



ECE Workforce Policy Highlight

April 2026

Strategies to Recognize Early Educators' Skills and Competencies Gained Through Experience

Rachel Abenavoli, Julianna Carlson, Ekaterina Novikova, and Sherri Castle

National ECE Workforce Center Policy Highlights provide a focused look at topics relevant to the ECE workforce. These topics emerge through technical assistance activities or learnings from the state or federal policy landscape.

States and institutions of higher education (IHEs) are increasingly implementing strategies to formally recognize the skills and competencies that early educators gain through direct experience in the field.^{1,2} These strategies are intended to acknowledge and codify the value of early educators' direct experience; support career advancement among early educators, many of whom experience financial or logistical barriers to earning a more advanced degree; and increase retention in the early care and education (ECE) field.

Strategies to recognize early educators' skills and competencies formally typically take one of two forms:

- IHEs award college credit for skills and competencies, often called "credit for prior learning," or CPL
- States issue a credential, qualification, or placement at a certain career level based on skills and competencies

Research indicates that adults who receive CPL through a variety of the strategies discussed below, compared to those who do not receive CPL, are more likely to complete their college program, complete their degree faster, and have reduced costs associated with earning a degree.^{3,4,5} There is also some evidence that college graduates who receive CPL have higher employment rates and higher incomes than college graduates without CPL.⁶ While more research is needed on CPL in the ECE field and on strategies that recognize skills and experience in state ECE qualification systems, this initial evidence highlights the potential of these strategies to support the ECE workforce.

Key Terms

A variety of terms are used to describe approaches for recognizing skills and competencies gained through experience.

Recognition strategies: Methods to assess and acknowledge skills and competencies formally (e.g., exams, portfolios, observations, articulated credit, verified work experience), resulting in credit, credentials, or qualifications.

Credit for prior learning (CPL): Academic credit awarded for knowledge and skills gained outside traditional coursework, including work experience or training.

Prior learning assessment (PLA): A process used to evaluate and validate an individual's prior learning for the purpose of awarding academic credit or credentials.

Experience-based pathway: A route to earning credentials, qualifications, or credit that recognizes skills and competencies gained through work and other real-world experiences, rather than relying solely on traditional coursework.

This policy highlight describes different strategies that states and IHEs use to recognize early educators' skills and experience, considerations for states and IHEs as they develop and implement these strategies, and additional needs for research to strengthen policy and practice.

What strategies do states and institutions of higher education use to recognize early educators' skills and competencies?

Below, we describe five strategies that IHEs and states use to award college credit, issue state credentials or qualifications, or both. While we review each strategy separately, it is important to note that each strategy comes with advantages and disadvantages, and no single strategy is sufficient on its own. Many states and IHEs use a combination of strategies to balance the tradeoffs of individual strategies and align with state and IHE policies in their context.

1 Exams

States and IHEs recognize early educators' knowledge and competencies through examinations that assess individuals' subject matter knowledge (e.g., knowledge of child development, developmentally appropriate practice, curriculum planning). Depending on how the strategy is implemented, early educators may earn college credit, a state credential or permit, or waivers from certain requirements by passing the exam. Exams include:

- **Standardized exams**, which are developed by national third-party organizations to test subject matter knowledge equivalent to a college course. For example, an IHE may accept scores from the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) to award college credit.^{7,8,9}
- **Challenge or departmental exams**, which are IHE faculty-developed, faculty-administered exams that align with the content of a specific course. An IHE can use these scores to determine whether a student can receive credit without completing the course.¹⁰
- **State exams**, which states may use as a required or optional component of their credentialing or permitting systems. For example, states can award a credential based on an exam, or they can use exams to create accelerated pathways that allow experienced educators to bypass certain training or coursework requirements, even when the exam alone does not result in a credential.¹¹

As a recognition strategy, exams allow educators to demonstrate knowledge independently of a formal academic degree and can provide a standardized metric aligned with state standards and competency frameworks. When used thoughtfully, exams can also support consistency in baseline knowledge across programs and providers, while offering experienced educators a pathway to receive credit or meet requirements based on what they already know. Exams offer an efficient and low-cost way for states and IHEs to assess educators' skills. However, exams assess educators' knowledge, not their practice, so exam performance may not accurately or fully represent educators' skills and competencies.

