

Chapter 15

Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential: A Competency–Based Framework for Workforce Development

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ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT The Child Development Associate® (CDA) is a nationally recognized credential based on demonstrated competencies widely understood to be essential for working with young children and accepted across the country as the foundational qualification for ECE educators. Since the creation of the CDA program in the early 1970s, the expansion of publicly funded early education programs and rising expectations for programs to address persistent gaps in developmental and educational outcomes for young children are shifting policy debates on educator qualifications. New degree mandates and program quality standards are presenting significant challenges for the field given its history of varied standards, low compensation, and a low skilled workforce with limited experience in postsecondary education. Despite these changes the competencies embedded in the CDA credentialing process remain the basis for new state and federal competency frameworks and career pathway systems to provide the workforce clearly articulated steps toward postsecondary degrees.

INTRODUCTION

Over forty years ago a national coalition of educators and advocates from a variety of professional educational associations and government agencies collaborated to develop the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™. Supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF), the goal of the Consortium was to design a

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training and credentialing process grounded in demonstrated competencies related to working with young children. The CDA was developed in response to two challenges that were facing the field in the early 1970s—the need for staff working directly with young children to improve their knowledge and skills and the need to improve overall program quality to influence positive outcomes for children and their families (Council for Professional Recognition, 2013; Klein & Williams, 1973). From its inception, the CDA was built upon a foundation of competencies developed and agreed upon by a task force of early childhood education (ECE) specialists and other child advocates. Through this process, the field made the explicit decision to adopt a competency-based approach to enhance educator preparation (Hutchinson, 1991; Ward, 1976). As Klein and Williams (1973) observed, “traditional teacher certification is based on college degrees or course hours completed; whereas, the CDA credential is based on actual performance with children” (p. 143).

Forty years later, at a time when policymakers and parents have increasing expectations for early education to reverse deeply entrenched gaps in educational, social and developmental outcomes for young children, the ECE field is still struggling to address the dual challenges of program quality standards and staff qualifications. As public funding for early education expands, state and federal policies are supporting non-traditional educator qualifications, including bachelor degrees, for all lead teachers. These expectations present significant challenges for a field built upon a decentralized system of formal and informal program types and standards, and large numbers of low skilled workers with widely varying knowledge and skills. Through these changes, the CDA competencies have remained the most frequently accessed standard for entry level educators and have shaped the development of state and federal competency frameworks that are designed to align professional development systems and career pathways for ECE educators (Bassok, Fitzpatrick, Loeb, & Paglayan, 2013; Cantigny Conference Report, 2004; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011).

This chapter provides an overview of the CDA credential as a model of competency-based education that represents a critical part of a broader workforce development system for ECE educators. The CDA credential plays multiple roles in this system. First, it is a nationally recognized credential considered the “Best First Step” for individuals entering the field that is based on their mastery of competencies that are considered essential for working with young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2014). Given its long standing in the field, the CDA has been integrated into states’ licensing requirements for ECE programs as a baseline quality standard and has market value for individual workers. Second, through both formal and informal partnerships with institutions of higher education (IHEs), the CDA has been an entry point to postsecondary education for many nontraditional students—low income, adult workers, immigrants, and English language learners (ELLs)—who work in early education settings. Articulation agreements and credit-bearing training options built into many CDA preparation programs provide a mechanism of transition for adult learners into postsecondary programs of study. Finally, the CDA credential occupies a foundational step in articulated career pathways for ECE educators that provide transparent and progressive credentials, coursework and training along a pathway to higher education degrees.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The focus of early childhood education as it relates to the CDA consists of any program or activity intended to provide a developmental experience for young children from birth-to-five years old before they

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