

Credentialing Early Childhood Teachers

Considerations for Teacher Preparation Programs



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

Summary

Developing and sustaining a knowledgeable and skilled workforce is critical for implementing successful early childhood education programs. Many states require that early childhood teachers hold a teaching credential focused on the early grades—typically prekindergarten through 3rd grade. This brief describes strategies that institutions of higher education can use to promote the quality and accessibility of early childhood credential programs. It is based on a study that examines early childhood credentialing in Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York and focuses on eight institutions of higher education in those states.

This brief is a companion piece to the brief *Credentialing Early Childhood Teachers: Considerations for Policymakers*, focused on designing state credentialing systems. The report on which these briefs are based is *Preparing Early Childhood Teachers: Credentialing and Preparation Programs in Four States*.

Introduction

The quality of early childhood education (ECE) depends significantly on the preparation and skills of early educators.¹ As states expand access to public preschool, nearly all have developed early childhood teaching credentials that authorize educators to teach in publicly funded ECE programs and the early elementary grades. Nationally, the most common age spans for early childhood credentials are birth through 3rd grade (B–3) and prekindergarten through 3rd grade (PreK–3).

State policymakers and institutions of higher education (IHEs) must work in tandem to develop and support a high-quality public PreK workforce. State policymakers make decisions about how credential systems are designed; for example, determining the grade spans of a credential and guidelines for program accreditation. Based on state requirements, IHEs make critical decisions about course content, the structure of clinical experiences, and assessments that determine how candidates will demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

This brief, aimed at practitioners and administrators in IHEs, examines the choices made by eight early childhood credential programs in Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York. (See [Table 1](#).) It outlines strategies that the IHEs have used to enhance the quality and accessibility of their programs. The brief is based on a larger study that examines state credentialing systems.

Table 1. Credentials and IHEs Studied, by State

Feature	Louisiana	Massachusetts	New Jersey	New York
Credential grade span	PreK–3rd grade	PreK–2nd grade	Preschool–3rd grade	Preschool–3rd grade
IHEs studied	Louisiana Tech University Northwestern State University	Boston College University of Massachusetts, Boston	Montclair State University Rutgers University	Bank Street College of Education City College of New York

Note: IHE = institute of higher education. Louisiana and Massachusetts use the term “PreK,” while New Jersey and New York use the term “preschool.” Both refer to educational programs for children ages 3 to 5.

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Preparation Program Design Choices

Early childhood educators need a wide range of knowledge and skills to support children’s physical, social and emotional, and academic development.² Carefully constructed preparation programs can support the development of these varied skills. There are numerous approaches to structuring high-quality preparation programs, and IHEs face many design choices, described below.

Designing Coursework

IHEs determine the content of candidates’ core courses and how extensively to cover different topics. Across the states and IHEs studied, 10 topics were consistently identified as critical areas of expertise for early childhood teachers to foster:

1. Learning and development (including specialized knowledge of the early childhood period)
2. Developmentally appropriate pedagogy (i.e., teaching that reflects how young children develop and learn)
3. Best practices for working with diverse learners (including dual language learners and children with disabilities)
4. Literacy teaching methods
5. Math teaching methods
6. Language development
7. Curriculum design
8. Observation and assessment
9. Social and emotional learning and development
10. Role of culture, communities, and families in learning

In designing preparation program curricula, each of the programs studied ensured coverage of these key domains, but they did so with varying levels of detail and in different configurations. All IHEs covered some topics, such as child development, in multiple courses. Some IHEs combined multiple topics in a single course. Bank Street College of Education in New York, for example, integrated topics such as developmentally appropriate pedagogy, working with diverse learners, and observation and assessment into subject matter courses. This highly integrated curriculum models interdisciplinary teaching, which can support the development of children's interrelated skills. Some IHEs covered topics in tandem with their elementary education departments, expanding the scope of study to a broader grade span, such as PreK through grade 6.

Notably, although staff at all programs remarked on the importance of developing teachers' skills related to social-emotional development and math methods, few programs had courses dedicated to these critical areas of development. These topics may have been included in other, broader child development or curriculum development courses.

Designing Clinical Experiences

Research has shown the importance of clinical practice under the auspices of a highly skilled mentor for developing candidates' skills.³ State credentialing policies set minimum requirements for clinical experience, with Louisiana requiring a full-year classroom placement, New Jersey requiring 2 semesters, and Massachusetts and New York requiring the equivalent of 1 semester. Recognizing the importance of sustained clinical experiences, most of the preparation pathways studied offered mentored clinical experiences lasting 2 semesters, even if not required in their state.