2 Portfolios

Another strategy for recognizing early educators' skills and competencies gained through experience is the use of portfolios. Portfolio-based assessment allows educators to demonstrate competencies via a structured narrative of their learning and professional experiences, accompanied by artifacts that provide evidence of their knowledge, skills, and practice. Artifacts might include lesson plans, reflective statements, child assessment records, documentation of classroom practice, or other materials.¹²

Portfolios may be used in multiple ways:

- IHE faculty may evaluate portfolios to determine whether an educator has demonstrated expertise comparable to the learning outcomes of a college-level course and award college credit accordingly.
- States may incorporate portfolios into credentialing or qualification systems, for example, as part of a framework in which candidates accumulate points across categories such as formal education, professional development hours, prior credentials, and documented experience.

Unlike exams, which primarily assess subject matter knowledge, portfolios allow early educators to demonstrate other aspects of their skills and competencies, including how they implement developmentally appropriate practices, plan curriculum, assess children's learning, and reflect on their teaching. In this way, portfolios can capture dimensions of professional practice that may be difficult to measure through standardized assessments alone. That said, portfolios can be time- and resource-intensive for early educators, state administrators, and IHE faculty. States and IHEs must develop detailed rubrics to ensure consistent assessment, and evaluating the portfolios themselves can also be time-consuming.

3 Observations

Another strategy for recognizing early educators' skills and competencies is the use of observations, in which educators demonstrate their skills in real or simulated early learning environments.¹³ Observations can be used to assess a wide range of practices that align with college course objectives and/or state competency frameworks, including early educators' skills in implementing developmentally appropriate practice or curricula, interacting with children, facilitating activities, leading instruction, and supporting children's engagement and behavior. Observations are sometimes used alongside interviews, in which early educators respond to questions related to competency areas. Standardized tools like the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) may be used to conduct observations, or observation protocols may be IHE or state specific.

Observations can be used in several ways:

- IHEs can use information from observations (typically in combination with other strategies, such as exams or portfolios) to award college credit.
- States can incorporate the use of observations into credentialing or qualification systems, including systems that award points for competencies demonstrated during formal observations (e.g., classroom visits conducted by approved evaluators).

A key advantage of observations is that they allow educators to demonstrate competencies in settings that closely mirror their day-to-day work, providing a more direct assessment of real-world practice than knowledge-based assessments alone. Observations can capture skills that may not be fully reflected through exams or written submissions and can complement other forms of recognition to provide a more comprehensive assessment of an early educator's skills and competencies. In addition, using observations to recognize skills and competencies aligns with many states' existing use of observations as part of their licensing or quality rating and improvement systems; leveraging this established infrastructure for conducting observations can support greater efficiency. At the same time, observations require substantial time and resources, including costs of standardized tools, trained observers, and ongoing monitoring to ensure consistency among observers. Observations also capture performance at a single point in time, which may not fully reflect an educator's typical practice on a more regular basis.

4 Articulated credit

Another strategy for recognizing early educators' skills and competencies is articulated credit, in which industry-recognized credentials or previously completed training are formally evaluated and translated to college credit or a state qualification, credential, or permit. For example, in the ECE field, states and IHEs commonly recognize the Child Development Associate (CDA), either by awarding college credit for the CDA (IHEs) or by allowing the CDA to satisfy entry-level qualification requirements for lead or assistant teacher roles in licensed programs (states).¹⁴

Beyond the CDA, some IHEs also recognize and award college credit for pre-approved professional development in core competency areas, allowing early educators to advance towards degree completion without repeating coursework. Furthermore, states and IHEs are expanding the use of microcredentials, which are short learning experiences designed to help students build specific skills or competencies in a relatively short period of time. Microcredentials may be offered for credit or as non-credit learning opportunities (such as digital badges or certificates of completion). When aligned with competency frameworks or course outcomes, microcredentials and other forms of professional development can sometimes be evaluated and translated into articulated credit.¹⁵

Articulated credit can support early educators by recognizing training they have already completed. However, unlike other strategies discussed, articulated credit typically involves awarding credit or qualifications based on training or other learning experiences alone, without directly assessing early educators' skills or competencies. While training is expected to strengthen early educators' skills and competencies, hours of professional development may not consistently translate to educators' practice. That said, this is an area of innovation, with new platforms combining professional development and video-based assessment as part of earning microcredentials, badges, or college credit.¹⁶

In addition, there are some upfront costs associated with recognizing skills via articulated credit, as states and IHEs need to invest time and resources into evaluating trainings and mapping crosswalks among trainings, course credits, and/or state qualifications. States and IHEs also must update crosswalks as new trainings become available, and they must establish processes for verifying completed trainings. That said, after crosswalks are established and/or new trainings reviewed, states and IHEs can automate processes for articulating credit, reducing time and costs for states and IHEs.

