

The Child Development Professional Credential™:

Building on the Child Development Associate® to Advance Lead Teacher Competency and Promote Equitable Career Pathways

In 1971, a group of innovative early childhood educators gathered to discuss ways to improve the quality of early care and education in response to two primary challenges facing the field—the need for qualified staff working directly with young children in Head Start as the program expanded across the country and the need to improve overall program quality to influence positive outcomes for children and their families.¹ The concept for the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ was born out of those meetings and initially funded by what was then called the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF).

In 1975, the first CDA® credential was awarded. From its inception, the CDA credentialing process was built upon a set of core competencies developed by early childhood education (ECE) professionals and child advocates. Over time, the field adopted this competency-based approach to early educator preparation.² Thriving in regulated, performance-based programs that promote school readiness, the CDA continues to validate the knowledge, skills and abilities of educators working in learning environments serving children from birth to age 5.

The early childhood education (ECE) profession continues to encounter challenges similar to those faced in the 1970s, which have been intensified by various social issues and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Despite recognizing early educators as essential workers during the peak of the pandemic, policymakers and families soon returned to heightened expectations for ECE programs to address long-standing gaps in educational, social-emotional, and developmental outcomes for young children. The field grapples with numerous difficulties related to maintaining high-quality program standards, ensuring appropriate staff qualifications, and providing trauma-informed care, all while striving to enhance practices that support all children and families effectively.

In response to the need for a uniform workforce development system and to advance the professional growth of early childhood educators, leaders in the ECE profession are championing an industry-specific *national* credential that builds on the theory and practice of the CDA and recognizes in-service training and work experience as academic credit.³ This paper proposes the Child Development Professional™ (CDP) as a *workforce solution* to the current needs of the field, through the design and offering of an *advanced* nationally recognized competency-based *Lead Teacher credential*.

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1 Council for Professional Recognition. (2023). *Essentials for Working with Young Children* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC.

2 Hutchison, B.L. (1991). The Child Development Associate®: Prototype for early childhood educators. *Educational Horizons*, 70(1), 41-48.

3 National Head Start Association & Bellwether Education Partners. (2021, January). "Broader, Deeper, Fairer: Five Strategies to Radically Expand the Talent Pool in Early Education". <https://www.headstarternetwork.org/downloadpaper>

The Problem

Credentialing requirements for early educators increase, as core standards for kindergarten progress. For example, the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 reauthorized Head Start programs with additional accountability and increased teacher qualifications by requiring at least 50% of staff to have a degree. As prescribed in section 648A(a)(3)(B) of the Act, a program must ensure all center-based teachers have at least an associate or bachelor's degree in child development or early childhood education, equivalent coursework, or otherwise meet the specified requirements.⁴

According to a survey issued to grantees by the National Head Start Association at the beginning of the 2023-2024 program year, the workforce crisis remains significant, due to issues such as staff vacancies, high turnover rates, compensation, and the lack of qualified candidates. Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated vacancies remain higher than usual. Due to the workforce crisis, an estimated 137,000 to 275,000 children were on Early/Head Start waiting lists in February 2023. This equates to 17 – 33% of funded slots. As of October 2023, 14% of Early/Head Start classrooms were closed. Of programs with closed classrooms, 75% cited staff vacancies as the primary reason.⁵

Barriers, including equity of access, academic difficulty, financial concerns, affordability, mental wellbeing, and family responsibilities, impede adult learners from successfully matriculating through the multiple years of coursework required to complete college degree programs.⁶ As a result, many professions are exploring alternative routes to competency to meet workforce needs and performance standards, primarily through partnerships with employers.⁷

OPPORTUNITIES

- Developing higher levels of practice-based competencies for CDPs
- Creating a credential that will be recognized and accepted towards an associate or a bachelor's degree by institutions of higher education
- Garnering support and endorsement from state and national organizations, accrediting bodies, and institutions of higher education
- Validating the quality of the CDP™ credential across states

THE GOAL

The proposed Child Development Professional™ (CDP) credential will be recognized as a higher-level industry-recognized national Lead Teacher credential, with the goal of equitable access to professional advancement, resulting in benefits to ECE programs, children and families.

OBJECTIVES

1. Develop a new opportunity for early educators who are CDAs to demonstrate higher levels of competence as a Lead Teacher while cultivating the professional development of practitioners.
2. Create a structured and advanced career pathway for national credential credit earned through supervised, on-the-job experience.
3. Facilitate recognition of the CDP as a guarantee of effective professional work experience and a certified pathway towards career advancement.

