

# Credentialing Early Childhood Teachers

## Considerations for Policymakers



Abby Schachner, Victoria Wang, Cathy Yun, Sara Plasencia, Chris Mauerman, Cordy McJunkins, and Deborah Stipek (with Hanna Melnick, Marjorie Wechsler, and Madelyn Gardner)

### Summary

The quality of early childhood education depends significantly on the preparation of teachers. Many states require that early childhood teachers hold a credential focused on the early grades—typically prekindergarten to 3rd grade. This brief describes state-level policies governing the credentialing of early childhood teachers in Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York and illustrates how states can support a high-quality preschool workforce through thoughtfully designed and implemented credentialing systems.

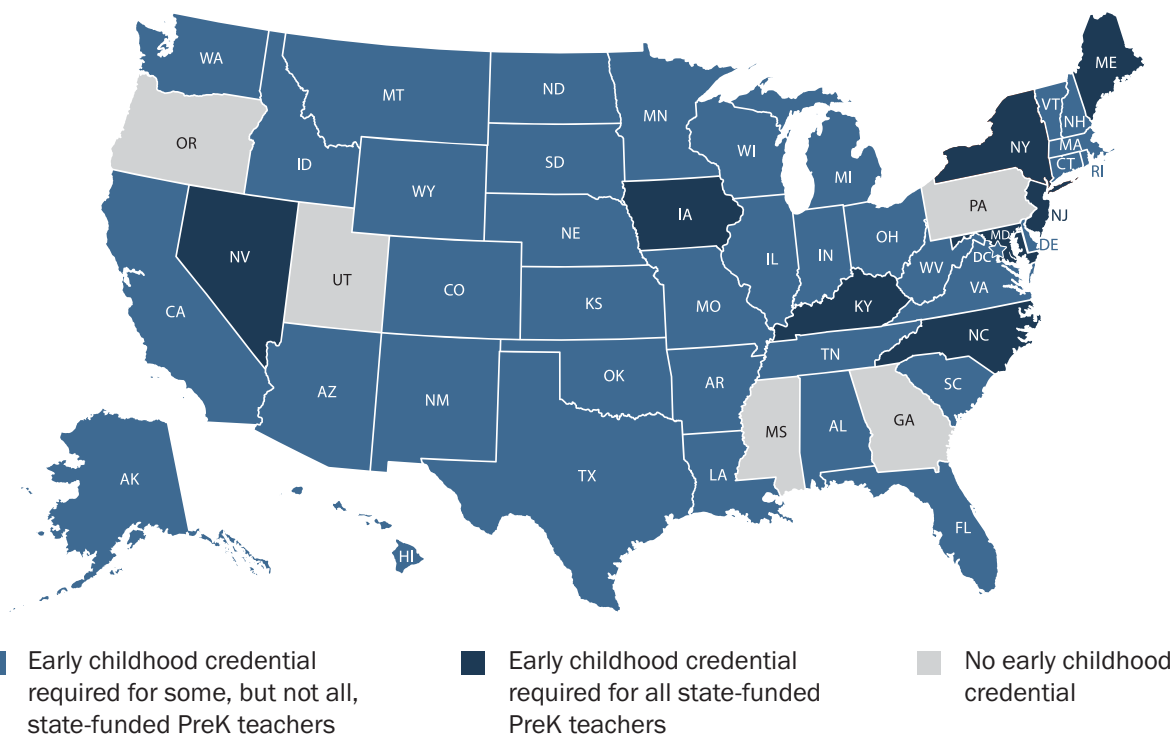
This brief is a companion piece to the brief *Credentialing Early Childhood Teachers: Considerations for Teacher Preparation Programs*, focused on program design decisions made by institutions of higher education. The report on which these briefs are based is *Preparing Early Childhood Teachers: Credentialing and Preparation Programs in Four States*.