Integrating classroom observations and other fieldwork into course curricula outside of the official practicum—a strategy adopted by many of the IHEs studied—also supports candidates' learning. For example, most of Bank Street's courses incorporated observations or field experiences to help candidates develop strong connections between theory and practice. Coursework at Montclair State University in New Jersey included field-based assignments that asked candidates to analyze others' practices in early childhood settings. Some IHEs also required specialized courses to be completed while candidates were engaged in a supervised clinical placement, which created opportunities for tight integration with coursework. Candidates at Louisiana Tech University (LA Tech), for example, took courses such as instructional design and classroom management concurrently with their full-year student-teaching placement.

Partnerships with high-quality early learning centers and schools enhance the depth and relevance of candidates' clinical experiences by creating consistency between what candidates learn in their coursework and what they experience in their placement classrooms. Many of the IHEs promoted high-quality clinical experiences for their candidates by collaborating with partner sites and mentor teachers. For example, Montclair offered tailored professional development opportunities to ensure that mentor teachers had the knowledge and skills to support learning aligned with the program's vision. Mentor teachers could apply to be clinical faculty members and take specialized courses relevant to their work with candidates; the courses were offered after school hours and were free to educators in partnering districts. LA Tech was a state-approved provider of mentor teacher training, which was structured as 6 hours of graduate course credit. The state of Louisiana covered the costs associated with training and

provided a stipend to teachers who served as mentors to undergraduate credential candidates. LA Tech also had a coordinator on staff who held regular seminars to facilitate relationship building and provide ongoing support for supervisory teachers working with their candidates. Across programs, however, recruiting and retaining expert mentors was a common challenge.

Expanding Access to Early Childhood Preparation Programs

Many candidates face barriers to obtaining early childhood teaching credentials, including the high cost of tuition, managing coursework while working or caring for family, and difficulty navigating higher education systems. These barriers are particularly pronounced for current early childhood educators, who often experience financial instability due to low wages.⁴ Research also indicates that obstacles to obtaining education and credentials disproportionately affect candidates of color.⁵ The IHEs studied adopted the strategies outlined below to create more inclusive and attainable early childhood preparation programs.

Multiple Pathways to Early Childhood Credentials

The IHEs studied offered multiple pathways to early childhood credentials, recognizing candidates' varying needs and levels of education. The eight institutions in this study designed pathways for credential candidates that included:

- integrated bachelor's degree and certification programs that could be completed in 4 or 5 years;
- transfer pathways that began in 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.

To better serve a racially and linguistically diverse pool of candidates and the incumbent ECE workforce, City College of New York's (CCNY's) bachelor's degree program for early childhood teacher preparation allowed candidates to transfer credits and enter the program at the baccalaureate or postbaccalaureate level. Though New York state requires a master's degree to become a permanently certified teacher, CCNY intentionally built baccalaureate-level pathways for candidates at the beginning of their career. Candidates could earn a preliminary early childhood teaching credential by taking courses to earn their Child Development Associate certificate; those who completed their associate degree at a 2-year institution could then transfer their credits to CCNY.

Intentional Recruitment Strategies

The IHEs studied employed multiple strategies to recruit candidates from diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Common strategies included outreach campaigns, partnerships with minority-serving institutions, and transparent application processes.

Some IHEs adopted new programs as a recruitment strategy. To increase racial representation within its PreK–3rd grade program and recruit candidates who wanted to teach in rural communities, LA Tech started a dual enrollment program for high school students from rural communities. Students in the program took three online, college-level ECE courses, giving them a head start on preparation program coursework. Northwestern State University in Louisiana implemented the [Call Me MiSTER](#) initiative to recruit and support Black male teacher candidates, offering academic mentoring and financial support. Some IHEs sought to diversify the racial, gender, and cultural makeup of their faculty, partly to encourage candidates to see themselves represented in the faculty and profession.

Several of the programs performed direct outreach to schools and districts or attended professional conferences to recruit candidates. Bank Street and CCNY partnered with the New York City Department of Education to communicate information about credentialing pathways to prospective teacher candidates. The recruitment campaign included subway advertisements, hiring events, and a web page detailing diverse pathways into early childhood classrooms in the city.

