



Routes to Competency: The Child Development Associate® Credential and State-Based Professional Development



A white paper

Over forty years ago, a national coalition of early educators collaborated to develop the Child Development Associate (CDA®) Credential. The CDA® developed in response to two challenges facing the field in the early 1970s—the need for staff working directly with young children to improve their knowledge and skills, and the need to improve overall program quality to influence positive outcomes for children and their families¹. From its inception, the CDA® was built upon a foundation of competencies developed by a task force of early childhood education (ECE) specialists and other child advocates. Through this process, the field made the explicit decision to adopt a competency-based approach to enhance educator preparation².

Forty years later, at a time when policymakers and parents have increasing expectations for early education to reverse deeply entrenched gaps in educational, social, and developmental outcomes for young children, the ECE field is still struggling to address the dual challenges of program quality standards and staff qualifications. In response, some states are developing state-based credentials or systems of professional development that either complement or compete with the CDA®.

This paper is an overview of the CDA® credential as a model of competency-based education that represents a critical part of a broader workforce development system for early childhood educators. This paper also compares the CDA® with the most current documentation of various state credentials.

Why CDA®?

1. The CDA® encompasses multiple sources of evidence, such as 120 hours of professional education in early childhood development, 480 hours of work experience, a Professional Portfolio that demonstrates an understanding of competence, feedback from families, an observation that demonstrates effective practice, and content knowledge via the CDA® exam.
2. The CDA® credentialing assessment system represents an organized process, a coherent sequence of learning experiences aligned with defined learning outcomes, and a comprehensive system of assessment that ensures that candidates master defined learning outcomes and can, most importantly, demonstrate them in practice.
3. The CDA® process includes a direct observation of the candidate in their work setting by a CDA® Professional Development Specialist.
4. The CDA® assessment can be conducted in any language that supports the early educator's daily work requirements.
5. The CDA® assessment contains feedback from families about the candidate's performance through the Family Questionnaire.

1 Klein, J., & Williams, C.R. (1973). The development of the Child Development Associate® (CDA®) program. *Young Children*, 28(3), 139-145. & Council for Professional Recognition. (2013). *Essentials for working with young children*. (1st Ed.). Washington, DC: Washington.

2 Hutchison, B.L. (1991). The Child Development Associate®: Prototype for early childhood educators. *Educational Horizons*, 70(1), 41-48 & Ward, E.H. (1976). The Child Development Associate Consortium's Assessment System. *Young Children*, 31(4), 244-254.

About the CDA®

The CDA® credential plays multiple roles in the preparation and recognition of early childhood educators. First, as a nationally recognized credential based on observed mastery of competencies, the CDA® is integrated into many state licensing requirements as a baseline quality standard. Second, through partnerships with institutions of higher education (IHEs), the CDA® is an entry point to postsecondary education for many nontraditional students. Finally, the CDA® credential occupies a foundational step in articulated career pathways for early childhood educators that provide transparent and progressive credentials, coursework, and training. For these reasons, the CDA® has market value for individual staff.

A Focus on Competency

While competency-based education (CBE) has a long history, at its core, CBE focuses on student learning outcomes rather than credit accumulation or seat time in college courses. CBE provides a more personalized experience, especially for nontraditional students. CBE models are grounded in competency frameworks linked to some vocationally-relevant outcome and a competency assessment. Ensuring validity between the competency frameworks and the assessments is widely seen as central to the credibility of programs and the long-term sustainability of CBE. There is a wide variation in the types of CBE programs being implemented, but they often fall into one of two models or hybrids of both: 1. Course-based credit equivalency models in which students progress through a competency-based program aligned with existing course and credit systems, and 2. Direct assessment models that provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their competencies through a variety of performance-based assessments.

Competency, the CDA®, and State Credentials

In a recent report, the National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives (PDW Center) conducted a preschool credential crosswalk of the CDA® and state/territory credentials.³ The PDW Center identified 24 states with preschool credentials or certificates and used a common framework to summarize these states' preschool credential or certificate requirements in seven critical areas: secondary school, early childhood training/organization, experience, health and safety certification, observation, documentation, and assessment/evaluation. But how do state credentials and the CDA® credential compare as a pathway to competency for early childhood educators?