## Early Childhood Teacher Credentials in the United States

Almost every state in the United States has invested in expanding publicly funded preschool and developing early childhood teaching credentials to ensure a high-quality preschool workforce. In 2022, 46 states had a credential that extended at least 1 year below kindergarten and focused on children in the early elementary grades (e.g., PreK–3rd grade or Birth–3rd grade). All but three of these states also offered an elementary grades credential that overlapped with their early childhood credential by at least one grade (e.g., a state with a PreK–3rd grade and a K–5th grade credential). Who must hold an early childhood credential in a preschool setting also varies by state. For example, 8 states required that lead preschool teachers in state preschool programs hold an early childhood credential in all settings, including private providers; in other states, a credential was only required in some preschool settings.<sup>1</sup> (See [Figure 1.](#))

This brief describes decisions states face when creating or revising their early childhood teaching credential requirements by examining early childhood credentials in Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. It then identifies strategies that states can implement to improve credentialing program quality and access.

**Figure 1. States With a Stand-Alone Early Childhood Credential**



Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of state credential data gathered from individual state education agency websites and statutes. (2022).

## Developing High-Quality Credential Systems

States have taken different approaches to defining requirements for early childhood teacher credentialing. (See [Table 1](#).) Below we describe some of the key considerations for states developing their credential systems, including the age spans the credentials cover, content and clinical experience requirements, and the assessments used to ensure that candidates meet state standards.

### Age Span

While there is consensus that educators need specific skills and knowledge to work with young children, there is not consensus around the age or grade span to include within a credential. Nationally, the most common age spans for early childhood credentials are birth through 3rd grade (B–3) and prekindergarten through 3rd grade (PreK–3).

A narrow age span allows teacher candidates to gain deeper knowledge specific to teaching children of a certain age, while a wider age span gives candidates a broader view of children’s developmental continuum and provides more flexibility for job placement. Each of the states studied confronted these trade-offs and adjusted its age spans over time. New York, for example, split its elementary teaching credential (PreK–6th grade) into two narrower age spans to provide more age-specific training: Birth–2nd grade and Grades 1–6. Massachusetts changed its credential from PreK–3rd grade to PreK–2nd grade,

narrowing the age span to reduce coursework and testing burdens associated with certification to teach 3rd-grade math. Louisiana, conversely, added a PreK–3rd grade credential to its Birth–K and Grades 1–6 credentials because too few candidates were attracted to the narrow Birth–K credential.

## Course Content

The states in this study used different strategies to ensure that credential programs prepared candidates with the knowledge and skills important for early educators. Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York required that programs align their course content with state learning standards and published detailed preparation program guidelines that described professional standards for curriculum, planning and assessment, and other areas. Louisiana, in contrast, required specific hours of coursework (33 hours of early childhood and 15 hours of pedagogy) but otherwise allowed credentialing programs to choose the specific content covered. This approach provided programs more flexibility but offered less assurance that early childhood teachers would be prepared in key areas. With both approaches, gaps in coursework remained; for example, few programs had a dedicated math methods course.

## Clinical Experience

Clinical experience, which includes both classroom observation and student teaching, is an essential part of high-quality teacher preparation. Clinical experience is most effective when it is supervised and sustained, when candidates have opportunities to connect their coursework to what they see in the classroom, and when they have multiple opportunities to receive feedback and apply their learning in practice.<sup>2</sup>

Of the four states studied, Louisiana had the most robust clinical experience requirement, stipulating a full-time clinical experience over the course of a full school year. New Jersey also required 2 semesters of clinical experience, although candidates were only required to be in the classroom full time in their second semester. Massachusetts and New York required just 1 semester of clinical experience.

States must consider multiple factors when determining clinical experience requirements. On the one hand, longer clinical experiences provide more opportunities for candidates to practice teaching skills alongside an experienced teacher of record. On the other hand, requiring a longer clinical practice can create barriers for candidates who need to work to support themselves or their families. To address such barriers, Louisiana provided a small stipend for candidates during their yearlong clinical experience to help with living expenses, while Massachusetts allowed candidates with prior preschool teaching experience to credit up to 150 of the 300 required clinical practice hours.

## Assessment Requirements

State credentialing assessments are intended to ensure candidates have the content knowledge and readiness to be effective in the classroom. To receive a teaching credential, candidates in each state were required to pass content exams that spanned the grade levels covered by the credential. Massachusetts and New Jersey also used performance assessments to evaluate candidates' readiness to teach. These performance assessments required candidates to develop portfolios that included unit plans, videos of their instruction, evaluation of student work, and written reflections that connected their teaching practice to theory learned in coursework.

