



Qualifications & Educational Support

Incorporating Early Educators' Experience Into Career Pathways

Research-to-practice brief series

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy.

This brief is based on a large-scale scan of existing literature and resources conducted in the first two years of the Center, as well as interviews conducted with educators, and an analysis of states' 2025-2027 Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) plans.

Intended audience

This brief is intended for ECE systems leaders who oversee and advise on ECE professional development systems, including licensing, higher education, and organizations that offer professional development and credentials.

Top Line Takeaways

Early educators build competencies in a variety of ways, including through direct experience working with young children. Experience is also a hallmark of the early care and education (ECE) workforce, as over 50 percent of center-based lead educators and 71 percent of family child care educators have at least 10 years of experience working with children.

ECE workforce career pathways (see the box on pg. 2 for definitions) include the qualifications required for each ECE role, as well as pathways for advancement. Qualifications often require a credential or degree alongside a minimum amount of experience, and advancement often hinges on additional educational attainment. Thus, for many educators, their career pathway is defined by their attainment of an initial credential, such as the Child Development Associate (CDA), followed by ongoing coursework, training, and degree attainment. Many states, professional development leaders, higher education professionals, and educator-supporting organizations recognize the value of experience as a means for gaining core competencies, but few career ladders or lattices explicitly incorporate experience as a component of advancement.

In this brief, you'll learn about options for developing career pathways that recognize the knowledge and competencies gained via experience in the field. We describe how:

- Field experience is a mechanism for gaining both foundational and advanced competencies.
- Credit for prior learning offers educators a viable pathway to a credential or degree by evaluating the knowledge and skills they accumulated from previous work experience.
- States are innovating experience-based equivalencies and pathways through their ECE career lattices.

Background

The ECE workforce is comprised of skilled and knowledgeable educators, most of whom have more than 10 years of experience and have completed college coursework.¹ Qualification standards—which may be recommended or mandated by a variety of entities including licensing bodies and professional organizations—are meant to ensure that educators have the competencies necessary for each ECE role across the ECE sector (e.g., assistant teacher, lead teacher, director, family child care owner, pre-K



teacher). Qualification standards primarily rely on educational attainment, and some include professional development and experience. Thus, for educators to advance in their careers, they often need to gain additional credentials or degrees.

Current educators, who are highly experienced, have expressed challenges to meeting degree requirements implemented since they first began their careers. The barriers to completing a degree while working full-time include limited hybrid or flexible options, managing family obligations on top of work and school obligations, and financial barriers.^{2,3,4,5} When the National ECE Workforce Center interviewed center-based and family child care educators about attaining a degree, the most commonly mentioned barrier was lack of time while the most commonly mentioned facilitator was financial support.⁶ In the absence of time and financial support (i.e., for the cost of attaining a degree, a wage increase after completing a degree), highly experienced early educators may not be able to meet new qualifications standards, leaving them undervalued for their competencies and unable to advance in their career.

Although experience is not often considered a qualification for advancement, field experience remains a central component of ECE preparation programs. ECE credentialing and degree programs commonly include a practicum, and multiple states include years of experience working in a licensed program in their minimum qualifications for each step in their career lattice. For instance, 11 states include experience in their minimum qualifications for center-based educators, three include it for family child care providers, and four for center directors.⁷ Further, research on high-quality early childhood career technical education programs indicates that structured, work-based learning experiences are essential for preparing the future workforce.^{8,9} These experiences offer students the chance to observe experienced ECE professionals, apply their knowledge, and gain practical skills.¹⁰ While experience in the field can build key competencies—including child development knowledge, curriculum development, classroom management, communication skills, and health and safety knowledge—the quality of that experience and the degree to which there is built-in reflective practice and supervision matters for gaining competencies.^{11,12}

Interest in capitalizing on the ability to gain key competencies through time and experience in the classroom or family child care home has only grown as registered apprenticeships gain traction. These job-embedded opportunities not only help educators earn while they learn but also provide opportunities to knit together knowledge and experience and demonstrate competencies (see our research-to-practice brief on [registered apprenticeships](#)).

