

PROFESSIONALIZING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION REQUIRES NATIONAL STANDARDS AND STRONG CAREER PATHWAYS

WHITE PAPER

High-quality early childhood education has been scientifically demonstrated to enhance young children's cognitive, psychosocial, and motor development, making them more "school ready" for K-12 education and yielding long-term economic and social benefits for individuals and society.¹ Well-trained early childhood educators, who may spend several thousand hours in a young child's life, are vital. Accessible and affordable early childhood education also make it easier for parents of young children to work, increasing both household income and national output.² We agree with the American Educational Research Association's recent evaluation of 22 studies: The time has come to stop asking whether early childhood education is effective.³

These facts are all widely recognized, yet there are many challenges facing the early childhood education field for children, families, staff, and the field itself:

- Nearly half of U.S. 3- and 4-year-olds are not in preschool, average annual program fees exceed \$10,000 or the cost of a public university in most states, and public financing is scarce.⁴
- For the two million early childhood educators, access to professional development is often limited. With their near-poverty wages of \$10-\$14 per hour,⁵ a college education is too often unaffordable. The fact that early childhood education is almost entirely a female occupation in a nation where women are disproportionately clustered into low-wage jobs exacerbates the issue of low status and compensation.⁶
- Moreover, early childhood education has not yet developed many of the attributes of a profession such as a universally accepted purpose, uniform standards, or clearly defined expectations of teacher preparation degree programs.⁷ For non-degree staff, the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ is the leading marker of professional competency for baseline knowledge and skills.

National standards and strong career pathways are essential elements of the movement to professionalize the field. In support of this movement, this white paper addresses these two foundational requirements: the need for national training and competency standards as well as a clearly defined career ladder.

THE MOVEMENT TO PROFESSIONALIZE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Given the clear “linkages between the well-being of children from birth to age 8 and the well-being of adults who care for and educate them,” the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM) made a forceful and compelling argument for professionalizing the early childhood education profession. IOM, in a 2017 paper, declared: “Supporting a strong and fairly compensated workforce is critical to the future health and development of children.”⁸

Although the value of high-caliber early childhood education is understood, “The sophistication of the professional roles of those who work with children from infancy through the early elementary years is not consistently recognized and reflected,” the IOM concluded in its 2015 report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age Eight: A Unifying Foundation*. Such professionalization [has] “not kept pace with what the science of child development and early learning indicates children need.”⁹

The benefits of professionalization in early childhood education accrue to children, workers, and society at large. Not only do young children learn more from well-trained and well-compensated educators but they also benefit from less turnover among teachers. Early childhood educators, now paid a fraction of what elementary and secondary teachers earn, ideally would get a raise both in wages and public esteem. And the nation would benefit from millions of children who are better academically and socially prepared for K-12, and ultimately positioned to be more successful as adults.

Professionalizing early childhood education requires “a consistent and unambiguous point of view about the purpose of its work, and about what defines its shared identity and responsibility,” according to Goffin and Washington. “Strong field-wide leadership is needed to bolster [its] political capacity to significantly sway public decisions about early care and education and to effect durable change... Yet these outcomes cannot be achieved in the absence of clarity regarding what defines and bounds early [childhood] education.”¹⁰

THE CASE FOR NATIONAL STANDARDS

National standards help ensure consistent quality among early childhood educators, which is essential for the profession and for the learning and well-being of very young children. Currently, except for the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential, there are no other widely utilized competency standards for early childhood educators. Without such standards, “the field’s ability to serve children well and to advocate effectively on behalf of early education is severely compromised,” Goffin and Washington said.¹¹

Parents’ and the public’s expectations for early childhood education are increasing the demand for assurances that the current unequal system for early education delivers consistent high-quality educational experiences for our youngest children. This demand has helped federal, state, and local governments to focus on the people who work in the field and their ability to produce desired results.

There are now expectations that early childhood education has a code of ethics for the professionals who work with children and families. The intent is to enable communities to confidently establish guidelines that will spark increased investment in young children and the professionals who teach them.

Second, standards would promote more uniform, predictable quality of early childhood education in every state and locality, thus achieving greater equity for children in any setting. Consistent standards also increase the portability of credentials for educators, making it possible for them to practice in different parts of the country. Today, there are wide disparities in both quality and access to early childhood education. Many states and localities have public preschool programs, but standards generally depend more on funding than the science of child development and early education.¹² Consequently, as a nation, we lack the structural, managerial, and organizational capacity to deliver on the promise of preschool.