Exams are a common barrier for candidates who have had less prior access to high-quality schooling, particularly candidates from low-income backgrounds, candidates of color, and candidates who are non-native English speakers.<sup>3</sup> To reduce barriers related to its exams, Massachusetts piloted alternative assessments that were shorter, less expensive, and included more open-ended responses. It also piloted ways of assessing candidates at the program level, such as through written tests and work projects.

**Table 1. Summary of State Credentialing Requirements**

Requirements	Louisiana	Massachusetts	New Jersey	New York
<b>Credential grade span</b>	PreK–3rd grade	PreK–2nd grade	Preschool–3rd grade	Birth–2nd grade
<b>Coursework</b>	Specific number of coursework hours required for general education, early childhood education, and pedagogy	Guidelines provided for how programs address subject-matter knowledge in alignment with state standards	Preparation programs required to align coursework with the state’s professional standards for teachers and leaders	General pedagogical core requirements outlined for all certification areas, as well as program-specific content and pedagogical core requirements
<b>Core skills exams</b>	No	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Content and pedagogy exams</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Performance assessment</b>	No	Yes	Yes <sup>a</sup>	Yes <sup>a</sup>
<b>Required length of clinical experience</b>	1 year	1 semester	2 semesters	1 semester <sup>b</sup>
<b>Required setting for clinical experience</b>	One setting	Two settings (PreK–K and 1st–2nd)	Two settings	Three settings through combined field experiences and student teaching (PreK, K, and 1st–2nd)

<sup>a</sup> After data were collected, these states changed their policy from requiring that candidates take an externally administered performance assessment (the edTPA) to requiring that candidates take a performance assessment administered by the credential program.

<sup>b</sup> For candidates entering a credential program in fall 2024 or later, New York requires a minimum of 70 days of student teaching plus an additional 100 hours of field experience related to coursework. Prior to fall 2024, the student teaching requirement was 40 days.

Source: Schachner, A., Wang, V., Yun, C., Plasencia, S., Mauerman, C., McJunkins, C., & Stipek, D. (2025). *Preparing early childhood teachers: Credentialing and preparation programs in four states*. Learning Policy Institute.

## Enabling Access to Quality Preparation

Many candidates face barriers to obtaining a teaching credential, such as challenges in paying tuition, taking time off work, and navigating higher education systems. Research indicates that these barriers disproportionately affect candidates of color and current early educators, who often experience financial instability due to low wages.<sup>4</sup> This section highlights policies that enable institutions of higher education (IHEs) to provide high-quality preparation at scale. Specifically, state policies can allow preparation programs to offer multiple pathways to a credential; develop IHEs' capacities to support candidates from diverse backgrounds, including the incumbent early childhood workforce, through targeted grants; and offer candidates financial support.

### Multiple Pathways to a Credential

All four states studied offered multiple pathways to early childhood credentials, recognizing candidates' varying needs and levels of education. Pathways in the four states included:

- integrated bachelor's degree and certification programs that could be completed in 4 or 5 years;
- transfer pathways that began at community colleges or high school dual enrollment programs;
- postbaccalaureate certification and master's pathways for candidates who already hold a bachelor's degree;
- dual certification programs in early childhood and bilingual and/or special education; and
- teacher residencies that enabled candidates to work full time with mentor teachers while completing coursework.

Because community colleges disproportionately serve more students of color than bachelor's-granting institutions, states in the study facilitated access to pathways in which candidates attended 2 years at a community college followed by 2 years at a bachelor's-granting institution (often called a 2+2 pathway). New Jersey, for example, required articulation agreements between all 2- and 4-year colleges. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education implemented the MassTransfer policy and [website](#) to help IHEs create articulation agreements. By facilitating articulation agreements between community colleges and bachelor's-granting institutions, states intended to make it easier for candidates to receive credit for prior coursework.

Focusing on a different pathway, when New Jersey expanded its state PreK program, it created an expedited pathway tailored specifically to experienced early educators, enabling the state to quickly increase the size of the credentialed early educator workforce. The pathway, called the Alternate Route, allowed early educators with a bachelor's degree to complete their clinical training at the preschool program where they were employed. The route required 12–15 credits at an approved program, coaching or mentorship from a colleague in the school district for an academic year, and evaluation by school or district staff.

