



# Advancing ECE Workforce Compensation and Equity:

Key Conditions for a National  
Lead Teacher Certification

[Click each topic to view](#)

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>03</b>
Context for national certification	03
Exploring the feasibility of a national lead teacher certification	04
Study structure and participants	05
<b>Study Results</b>	<b>05</b>
Key learning	05
Appetite for certification	05
Support for a focus on competencies	07
Conditions for national certification success	08
Compensation	08
Equity	09
<b>Applying Learnings from the Study</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Recommended Strategic Actions and Investments</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Study Leads and Acknowledgements</b>	<b>12</b>

# Introduction

In 2019, the [Early Educator Investment Collaborative](#) (The Collaborative) commissioned a nationwide study to assess the viability of a national, competency-based certification for lead teachers<sup>1</sup> in early childhood education (ECE) settings in the United States. While the COVID-19 pandemic soon forced The Collaborative to put the study's research on hold as it shifted to [rapid response grants](#) to address the sector's urgent needs, we are now very pleased to share this summary of the study's results.

## Context for national certification

There is wide consensus that early childhood educators play a fundamental role in the learning and development of young children—and that quality indicators in ECE programs are linked directly to teachers' qualifications and knowledge of child development. Yet for too long, a public misconception that early educators are primarily basic caregivers (similar to babysitters) and only incidentally teachers has contributed to their skills being dismissed and devalued. For ECE programs - as a pathway for the workforce - to be successful, factors affecting the current context for national certification must be taken into account. This includes, but is not limited to: 1) racial inequities within the field, 2) inconsistencies in qualification requirements 3) meaningful ways to improve working conditions for the workforce as a whole. This section will discuss each of these factors to set the stage for exploring the feasibility of a national certification.

Racial inequities within the field are visible in several ways. The majority of early childhood educators are women, and they are more racially and linguistically diverse than the broader U.S. workforce. [Previous research](#)

[commissioned by The Collaborative](#) affirmed that “Black and Hispanic ECE professionals [are] especially poorly paid...[regardless of] the age of children, setting type or education level. For instance, Black women who work with infants and toddlers earn on average \$0.77 less per hour than other infant-toddler professionals, and the gap increases to \$1.71 when examining preschool-aged children.”

The same [research](#) documented chronic underfunding for the ECE field resulting from centuries of racist and sexist policies. This pervasive underfunding has led to apathy and a sense among many practitioners that the field is invisible. Facing stubborn resource gaps in an under-resourced field, early childhood educators endure extremely low wages, long working hours and challenging working conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic also placed significant strain on the ECE workforce and further exacerbated inequities within the field. These conditions not only undermine the well-being and job satisfaction of early childhood educators but also affect the overall quality of early childhood education itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Lead Early Childhood Teacher: educator of record and the decision-maker who is directly responsible for the instruction of children (and who may supervise staff) in all types of ECE classrooms and care settings.

Another significant factor to consider is low and inconsistent qualification requirements across many states and educational settings, with some states setting no minimum qualifications at all documented in a [2020 study by the Center for the Study of Child Care employment](#). Where there are requirements, they often do not align with expert recommendations regarding the educational needs of children. Instead, they are shaped by health and safety requirements or other bureaucratic standards, over the skills, knowledge and competencies required for care and education of young children. More broadly, lack of data and a false distinction between “education” and “care” make it challenging to identify consistent patterns in qualification requirements within and across states.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities and workforce issues, further driving demand for solutions that could address these conditions, elevate the status of educators and ensure the provision of high-quality early childhood education across the nation.

Many in the ECE field have long considered the creation of a nationally transferable advanced certification that would recognize the knowledge and skills of lead teachers as well as equip them with accessible training and education. This certification could potentially expand the professional pathway that includes the national Child Development Associate (CDA) and National Board Certification.<sup>2</sup>

## Exploring the feasibility of a national lead teacher certification

The Collaborative has been among advocates who support a national certification that centers equity with regards to access to certification and increased compensation. As a potential path towards improving teacher preparation, success would include increased lead teacher diversity, meaningful recognition for the work of early childhood educators and improved consistency of qualification requirements.

The Collaborative set out to assess stakeholder interest in developing such a certification by enlisting the [Council for Professional Recognition](#) (The Council) and the [National Board for Professional Teaching Standards](#) (NBPTS) to research the feasibility of a national certification for lead teachers. These partners were selected based on their extensive experience in competency-based credentialing and certifications.

Together, The Council and NBPTS produced “Elevating the ECE Educator Workforce: A Feasibility Study on the Viability of a National ECE Lead Teacher Certification.”<sup>3</sup> The goal of this study was to assess the feasibility of (i.e., demand and support for) developing a competency-based certification for educators working with children from birth to 8 years old.

