



Leveraging the CDA®

as the *Entry-Level Qualification*
for the Early Learning Field:

Building Role Clarity in Early Childhood Education

PREFACE

For decades, the early childhood education (ECE) field has grappled with the pressing issue of entry-level qualifications, a challenge that has persisted despite the growing recognition of the importance of quality early education in shaping children's futures. The absence of standardized qualifications has led to a fragmented workforce, where educators often enter the field without the necessary skills and training to provide high-quality care and education. This inconsistency undermines the very foundation of early childhood education, ultimately affecting the developmental outcomes of young children.

In response to this growing concern, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) established the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ in 1971 as a workforce solution specifically designed for the Head Start program. The first CDA® was awarded in 1975. The CDA was created to ensure that early childhood educators possess the essential competencies required to foster children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Over the last 50 years, the CDA has proven to be a vital resource in promoting professional standards within the ECE field, yet its potential as a universal entry-level qualification has not been fully realized.

As we reflect on the original intent behind the CDA's creation, it becomes clear that the time has come to embrace this credential as the foundational step toward establishing consistent entry-level qualifications in the early childhood education landscape. The CDA remains the best first step in building a solid foundation for our educators, ensuring that they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of young learners. This paper will make the case for mandating the CDA as the entry-level qualification in the ECE field, advocating for a unified approach that prioritizes the quality of education and care for our youngest children.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Calvin E. Moore, Jr., PhD, is the CEO of the Council for Professional Recognition and the first leader of the organization to hold the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™. Appointed in 2020, he brings decades of experience across early childhood education, including extensive work in Head Start programs serving diverse communities. Dr. Moore has led major federal and state initiatives supporting underserved children and families, previously overseeing more than 350 Head Start and Early Head Start grantees as a regional program manager with the U.S. Department of Human Service, Administration for Children and Families. His career also includes senior roles with the Office of Child Care, the Alabama Department of Human Resources, and ICF International. An accomplished author and award winning leader, Dr. Moore holds advanced degrees in education and history, including a PhD in Early Childhood Education.

Andrew Davis
Chief Operating Officer (COO)

Andrew Davis serves as Chief Operating Officer at the Council, overseeing the Programs Division, which includes credentialing, business development, marketing and communications, public policy, research, innovation, and customer relations. He brings more than 20 years of experience in early care and education. Previously, Andrew served as Senior Vice President of Partnership and Engagement at Acelero Learning and Shine Early Learning, where he advanced equitable service delivery and strengthened community partnerships. Prior to that, he served as Director of Early Learning at Follett School Solutions. Andrew holds an MBA from the University of Baltimore and Towson University and a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland – University College.

Dr. Shannon Bracamonte
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Shannon Bracamonte is the Program Operations Director for the Early Childhood Services Center at the University of New Mexico, where she has served since 2008. With more than 20 years of experience in early childhood development, she brings deep expertise in educational service management, pre-kindergarten coordination, childcare licensing, training and technical assistance, and special education advocacy. Shannon has held leadership roles across diverse programs and regions, consistently championing high-quality early childhood education and early intervention.

She also serves on the Council for Professional Recognition's Board of Directors and was recently elected Secretary of the Board, reflecting her strong governance experience and commitment to advancing the early childhood profession.

Special Gratitude

Dr. Lisa Yarkony – *Editing Manager, Council for Professional Recognition*



SETTING THE STAGE

The Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ has been a cornerstone of early childhood education for over 50 years, having its origins in the Head Start program established in 1975. Designed to enhance the quality of care and education for young children, the CDA® has played a pivotal role in setting professional standards within the early learning field. The Council for Professional Recognition, the organization behind the CDA, was founded with the mission to improve the quality of care for children by establishing, promoting, and maintaining a national credentialing system for early childhood educators. The Council's purpose is to recognize and validate the competencies of educators working with

young children, ensuring they possess the skills necessary to foster children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Throughout its history, the CDA has gained national recognition and respect, becoming synonymous with quality in early childhood education. The credential is awarded based on a rigorous process that includes a combination of coursework, practical experience, and assessments, ensuring that educators are not only knowledgeable but also adept in applying their skills in real-world settings. Despite its success and recognition, the early learning field continues to grapple with a lack of uniformity in professional qualifications, posing a significant challenge to achieving high-quality education for all children.