A third rationale for national standards is that they can help to promote equity, given the continuing reality of sexism, racism, and educational, geographical, and other socioeconomic divides. Equal access to quality early childhood education and educators ideally can play a role in eliminating achievement gaps, especially those affecting low-income children and children of color. The wide range of program requirements and staff qualifications that now exist in states and communities hinder more equitable delivery of early childhood education.

Moreover, the United States is a laggard when compared to many nations in terms of access to early childhood education and standards for educators. About one-third of U.S. 4-year-olds are in public programs and another third are in private preschools. Only 36 percent of 3-year-olds are enrolled. By comparison, 100 percent of French children in both age groups are enrolled in programs with national standards, and nearly all young children in countries like Germany, Spain, and Israel are in public preschool. Within the United States, Oklahoma, Florida, and Wisconsin provide public pre-K to more than 70 percent of 4-year-olds, whereas states like Massachusetts, Ohio, and Arizona serve fewer than 10 percent. New initiatives like the development of public preschool in New York City, which enrolled 70,000 children in 2016-17, are promising.¹³

Educator requirements also tend to be more uniform in other countries. Sweden, for example, requires a degree in preschool education with 210 credits. A “maestro” certificate and a specialty in nursery or infant education are standard requirements for early childhood educators in Spain. In France, pre-primary teachers in “écoles maternelles” must have four years of specialized training, and they receive the same relatively high pay that French elementary school teachers do.¹⁴ By comparison, in the United States, workforce qualifications for educators vary from state to state and within states.¹⁵ As noted, this undermines the dependability of educators’ competencies and performance.

In addition, national standards should originate from the field itself. Leaders and practitioners need to articulate what defines a coherent field of practice, and implement standards that are in the best interests of children, families, the staff who serve them, and the nation.

THE CDA®: A PROVEN AND ENDURING NATIONAL STANDARD

We trust the field's capacity to meet the goals of professionalization. Prior successes give us confidence. Leadership in the field responded to challenges emerging from the establishment of the Head Start program in the 1960s. A collaborative effort involving child development experts, higher education institutions, national organizations and local communities led to the creation of the Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials in 1972. The CDA quickly emerged and continues to thrive as a national standard for what early childhood educators should know and be able to do to work with young children—particularly but not exclusively for non-degree holders. The twin goals of the CDA were originally designed to support the creation of replicable preschool programs that benefited low-income children and to prepare staff, often recruited from local communities, to ably and consistently provide these services.¹⁶

From its inception, the purpose of the CDA credential has been to define and assess basic competencies for early childhood educators working in preschools, with infants and toddlers, as home visitors, and for family childcare. Combining a focus on multiple sources of evidence, attaining a CDA credential requires 480 hours of supervised classroom experience, 120 hours of training, a portfolio, feedback from parents, and an observation of the candidate focused on specific competencies and demonstration of effective practice.

With 420,000 CDA's earned since 1975, the CDA credential is the most widely recognized certification that early childhood educators have gained the initial knowledge, skills, and experience to effectively engage with young children. In 2017, more than 20,000 early childhood educators earned a new CDA and over 24,000 renewed their CDA credential.

The CDA has remained popular and effective for many reasons: It establishes a baseline for the necessary knowledge and skills of professionals who work with young children—whether they are center-based, in preschools, work with infants and toddlers, are in family child care, or are in home visitor programs. The CDA is the only portable, valid, competency-based credential recognized in all 50 states, territories, the District of Columbia, community colleges and the United States military. The CDA credentialing system is based on extensive scholarship in early learning. Utilizing multiple sources of evidence, the CDA is the only comprehensive credential that recognizes the essential competencies needed by entry-level and all early childhood professionals.

THE CDA PROVIDES A DEFINED CAREER PATHWAY

The CDA is a cornerstone and a steppingstone in the quest to professionalize the early childhood education workforce. As the most prominent credential for early childhood educators in the United States, it is also a foundation for further professional development and academic advancement. It is the “best first step” because the CDA is the only credit-bearing national credential that articulates to associate degrees in most community college systems throughout the nation and many four-year institutions. As the only multilingual credential that assesses educators in the language of their daily

work, the CDA serves the nation's diverse population – and is often the only entry point to the profession for staff who do not speak English well.