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<sup>2</sup> The CDA is a professional development opportunity for early educators working with children ages birth to 5 years old to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities in the early childhood education field. The CDA credentialing program assesses Candidates using multiple sources evidence, including an exam, observation and professional portfolio. National Board Certification was designed to develop, retain and recognize accomplished teachers and to generate ongoing improvement in schools nationwide. It is the most respected professional certification available in K-12 education. Created by teachers, for teachers, NBPTS Standards represent a consensus among educators about what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do. Board certification is available in 25 certificate areas spanning 16 disciplines from Pre-K through 12th grade. Currently, the Council for Professional Recognition’s CDA is the only nationally portable credential in ECE (to ensure that all professional early childhood educators and caregivers worldwide meet the developmental, emotional, and educational needs of the youngest children), and it is geared specifically toward novice educators.

<sup>3</sup> To access the full study reports, please contact The Collaborative via the details provided on page 12.

## Study structure and participants

The approach to the study was designed to prioritize understanding of the perspectives of those most affected by such a credential (referred to as a national lead teacher certification - NLTC). These primary stakeholder perspectives were triangulated with the perspectives of other key stakeholders in the ECE field to provide a nuanced feasibility analysis.

The study collected and analyzed responses from 4,365 individuals: 101 via one-on-one and small-group interviews. Those interviewed included lead teachers, ECE program leaders, parents, policymakers, staff at colleges/universities involved in ECE-related programs, accreditation organization leaders, and labor union leaders. The interviews were supplemented by a national survey of six stakeholder groups (lead teachers, other early childhood educators, ECE program leadership, parents, policymakers, and staff at colleges/universities involved in ECE-related programs).

## Study Results

The study indicates that as respondents look toward the future of the ECE field with interest and support for an NLTC, they are considering what current conditions stand in the way of a successful certification program.

### Key learning

Study respondents identified low compensation and deep inequities within the field as obstacles that must be addressed in order to bring to life an NLTC that will truly benefit the workforce.

### Appetite for certification

The study revealed that respondents across all stakeholder groups overwhelmingly support the idea of an NLTC—and are willing to work for it.

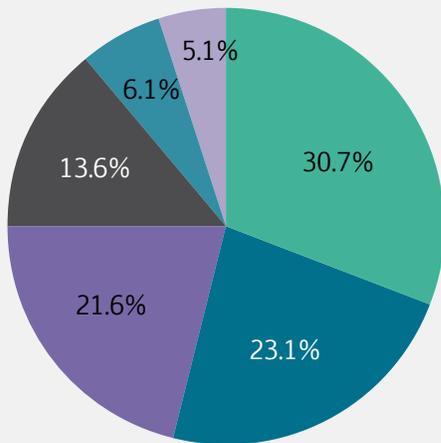
Nearly 3 in 4, (74%) of all surveyed educators, program leaders, IHE staff, and policymakers indicated they would be “very” or “extremely” supportive of an NLTC system that increased pay for educators.

Educators reported these levels of support at a rate slightly higher than the average across all groups (77%).

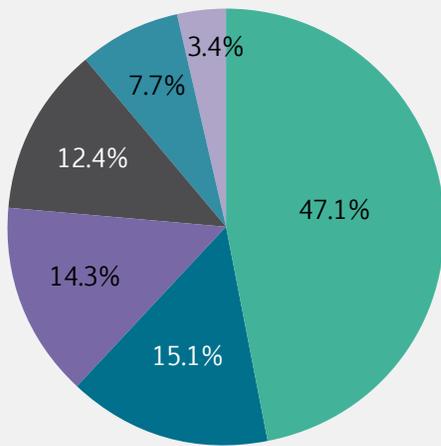
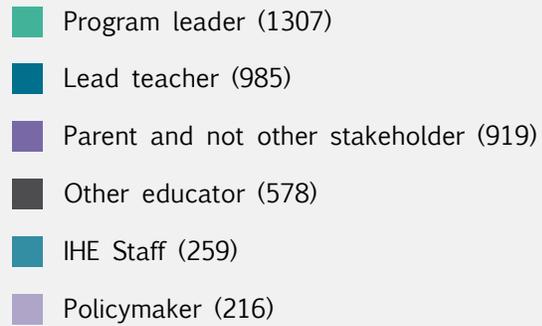
78% of educators reported a strong willingness to work toward an NLTC.

Across all stakeholder groups, very few were strongly not in favor of an NLTC (i.e., said it “definitely should not” exist).