Career Pathways

We use the term “career pathways” in this brief to broadly refer to the ways in which educators achieve and demonstrate qualifications and career advancement. We recognize that career pathways include many different pieces of an early childhood professional development system:

Preparation programs: Includes institutions of higher education, credentialing bodies, and apprenticeships.

Qualifications: Required experience, coursework, training, credentials, and/or degrees for a particular role. Qualifications are articulated in standards set by professional organizations, Head Start Program Performance Standards, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, and Licensing entities.

Career ladder: A structured model for career advancement characterized as hierarchical and focused on upward progression by way of one set of qualifications.

Career lattice: A flexible multidimensional model of career advancement, in which there are multiple pathways through the lattice to achieve a similar role (e.g., equivalencies).

Professional development: Trainings, courses, mentorship, certificates and/or microcredentials. These serve to help educators gain competencies and grow in their careers.



In this brief, we offer examples of how experience fits into competency-based frameworks and how it can be incorporated into career pathways to appropriately reflect and value the role of experience in promoting increased competencies for the ECE workforce.

Featured Approaches to Incorporating Experience Into Career Pathways

[The National ECE Workforce Center analyzed state 2025-2027 Child Care Development Fund \(CCDF\) plans](#) and found that at least 32 states recently updated or are planning to update their career pathways, including updates to their ladder or lattice. While many of these revised career pathways remain voluntary or apply only to a specific segment of the ECE workforce (e.g., public pre-k or state-funded preschool programs), they shape the landscape of ECE educator qualifications. The revision process is an opportunity to ensure that career advancement is tied to growing competencies and to evaluate the ways in which educators can gain those necessary competencies.

When thinking about how experience can be built into qualifications or be a part of career advancement, we consider two possible approaches that are not mutually exclusive: 1) degree-based career pathways in which credit for prior learning is incorporated into degree programs and 2) state- or program-defined qualifications or credentials that explicitly include years of experience as a criterion for a qualification. We review each approach below, including examples of states that have enacted variations of each approach.

Credit for prior learning offers an evidence-based and viable pathway to a credential or degree

For states seeking to offer career pathways based on coursework, credentials, and/or degree attainment, credit for prior learning (CPL) can support highly experienced educators to leverage their experience and expeditiously attain degrees. CPL assessments evaluate the knowledge and skills educators have gained via experience, training, and/or other opportunities outside of higher education against a competency framework. Assessments can include exams, portfolio-based assessments, and observations, among other approaches. For instance, Honolulu Community College's ECE program offers three options for prior learning assessments through which an educator can earn college credit in lieu of coursework. These include credit awarded for a current CDA, credit by examination, and a portfolio-based assessment; two of the three options allow educators to receive course credit for competencies gained from experience.

Research on CPLs across disciplines suggests that they are effective and efficient mechanisms for degree completion. One study found that adult students with CPL credit had completion rates 49-73 percent higher than adult students without CPLs, and CPL students earned their degrees an average of 9 to 12 months faster.¹³ This expedited timeline also confers cost savings to the student.¹³ Research suggests that CPL adult students have higher retention rates,¹⁴ and colleges that offer CPL are more attractive to students.¹³

Earning course credit via CPL brings a portable (i.e., transferrable) degree more within reach for an educator and allows them to focus on gaining new competencies. These strategies are gaining in popularity—over 50 percent of ECE higher education programs are offering CPL.¹⁵ The National ECE Workforce Center's analysis of 2025-2027 CCDF plans indicated that seven states are planning to or already support CPL at multiple higher education institutions within their state.

States are innovating experience-based equivalencies and pathways through their ECE career lattices

For states seeking to offer career pathways that are not tied to degree completion, very little evidence exists to guide their decision-making. States are innovating by offering state-developed credentials that allow



accumulating years of experience to either in part or entirely confer a given credential. States vary in whether they assess the competencies gained from that experience before awarding the credential. For example, North Carolina has developed a new equivalency exam, which, if passed, results in a credential; it does not result in college credit. In Colorado, experience can earn educators points towards a new points-based early childhood credential. Both states' approaches are reviewed in more depth in the next section.

