

Understanding and Aligning with the Unifying Framework

Updated: May 2023

Introduction

When educators' autonomy and expertise are being undermined and undervalued, it underscores the importance of having a strong, supported, and unified early childhood education profession. In response to current attacks on educator autonomy; in anticipation of future threats; in the wake of the devastation of the pandemic; and in building on decades of leadership, research, and advocacy, we urge educators, advocates, and policymakers to look to the consensus *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession* to serve as a roadmap for supporting and investing in early childhood educators, in order solve the challenges of access, quality, and, above all, compensation.

The educators and organizational leaders who comprise the Commission on Professional Excellence believe that our society cannot go back to a broken child care and early learning system that does not work for children, families, educators, or businesses. Taking steps to implement and align with the Unifying Framework is an opportunity for the ECE workforce – as other workforces have done – to decide and determine *for ourselves* who early childhood educators are, what we will be held accountable for, and what supports and resources are needed to ensure success.

States are choosing to pursue alignment with the Unifying Framework where it helps them advance towards a shared goal of a straightforward, fair, clear, aligned, and coordinated system that supports a diverse, equitable, well-prepared, and well-compensated ECE workforce. For example, states are:

- Centering the voices of educators working in all settings, including centers, schools, and homes
- Investing in higher education faculty and accreditation
- Adopting and aligning with the Professional Standards and Competencies
- Contributing to building seamless pathways for students
- Supporting credit for prior learning and experience policies
- Increasing compensation, through wages and benefits
- Creating compensation scales and cost of quality studies that are aligned with the Unifying Framework's professional pathways

As the Commission on Professional Excellence and partner organization members continue working on key elements that will be necessary for full implementation of the Unifying Framework, advocates at federal and state levels continue to push for prioritized, sustainable, substantial investments in child care and early learning.

To learn more about the recommendations offered by the consensus Unifying Framework, review the [full document](#) or [Executive Summary](#).

What are the key focus areas of the Unifying Framework’s major recommendations?

With underlying goals of clarity, simplicity, equity, reciprocity, and transparency, key focus areas include:

1) *One distinct profession, three designations*

- The Unifying Framework recommends a structure in which the current complexity of labels and roles in early childhood education, is simplified to establish three distinct and meaningful designations – Early Childhood Educator I, II, and III – who make up the early childhood education profession, and are responsible for caring for and promoting the learning, development, and well-being of children birth through age 8 across all states and settings.

2) *Aligned professional preparation pathways*

- To promote seamless pathways and ease of articulation and transfer, the Unifying Framework recommends establishing a primary set of pathways, aligned with the leveled Professional Standards and Competencies, to prepare early childhood educators for licensure at the ECE I, II, and III designations.

3) *Professional compensation*

- As early childhood educators are professionally prepared, so they must be professionally compensated, inclusive of wages and benefits, with increases that are commensurate with increased preparation and competency; and with parity and comparability, regardless of what ages of children they serve and whether they work in a community-based center, elementary school, or family child care home.

4) *Supportive infrastructure and shared accountability*

- The Unifying Framework recommends a more coherent early childhood system with consistent accountability and accessible, coordinated supports and resources, in which everyone has a role to play in creating conditions for educators to be effective, valued, and autonomous in their practice.

What does the Unifying Framework mean by “defining a profession”? Aren’t early childhood educators already professionals?

- Many educators are indeed “professionals” in their practice—while operating without the supports and structures of a real “profession.”
- Established professions — such as nurses, architects, speech-language pathologists, architects, and accountants — are built on a shared purpose, common identity, and agreement on the unique responsibilities and ethical standards for their work. From this foundation, they establish and update skills and competencies, build career pathways, strengthen preparation programs, and determine compensation.
- The *Unifying Framework* sets the foundation to bring this type of professional unity to the ECE profession for educators serving children birth through age 8.

What might alignment with the Unifying Framework mean for an educator who wants to be part of the “early childhood education” profession?