THE CHALLENGE AT HAND: *Role Ambiguity in the ECE Workforce*

The need for a well-trained workforce in early childhood education is critical for the development and success of young learners. However, the ECE field lacks consistent definitions of roles and responsibilities at the point of entry. Terms such as assistant teacher, teacher, educator, provider, or caregiver are used interchangeably across states and settings, often without shared expectations or competency requirements. This ambiguity has real consequences:

- Educators are unsure of what knowledge, skills, and behaviors are expected of them.
- Employers struggle to define job descriptions, performance expectations, and advancement criteria.

- Families cannot easily understand what qualifications educators possess or what quality looks like.
- State systems face difficulty aligning licensing, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), registries, and professional development frameworks.

Role clarity is not a peripheral issue—it is foundational to professionalization. The absence of a uniform entry-level qualification perpetuates a system where some educators are equipped to provide high-quality learning environments, while others are not. Consequently, this discrepancy can have lasting effects on children's cognitive and emotional development, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who depend on early education for a strong start in life.





To address this pressing issue, it is imperative to establish a baseline qualification that ensures all educators possess the competencies required to support the diverse needs of young children. By prioritizing the development of a qualified workforce, we can work towards a more effective early education system that ultimately benefits all children.

THE PATH FORWARD: *Establishing the CDA® as the Entry-Level Qualification*

To address these challenges, we propose mandating the CDA® as the entry-level qualification for the early learning field across the nation. This initiative would establish a standardized benchmark for educators, ensuring that they possess the necessary skills and training to foster the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young children. The CDA credential is already

recognized nationwide and has a proven impact on the quality of early education. By requiring educators to earn this credential, we can elevate the standards of early childhood education and make the profession more attractive to skilled individuals. The CDA provides a clear definition of entry-level practice, articulating expectations across key domains such as safe and healthy learning environments, curriculum implementation, and family engagement. This clarity is particularly important for educators entering the field through nontraditional pathways, including apprenticeships, family child care, and career technical education programs.

To implement this plan, states should enact policies that recognize the CDA as the entry-level credential for early childhood educators. This could involve revising licensure requirements to include the CDA as a prerequisite for employment in early learning settings. Additionally, policymakers

must allocate resources to support current and future educators in obtaining their CDA, including funding for training programs, scholarships, and access to credit-bearing coursework.

ROLE CLARITY AS THE FOUNDATION FOR CAREER PATHWAYS

Role clarity supports consistent practice, strengthens professional identity, enables accountability, and underpins career pathways. When educators understand their role, they are more likely to implement developmentally appropriate practices consistently. Clear expectations reduce variability driven by individual interpretation rather than shared standards.

The CDA's competency standards articulate expectations for entry-level educators and require them to demonstrate competence through documented work experience, a professional portfolio, and observation of real practice. This assessment structure reinforces role clarity by ensuring educators are evaluated on actual job responsibilities, not proxy measures such as seat time or

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course completion alone.

ADDRESSING COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT ROLE DEFINITION

Some stakeholders worry that defining an entry-level role too narrowly could limit flexibility or innovation. In practice, the opposite is true. The CDA® establishes a baseline, not a ceiling. States retain authority to add competencies or requirements, and programs can tailor roles above the entry level. Role clarity at entry frees the field to innovate above it.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: *Using the CDA® to Strengthen Role Clarity*

To maximize the CDA's role-defining potential, states should:

1. Adopt the CDA as the entry-level qualification in licensing regulations.
2. Align job titles and role definitions with CDA competencies.
3. Use the CDA to distinguish entry-level

roles from advanced roles.

4. Integrate CDA competencies into performance evaluations and professional development plans.
5. Communicate clearly to families and educators what the CDA represents.

These steps reinforce clarity without adding unnecessary burden.

