For more than 30 years, the Council for Professional Recognition has promoted improved performance and recognition for professionals in the early childhood education of children aged birth to five years old. Through our comprehensive assessment of educator knowledge and classroom competence, the prestigious Child Development Associate® (CDA) credentials have set the standard for what early childhood educators should know and be able to do.

Simply put, in early childhood education, the CDA is a symbol of quality and trust.

The Council wants to ensure all CDA students can obtain the high-quality training they are seeking from the variety of education providers. That’s why we are now conducting a pilot study of the new the CDA® Gold StandardSM for organizations that provide professional development to CDA candidates. The CDA® Gold StandardSM is an earned recognition that demonstrates qualified organizations have met our rigorous criteria for student services, sound business practices and professional development – all designed to prepare students for the CDA certification exam and verification visit.

Challenges

The need for the CDA® Gold StandardSM is clear: Early childhood educators and home visitors have historically come from a wide range of backgrounds — some of which require formal education and some that do not. The evidence is strong: the Council’s decades of experience and scores of research both demonstrate that students working to become early childhood educators don’t necessarily have the assurance that the courses or training in which they are participating will adequately prepare them for teaching and caring for young children.

“As indicated by the ubiquitous ‘early childhood-related’ label widely used to describe the educational backgrounds of teachers of young children, there is no accepted and agreed-upon standard for what constitutes a high-quality program of study for ECE practitioners,” wrote the authors of Default or By Design? Variations in Higher Education Programs for Early Care and Education Teachers and Their Implications for Research Methodology, Policy, and Practice, a 2012 report from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. “Too often, highly diverse higher education programs are assumed to produce equivalent results.”¹

One example of more recent efforts to improve teacher preparation standards began in 2009, when the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) started working to give early educators some guidance on higher education programs that meet the association’s Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs.² The seven standards
include topics such as promoting child development and learning, building family and community relationships, observing, documenting and assessing to support young children and their families, and having field experiences.

Nevertheless, early childhood teacher education faces many challenges. In the Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States: National Report, researchers from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, provided evidence of this variation. In a review of 1,179 two- and four-year institutions offering programs that “might prepare students to work with young children,” the researchers found, that some programs addressed working with children across the birth-to-8 age range, while others focused more specifically on preschoolers and children in the early school grades. In the end, the researchers identified some significant gaps across 19 different topic areas related to the early-childhood profession.

Areas of Improvement in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation: Dual language learners and children with special needs

There are certain subjects in early educator preparation that need to be included in modern practices to reflect the diversity of all children. “About 20 percent of CDA and associate’s programs and about 10 percent of bachelor’s and master’s programs did not require any coursework in working with bilingual children learning English as a second language,” the Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States: National Report authors noted. “With the national increase in ethnic and linguistic diversity among young children, it may be important for all programs to require coursework in this area.”

The researchers also looked at practicum requirements for early educators and found that some programs — specifically 4 percent of associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs and 33 percent of master’s programs — required no student teaching or field placement experience. Of all the associate’s degree programs only 62 percent required practicum experience in working with infants and toddlers. In addition, students in only 41 percent of those two-year programs gained experience working with children with disabilities. They concluded that while some early-childhood teacher preparation programs covered a broad range of topic areas, they questioned whether teachers were gaining “the depth necessary to be ‘highly qualified’ to teach children at each age covered.”

Practitioners are well aware of this challenge. In 2015, 32 percent of the 3,750 early educators surveyed by NAEYC expressed concern over a lack of opportunities for training and education to prepare them to become teachers. Latino, African-American and Asian-Pacific Islander teachers were even more concerned about the adequate training and mentoring opportunities.
It is now more important than ever for those entering the early childhood education field to know how to identify the programs that will provide both comprehensive training and solid practical experience in a range of early learning programs.

Educator Competency in Early Childhood Settings Requires Preparation

A more coherent and consistent expectation for early childhood teacher training is becoming more important as federal and state programs increase their program standards. Working toward some common expectations for early childhood teacher preparation programs is also important given growing expectations for workforce qualifications. These higher expectations are reflected in federal initiatives like Head Start as well as in state-funded preschool programs or quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS).

For example, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research’s most recent State Preschool Yearbook, 33 of the 57 state-funded preschool initiatives now require lead teachers to have a bachelor’s degree and 21 programs require assistant teachers to have a Child Development Associate credential or equivalent. In most QRIS systems, the highest ratings are awarded to centers in which lead teachers have bachelor’s degrees, and to family child-care homes in which providers have a CDA or a state early-childhood credential.

Yet research has demonstrated that a “degree” may or may not indicate specific “competencies.” Meaning that early educators may not gain the necessary experience and skills needed to work with all young children. Studies have consistently found that teachers report that, after earning their degrees, they have felt inadequately prepared them to fulfill their critical roles. Even those attending a weekend workshop or a summer seminar should know in advance what competencies they will gain and how they will be able to apply their knowledge and skills to the program setting in which they work.

Now: The Gold Standard is a symbol of quality!

As the largest credentialing agency for early childhood educators, the Council frequently hears employer and student concerns about early childhood teacher preparation. In response we have designed and are now piloting the new “CDA® Gold StandardSM.” The focus of the CDA® Gold StandardSM is to meet the demand for quality assurance that the early childhood education training meets the expectations that students and employers desire and pay for.

The CDA® Gold StandardSM may be earned by all types of organizations that provide professional development, including higher education institutions, resource and referral agencies, private training entities and other nonprofits. For these organizations, the CDA® Gold StandardSM represents:
» **Professional recognition** that distinguishes organizations as verified high-quality providers to CDA students.

» **Certification** that the training and professional development organizations provide are aligned with the CDA’s eight Subject Areas, competency criteria, and desired outcomes.

» **Accountability** through evidence that organizations meet the Council’s rigorous criteria for professional development, business practices, and student services.

» **Collaboration** with the Council in meeting the training and preparation needs of CDA students.

» **Acknowledgement** of a demonstrated commitment to improving practitioners’ skills as early childhood educators and the advancement of the profession.

To earn the CDA® Gold Standard℠, organizations must document and demonstrate they meet each of three principles and their components as described below.

**PRINCIPLE I: CDA® FORMAL EDUCATION COURSEWORK ALIGNMENT**
How well does the CDA education and preparation program offered by an organization align with the eight CDA Subject Areas?

**PRINCIPLE II: BUSINESS POLICIES AND PRACTICES**
In what ways does an organization manage and sustain effective, ethical business practices? How does an organization ensure program accountability?

**PRINCIPLE III: QUALITY STUDENT SERVICES**
What do students say about their organization’s programs and service delivery? How is excellence ensured in meeting students’ educational and professional needs?

**Advancing the Field: Empowering Early Educators**

The CDA® Gold Standard℠ is an answer to the long-needed collaboration between high-quality early childhood educators, administrators, colleges, universities and training organizations that will add value to and ensure integrity in the early childhood profession.

To find out more about how your training organization might earn a CDA® Gold Standard℠ send inquiries to goldstandard@cdacouncil.org. News about the progress of the pilot study will be reported in CouncilLINK. To subscribe, visit: www.cdacouncil.org/subscribe.

2 https://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ProfPrepStandards09.pdf