- As states consider aligning with the recommendations, anyone in that state who is working with young children, birth through age 8, has the potential to be considered an “early childhood educator” if he or she is working in a licensed or regulated early childhood education program. This includes those working in public and private centers, schools, and family child care homes.
- In the early childhood education profession of the future, a distinct profession in the early childhood field, early childhood educators at all designation levels must meet the guidelines established by the profession (i.e., complete a preparation program designated by the profession; obtain and maintain an individual license to practice) and be accountable for their daily practice with all children, including:
 1. Planning and implementing intentional, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that promote the social-emotional development, physical development, health, cognitive development, and general learning competencies of each child served;
 2. Establishing and maintaining a safe, caring, inclusive, and healthy learning environment;
 3. Observing, documenting, and assessing children’s learning and development using guidelines established by the profession;
 4. Developing reciprocal, culturally responsive relationships with families and communities;
 5. Advocating for the needs of children and their families;
 6. Advancing and advocating for an equitable, diverse, and effective early childhood education profession that is well-compensated; and
 7. Engaging in reflective practice and continuous learning

What if someone in the early childhood field doesn’t want to be part of the ECE profession?

- The early childhood education profession, as defined in the Unifying Framework, is only one part of a much wider, and highly valued early childhood field.
- The Unifying Frameworks’ explicit and stated goal is that those working directly with young children will have the resources and supports they need to meet the requirements for being an “early childhood educator,” as well as the resulting and increased compensation.
- However, even if they have equitable access to all of those supports and compensation increases, some individuals who work directly with young children, particularly in family, friend, and neighbor care (FFN) and/or in non-licensed settings, may choose to care for young children without meeting the guidelines of the early childhood education profession. They will remain part of the early childhood education field, but they are not the primary focus of our recommendations for the early childhood education profession within that field.
- In other words, while all workers should have a livable, family-sustaining wage, the recommendations in the Unifying Framework, including qualifications and compensation, apply to individuals who meet the standards and guidelines of the profession.

Does the Unifying Framework say that everyone has to earn a bachelor's degree?

- No. The audacious vision in the Unifying Framework aligns with the Institute of Medicine's seminal [Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8](#) report in establishing a far-in-the-future vision in which all educators with lead responsibilities across settings and age bands are prepared at the ECE III (bachelor's degree in early childhood education) designation.
- However, the recommendations put forth in this first edition of the Unifying Framework recognize the reality and challenges the field faces today, elevate the value of multiple preparation programs, and move the profession forward on an intentional, supportive path.
- That path includes establishing a primary set of preparation pathways, aligned to the three designation levels of the profession as outlined in the [Professional Standards and Competencies](#). All represent an organized early childhood education program of study, but with different requirements, and each of these pathways will prepare students for professional licensure at the associated designation level, offering field experience and preparing students to pass required licensure assessments.
 - *Early Childhood Education Certificate/Credential Programs (ECE I)*: These programs are a minimum 120 clock hours. ECE I completers may meet the educational requirements for industry-recognized national credentials and other portable credentials.
 - *Early Childhood Education Associate Degree Programs (ECE II)*: An associate degree is at least 60 credit hours of college-level coursework.
 - *Early Childhood Education Bachelor's Degree Programs (ECE III)*: A bachelor's degree is at least 120 credit hours of college-level coursework OR *Early Childhood Education Master's Degree Programs for initial preparation (ECE III)*: Initial-level master's degree programs are designed for individuals with non-early childhood education bachelor's degrees.

The recommendations do increase the expectations for some early childhood educators who don't currently have a degree or credential. I am concerned that some educators, particularly those from communities of color, from rural communities, and those who speak a language other than English, will have a difficult time meeting these recommendations. Do these recommendations have different expectations for educators from different communities?

- No. The Unifying Framework is constructed based on a shared value that all individuals have the capacity to meet increased preparation and practice expectations, in spite of the continued existence of institutional barriers such as racism, sexism, classism, elitism, and bias, *provided* (a) they have equitable access to the resources they need to be successful and (b) decision-makers create funded policies to mitigate and remove those structural and systemic barriers.
- Funded pathways and supports – including sufficient grace periods for requirements, exemption policies for some, higher education coursework in languages other than English, and affordable, equitable access to credit for prior learning and experience – are absolutely necessary in order to ensure that all educators who want to be a part of the early childhood education profession have a valued and meaningful place in it.