5 Verified work experience

A somewhat less common strategy for recognizing early educators' skills and competencies is verified work experience, in which states implement a process for validating an individual's work experience and completion of required training (e.g., through employment records, letters from employers/supervisors, workforce registry data). With that verified experience and training, early educators can qualify for a credential, permit, or placement at a certain career level without earning an advanced degree.¹⁷

Like articulated credit, this strategy focuses largely on experience itself (e.g., years of experience in the ECE field) without directly assessing early educators' skills and competencies. While verified experience working with children is expected to relate to early educators' skills and competencies, the translation from experience to skills may not always be evident or consistent across educators and settings. In addition, to implement this strategy, states need to invest time and resources in defining qualifying roles and experience thresholds, verifying experience, and establishing verification systems.

Examples From the Field

Below, we highlight examples of states and IHEs using specific strategies and combinations of strategies to recognize early educators' skills and competencies.

Strategy: Exams

The **North Carolina** Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Child Development and Early Education administers the free, online North Carolina Early Childhood Equivalency Exam. Individuals who pass with a score of 80 percent or higher receive the North Carolina Early Childhood Equivalency Certificate.^{18,19} This certificate is an alternative to the North Carolina Early Childhood Credential and allows the individual to be a lead teacher, teacher, or family child care home provider.

Strategy: Portfolios

Universities of Wisconsin (UW) have a unified policy that provides a general structure for CPL, and individual universities within the UW system determine which specific CPL strategies they will offer and how they will be implemented. At UW Oshkosh, students who want to earn CPL through a portfolio must enroll in the Assessment of Prior Learning course. After completing the course, students submit portfolios for review to faculty in the relevant discipline who determine the number of credits to award, with a maximum of 24. Faculty are compensated for portfolio review.²⁰

Strategy: Observations

Through **Illinois'** Professional Development System, students can complete a virtual reality-based assessment that tests competencies aligned to the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Level 2 Credential. After completion, educators send a video of their performance in the simulated environment to a selected institution, where a certified faculty assessor evaluates it and awards college credit.²¹

Strategy: Articulated credit

State University of New York (SUNY) offers a variety of stackable microcredentials in ECE.²² For example, SUNY Rockland Community College offers an Early Childhood Education Fundamentals microcredential. Students earn nine credits after completing the microcredential, which can be used toward the associate's degree in Teacher Education or Early Childhood Education.²³ In addition, SUNY Oneonta offers both for-credit and non-credit microcredentials.²⁴ Non-credit microcredentials can be stackable, meaning they can be combined and translated to a for-credit course, credential, or program. Academic credit for non-credit microcredentials can be awarded through evaluation.

Strategy: Verified work experience

In **Washington**, early educators can meet qualification requirements through an experience-based competency equivalence. As of 2026, early educators who will have five years of experience working in a licensed child care program by August 2030 and have completed required trainings (both recorded in the state's workforce registry) are eligible for the experience-based competency equivalence. This allows individuals to serve as early educators in centers and home-based settings, but it does not meet qualifications for the Early Childhood Education & Assistance Program (the state-funded preschool program for children from families with low incomes) or for professional development points in the state's quality rating and improvement system.^{25,26}

Strategy: Combination of strategies

Community College of Vermont (CCV) uses a range of strategies to assess skills and competencies among students seeking CPL. For example, students may earn 3 to 12 college credits by passing standardized exams such as the CLEP or DSST, which can be taken on campus or in some cases remotely.²⁷ Students may also pursue course challenge options through which a faculty member who teaches the course conducts an individualized evaluation of the student's knowledge and skills, with a fee equivalent to one credit hour. A competency-based pathway allows students to complete a standardized assignment developed for specific courses, typically costing about \$150 per course (compared to approximately \$870 for a three-credit course).²⁸ Two portfolio options are also available: Students may enroll in a three-credit Assessment of Prior Learning course, in which they meet weekly for a semester and work on creating a portfolio. Students must pay the three-credit course tuition and a \$300 portfolio assessment fee. There is no limit on the number of CPL credits students can request, and an average of 30 credits are awarded. Alternatively, students may enroll in a one-credit Focused Portfolio Development course. Students pay the one-credit course tuition, administrative fee, and assessment fee, and they may request up to 16 credit hours.²⁹