CDA® Competency Standards

- I. To establish and maintain a safe, healthy learning environment.
- II. To advance physical and intellectual competence.
- III. To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance.
- IV. To establish positive and productive relationships with families.
- V. To ensure a well-run, purposeful program that is responsive to participant needs.
- VI. To maintain a commitment to professionalism.

³ The National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives (PDW Center), https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/pdw_preschool_credential_crosswalk.pdf

Core Expectations

- First, we must ask: What should early childhood educators know? About half of the states have specific requirements for a state credential, but there is no overarching framework or design outlining basic expectations. The closest to consensus among the states involves requirements covering knowledge of first aid, hygiene, and food preparation.
- Most State Professional Development Systems do not actually list competencies that early educators must demonstrate prior to being assigned a classroom of young children. For the most part, State Professional Development systems are silent relative to how competencies are observed in early education candidates.
- The CDA®, on the other hand, is built around a core set of competency standards that have been generally accepted in the field for decades. The CDA® credentialing process requires learning the theory behind six core competencies, documenting experience in applying the competencies to practice, and observation of how the candidate incorporates theory into practice.

Reliable and Valid Examination of Teaching Knowledge Base and Practice

- There is no general objective measure of knowledge employed at the State level for early care and education teachers.
- The CDA® provides a regularly revised and updated standardized test of candidate understanding and application of the knowledge base that forms the foundation of early care and education practice.

EDUCATION PREREQUISITES

Most of the states require a high school diploma as a basic prerequisite, but for instance, Kentucky does not. The CDA® requires a minimum of a high school diploma or GED to initiate the early educator credentialing process; however, a junior or senior nearing graduation from a high school career/technical program in early childhood education may apply for CDA assessment.

EXPERIENCE

A coherent pathway to professional development must also answer the question: What should the early childhood educator *be able to do*?

- Ten states require that candidates for early childhood credentials be enrolled in technical or community colleges that may supervise teaching or caregiving work experiences and then approve the candidates to receive a state credential. Twelve states require early educators to have early childhood teaching experience before they receive a credential.
- The CDA® requires 480 hours of classroom teaching experience and an individually developed portfolio that demonstrates personal understanding and application of child development theory.

DEMONSTRATION OF SKILL

- Most state systems lack work experience requirements or observation tools to record and reflect early educators/candidate competence.

- The CDA® assessment process includes candidate observation in the classroom by a CDA® trained Professional Development Specialist. The CDA® combines a knowledge base with observed, documented practice as criteria to receive the credential.

PORTABILITY

- The CDA® Credential is the only credential accepted nationwide. The CDA® credential plays a significant role across the spectrum of early childhood settings in the United States and is recognized in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the United Arab Emirates, from employer-sponsored child care and community-based sites to federal government-funded entities, such as Head Start and military child care programs.

Valuing Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Now more than ever, given demographic changes in the United States,⁴ attention to linguistic and cultural diversity is critical for early childhood educators. A recently acknowledged fact is that almost 20% of the early care and education workforce is composed of recent immigrants to the United States⁵.

- Only California has state requirements addressing competencies for serving English language learners in the classroom.
- The CDA® assessment is available in any language in which the candidates work. In the past year, for example, CDA® assessments were provided in 12 different languages.

Family Engagement

Family engagement has been recognized as an essential element of effective practice in the early years⁶. That is not a focus in many post-secondary programs.

- Currently, no state system addresses competence in working with families.
- Establishing positive relationships with families is a CDA® core competency that every candidate must master, and is assessed via the Family Questionnaire.