How do individuals currently working in the ECE field without a credential or degree fit in? What about those with a different, or unrelated degree?

- The Framework recommendations and requirements must be phased in over time and in an intentional manner that does not push out our educators already bringing value and experience to programs and who are committed to the profession.
- While establishing these pathways and professional licensure systems, as the Commission's legislative language begins to do, states must simultaneously establish a process in which they implement policies that exempt some current educators (including those that do not hold ECE related credentials and degrees) from the licensure process, for some period of time.
- In addition, states are strongly urged to adopt and implement policies that offer flexible approaches to demonstrating competence, such as credit for prior learning and experience, and align those pathways back to the core professional pathways, so that educators whose competence is recognized through these pathways earn equivalent compensation at the appropriate designation.
- States may also choose to recognize educators who have completed a different preparation pathway, such as those without ECE degrees but with Montessori credentials, as equivalent to the appropriate designation level.

Who else is included in the early childhood education profession?

- The early childhood education profession also includes the professional preparation faculty and trainers who are preparing early childhood educators as well as the pedagogical and instructional administrators in early learning programs.
- It is anticipated that individuals preparing early childhood educators or in instructional and pedagogical leadership roles must be prepared as early childhood educators before assuming these leadership responsibilities.
- However, because it was outside the scope of the Power to the Profession Task Force to determine specific recommendations for these groups with regard to qualifications, responsibilities, and competencies, the Commission on Professional Excellence will address these areas in the future.

Staffing is already so difficult in child care programs. How will implementation of the Unifying Framework help solve this challenge?

- By supporting and advancing a profession that current and prospective early childhood educators want to be a part of.
- Policymakers may try to address child care supply issues by undoing regulations that are in place to protect children's health and safety, as well as educator well-being.
- A strong, unified early childhood education profession can push back on these efforts and instead push policymakers to secure needed investments that support important safety and quality assurances – as nurses and other professions do in their contexts.

It sounds like a lot of the implementation work aligned with the Unifying Framework has to do with higher education and professional preparation systems. What is the professional preparation vision in the Unifying Framework?

- That there is wide and unbiased access to professional preparation pathways that allow prospective and current early childhood educators to efficiently complete their preparation credentials.
- That completers of programs are confident that they are prepared in the *Professional Standards and Competencies* and are ready to meet their expected scopes of practice.
- That professional preparation programs are provided the resources they need – resources to support faculty, resources to support program design and delivery that are responsive to students, resources to support quality assurance efforts such as professional accreditation, resources to offer quality ECE field experiences - to effectively prepare early childhood educators to support young children’s learning and development.

As states move to align with the Unifying Framework, and when supports are increased, what will professional preparation programs have to do?

- ECE professional preparation programs will have meet certain requirements to be considered an approved preparation program for licensure.
- Programs will need to align their coursework, assessments, and programs of study with the [*Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators*](#).
- Programs will need to ensure that completers of their program are prepared to demonstrate their mastery of these standards and competencies, at the articulated, leveled area of depth and breadth, where ECE associate and baccalaureate programs are valued for what they do well.
- All programs will need to attain accreditation or recognition from an early childhood accreditation or recognition body.

Will families, educators, and program owners have to pay for all of this? Where is the funding for increased compensation coming from?

- Significant and sustained public investment directed toward the compensation and preparation of early childhood educators is the best way to improve outcomes for children and their families. The costs cannot be borne by families or early childhood educators.
- The pandemic has demonstrated the extent to which child care is an essential component for a functional, equitable economy, and must therefore be supported as the public good it is.
- Funding will have to come from state and federal governments, with the vast majority coming from the federal government, which should be the financial backbone of the profession. Specific policy recommendations, sequences, and levers to achieve increased investments directed towards the workforce is a priority part of the implementation efforts and will be essential for rebuilding the child care and early learning sector in our country.