Colorado's point system allows early educators to document their skills and competencies through the voluntary Early Childhood Professional Credential (ECPC), which qualifies them for roles in licensed child care programs. Educators earn points towards a level of the ECPC based on their formal education, hours of direct experience with children, hours of professional development, and demonstrated competencies assessed through observations using an approved observation tool. Early educators' experience with children can be verified through their profile in the Professional Development Information System (PDIS; Colorado's workforce registry), through a letter of experience, or with a family child care license. Training hours completed through the PDIS are automatically applied to ECPC applications, and educators may also upload external training certificates to the PDIS for review. Approved observation tools include the CLASS, ERS, Colorado State Model Performance Management System Evaluation (COPMS), Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT), or Teaching Pyramid Infant-Toddler Observation Scale (TPITOS).³⁰

What should system leaders consider when developing or implementing strategies for recognizing skills and competencies in ECE?

Recognizing early educators' skills and competencies requires more than selecting individual strategies. It depends on strong alignment and coordination across state agencies, IHEs, and other ECE workforce partners. While the strategies described above require an upfront investment of time and resources, coordinated efforts at the state and IHE systems level can streamline implementation, reduce confusion and other barriers experienced by early educators, and ultimately support them to advance in their education and careers.

- 1 Consider tradeoffs of each strategy, implementation details, and existing state and IHE policies and systems when selecting strategies to recognize early educators' skills and competencies.**

Table 1 summarizes key advantages and disadvantages of each strategy that states and IHEs should consider, as well as additional questions to guide planning and implementation. Some questions are common across multiple strategies (e.g., what policies will govern the strategy; how does the strategy align with course objectives and/or state competency frameworks; how will results be reflected in transcripts and/or workforce registry profiles?). Other questions are specific to each strategy (e.g., who will conduct observations, and how will they be trained and compensated?). States and IHEs should also reflect on

opportunities and constraints within their systems that may relate to implementation. For example, what existing resources and infrastructure can be leveraged to support consistent evaluation of early educators' skills and competencies? What existing policies facilitate (or hinder) implementation of each recognition strategy across IHEs and state agencies?

2 Consider approaches that support high-quality and consistent assessment of prior learning, skills, and competencies.

States and IHEs should explore ways to standardize assessment criteria across agencies and institutions, preserving institutional autonomy while promoting greater consistency and fairness. For example, using shared rubrics, competency frameworks, or validated assessment tools could increase reliability and quality while also reducing burden on individual IHE staff members. Consistent, streamlined processes may also make recognition strategies easier to implement more widely, increasing access for early educators.

3 Consider policies that expand access and reduce barriers for early educators.

Early educators may face financial, linguistic, or other administrative barriers in applying for CPL or experience-based pathways. States should identify opportunities to make CPL and experience-based pathways easier to navigate for early educators while still allowing flexibility for individual agencies and institutions. This could include reducing or waiving fees, streamlining documentation, providing guidance in multiple languages, and enhancing transferability across institutions.

4 Consider how to build shared understanding and trust in strategies to recognize skills and competencies.

States and IHEs should consider how to build a shared understanding of strategies for recognizing early educators' skills and competencies across state agencies, IHEs, professional development providers, and the ECE workforce. Clear, consistent messaging about what CPL and other recognition strategies are—and how they support workforce advancement, reduce barriers, and recognize meaningful experience—could help faculty, administrators, and employers view CPL and experience-based pathways as credible and valuable routes for degree completion and career growth. Creating common definitions and aligning marketing and communication tools can help ensure state administrators, IHE faculty, ECE employers, and early educators understand the purpose of recognition strategies in ECE and feel confident implementing these strategies to recognize early educators' skills and competencies.

