

Credentialing the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska

Based on the evidence about the importance of the early years and the skills necessary for interacting with children effectively, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute supports the continuing certification of teachers in state-funded early childhood programs as required under Rule 11 of Nebraska state regulation. Moreover, the Institute supports the establishment of innovative and adaptive systems of preparation and accountability to help prepare more professionals to work with our youngest and most vulnerable citizens—whether as certified teachers or for other important roles with young children and their families.

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The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska is dedicated to promoting the development and learning of children from birth through age 8. Our vision is to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby. Visit buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu for more information.



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Background

Research of the past several decades shows that success in school and life for young children is dependent upon the availability of a skilled, informed, and diverse workforce of early childhood teachers and caregivers. Optimal brain growth, from birth through Grade 3, occurs when children are cared for and educated by adults who interact sensitively and responsively with them, provide safe and well-organized early experiences that include materials and activities that advance learning, and who understand how children develop cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Professionals who are effective with children in this age range need core knowledge about child development and specialized skills uniquely suited to young children.

Ensuring that early childhood professionals are equipped with appropriate levels of knowledge and expertise is a matter of state policy in Nebraska. State statute and regulation (Rule 11) require that teachers working in state-funded early childhood programs and in Kindergarten through Grade 3 have a teacher certification credential. Others working with young children are not required to hold this credential.

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The state of Nebraska has a long history of leadership in the care and education of young

children. For decades, public dollars have been dedicated to Kindergarten, PreKindergarten, and early education programs, reflecting the state's recognition of the rapidly growing evidence base concerning the critical nature of the earliest years of life. In keeping with the expectations required of teachers in the K-12 system, state-funded early childhood education programs also require professionals with teacher certification credentials. Nebraska's commitment to these programs demonstrates an understanding that our youngest children benefit most when they are enrolled in early childhood settings that provide high-quality care and education delivered by a well-prepared workforce.

A skilled and informed professional can have a positive impact on a child's life from birth onward. Conversely, a poorly prepared educator or caregiver can limit or slow a child's development. Failing to ensure that early childhood professionals possess the knowledge and skills for the job is tantamount to failing to ensure that children have the opportunity to develop the foundation necessary for later success.

In Nebraska today those working with children not yet enrolled in Kindergarten have credentials ranging from a high school diploma to specialized master's degrees. These differences in preparation reflect differences in skills and knowledge. Our current system of professional credentialing for those working in state-funded programs serving children prior to Kindergarten enrollment relies on teacher certification at the bachelor's degree level as a proxy for career readiness. This system, while imperfect, is the best accountability system available for ensuring that professionals have the knowledge and skills that current science suggests is best for our youngest children. Nevertheless, it excludes those with extensive practical experience and high levels of skill but no equivalent degree attainment. And it does not account for marginalized groups that, historically, have had limited access to higher education.

Challenges

Nebraska faces two critical challenges in providing early childhood programs and services to children across the state: a shortage of skilled and trained teachers for state-funded programs that require teacher certification and a shortage of well-prepared caregivers and teachers that work in all other settings. Data from the Nebraska Departments of Education and Labor indicate that early childhood teachers are in short supply, particularly in rural parts of the state. While Nebraska has numerous higher education institutions that offer early childhood degree programs, poor salaries and low status of the field depress enrollment numbers. In other industries, when a shortage of workers exists, the industry responds by raising wages, recruiting, and training the best possible candidates.

- “ Eliminating or reducing qualification requirements for early childhood teachers may appear to be an easy solution, but it is not in the best interests of our children, our schools, or our state.
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In order to recruit and retain a skilled, informed, and diverse early childhood workforce, Nebraska must take advantage of current resources while constructing a new path forward for those already in the field. We acknowledge that all of the adults who children encounter early in life do not need to have the same level of specialized skills or degrees, but children who are most vulnerable are most in need of well-prepared adults who know how to foster optimal growth and development.

A Path Forward

For greater numbers of professionals to achieve early childhood teacher certification, the state must establish policies that bridge the present to the future.

- “ Increasing the supply of teachers requires a flexible and unified approach involving state agencies, higher education institutions, and child-serving programs.
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Just as a skilled teacher knows that each child learns at his or her own pace and in his or her own way, state policies must adapt to unique local circumstances while reflecting the current knowledge of the field.

To address both the state’s critical shortage of certified teachers to work in state-funded early childhood programs and better prepare early childhood professionals working in all other settings, the Buffett Institute recommends a set of possible strategies:

1. Establish a process that allows programs with shortages of certified teachers extended time to meet requirements.

This process could grant a two- to three-year period that includes plans for program improvement alongside teacher education and certification.

2. Allow individuals with a bachelor’s degree in child development/early childhood to obtain teacher certification more easily and more quickly.

For example, successful completion of Praxis tests, supervised student teaching experience, and specific coursework could serve as an alternative process to traditional teacher certification coursework and field experiences.

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- 3. Expand the Transitional Teaching Permit program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney to include other higher education institutions and to specifically target early childhood teachers.** UNK's Transitional Certification Program is an alternative teacher certification pathway for individuals with a baccalaureate degree or higher and currently offers endorsements in secondary content areas such as chemistry, secondary English, and physics for grades 7-12. Expanding the Transitional Teaching Permit program to include early childhood education and offering the program at additional institutions of higher education in the state could aid in certifying teachers more quickly.
- 4. Revise early childhood teacher certification requirements under Rule 24 of Nebraska state regulation to create "stackable" credentials.** For example, an infant-toddler endorsement (birth – age 3) could be added to a preschool endorsement (age 3 – Kindergarten) and an early elementary endorsement (Kindergarten – Grade 3), and an early childhood special education endorsement. Achieved over time, the individual endorsements could be combined to meet requirements for the current early childhood inclusive endorsement, Birth – Grade 3.
- 5. Create programs and assessments that recognize the skills, competencies, and experience of early childhood professionals already working in the field.** Work with higher education institutions to establish reliable and valid processes for granting credit for field-based experience and skill.
- 6. Incentivize higher education institutions to recruit and prepare experienced teachers who lack educational credentials.** Support the development of resources and programs designed for individuals in the field who have background and skills in the field.
- 7. Encourage institutions of higher education to work with local programs to create options for the workforce.** For example, groups or cohorts of early childhood workforce members seeking certification would benefit from online, community of practice, and other educational strategies.
- 8. Encourage the state and local communities to establish incentives for early childhood professionals to enter and remain in the field.** Examples of such incentives could include salary supplements, loan forgiveness, and housing supplements.