States are innovating in response to the voices of their current educators, who are seeking career advancement for the knowledge and skills they gained through experience. Washington state is offering a time-limited, experience-based competency pathway that specifically targets educators who were working in ECE at least two years prior to the enactment of 2021 legislation that mandated increased educational qualifications (see the Washington state box below). In addition, there are five years between the enactment of the legislation and when new educational requirements go into effect—thus, they are balancing 1) valuing their experienced workforce; 2) providing a sufficient on-ramp to new educational and training requirements; and 3) creating a more aligned set of career pathways across their ECE sector, including Head Start, public pre-K, and community-based ECE programs.

States that offer credit, a credential, or a pathway to a credential based on experience without an assessment (other than requiring the experience be gained in a licensed facility) cannot fully guarantee that experience is equivalent to education-based requirements.¹⁵ Field experiences can and do vary widely.¹² This challenge—and the tension it can present—requires deep understanding of the workforce across a state, and the available professional development and the higher education landscape.

Examples From the Field

As reviewed above, there are multiple possibilities for awarding course credit, a credential, or points towards a credential for field experience. Most often, these are designed to meet the needs of the current, highly experienced workforce, while also providing clear pathways for career entry and advancement that support degree completion.



Washington: Time-limited alternative career pathway based on experience

In 2021, Washington enacted education requirements for their ECE educators, while allowing 5-6 years for the current workforce to meet these requirements. One [alternative way for the current workforce to meet the new qualifications requirement](#) is through an experience-based competency pathway. Educators with seven or more years of experience in a licensed facility (who have also completed required trainings) by August 1, 2026 can earn an [ECE certificate](#) that qualifies educators to be [center lead educator or family child care lead/owner](#). This pathway is not available to educators in Washington's [state-funded preschool program that serves children furthest from opportunity](#), and this pathway is only available for those who were working in the field before August 1, 2019, 2 years before the legislation was enacted. The new educational requirements go into effect on August 1, 2026.





Colorado: Braiding competencies gained from coursework, professional development, and experience

[Colorado developed an early childhood credential \(ECPC\)](#) that awards points for higher education attainment, professional development hours, years of experience, and demonstrated competencies assessed through observation. Each of these four components can earn educators points towards [a level of the ECPC](#). An educator with 10 years or more of experience and who demonstrates competencies at a high level through observation could earn enough points to qualify to be an early childhood lead teacher or small center director. Advancement requires additional professional development, coursework, or a degree. Colorado noted their impetus for developing the ECPC was to “[Make] professional development and career advancement for educators more accessible [to] improve stability in the industry through increased recruitment and retention.”

Colorado also has made recent advancements regarding credit for prior learning. All two- and four-year public universities accept the CDA for three credits, and they have developed assessments for prior learning for four ECE courses, which are also being translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Cantonese.



North Carolina: Course credit for prior experience and an early childhood equivalency exam

North Carolina early educators can receive up to nine community college credits for early childhood work experience through the new CPL from participating NC community colleges. Educators can apply credits toward the newly created Early Childhood Workforce Certificate, Early Childhood Education Diploma, Certificate and/or an Associate in Applied Science (AAS) Degree in Early Childhood Education. This opportunity, as well as available supports for accessing higher education, are detailed [in a press release](#).

Legislation from 2022 created the [North Carolina Early Childhood Equivalency Exam](#), an alternative pathway to the NC Early Childhood Credential. Applicants who achieve a score of 80 percent or higher on the NC Early Childhood Equivalency Exam earn the new North Carolina Early Childhood Equivalency Certificate. This certificate is equivalent to a North Carolina Early Childhood Credential and qualify the individual to be a lead educator in an early childhood classroom. It does not, however, confer college credit.

Remaining Research-to-Practice Gaps

As states are innovating to meet the needs of the current and incoming ECE workforce, more research is needed to understand how well these innovations are working to promote the recruitment and retention of a highly qualified workforce. We highlight two considerations for future research to support states as they seek to develop qualification standards and advancement opportunities that meet the needs of the workforce, children, and families.