### Total Survey Respondents by Stakeholder



### Race by Frontline Stakeholders Survey Respondents: Lead Teachers; Program Leaders, other Educators and Parents



### Interview Stakeholder Group Sample Sizes

	Stakeholder	Sample Size
<b>Frontline Stakeholders</b>	Lead Teachers	22 (3 Spanish)
	Early Childhood Program Leadership	25 (4 Spanish)
	Parents	20 (2 Spanish)
<b>System-Level Stakeholders</b>	Policymakers	21 (1 Spanish)
	IHE ECE Program Staff (Deans, Program Administrators, Faculty)	7 (1 Spanish)
	Accreditation Org. Leaders	3
	Labor Union Leaders	3



## Support for a focus on competencies

Many respondents highlighted the competency-based nature of the potential certification as a significant advantage in that it is designed to enable educators to acquire and demonstrate knowledge through real-world practice, rather than solely relying on exams.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees pointed out that a competency-based certification would help clarify the specific knowledge, skills and abilities required to effectively educate young children and provide educators with structured guidance and support through classroom-based experiences. Additionally, respondents appreciated that a competency-based certification would allow experienced educators to showcase their existing knowledge and skills.

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**“I think competencies are always the good metric to have, and that you can measure...[Y]ou can show when somebody is emerging and a skill that they’re doing well, or they just need more support and then you can dig in deeper.”**  
—Study participant

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<sup>4</sup> Alongside this feasibility study, The Collaborative also conducted a job analysis and competency modeling study using qualitative and quantitative methods to identify the professional requirements and activities associated with the role of ECE Lead Teacher and to develop a sample competency model. For more information, please contact The Collaborative via the details provided on page 12.

## Conditions for national certification success

Study respondents overwhelmingly highlighted a need to address current compensation and equity conditions in the ECE field before moving forward with an NLTC.

### Compensation

When stakeholders were asked to identify the most significant challenges and barriers to implementing an NLTC, they consistently highlighted three dimensions: cost, time commitment and staff coverage. It was widely agreed upon that a potential NLTC system should be accessible to educators at low or no cost. This consensus underscores the importance of financial assistance to ensure the successful implementation of the certification.

Some interviewees also raised the issue of wage increases for all early childhood educators, regardless of whether they pursue an NLTC. They believed that addressing compensation concerns is critical not only to facilitate the conditions for an eventual NLTC, but also to tackle existing inequities within the field. These interviewees suggested that improving wages should be prioritized before introducing an NLTC, as it would provide much-needed support to the field before introducing additional requirements.

The value of a certification without accompanying assurances of increased compensation, benefits, and opportunities for professional advancement was also raised as an issue. Without clear, tangible rewards, the certification may be viewed as lacking practical benefits, potentially diminishing its appeal and adoption among educators.

It is essential to recognize the intrinsic connection between compensation and credentialing, as both provide recognition for the work of early childhood educators. By addressing compensation concerns and enhancing professional development opportunities, we can work toward a more equitable and respected environment within early childhood education. A Nebraska IHE representative noted that focusing on an NLTC when educators are so under-compensated was an ill-advised emphasis.

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**“I am concerned that this lead teacher [certification] is going to take some money away from where we need the money to go,” they said, “...Who’s that money going to? We don’t have any cash. There is no cash. That money needs to go to the child care workers.” –Study participant**

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On average, **over half (56%) of surveyed stakeholders** reported that resultant increased pay would need to be a feature for the system to be feasible.

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**Only 43% of program leaders, IHE staff, and policy makers** said compensation would be “significantly” improved by an NLTC system, indicating the need to improve compensation first.

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Support for an NLTC resulting in increased pay for educators was high among educators; **nearly three in four (74%)** said they would be “very” or “extremely” supportive of an NLTC that increased pay for educators.

## Equity

During interviews, nearly all participants expressed concerns related to equity, particularly regarding equitable access to higher education, support and outcomes associated with an NLTC. They expected that educators will experience barriers to accessing information about NLTC certification, qualifying for programs, and securing resources and support to help them to fulfill NLTC requirements — all of which will shape who is ultimately able to experience the potential benefits of the certification. In addition, long hours, exhausting work and thin staffing structures make higher education inaccessible to many ECE workers. These barriers to accessing an NLTC will further exacerbate existing inequities in the field.

Stakeholders also raised questions about the potential effects of an NLTC in a field characterized by systemic racism and structural barriers. Concerns were voiced that the certification may primarily benefit white, advantaged teachers, exacerbating existing stratification within the ECE workforce and pushing out teachers of color. This concern stems from the reality that teachers from privileged backgrounds have greater access to resources, support and opportunities for professional growth, making it easier for them to meet the requirements of a certification.

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**“[...]I am worried about the demographic direction the field is already taking because we know that women of color who have historically been the backbone of the field are being phased out by white women who have the resources for their college degrees. But at the same time, I think that having an additional standard for lead teachers [...] would be valuable to children and families, so it’s all in that application, I guess, in making sure that there is a way to put this out into the field in as equitable a manner as possible.”**

**—Study participant**

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Addressing systemic equity barriers will be critical in ensuring the successful implementation of an NLTC program. Comprehensive efforts must be undertaken to promote diversity, equity and inclusion within the ECE workforce, ensuring that the NLTC does not perpetuate existing disparities but instead serves as a tool for promoting equity and quality in ECE.