5 Consider how to use data to strengthen the implementation and impact of recognition strategies.

Policies on the collection, use, and sharing of data can support more effective implementation of recognition strategies, with the goal of increasing early educators' opportunities to earn degrees and advance in their careers. Understanding who is accessing opportunities to receive credit or qualifications for skills and competencies gained through experience, what types of credit or qualifications are being awarded, and career trajectories for students after receiving credit or qualifications can help states and IHEs identify gaps, improve consistency, and understand where processes may be creating unintended barriers. Stronger statewide and institutional data systems can also support transfer or articulation policies to make CPL and qualifications earned via experience-based pathways more transferable across different educational and career pathways.

Table 1. Considerations for Selecting Recognition Strategies

Advantages and Disadvantages	Example Implementation Questions to Consider
Strategy: Exams	
<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a standardized metric of knowledge across IHEs and/or agencies • Efficient and relatively low cost to administer • Challenge exams can be tailored to specific course objectives <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess knowledge rather than practice, so results may not fully reflect real-world skills and competencies • Challenge exams require development and validation, which can take time and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies will govern credit/qualifications through exams (e.g., minimum passing grade, courses/requirements satisfied, maximum credits or points earned, transferability), and will they be uniform or vary across the state, IHEs, and/or departments? • How do exams align with course objectives and/or state competency frameworks? • Who develops, selects, and/or validates exams, and how will they be administered (e.g., in-person, remote, languages)? • How will educators learn about and access exams (including information about costs)? • How will exam results be reflected in transcripts and/or workforce registry profiles?
Strategy: Portfolios	
<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow educators to demonstrate a broad range of skills and competencies • Capture dimensions of professional practice that standardized assessments may miss <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More difficult to standardize across IHEs and/or agencies • Require detailed rubrics to support consistent evaluation • Time- and resource-intensive for state administrators and IHE faculty to develop rubrics and evaluate portfolios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies will govern credit/qualifications through portfolios, and will they be uniform or vary across the state, IHEs, and/or departments? • How do portfolios align with course objectives and/or state competency frameworks? • Are clear rubrics and evaluation processes in place to ensure consistency and rigor? • Who will evaluate portfolios, what guidance will they receive, and how will they be compensated? • What guidance or resources are available to help educators learn about portfolio options and develop strong portfolios? • How will portfolio results be reflected in transcripts and/or workforce registry profiles?
Strategy: Observations	
<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide direct assessment of real-world practice in authentic settings • Can leverage existing state systems (e.g., quality rating and improvement systems), improving efficiency <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require significant time and resources (e.g., trained observers, standardized tools, monitoring for reliability) • Capture performance at a single point in time, which may not represent typical practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies will govern credit/qualifications through observations, and will they be uniform or vary across the state, IHEs, and/or departments? • What observation tools will be used, and how are they aligned with courses, state competency frameworks, and existing systems (e.g., quality rating and improvement system, licensing)? • Who will conduct observations, and how will they be trained and compensated? • How will observation results be reflected in transcripts and/or workforce registry profiles?

Advantages and Disadvantages	Example Implementation Questions to Consider
Strategy: Articulated credit	
<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes prior training already completed by early educators • Can be automated after crosswalks are developed, reducing time and long-term costs <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awards credit or qualification based on training without assessing skills or competencies, so may not accurately reflect educators' practice • Requires upfront investment to evaluate trainings, build crosswalks, and establish verification processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies will govern articulated credit, and will they be uniform or vary across the state, IHEs, and/or departments? • How will trainings and credentials be evaluated and mapped to course credit, points, or qualifications? • What systems can be leveraged or need to be built to verify training and credentials? • How will educators learn which trainings or credentials can be stacked towards a degree or qualification? • How will articulated credit be reflected in transcripts and/or workforce registry profiles?
Strategy: Verified work experience	
<p>Advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closely aligned with the actual work educators perform • Reflects hands-on, real-world experience with children <p>Disadvantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awards qualification based on experience without assessing skills or competencies, so may not accurately reflect educators' practice • Requires systems to define qualifying roles, set thresholds, and verify experience, which can be resource intensive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies will govern verified work experience, and will they be uniform or vary across the state? • How are qualifying roles, years of experience, and types of experience defined? • What documentation (e.g., letters, registry profile information) is required, and how will experience be verified? • How will experience translate to qualifications? • What guidance or resources are available to help educators learn about and navigate the process of verifying work experience? • How will this pathway ensure alignment with formal education pathways and state competency frameworks? • How will verified experience be reflected in transcripts and/or workforce registry profiles?

