

## Arizona's Early Childhood System of Degrees and Credentials

### A Critical Component of a Comprehensive Professional Development System

The best hope of improving educational outcomes is to substantially strengthen the skills and capabilities of those who educate our youngest children, but in Arizona, there is no clear matriculation path for early educators. Teachers for Birth - 5 children face a fragmented system that often results in taking more courses than would normally be required in a four year degree program. A statewide group of early childhood stakeholders, convened by First Things First and functioning as a working group of The BUILD Initiative, recommend two high-leverage goals to streamline the early childhood higher education system: <sup>1</sup>

- Develop an **Associates of Arts in Early Childhood Education Degree (AAECE)** that can be implemented at any Arizona community college. The AAECE would provide an opportunity for students to learn much needed child development and early childhood content early in their degree program.
- Adopt or develop an early childhood **Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)** that is eligible for college credit. The PLA would allow students to receive college credit for existing knowledge and is an important and often overlooked strategy for helping adults progress towards a degree.

### What is an Associate's of Arts in Early Childhood Education (AAECE) Degree?

The **Associate of Arts in Early Childhood Education (AAECE) degree** is designed for students who plan to transfer to four-year colleges and universities without a loss of credit. The AAECE would combine foundational early childhood coursework with Arizona's General Education Curriculum (AGEC). The AAECE would also meet the requirements of the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, an entry level credential for early childhood professionals, as well as the specific requirements of each Arizona community college and university. The AAECE would transfer as a block, without loss of credit, to Arizona's public universities, providing a way to transfer without losing college credit. This means, generally, that AAECE transfer students can begin work on their specialized, major-area coursework as soon as they transfer from any Arizona community college to any ABOR university. <sup>2</sup>

### What is a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)?

A **Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)** is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom, including employment, military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service. The PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives, and may make education more affordable and take less time. PLA students have better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned. Institutions may use several different PLA methods in order to award credit for prior learning. <sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Arizona Early Childhood Development and Health Board (First Things First). (2013). *Arizona's Unknown Education Issue: Early Learning Workforce Trends*. Phoenix, AZ: First Things First.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved May 14, 2013 from <http://www.aztransfer.com/aztransfer/associates/>

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved May 14, 2013 from [http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA\\_Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA_Executive-Summary.pdf)

## Why does Arizona need an AAECE and PLA?

Unlike the K-12 public school and higher education's systems, Arizona has no system-wide credentials for educators working with children Birth-5. Early Childhood Educators should be able to plan a sequence of increasing career achievements and have an understanding of the professional possibilities associated with professional growth. Establishing the AAECE and PLA will streamline the pipeline through Arizona's complex higher education system and ensure that more students can successfully matriculate.

## What is the Status of the Early Childhood Workforce in Arizona?

Arizona's view of our growing early childhood workforce as a critical component of quality early learning has not kept up with our increased expectations for young kids. The latest research shows that in Arizona, those working with kids at their most critical stage of brain development are poorly paid and struggle to attain higher education, both critical components of hiring and retaining the best teachers. Data from the 2012 *Early Care and Education Workforce Survey* suggest that Arizona's early childhood workforce should continue to be supported to ensure high-quality, well-prepared, fairly compensated professionals. Recommended approaches include:<sup>4</sup>

- State-level policy changes and programs like Professional REWARD\$ that provide incentives and supports for early care and education professionals should continue to be supported and expanded as appropriate.
- A State of Arizona registry system should be developed and improvements in quality and availability of data on Arizona's early childhood teachers should be supported.
- Early childhood coursework and degrees should have clear articulation, and educational pathways should be streamlined to remove obstacles to degree attainment.
- Policies and programs such as T.E.A.C.H. that provide incentives and supports for degree attainment should continue to be supported and expanded as appropriate.
- Policy changes should be made so that child care subsidies currently provided through federal funds to help low-income children access early learning programs may only be used in quality early learning settings. The amount of the subsidy should reflect the actual cost of providing quality early learning to young kids, including the cost of hiring highly skilled educators.

## How Are Other States Addressing Early Childhood Degrees and Credentials?

1. **New Mexico:** All associate and baccalaureate degree programs share a common, state approved, course title and numbering system with statewide transfer agreement.
2. **California:** Legislative mandate for Curriculum Alignment Project to develop eight common "lower division" courses that will transfer into CA University system.
3. **North Carolina:** All associate degree programs share a common, state approved, course title and numbering system. Universities do not share common courses.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved May 14, 2013 from <http://www.azftf.gov/WhoWeAre/Board/Documents/FTF-CCReport.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Lutton, A. (2013, February). Building a Profession: Standards, Credentials & Portability. Lecture conducted from Arizona Early Childhood Education Career Pathway Faculty Meeting, Phoenix, AZ.