

# Early Childhood Teacher Certification:

## The current state policies landscape and opportunities

### NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation

These standards describe what early childhood professionals are expected to know and do with children from birth through age eight, defining essential learning outcomes in professional preparation and presenting a shared vision of excellence. Each standard includes a key element requiring application of knowledge and skills through field or clinical experiences. There are six standards:

1. Promoting child development and learning;
2. Building family and community relationships;
3. Observing, documenting, and assessing;
4. Using developmentally effective approaches to connect with children and families;
5. Using content knowledge to build meaningful curriculum; and
6. Becoming a professional.

**E**ARLY CHILDHOOD—the period from birth through age eight—is the critical stage in development when young children build foundational academic and social skills that affect lifelong learning.<sup>1</sup> Research shows teachers can positively influence student achievement when they effectively apply their knowledge of child development in a manner consistent with the developmental period taught. NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs reflect this specialized knowledge and can be used in a variety of ways to promote the early childhood education profession, including for national accreditation of professional early childhood preparation programs, state approval of early childhood teacher education programs and state certification of early childhood teachers.

Teacher certification policies have an important impact on the preparation of teachers. Teacher preparation programs (specifically “licensure programs”) in higher education institutions and other nontraditional settings design their curriculum and course of study to ensure that their students earn teacher certification upon graduation. These programs are often evaluated based on the percentage of graduates that successfully earn teacher certification. Teacher certification policies also determine how teachers are assigned to classrooms, as teachers must have the certification in the areas or grades they teach. For example, teacher preparation programs designed to help aspiring teachers successfully earn a Pre-K through 6th-grade certification will often place more emphasis on instructional approaches that are better suited for older children but detrimental for children eight years old and younger. Consequently, it is likely that a graduate of such a program will not have the knowledge and skills needed to be an effective kindergarten teacher.

Given this influence, NAEYC has long called for states to develop a distinct early childhood teaching certification to ensure that children from birth through third grade have teachers with the specialized knowledge they will need to support children’s optimal development and learning.<sup>2</sup> The Association of Teacher Educators and the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators also advocate for distinct early childhood certification. In 2013, NAEYC initiated the development of a web-based

state certification profiles database to better examine and continuously track the status of certifications and endorsements for birth through third grade teachers. NAEYC collected the information for the profiles through a survey provided to key state teacher certification administrators and through other research methods. Each state had an opportunity to review its draft profile, and many states provided feedback. At this time, the profiles do not include detailed information about academic-area or disability-specific endorsements or certificates. NAEYC welcomes updates from states to keep these profiles current as their policies evolve.

### *Overarching findings from the profiles:*

- Most states have one or more teacher certifications that recognize early childhood general education and early childhood special education.
- Many states have a broad certification that encompasses both early childhood and middle childhood (extending to the sixth or eighth grade). Of those states, most also provide an endorsement that includes more specialization in early childhood education.
- Most states have multiple certificates that subdivide the early childhood span, and there is not much consistency in these subdivisions among states.
- Many states have overlapping certificates, such as a certificate for teaching prekindergarten and kindergarten and another certificate for teaching kindergarten through a higher grade level.
- Terminology differs among states. Many states use the term “certificate,” others use the term “license,” and one state uses the term “credential.”
- Most states review and revise their certification policies on an as-needed basis, for reasons such as legislative changes, and few states have a regular cycle for undertaking reviews and changes.

### Implications and Policy Recommendations

We hope that state policymakers and higher education leaders will use these profiles along with NAEYC position statements and national standards for professional preparation<sup>3</sup> to enhance their certification policies. Here are implications and policy recommendations to

drive conversations about the development of a distinct early childhood teaching certification.

NAEYC recognizes that many teachers work with young children in only a part of the early childhood span—infants/toddlers, preschool, kindergarten, or early elementary grades. Multiple subdivisions of the birth- through third-grade period and overlapping certificates reflect, in part, that reality. However, NAEYC believes that all early childhood professionals should have a broad knowledge of development and learning across the birth-through-age-8 range. Without knowing about the past and the future (the precursors to children’s current development and learning and the trajectory they will follow in later years), teachers cannot design effective learning opportunities within their specific professional assignment.

There are states that have created certifications that extend beyond the early childhood period such as preschool through sixth- or eighth-grade certifications or first-grade through middle-school-years certifications. While these give school administrators more flexibility in placement of teachers within their school buildings, they often hinder the ability of teacher preparation programs to prepare graduates with specialized knowledge and skills in early education. States should continue to develop distinct early childhood teaching certification based on the developmental period.

Teacher certificates determine the higher education teacher preparation programs in a state. Thus, early childhood teacher preparation programs can better support the continuum of birth-through-eight learning and development when there is a certificate that encompasses the full early childhood span.

In addition to addressing the age span of teacher certification policies, states can and often do use NAEYC’s national professional preparation standards and related accreditation and recognition systems to create a shared vision of excellence and specifically meet three important objectives: ensure that all early childhood teacher preparation programs (including endorsements) are grounded in current, evidence-based knowledge and practice; create articulation agreements for student transfers between two- and four-year public and private higher education institutions; and facilitate a performance-based pathway to early childhood teacher certification.

A shared terminology, developed and agreed upon by teacher preparation programs, national organizations, and other stakeholders, will better support data collection and research efforts, policy alignment across state agencies, and portability of early childhood teacher credentials across sectors of the field and across states.

### Additional Resources

*Workforce Designs: A Policy Blueprint for State Early Childhood Professional Development Systems*, NAEYC, (Sarah LeMoine, 2008), [www.naeyc.org/policy/ecwsi-blueprint](http://www.naeyc.org/policy/ecwsi-blueprint).

Additional NAEYC Position Statements, [www.naeyc.org/positionstatements](http://www.naeyc.org/positionstatements).

*Getting In Sync: Revamping the Preparation of Teachers in Pre-K, Kindergarten and the Early Grades*, New America Foundation, (Laura Bornfreund, 2011), [www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/getting\\_in\\_sync](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/getting_in_sync).

*Early Childhood Teacher Certification Toolkit*, National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators, (June 2008), <http://www.naecte.org/docs/Toolkit%20for%20use%20with%20NAECTE%20Position%20Statement%20on%20Teacher%20Certification..pdf>

<sup>1</sup>The Road Less Traveled: How the Developmental Sciences Can Prepare Educators to Improve Student Achievement: Policy Recommendations, National Expert Panel of the Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education on Increasing the Application of Knowledge about Child and Adolescent Development and Learning in Educator Preparation Programs, (October 2010), [www.ncate.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gY3FtiptMSo%3D](http://www.ncate.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gY3FtiptMSo%3D).

<sup>2</sup>Early Childhood Teacher Certification: A Position Statement of the Association of Teacher Educators and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, (Adopted June/July 1991; amended 2008), [www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ectc\\_PositionStatement.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/ectc_PositionStatement.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation, NAEYC, (Adopted Position Statement 2009 [www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/files/2009%20Professional%20Prep%20stdsRevised%204\\_12.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/files/2009%20Professional%20Prep%20stdsRevised%204_12.pdf)). To learn more about the standards, go to [www.naeyc.org/ncate/standards](http://www.naeyc.org/ncate/standards).

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