New York City likewise created two new pathways specifically for experienced early educators when it moved to universal PreK (UPK). (We include New York City in this brief about state policies because its preschool system is larger than that of many states.) One, the Study Plan Lead Teacher pathway, was for experienced educators and teachers certified in another state. Candidates on this path could be hired as a lead teacher at a community-based UPK classroom if they held a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood or a related field and had some early childhood education coursework or significant early childhood experience. Candidates needed to commit to obtaining a B-2 teacher certification within 3 years of employment and develop a study plan to get there. The second pathway was the Internship Certificate, which offered temporary certification for teachers who had completed more than half of their B-2 credential program and had a letter from a principal verifying a job offer. The IHE was required to supervise candidates in this pathway during their formal student teaching semester, which could be completed in the school in which they were hired. Candidates needed to complete the program and pass certification exams within 2 years.

## Grants to Support IHE Capacity-Building

Across the preparation programs and pathways studied, we identified several common strategies that allowed IHEs to attract candidates to early childhood credentialing programs and reduce barriers for diverse candidates to earn their early childhood credentials. These included:

- reducing required units and aligning courses and credits with related programs and institutions, including through articulation agreements;
- tailoring the location, modality, and timing of courses to candidates' needs;
- building a sense of community among candidates and faculty through cohort models and summer institutes;
- conducting multipronged outreach to recruit candidates and faculty from racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds; and
- providing specialized advising and multifaceted supports to manage certification requirements.

Both New Jersey and New York City made investments to build IHEs' capacities to implement these strategies. During New Jersey's UPK expansion in the early 2000s, for example, the state appropriated \$13 million in one-time funding (\$21 million in 2022 dollars) to create two competitive grant programs to support the development of new Preschool–3rd grade credential programs. State grants allowed IHEs to hire new faculty; modify their programs to offer courses at convenient times and locations (e.g., via extension satellite facilities, on-site at school districts, at community-based child care centers); and provide academic supports such as tutoring and advising.

New York City also invested in IHE capacity-building when it expanded PreK. The New York City Department of Education provided a \$6.7 million grant to the City University of New York's Early Childhood Professional Development Institute to certify up to 400 early educators. The grant allowed the university system to support candidates on the Study Plan Lead Teacher and Internship Certificate pathways through expedited programs that were tuition-free or subsidized and included personalized advising, coaching, and test prep.



The City's Department of Education also funded a multipronged recruitment campaign for PreK teachers, including partnering with local early childhood preparation programs to launch a "Teach NYC Pre-K" subway ad campaign. To support recruitment efforts, the department funded hiring events and developed a [web page](#) detailing various pathways to a credential for candidates with different levels of education and experience.

## Financial Assistance for Candidates

Research finds that the cost of credentialing programs is a barrier to many candidates' participation in traditional teacher preparation programs, especially for candidates of color, who tend to come from lower-income households than their White peers. States can enable candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to pursue high-quality teacher credential programs by providing financial supports such as scholarships and tuition assistance programs as well as stipends that cover living expenses.

Several studied states offered financial supports for candidates throughout their early childhood credentialing program. Louisiana, for example, provided a small stipend to all candidates as they completed their yearlong clinical experience. New Jersey provided scholarships to working preschool teachers through the New Jersey Professional Development Center when it expanded PreK between 2000 and 2006. Educators could receive up to \$5,000 per year for tuition and an additional \$50 per course for books or other expenses. This amount covered the full cost of public college tuition. New York City provided funding to individual IHEs when it scaled up universal PreK to allow the IHEs to subsidize the cost of coursework for credential candidates.

## Recommendations

States designing or implementing early childhood credentialing systems can take the following steps to create high-quality, accessible pathways to an early childhood credential.

- **Design guidelines for program coursework and fieldwork that will effectively develop early educators' knowledge and skills.** States can design research-based preparation program guidelines that outline the key knowledge and skills early childhood teachers need. Guidelines should inform the program accreditation and review process and be aligned with state assessments required for the credential. Policymakers need to be realistic about how much content can be covered in a preparation program and must decide what knowledge and skills are most important so that preparation programs can be completed in a reasonable amount of time.
- **Support the articulation and alignment of coursework across and within IHEs to enable more accessible pathways toward credentials for early childhood teachers.** Having aligned coursework allows candidates to begin their prerequisites and credential coursework in community colleges and transfer these units seamlessly into 4-year settings where they can complete their credential. States can require or incentivize educator preparation programs to develop articulation agreements with other IHEs for 2-year, 4-year, and postbaccalaureate pathways, as developed in Massachusetts and New Jersey.