What research is needed to strengthen strategies for recognizing skills and competencies in ECE?

While there is some research on how CPL strategies support the rate, speed, and costs of degree completion, more research is needed on a broader set of strategies and outcomes to inform states and IHEs as they develop, implement, and sustain approaches for recognizing skills and competencies in the ECE field. There is also a need for educator voice to inform the design, implementation, and research on recognition strategies.

How do assessments of skills and competencies map on to actual practice?

Additional research is needed to strengthen the validity and reliability of strategies used to recognize early educators' skills and competencies. This includes validating assessments (e.g., exams, portfolios, observations, training-to-credit crosswalks, points systems) against actual job performance, demonstrated

skills, and educator competencies. Research could also examine the reliability and consistency of different assessment approaches across institutions and evaluators. More evidence on the validity of these strategies may help increase buy-in and adoption of these strategies among a broader set of states and IHEs.

How do recognition strategies support longer-term workforce outcomes?

More evidence is needed on how strategies that recognize early educators' skills and competencies influence longer-term workforce outcomes in ECE such as degree attainment, career advancement within the field, retention in early childhood roles, earnings growth, and job satisfaction. Research should also examine for whom these strategies are most effective (e.g., educators with different levels of experience, education, or backgrounds) and under what conditions (e.g., program supports, institutional policies, state workforce systems).

How do early educators experience each of the recognition strategies?

In addition to research on workforce outcomes like degree attainment, career advancement, and retention, there is a need to better understand how early educators experience these strategies as recognizing their skills and competencies. For example, qualitative research that examines how early educators learn about and access these strategies, what supports their successful participation, and the barriers they face is critical to helping states and IHEs design approaches that are responsive to early educators' strengths and needs.

How effective are different strategies and combinations of strategies?

States and IHEs are implementing a range of approaches to recognize educators' knowledge and skills, but more research is needed to determine which strategies or combinations of strategies are most effective. This includes examining CPL approaches within ECE, where the research base remains limited compared to other fields.³¹ Research could also explore how recognizing competencies within state qualification or credential systems interacts with higher education strategies to support educators in attaining credentials and progressing in their careers.

What facilitators and barriers influence implementation of recognition strategies?

Launching and sustaining strategies that recognize early educators' skills often requires coordination across multiple systems, including IHEs, state agencies, professional development providers, and other early childhood organizations. Research could identify common facilitators and barriers related to systems alignment, state and IHE policies, funding, and system leader buy-in. Understanding these implementation factors may help states and institutions design more effective, scalable approaches.

Continued innovation by states and IHEs, alongside stronger evidence on outcomes, can strengthen these approaches and expand opportunities for early educators to demonstrate their competencies, advance their careers, and have their expertise more fully valued

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by Grant Number 90TA000004-01-00 from the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this website (including, without limitation, its content, technical infrastructure and policies, and any services or tools provided). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration for Children and Families, including the Office of Early Childhood Development; the Office of Head Start; and the Office of Child Care.

Thanks to Tamara Halle, Sondra Ranum, Kathryn Tout, Mallory Warner, and Lauren Zarick for their feedback and helpful reviews, and to Audrey Franchett for help with design of the highlight.

Suggested citation: Abenavoli, R., Carlson, J., Novikova, E., and Castle, S. (2026). *Strategies to Recognize Early Educators' Skills and Competencies Gained Through Experience*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.

Who Are We?

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 center uses a research-to-practice model to advance compensation and career advancement for early educators.