Specific Supports for Current Early Educators

In addition to generally recruiting individuals into the profession, some IHEs took steps to directly recruit and support current early educators. When they were rapidly expanding access to PreK, New York City and New Jersey both offered supports to the current workforce to pursue higher education. For example, the City University of New York, the overarching institution for CCNY, instituted the PreK Teacher Preparation Project to certify up to 400 early childhood educators. The program asked all directors at community-based PreK sites to nominate PreK teachers for its program. The New York City Department of Education additionally created a Lead Teacher Incentive Program that offered a \$3,500 bonus to all PreK teachers who got certified and returned to their site the following year.

To support early childhood educators pursuing a credential, some states and IHEs allowed current early educators to complete their clinical practice at their job site. Montclair's Modified Alternative Route Preschool–3rd Grade (P–3) certification program was designed specifically to help current educators with a 4-year degree obtain their P–3 credential. The program offered a hybrid and evening format for all coursework and allowed candidates to complete the required clinical experience at their place of employment. Massachusetts allowed candidates to count up to 150 hours of their previous classroom experience as part of the 300 required clinical practice hours.

Financial Supports

Candidates who work to support themselves and their families while studying are more likely than nonworking students to take fewer courses, progress more slowly, and drop out before completing their program. These barriers disproportionately affect candidates of color, who tend to come from lower-income households than their White peers.⁶ The preparation programs studied offered several financial supports to reduce economic barriers to participation. These included reduced tuition costs; scholarships and stipends; paid clinical experience; and coverage of incidental costs such as books, credentialing fees, child care, and transportation. Programs also provided advising to help candidates identify and apply for financial aid.

The IHEs studied used funding from a range of sources to provide financial assistance to candidates. LA Tech received donor funding to offer scholarships. Others, such as Montclair, partnered with districts to tap into grant-based funding or accessed federal work study and Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) grants. Bank Street partnered with the New York City Department of Education to subsidize the cost of coursework for entire cohorts of PreK teachers pursuing their credentials.

Some institutions also reduced the cost of earning a credential by streamlining requirements. Montclair, for example, reduced the number of credits required for completion of all bachelor's degree programs to 120 to allow candidates to graduate more quickly. IHEs also developed articulation agreements that specified coursework at community colleges that could transfer to a bachelor's degree-granting institution to reduce costs for candidates by ensuring that courses with similar content did not need to be repeated.

Academic Supports

Navigating complex academic requirements can create barriers to completion of preparation programs, and research indicates these barriers are greatest for those who have had less prior access to high-quality schooling. This is often the case for non-native English speakers, as well as those from low-income backgrounds.⁷ To promote retention and success of racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse candidates, IHEs in the study offered multifaceted academic supports.

Some supports focused on relationship building. Cohort-based models, in which candidates progress through their program in a stable peer group, help build a supportive learning community and allow IHEs to tailor programs for specific groups of candidates, fostering retention and success.⁸ For example, Boston College offered the [Donovan Urban Teaching Scholars](#) PreK–2 credential program, an intensive 1-year cohort-based master's program that focused on recruiting aspiring educators of color. Candidates received a minimum of 50% tuition remission and participated in cohort-based classes. Orientations that occur prior to the official start of a program can likewise help candidates build relationships with faculty and peers. LA Tech, for example, offered candidates a summer advising session so that each incoming student knew at least one faculty member before the start of fall courses.

The IHEs in the study also invested in dedicated advising and support services to help candidates navigate credentialing requirements. Common support services included test preparation resources, literacy and writing assistance, and career counseling. At CCNY, faculty worked with candidates to review their previous experiences and coursework, plan their programs, and advise them on course and credential requirements. Program administrators at Bank Street used advising and peer mentoring to help candidates understand the content covered in state-required exams and to increase candidates' confidence in their knowledge and skills. Montclair hired part-time employees and graduate assistants to help candidates prepare for certification exams, including during evening hours.

The IHEs studied also built flexibility into program delivery, allowing working educators to advance their qualifications while maintaining employment. For example, Montclair operated a satellite cohort for current early educators seeking a P–3 credential in the southern part of New Jersey because there were few IHEs offering relevant preparation programs in that area. Coursework was offered in a hybrid format, with in-person sessions taking place at a local community-based site. Bank Street, CCNY, LA Tech, Montclair, and Northwestern State likewise offered online and hybrid learning formats, evening and weekend courses, and coursework held at off-campus community locations to promote accessibility.