⁴ Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, Public Law 110-134, 121 STAT. 1363 (2007). <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/hs-act-pl-110-134.pdf>

⁵ National Head Start Association. (October 2023). The Head Start and Early Head Start workforce is in crisis. <https://nhsa.org/resource/confronting-head-starts-workforce-crisis/>

⁶ Bellare, Y., Smith, A., Cochran, K., & Lopez, S. G. (2023). Motivations and Barriers for Adult Learner Achievement: Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education. *Adult Learning*, 34(1), 30-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10451595211059574>

⁷ Venable, M. A. (2021). 2021 Alternative Education Pathways Report. *BestColleges.com*. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/alternative-education-pathways/>

Demonstrating Competence

Earning the CDP™ credential requires experience working in the role of teacher in an early care and education setting prior to application. As prospective CDPs achieve higher levels of competency and practice, they will apply their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to demonstrate leadership cultivating high-quality program experiences that optimize young children’s holistic development, along with practitioners who serve them and their families.

Unlike traditional ECE credentials, the CDP would require employment prior to application. While CDA® candidates may *volunteer* in early learning programs to earn the 480 hours of work experience, candidates seeking to earn the CDP must be *working* as a teacher, support staff or an administrator in a licensed or registered early learning program for a minimum of two years. This work experience requirement extends beyond the 480 hours initially earned to apply for the CDA credential and must be supervised to count as credit.

The CDP emphasizes a balance between theoretical knowledge, practical application, and sensitivity to the diverse needs of young children. To demonstrate advanced competency after the CDA, aspiring CDPs must continue their professional development through in-service learning with the option of formal coursework. The combination of in-service professional learning and supervised on-the-job experience prepares candidates for a variety of careers in ECE, from teacher mentor or coach to advocacy and administration. While the CDA is considered “The Best First Step,” the CDP can be considered “The Best Next Step.”

While the CDA® is considered “*The Best First Step,*” the CDP™ can be considered “*The Best Next Step.*”

CDP credentials will be awarded to ECE practitioners who demonstrate advanced abilities in working with young children ages birth to 5 in a variety of settings, including family child care learning homes and center-based programs. CDPs will be equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills in teaching and learning strategies, classroom management, exceptionalities, and technology solutions, with a strong emphasis on creating developmentally appropriate learning environments.

Expectations of CDAs and CDPs

Child Development Associate® (CDA)	Child Development Professional™ (CDP)
A CDA® is an <i>entry-level educator</i> who has <i>met</i> the <i>CDA Competency Standards</i> and is either <i>starting</i> a career in early childhood education or professionalizing their career with the goal of working as a Lead Teacher.	A CDP™ is an <i>experienced educator</i> or leader who has earned the CDA credential and <i>mastered</i> the <i>CDA Competency Standards</i> with the goal of <i>supporting</i> the professional advancement of other practitioners.
For each CDA® competency goal, the CDA demonstrates knowledge and skills in performing work with young children and families in the role of a teacher.	The CDP™ understands the art and science of teaching, has mastered the role of the Lead Teacher and guides, supports, and advocates for the professional advancement of practitioners along with the continuous quality improvement of the program.

The Road Ahead

- **Rethink professional competence.** Align qualifications to perform the Lead Teacher role effectively and ethically with proficiency demonstrating the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), as well as judgment.
- **Optimize competency-based training.** Honor the CDP™ as a key next step for apprenticeships and work-based training after completion of the CDA® and an alternative to CDA renewal.
- **Connect the CDP to career advancement.** Integrate this higher-level credential with tiered value into state teacher training requirements. Work with state systems to add the CDP as a higher-level opportunity on career pathways.
- **Create performance benchmarks for use in articulation.** Substantiate CDP competence and work experience for the purpose of coursework articulation, should a candidate choose to continue a higher education career path.
- **Continue CDA renewal, while promoting CDP.** Preserve and support access to all career level choices, including continuation of CDA renewal for professionals who want to maintain the CDA credential.
- **Consider where the CDP falls on the state ECE career pathway.** Review current career pathways and determine the progression of credentials with consideration for placement of the CDP as advancement beyond the CDA.

ADDRESSING CRITICAL NEEDS

- **Professional compensation.** A CDP™ embodies substantiated and supervised paid work experience requiring demonstration and documentation of key skills at advanced levels of practice, which should result in increased compensation and recognition.
- **Educational advancement.** A CDP credential provides an important avenue for increased teacher competency in communities and states where attainment of a bachelor's degree for lead teachers is lower than average.
- **Equal career access.** The CDP will provide equal access to early educators who choose to work in any type of birth to age 5 learning environment - home visiting, family child care, infant/toddler, preschool/pre-k, Early/Head Start, thus reducing staff turnover and filling vacancies.
- **Teaching and learning.** A CDP credential can fill the gap in professional education for teachers who speak English as a second language. In many states with a high population of multilingual teachers, families, and children, the need is greater.
- **Access for children and families.** Offering the CDP as a workforce solution can decrease the number of classroom closures by enabling programs to adequately fill staff vacancies, therefore reducing teacher shortages causing the ECE workforce crisis.

Conclusion

To address professional critical needs, stabilize the ECE field, and build on the CDA®, the Council for Professional Recognition proposes the CDP™. This new credential will create an additional pathway for professional advancement through a higher-level, scaffolded national certification.

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