How to align competencies to professional development and career advancement

Multiple states (Colorado, Kansas, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah) explicitly noted in their 2025-2027 CCDF plans that they are moving towards or have already adopted a competency-based framework for professional development and career advancement that aligns with their career lattices. These competencies are similar to learning objectives within coursework for degree or credentialing programs, and can also be aligned to features of experience, including previous job responsibilities and on-the-job professional development, such as coaching. Together, state early childhood leaders and researchers can partner to understand how competency-based frameworks can be designed to include the competencies gained from center-based and family child care-based ECE experience. Research-to-practice partnerships could address the following questions:

- What are the skills and competencies early educators gain via experience? What types of settings and conditions facilitate the development of these skills? How do we facilitate competency development up and down the career pathway (e.g., by educator role and tenure)?
- Given that research suggests that some competencies gained via experience require supervision and/or mentorship,^{11,12} what are the costs associated with developing an accessible experience pathway? And does the state, the program, or the educator incur those costs?
- Given the unique aspects of providing care in a family child care home (physical environment differences, serving mixed-age groups, offering care at non-traditional work hours),¹⁶ how are the competencies gained from experience in a family child care home different than in a center?
- How are institutions of higher education engaged in the process of determining the competencies gained from work experience? Their involvement can promote alignment with coursework, CPL, and practicum expectations.
- To what extent are the competencies expected for field placements in early childhood teacher preparation programs aligned with CPLs?
- What are valid and efficient ways to document or assess competencies? How can states build the infrastructure for state-wide, accessible competency assessments? What is the cost of such an assessment system?

How the workforce moves through the career pathways

To date, there is limited research detailing the movement of the ECE workforce through career pathways, including a career lattice. Available research has typically focused on moving one step onto or up in the career pathway, such as the process of earning a CDA or how CPL promotes BA attainment. States are balancing the needs of their ECE workforce with the desire for higher qualifications that are aligned across ECE settings. It's important to understand if the career pathways are working well towards desired outcomes, including recruitment, retention, and increased competencies. Research-to-practice partnerships could address the following questions:

- When states offer multiple pathways, and a career lattice, how many educators take each pathway?
- How quickly do educators advance on each pathway?
- Are there unintended consequences, whereby some educators end up encountering barriers to their pathway? Do some pathways lead to greater rates of turnover or exit from the field?
- Do differing pathways facilitate similar levels of competencies?
- What are educators' reflections about the barriers and facilitators to advancing on each pathway?
- What is the increase in compensation along each step of each pathway?



Where To Go From Here

For state, community, and institute of higher education (IHE) ECE leaders seeking to **align experience with their competency-based framework for professional development**, consider:

- Is my state/community ready to evaluate aligned competencies with our professional development system (e.g., training, degree/credentialing programs)? Has any of this work been done by one or more institutions of higher education?
- How will we engage with institutions of higher education to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of varied CPL approaches or the portability and stack-ability of state-specific credentials?

For Further Reading:

- [Competency Frameworks for Infant-Toddler Teachers](#)
- [Promising Career Pathway Approaches: Registered Apprenticeships](#)
- [Credit Where Credit is Due](#)

For state and community ECE leaders involved in **developing and revising career pathways to include experience**, consider:

- How many years of experience does the ECE workforce in my state or community have?
- What are the root causes of the educational attainment rates among early educators in my state/community? Given these causes, would CPLs help educators complete more coursework or degree programs?
- How will we engage with the ECE workforce, directors, and owners to understand the opportunities and challenges of establishing experience equivalencies or experienced-based pathways to credentials?
- How portable or stackable (e.g., is it a building block towards a higher credential or degree) is a credential that awards points or equivalencies for experience alone (without an evaluation of the competencies gained via experience)? What are the potential unintended consequences of the approach?
- Are there unintended consequences of developing multiple pathways that differ among parts of the ECE sector (i.e., Head Start, public pre-K, family child care programs, community-based child care)?

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The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. To learn more about the center, please visit our website <https://www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org/>.

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