection, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/tp&CISOPTR=71796&CISO_SHOW=71777
- ² Watertown Historical Society. <http://www.watertownhistory.org/Articles/KindergardenFirst.htm>
- ³ Source of photo: Jill Haglund, Department of Public Instruction
- ⁴ Wisconsin Hometown Stories, *Manitowoc-Two Rivers: A History*. <http://www.wisconsinstories.org/manitowoc/essay/index.cfm?page=3>
- ⁵ DPI PowerPoint by Jill Haglund, *Four-Year-Old Kindergarten in Wisconsin*, 2009.
- ⁶ *Report to State Superintendent Barbara Thompson on the Four-Year-Old Kindergarten*, special ad hoc task force, June 9, 1980
- ⁷ DPI website: <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/fscp/pdf/ec4yktrend-to2010.pdf> The 53 percent figure was calculated by dividing numbers served in 2009-10 (38,000) by the most recent data on 4-year-olds in Wisconsin (71,519)
- ⁸ National Institute for Early Education Research (2009) *The State of Preschool 2009: State Preschool Yearbook* <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>
- ⁹ Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (2006) *Early Education Matters*: <http://www.wccf.org/pdf/eemlessonslearned.pdf>
- ¹⁰ **DPI website:** <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/fscp/pdf/ec-impact-dev.pdf>