CONCLUSION |

CLARITY as a Professional Imperative

Professional fields are defined not only by credentials but by clarity—clarity of roles, expectations, and responsibilities. Early childhood education has long lacked this clarity at entry, leaving educators, employers, and families to navigate uncertainty. The CDA® offers a proven solution. By clearly defining what it means to function as an entry-level early childhood educator, the CDA strengthens professional identity, improves consistency of practice, and creates a stable foundation for career advancement and system alignment.

Establishing the CDA as the entry-level qualification is not simply a workforce policy choice; it is a commitment to coherence, professionalism, and the long-term success of children and educators alike. Let us act with purpose and unity to ensure that every child in America benefits from the guidance of a qualified, skilled, and respected early childhood educator.

NOTE |

The Council's **Model Legislation for Mandating CDA® as Entry-Level Qualification in Early Education** on the *next page* is designed to support state systems leaders in their efforts to establish a base level of competence for the field.

For more than 50 years the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ has served as a foundational qualification for individuals entering the field of early education. Mandating the CDA® as an entry-level requirement is critical for several reasons:

1. **Standardization of Qualifications:** Requiring the CDA ensures that all early education professionals possess a consistent level of knowledge and skills, fostering a higher standard of care and education for young children.
2. **Enhanced Professional Development:** The CDA process emphasizes ongoing professional growth, encouraging educators to stay informed about best practices in child development, learning strategies, and family engagement.
3. **Improved Outcomes for Children:** Research indicates that educators with formal training, such as the CDA, are better equipped to support the developmental needs of children, leading to improved educational outcomes.
4. **Increased Workforce Competency:** By establishing the CDA as the minimum qualification, we can help elevate the professionalism of the early education workforce, attracting more individuals to the field and reducing turnover rates.
5. **Alignment with National Standards:** This mandate aligns with national early childhood education standards and initiatives aimed at improving educational quality across the country.

Adopting model legislation that mandates the CDA as the entry-level qualification for early education professionals is a strategic step towards unifying the field of early childhood education as a field of practice and enhancing the quality of education and care provided to our youngest learners.

Model Legislation Title: *Establishing the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ as the Entry-Level Teacher Qualification for Licensed Child Care Programs*

Section 1: Purpose

The purpose of this legislation is to enhance the quality of early childhood education by establishing the Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ as the required entry-level qualification for all teachers in licensed child care programs within the state.

Section 2: Definitions

Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™: A nationally recognized credential awarded by the Council for Professional Recognition, signifying that an individual has met specific training and competency standards in early childhood education.

Licensed Child Care Program: Any child care facility that is licensed by the state to provide care and education to children under the age of six.

Section 3: Credential Requirements

- (a) Effective [insert date], all teachers employed in licensed child care programs must possess a valid CDA® credential as a prerequisite for employment.
- (b) The CDA® credential must be obtained through a process that includes:
 - 1. Completion of a minimum of 120 hours of training in early childhood education.
 - 2. Demonstration of competencies in working with young children and their families.
 - 3. Successful completion of an observation and assessment process as required by the Council for Professional Recognition.
- (c) Transition provisions shall be made for current employees in licensed child care programs to obtain the CDA® credential within [insert a specified time frame, e.g., two years] from the effective date of this legislation.

Section 4: Implementation and Compliance

- (a) The state child care licensing authority shall:
 - 1. Develop guidelines and resources to assist licensed child care programs in the implementation of this requirement.
 - 2. Provide training and support for current educators to achieve CDA® certification.
- (b) The state shall establish a monitoring system to ensure compliance with this credentialing requirement for all licensed child care programs.

Section 5: Funding and Resources

- (a) The state shall allocate funding to support professional development initiatives aimed at helping educators obtain the CDA® credential.
- (b) Grants and scholarships may be established to assist individuals pursuing the CDA® credential, particularly those from underrepresented communities.

Section 6: Effective Date

This legislation shall take effect on [insert date], with implementation of the CDA® credential requirement commencing [insert date].

Section 7: Severability

If any provision of this Act is found to be invalid or unconstitutional, the remaining provisions shall continue in full force and effect.

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