Working Together: The CDA and the States

It is clear that the CDA® National Credential surpasses state credentials in reinforcing best practices in early educator professional development. Historically, the CDA® has promoted professionalism and commitment to the field of early care and education:

- A national study of CDA® recipients reported a 90.1% retention rate in the field and that 32% of CDA® recipients initiated post-secondary studies.⁷

4 Bipartisan Policy Center. (2014). *Immigration: America's demographic edge*. Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center

5 Park, M, McHugh, M, Zong, J, Batalova, J. *Immigrant and Refugee Workers in the Early Childhood Field: Taking A Closer Look*. MPI National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy April 2015

6 Fantuzzo, J., Tighe, E., & Childs, S. (2000). Family Involvement Questionnaire: A multivariate assessment of family participation in early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(2), 367–370

7 Bredekamp, S. Executive Summary, National Survey of the Child Development Associate Credential

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- A survey of CDA® recipients who earned their credential through a high school career and technical education (CTE) program found that 8 in 10 (81.5 %) reported the CDA® encouraged them to continue their education toward a degree.

There are six basic strategies that the Council proposes to bolster and support the important efforts of states to strengthen the early care and education workforce:

1. Partnerships Between States and the CDA®

- Florida
 - o A partnership between the public schools and Miami-Dade Community College with CDA® instructs both high school and community college students for careers in early care and education. Dedicated and linguistically diverse faculty are recruited and trained to serve as CDA® Professional Development Specialists (PDS) to conduct final classroom observations of student competencies and to provide onsite mentoring.
- Georgia
 - o Georgia combines resources through state agencies, community colleges and United Way to provide funding to support CDA® coursework, as well as CDA® assessments for their early childhood teachers.
- Tennessee
 - o Funding from the Tennessee Department of Human Services provides support for CDA® course development, candidate preparation assistance, and the Validation visit.
- CDA® partners with the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® (T.E.A.C.H.) Initiative in 24 States and the District of Columbia.

2. Use of CDA® Professional Development Specialists

States can partner with the Council and its network of nearly 7,000 Professional Development Specialists, who conduct candidate's Verification Visits, throughout the United States. They are skilled in reviewing professional portfolios with candidates, observing classroom practice and mentoring each CDA® candidate through reflection on and planning for their professional career in early care and education.

3. Use of the CDA® Assessment

States can incorporate the validated CDA® standardized test and knowledge application into their systems. The CDA® exam is updated every time the Essentials Workbook is revised with current research.

4. Collaboration with High School CTE Programs⁸

- Between 2011 and 2015, CDA recipients that self-identified as completing their CDA training through a CTE program, at least 555 CDA credentials were awarded to high school students.
- Nearly half (45.1 percent) reported that they received college credits for their high school CDA training.
- Forty-six percent of the student respondents (to a 2011 CDA survey) were employed and working with children on a part-time basis and fourteen percent were employed and working with children on a full-time basis.

⁸ Washington, Valora, Ph.D. CDA and Career and Technical High Schools as an Effective Entry into Early Care and Education. Council for Professional Recognition. Washington, D.C., 2015. Reprint with permission.

5. Home Visitor Assessments

An updated process for acquiring the CDA Home Visitor Credential will be released in the summer of 2016. The Competency Standard book has been updated while still maintaining elements common to all CDA Credentials such as the observation of competencies in practice settings (family home), the Family Questionnaire, and Professional Development Specialist mentoring.

6. Community College Career Pathways

- A number of States only require enrollment in Community College courses and working toward a degree in Child Development for a preschool teaching position in some State licensed programs .
- The Council partners with a number of Community Colleges around the Country to assist students in obtaining their CDA. T.E.A.C.H offers community college scholarship that pays costs associated with the CDA Assessment process including the exam. In addition, many CDA candidates utilize T.E.A.C.H. funds for coursework and classroom release time for CDA assessments and required course completion toward their CDA Credential.

Conclusion

The CDA® is a time-proven and effective competency-based system of training and assessing demonstrated competencies in early care and education. The data clearly indicate the unparalleled power of the CDA®, historically and at the present time, to provide a coherent foundation for early educator knowledge and skill development. In comparison to the current realities of state credentials, the CDA® has stronger tools and practices, as well as the complex institutional infrastructure and sustained focus, to assess teacher competencies and help build a strong professional workforce. ■



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