Learn more and get in touch with us at our website:

www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org

References

April 2026

- ¹ Paschall, K. (2025). *Incorporating early educators' experience into career pathways*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.
- ² National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ³ Klein-Collins, R., Taylor, J., Bishop, C., Bransberger, P., Lane, P., & Leibrandt, S. (2020). *The PLA boost: Results from a 72-institution targeted study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes* (Revised December 2020). Council for Adult and Experiential Learning; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PLA-Boost-Report-CAEL-WICHE-Revised-Dec-2020.pdf>
- ⁴ Kilgore, W. (2020). *Recognition of prior learning in the 21st century: An examination of prior learning assessment policy and practice as experienced by academic records professionals and students*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/aacrao-brief071420.pdf>
- ⁵ National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ⁶ Falkenstern, C. (2020). *Recognition of prior learning in the 21st century: Credit by examination: Recognizing learning and supporting adult learners*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WICHE-Credit-by-Exam-brief.pdf>
- ⁷ Soler, M. C., Klein-Collins, R., Swirsky, E., Seidel, K., & Hirsch, R. (2024). *The national landscape of credit for prior learning: Effective state and system policies for success and equity*. American Council on Education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/National-Landscape-CPL-2024.pdf>
- ⁸ National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ⁹ Higher Learning Advocates. (2023). *Backgrounder: How credit for prior learning (CPL) can benefit today's students*. <https://todaysstudents.org/wp-content/uploads/credit-for-prior-learning-backgrounder-2023.pdf>
- ¹⁰ National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ¹¹ 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>
- ¹² National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ¹³ National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*.

-
- https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ¹⁴ National Association for the Education of Young Children & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2024). *Credit where credit is due: Expanding credit for prior learning in ECE higher education programs*. https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/final_cpl_brief_december_2024.pdf
- ¹⁵ Galindo, M. (2024). Recognition of early childhood professionals' competencies through a micro-credential program. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 45(4), 473–485. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2024.2373847>
- ¹⁶ BUILD Initiative. (2023, January 9). *Afina Learning: A national initiative to transform professional development* [Resource]. <https://buildinitiative.org/resource-library/afina-learning-a-national-initiative-to-transform-professional-development/>
- ¹⁷ Paschall, K. (2025). *Incorporating early educators' experience into career pathways*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.
- ¹⁸ North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education. (n.d.). *Teacher Requirements*. https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/works_simulator/teacher.html
- ¹⁹ North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education. (2023, June 27). *Resuming the star-rated license reassessments* [Webinar presentation]. https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Portals/0/documents/pdf/S/Star_Rated_License_Reassessments_06_272023webinar.pdf?ver=3q02OH2NrK70MRDn-GWidw%3D%3D
- ²⁰ University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. (n.d.). *Credit for prior learning policy*. <https://www.uwosh.edu/academic-affairs/wp-content/uploads/sites/196/2022/11/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-University-Policy.pdf>
- ²¹ Gateways to Opportunity: Illinois Professional Development System. (2021). *Gateways ECE Level 2 credential prior learning assessment*. Illinois Department of Early Childhood. <https://idec.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/idec/documents/unordered-documents/gateways-ece-level-2-prior-learning-assessment-initiative.pdf>
- ²² State University of New York. (n.d.). *Microcredential catalog: Child development* [Database]. <https://www.suny.edu/microcredentials/programs/?skillsSearch=Child%20Development>
- ²³ Rockland Community College. (n.d.). *Early childhood education fundamentals*. <https://sunyrockland.edu/academics/micro/credit-microcredentials/early-childhood-education-fundamentals/>
- ²⁴ State University of New York Oneonta. (n.d.). *Microcredential policy*. <https://suny.oneonta.edu/policy-library/policies-z/microcredential-policy>
- ²⁵ Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. (n.d.). *Education equivalents for child care providers*. <https://dcyf.wa.gov/services/early-learning-providers/qualifications/child-care-providers/education-equivalents>
- ²⁶ Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. (n.d.). *Experience-Based Competency*. https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/EPS_0051.pdf
- ²⁷ Community College of Vermont. (n.d.). *Credit by examination*. <https://ccv.edu/academics/credit-for-what-you-know/credit-by-examination/>
- ²⁸ Community College of Vermont. (n.d.). *Credit through course challenge*. <https://ccv.edu/academics/credit-for-what-you-know/credit-through-course-challenge/>
- ²⁹ Community College of Vermont. (n.d.). *Portfolio courses*. <https://ccv.edu/academics/credit-for-what-you-know/portfolio-courses/>
- ³⁰ Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (n.d.). *About the ECPC 3.0*. Colorado Shines Professional Development Information System. <https://www.coloradoshinespdis.com/s/about-the-ecpc>
- ³¹ Paschall, K. (2025). *Incorporating early educators' experience into career pathways*. National Early Care and Education Workforce Center.