Over the decades of its existence, there are literally hundreds of thousands of stories about CDA candidates who have used the credential as a bridge to higher education. To learn more about how CDA recipients have used the credential to further their careers, the Council for Professional Recognition, in partnership with the University of Virginia's Center for Survey Research, surveyed 1,600 credential holders in 2017.¹⁷

The survey found that over the past ten years:

- 65 percent of CDA earners strongly agreed, and 19 percent somewhat agreed, that attaining a CDA made respondents to feel “part of the profession.”
- Similarly, 65 percent of CDA earners strongly agreed, and 23 percent somewhat agreed, that earning a CDA enabled them to “learn the best practices in the field.”
- One-third of those who obtained a CDA either had an associate degree or were working toward one, and one-quarter said that they either had a bachelor's degree or were working toward one.
- Having the CDA helped staff obtain a raise (55%) or a promotion (58%)

The findings demonstrate that earning a CDA generally leads to

- higher wages (although pay remains low)
- additional postsecondary education,
- career advancement, and
- greater feelings of professionalism.

High School CTE/CDA Leads to AA Degree

In 2011, Betsy Wayt (formerly Betsy Thompson) was among the first high school students in the country to earn a Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ through a Career and Technical Education (CTE) program while completing her high school diploma at Columbus East High School.

Wayt attended Ball State University in Muncie, IN before transferring to Ivy Tech Community College where she earned an associate degree in Early Childhood Education in 2013. She earned dual credit for the ECE courses she took in 11th and 12th grade, allowing her to receive 12 credit hours toward her college degree. Wayt now works in an Early Head Start program with Human Services, Inc. in Indiana.

CDA Inspires Dreams of Life-long Learning

After working with young children for 12 years before obtaining her CDA Credential in July 2017, Tammie Washington is already enrolled for the Spring 2018 semester at Northwestern College to complete her bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

“The T.E.A.C.H program made it possible for me to obtain my CDA credential. They will also support me in obtaining my future degrees. I plan to continue until I have obtained a PhD in early childhood education.”

Calvin E. Moore, Jr. CDA to Ph.D. in ECE

Dr. Calvin E. Moore, Jr. is a CDA holder who went on to earned his BS degree in Early Childhood Education from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and a MS in Education and Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education from Walden University. “Acquiring my CDA gave me the confidence to do more – which is so important early in a career.” Dr. Moore, a long-time advocate for children, families and early childhood education said.

Critically, for young children, the CDA also aligns with the skill needs for early childhood education. These criteria are part of the definition of a career pathway under the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014.¹⁸

MOVING FORWARD

Professionalizing early childhood education requires national standards and strong career pathways. In addition, these standards and pathways must be accompanied by significant federal, state, and community investments in the workforce that enable staff to achieve these goals.

Professionalizing early childhood education requires elevation of the voice of the early childhood educator on whom direct services and effective system building ultimately depend. The Council is proud to actively participate in and represent the voices of practitioners in many initiatives now focused on professionalizing the field. As we do so, we value our colleagues' recognition that it is important to build on the field's existing and sustainable assets – such as the CDA.¹⁶

¹ Bari Walsh, "The Lasting Payoff of Early Childhood Education," Harvard Graduate School of Education, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/11/lasting-payoff-early-ed>; and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Starting Strong V* (Paris: OECD, 2017).

² Ibid.; Cristina Novoa and Katie Hamm, "The Cost of Inaction on Early Childhood Education," The Center for American Progress, Oct. 31, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2017/10/31/441825/the-cost-of-inaction-on-universal-preschool/>; U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, "Early Childhood Education," <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/topics/early-childhood-education>; and Isabel V. Sawhill, Jeffrey Tebbs, and William T. Dickens, "The Effects of Investing in Early Education on Economic Growth," The Brookings Institution, April 30, 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-effects-of-investing-in-early-education-on-economic-growth/>;

³ American Educational Research Association, "Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium- and Long-Term Educational Outcomes," Educational Researcher, Nov. 16, 2017, <http://www.aera.net/Newsroom/Recent-AERA-Research/Impacts-of-Early-Childhood-Education-on-Medium-and-Long-Term-Educational-Outcomes>.

⁴ Brigid Schulte and Alieza Durana, *The Care Report*, The New America Foundation, Sept. 28, 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/care-report/introduction/>).

⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, <https://www.bls.gov/Oes/current/oes399011.htm> and <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm>; and U.S. Department of Education, "High-Quality Early Learning Settings Depend on a High-Quality Workforce Low Compensation Undermines Quality," June 2016, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/initiatives/earlylearning/files/ece-low-compensation-undermines-quality-report-2016.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid., and Institute for Women's Policy Research, "Undervalued and Underpaid in America: Women in Low-Wage, Female-Dominated Jobs," 2016, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/D508%20Undervalued%20and%20Underpaid.pdf>.

⁷ Stacey G. Goffin and Valora Washington, *Ready or Not: Leadership Choices in Early Care and Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

- ⁸ Adams, D., L. A. Bornfreund, J. E. Carinci, L. Connors-Tadros, L. Fraga, A. Guarino, W. Hao, B. Hudson, R. M. Kor, S. LeMoine, J. Lockwood-Shabat, J. Martella, D. S. Mathias, C. McLean, C. Polk, P.S. Rogers, T. Rucker, S. D. Russell, A. A. Samuel, C. Stevens, T. N. Talan, V. Washington, and V. Williams. 2017. "A unified foundation to support a highly qualified early childhood workforce." Discussion Paper, National Academy of Medicine, Washington, DC., <https://nam.edu/a-unified-foundation-to-support-a-highly-qualified-early-childhood-workforce>.
- ⁹ Institute of Medicine of the National Research Council of the National Academies, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National academies Press, 2015), 487.
- ¹⁰ Goffin and Washington, *Ready or Not*, 49.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² U.S. Department of Education, "High-Quality Early Learning Settings Depend on a High-Quality Workforce Low Compensation Undermines Quality"; and National Institute for Early Education Research, "State of Preschool 2016," Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, 2017, http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/YB2016_StateofPreschool2.pdf.
- ¹³ National Center for Education Statistics, "Preschool and Kindergarten Enrollment," April 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cfa.asp; National Institute for Early Education Research, "State of Preschool 2016"; and New York City Department of Education, Teach NYC Pre-K, <http://schools.nyc.gov/careers/teachers/prek.htm>.
- ¹⁴ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, "Teacher Training—Basic and Specialist Teacher Training," n.d., <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/sweden/national-overview/teacher-training-basic-and-specialist-teacher-training>; Elisabeth Wilinski, "Early Childhood Education in Spain," Prezi, Nov. 6, 2013, <https://prezi.com/cmjrt2rnnp6/early-childhood-education-in-spain/>; "France's Childcare System," Nursery World, Feb. 8, 2013, <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/analysis/1097583/frances-childcare-french-lessons>; Pamela Oberhuemer, "The Early Childhood Education Workforce in France: Between Divergencies and Emergencies," *International Journal of Childcare and Education Policy*, vol. 5, no. 1, May 2011, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/2288-6729-5-1-55>; and UNESCO, Policy Brief on Early Childhood: The Training and Working Conditions of Preschool Teachers in France," No. 37, March-April 2007, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001499/149966E.pdf>
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education, "A Matter of Equity: Preschool in the United States," 2015, <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/early-learning/matter-equity-preschool-america.pdf>; PreschoolTeacher.org, "Preschool Teacher Requirements: Degrees, State Certification and National Credentials," <https://www.preschoolteacher.org/requirements/>; New York City Department of Education, Teach NYC Pre-K, <http://schools.nyc.gov/careers/teachers/prek.htm>; and Oklahoma State Department of Education, "Requirements for Early Childhood Education Jobs in Oklahoma," <https://www.preschoolteacher.org/oklahoma/>.
- ¹⁶ Valora Washington, "Financing Early Care and Education with a Highly Qualified Workforce," presented before the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, May 17, 2017, https://www.cdacouncil.org/storage/documents/Media_Room/Financing_Early_Care_and_Education_final-060617.pdf; and Council for Professional Recognition, "The African American Pioneers: legacy Influences on Early Childhood Teacher Preparation," June 2016, http://www.cdacouncil.org/storage/documents/Media_Room/African-American-Pioneers_062016.pdf.
- ¹⁷ Well World Solutions, "Who are CDA Credential Holders? Findings from a 2017 Survey of CDA Credential Holders," prepared for the Council for Professional Recognition, Sept. 25, 2017.
- ¹⁸ Anna Heinrich, "Is Earning a Child Development Associate Credential Worth It?" Rasmussen College, Sept. 5, 2017, <http://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/education/blog/earning-child-development-associate-certificate-worth-it/>; and National Skills Coalition, "Career Pathways: Promises and Pitfalls," April 2015, <https://m.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/2015-04-29-Career-Pathways-Promise-and-Pitfalls.pdf>.