## Applying Learnings from the Study

While the report results are illuminating, they represent a snapshot in time; data collection was completed in June 2021, before COVID-19 had dramatically exacerbated challenges in the ECE field. With the study results and the current realities of the workforce since COVID-19, it is important to take a step back and emphasize the enabling conditions, rather than proceeding to increasing the certification requirements in an already stretched field. The feasibility of an NLTC for early childhood educators is promising, but only when compensation and equity are effectively addressed.

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**“Let’s win infrastructure, let’s win investment, let’s win compensation, let’s address inequities and then we can think about diversifying the ways in which our educators and the teachers can choose to specialize or to deepen their course of practice.” –Study participant**

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The Collaborative is actively working to address equity and compensation challenges with our partners. Increasing compensation for the ECE workforce is core to The Collaborative’s mission—and the feasibility study’s results have only strengthened this commitment. [Our grantmaking program \(higher education partnership grants and compensation capacity-building grants\)](#) and other projects aim to address the systemic devaluing of ECE professionals, the systemic underfunding of the ECE sector (e.g., low compensation and inadequate benefits), and the inaccessibility of higher education pathways experienced by many early educators. If appropriate compensation is to be commensurate with professional

competencies that reflect the knowledge and skills required for this important work, dismantling racial inequities in preparation, compensation, and career progression must be intentional activities. It is possible to achieve equity and inclusion in the field while preserving the diversity of the existing workforce.

Through our higher education partnership grants we encourage our higher education and state systems partners to address structural barriers to ECE workforce preparation by supporting a variety of innovative recruitment and retention strategies. Through our compensation capacity-building grants, we encourage state and local systems partners to innovate financing systems to increase the compensation of the ECE workforce. We acknowledge that early educator compensation is a complex issue with many related components. Still, innovative financing approaches centered on the use of multiple funding streams to permit increased compensation in the immediate and long-term future — including the use of typical funds, atypical funds, one-time competitive grant funds, education funds and new revenue — will promote high-quality ECE.

The Collaborative aims to work with our partners to create an environment that supports the professional growth and success of all ECE educators, ultimately laying the foundation for a national certification program.





## Recommended Strategic Actions and Investments

The Collaborative encourages national, state and local partners to work to address the structural barriers to ECE workforce preparation and increased compensation through continued strategic actions.

**State and local governments** can advance greater investments in the workforce including scholarships for early educators to access higher education, loan forgiveness efforts, tax credits for early childhood educators, and universal pay increases.

**Institutions of higher education** should expand equitable access to higher education programs, including alternative course locations, times, and offerings and support for students with limited English proficiency and different learning needs.

**State and local governments** may leverage and implement innovative financing approaches centered on the use of multiple funding streams to fund high-quality ECE and increased compensation including the use of atypical funds, one-time competitive grant funds, education funds, and new revenue.

Some examples of atypical funds include Medicaid, and Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds.

**State and local governments** need to develop new financial mechanisms including the systematic use of contracts rather than child care assistance vouchers, and moving from a market rate based approach to calculating the cost of early childhood education services, to using a true cost care model with equitable compensation levels.

**Early childhood employers** may support paid release time for staff to access professional development and higher education courses, support high-quality, clinically based practicum and induction experiences at their sites, and partner with local apprenticeship programs to encourage staff attainment of higher credentials.

**Parents, caregivers and organizers** must advocate for greater public investment in order to increase compensation for the workforce.

# Study Leads



For more than 35 years, the Council for Professional Recognition (Council) has been at the forefront of the advancement and recognition of professionals in the field of early childhood education (ECE). In keeping with its goal to meet the growing need for qualified early child care and education staff, the Council administers and promotes the Child Development Associate® (CDA®) National Credentialing Program. The CDA® Program is designed to assess and credential early childhood education professionals. Through the CDA® Credential, the Council works to ensure that all professional early childhood educators and caregivers worldwide meet the developmental, emotional, and educational needs of the youngest children.



Established in 1987, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is an independent, nonprofit organization working to advance accomplished teaching for all students. NBPTS' mission is to advance the quality of teaching and learning by maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, and

providing a national voluntary system certifying teachers who meet these standards. NBPTS works with a broad range of partners, from teachers to leadership at the school, district, and state level, as well as nonprofits and funders who share NBPTS' vision and mission for the education profession.

## Acknowledgments

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Most significantly, The Collaborative would like to thank the thousands of stakeholders who participated in the research studies conducted by RFA and HumRRO.

## Contact

To access the full study reports, please contact The Collaborative.



[info@earlyedcollaborative.org](mailto:info@earlyedcollaborative.org)



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