Factors That Enable Program Success

To offer high-quality programs and attract a diverse pool of early childhood teacher candidates, programs need financial support for capacity building and data to inform their efforts. Interviewees in all four states mentioned the need for additional funding for preparation programs to build capacity, including funds to recruit diverse faculty, provide financial assistance and stipends to candidates, develop coursework, and hire staff for advising and clinical supervision. When expanding their PreK workforce, both New Jersey and New York City made investments in higher education that the IHEs were able to tap into. For instance, IHEs collaborated with their state departments of education to develop, communicate, and implement multiple pathways to credentials. They could also take advantage of grants that New Jersey and New York City provided for higher education capacity building that enabled the IHEs to implement preparation programs tailored for the incumbent early childhood educator workforce. These grants were important to quickly scale new credentialing programs and ensure they were accessible to a wide range of candidates.

IHE staff in New Jersey and New York City additionally stressed the importance of collecting data on the demographics, qualifications, and job placements of candidates to understand how new investments and changes to credentialing requirements affect candidate diversity. These data, along with data on program retention, can help IHEs measure their impact and inform continuous improvement.

Recommendations

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

- **Design program coursework and fieldwork that will effectively develop early educators' knowledge and skills.** Content should be informed by research and include early literacy skills, methods for teaching early math, social and emotional learning, differentiation, and family and community engagement. IHEs can develop course sequences and field experiences that cover the content in state guidelines in a way that is tailored to the needs of their candidates.
- **Support the articulation and alignment of coursework across and within IHEs to enable more accessible pathways to credentials.** Having aligned coursework allows candidates to begin their prerequisites and credential coursework in community colleges and transfer these units to 4-year settings where they can complete their credential. IHEs can develop their own transfer agreements with community colleges and universities in states where articulation agreements are not required. They can also train staff to review transcripts and provide credit for coursework taken in other departments and at other institutions.
- **Develop intensive and coherent clinical experiences with frequent and comprehensive candidate supports.** Research suggests that clinical experiences are most likely to build candidates' knowledge and skills when they are sustained, well supported, and integrated with relevant coursework.⁹ IHEs should provide candidates with a full year of supervised clinical experiences, even if this exceeds their state's minimum requirement. IHEs can partner with schools that model strong practices and offer candidates frequent advising and opportunities for reflection.
- **Create and support multiple pathways to an early childhood credential.** These pathways might include residencies, apprenticeships, and other structures that allow candidates to work while completing their credential. IHEs should give special consideration to pathways for experienced educators who are working in the classroom while earning a degree. IHEs can offer advising and mentoring to help candidates understand and navigate credentialing requirements.
- **Make credential programs accessible by providing candidate supports.** IHEs can support accessibility by offering courses at convenient times and locations (e.g., at community sites, on weekends or in the evening, and in hybrid or online formats) and by providing advising, cohort models, and summer orientation sessions. They can also support faculty diversity and expertise, both of which can attract candidates and boost their success, by funding graduate fellowships and targeting recruitment.
- **Provide financial assistance to early childhood educators seeking higher credentials and degrees.** Given persistently low wages in the ECE 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, childcare, and transportation, as well as financial advising.

- **Offer candidates multiple ways to meet credential requirements by crediting prior experience and addressing testing barriers.** IHEs can reduce barriers to a credential by allowing previous experience, along with supervised classroom teaching, to count toward clinical experience and by developing processes to determine whether candidates' prior coursework meets content requirements. Standardized credentialing exams required by the state can also be a barrier to obtaining a credential; IHEs can provide coursework and other supports to ensure success on these exams.

The credentialing programs described in this study offer valuable strategies that IHEs can draw on for ensuring a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse early education workforce that is well prepared to meet the needs of the young children. To successfully develop and implement high-quality credential programs for early childhood teachers, IHEs can work collaboratively with their state departments of education and take advantage of state grants and other resources. To monitor their success in serving candidates from diverse backgrounds and determine strategies for program improvement, IHEs can track credential candidate data such as demographics, previous education and experience, program enrollment and completion, and candidates' job placements. By providing candidates with high-quality programming and supporting their success, IHEs can develop highly skilled teachers capable of having positive and long-lasting impacts on young children's academic achievements and life outcomes.

Endnotes

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