- **Develop intensive and coherent clinical experiences with frequent and comprehensive candidate supports.** Research suggests that clinical experiences are most likely to allow candidates to apply knowledge gained from coursework when they are sustained, well supported, and integrated with relevant coursework. Some states, including Louisiana, have required a full year of supervised clinical experience that allows candidates to connect coursework to the classroom. States with shorter requirements for supervised clinical experience can consider increasing the length of clinical practice required for a credential.
- **Create, communicate about, and support multiple pathways to an early childhood credential.** States can articulate multiple pathways in credentialing regulations and invest in scaling up residencies, apprenticeships, and Grow Your Own pathways that allow candidates to work while completing their credential. To support access to credentialing programs, state agencies can develop outreach strategies to publicize information on credentialing requirements and available pathways, providing information in multiple languages and modalities.
- **Invest in building capacity for credentialing programs to design and implement accessible programs.** States can offer grants to programs for hiring faculty, developing coursework, designing robust clinical experiences and mentorships, and tailoring programs to support current early educators, as New Jersey did when it expanded universal PreK. Additionally, states can provide preparation programs with financial resources to offer convenient course locations, night and weekend courses, and hybrid and online courses.
- **Provide financial assistance to early childhood educators seeking higher credentials and degrees.** Given persistently low wages in the early childhood education field, early childhood educators face significant financial barriers to completing credential programs. Financial assistance can include scholarships; paid clinical experience; and funding for books, credential fees, child care, and transportation.
- **Offer candidates multiple ways to meet credential requirements by crediting prior experience and addressing testing barriers.** States can reduce barriers to a credential by allowing previous experience, along with supervised classroom teaching, to count toward clinical experience. Massachusetts and New York both had policies to recognize prior teaching experience. States can also develop processes to allow coursework or other evidence, such as GPA, to substitute for some licensure tests, and they can create alternative assessments for candidates to demonstrate proficiency.

The state and city examples described in this study offer valuable lessons for policymakers in other states as they seek to develop or improve their early childhood credentialing systems. To monitor their success in serving candidates from diverse backgrounds and determine strategies for improvement, states can partner with IHEs to track credential candidate data such as demographics, previous education and experience, program enrollment and completion, and job placements. By setting up strong credentialing systems and offering supports to candidates and IHEs, states can develop highly skilled teachers capable of having positive, long-lasting impacts on young children.



## Endnotes

1. For more information about credential requirements by state, see Appendix A of the full report, *Preparing Early Childhood Teachers: Credentialing and Preparation Programs in Four States*.
2. Darling-Hammond, L., Hammerness, K., Grossman, P., Rust, F., & Shulman, L. (2007). The design of teacher education programs. In L. Darling-Hammond & L. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 390–441). John Wiley & Sons.
3. Mitchell, K., Robinson, D., Plake, B., & Knowles, K. (Eds.). (2001). *Testing teacher candidates: The role of licensure tests in improving teacher quality*. National Academies Press.
4. McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K. L. (2021). *Early childhood workforce index 2020*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/report-pdf/>

## Acknowledgments

The report on which this brief is based benefited from review by Abby Copeman Petig, Research Director at Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, and Aisha Ray, Professor Emerita of Child Development at Erikson Institute and a Distinguished Fellow at the BUILD Initiative.

This research was supported by the Ballmer Group, Heising-Simons Foundation, and Kelson Foundation. Additional core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, Skyline Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

Suggested citation: Schachner, A., Wang, V., Yun, C., Plasencia, S., Mauerman, C., McJunkins, C., & Stipek, D. (with Melnick, H., Wechsler, M., & Gardner, M.). (2025). *Credentialing early childhood teachers: Considerations for policymakers* [Policy brief]. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ece-credentialing-policymakers-brief>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

Document last revised November 25, 2025