



REACHING FOR THE STARS:

The CDA® and Quality Rating
and Improvement Systems
in the States

“I truly enjoy working with children,” an educator said in response to a recent survey of the Idaho early childhood workforce. “I feel my purpose is to touch someone’s life and help them learn something new, so I go to work with an open heart and mind.” She also goes there with the skills she needs to connect with children and their family members because the state is giving her the right support and training. “I am currently taking a course through IdahoSTARS,” she added, “to attain my Child Development Associate (CDA®) credential.”¹

THE KEY ROLE OF THE WORKFORCE IN QRIS

Idaho, along with most states, recognizes the CDA credential as a benchmark of value in its quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for early care and education. The CDA, as many state officials understand, is an essential building block that guides professional growth for early childhood educators within QRIS systems nationwide. Administered by the Council for Professional Recognition for more than 35 years, the CDA provides the structured way to assess, enhance and communicate the level of safety,

competence and responsiveness in early care and education settings that QRIS systems desire.² When educators choose to earn a CDA, they set out on a path of continuous learning and quality improvement.³

QRIS systems typically offer a rating system that can guide parents in finding the best services for their children and help educators reach their potential. Under a QRIS system, child care and early childhood education programs receive more stars — like restaurants or hotels — as they meet progressively higher standards on key components of the system: interpersonal interactions; physical environment; program support structure; effective leadership; comprehensive family engagement activities; age-appropriate curriculum — and, most crucial of all, a professional early childhood education workforce.

There’s widespread consensus that educators play a key role in children’s lives by giving them emotional support, responding to their developmental needs and teaching and encouraging them to explore new concepts.⁴ Early educators equipped with verified comprehensive training that’s demonstrated by a credential such as the CDA offer richer learning environments and have warmer interactions with children. They also produce higher ratings for their programs or program settings since QRIS systems consider the qualifications of the caregivers when awarding stars.

The states use this information to support parents by providing quality ratings parents can use to find care and education settings with competent, experienced staff. And setting rigorous standards for credentials also benefits the early childhood education workforce by encouraging them to take

their careers to a higher level, such as one director of a child care center in Kentucky.

“I came into the center with no education,” she said. “I got my CDA through Kentucky All Stars (the state’s QRIS) and now I’m 22 hours from getting my bachelor’s degree.”⁵

A COMMON COMMITMENT TO QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATION

Earning a CDA credential helped her rise in her profession because it’s embedded in more than half of state systems. At their core, QRIS systems and the Council for Professional Recognition have the same purpose: to define and advance the quality of early childhood educators, the programs in which they work and the entire early care and education field.⁶

They also share the goal of making quality education available to all children, including those who have special needs or come from immigrant households.⁷ As the U.S. population grows ever more diverse, states are becoming more sensitive to the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the children they serve. In Indiana, for example, the QRIS guidelines now include meeting the needs of dual-language learners, an objective that has long been a cornerstone of the CDA.⁸

It’s also a concern of the Council for Professional Recognition, which supports CDA credentialing in whatever language candidates use in child care and education settings. To date, the Council has worked with CDA candidates in 25 languages — including world languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin and sign language, along

with those for more specific populations, such as Navajo and Yup’ik. The latter is spoken among Alaska’s Eskimos and Aleuts. But no matter what language they speak, educators must gain certain competencies to earn a CDA credential. And these competencies are highly valued in QRIS systems.

Michigan’s Great Start to Quality, for example, requires educators to have training in eight content areas drawn directly from the Council’s CDA requirements:

- Planning a safe and healthy learning environment
- Advancing children’s physical and intellectual development
- Supporting children’s social and emotional development
- Building productive relationships with families
- Managing an effective program
- Maintaining a commitment to professionalism
- Observing and recording children’s behavior
- Understanding principles of child development and learning.⁹

The criteria for the CDA credential also are in sync with standards for assessing child care and education settings in the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale, a framework for QRIS systems.¹⁰ And state officials have acknowledged the strong foundation of the CDA in the way they rate early child care and education settings, give scholarships and other financial incentives to providers and foster development of the early childhood workforce.

Educators, who often work very long days, need flexible training options that suit their

schedule, as both QRIS systems and the Council acknowledge. The states allow educators to get the training they need in several ways: adult education classes, college courses, distance learning and in-service training.¹¹ The Council also accommodates this busy, dedicated workforce by permitting educators to complete the 120 hours of required coursework either online or in class before they get the 480 hours of experience needed to earn the credential. At this point, some educators who work in a role that doesn't require a college degree might choose to end their education. Most are encouraged to see their CDA credential as an entry ramp that guides them into the early childhood education field, then onward to the next professional credential or degree — often with funding from the state.¹²

Take the case of Florinda Sowell, an Idaho educator who earned her CDA credential and went on to earn her associate and bachelor's degrees. The experience taught her that “I must be in charge of my professional growth,” she said. “If I show the initiative to get more training and get involved in professional activities, the state will support me financially. Opportunities for professional development are available to me.”¹³

Those with a CDA can make a real impact on the quality of care and education that children receive, as states recognize in their standards for early childhood education staff. Assistant teachers, who generally spend as much time with children as lead teachers, typically need a CDA credential.¹⁴ In Tennessee, the highest-quality rating of triple stars requires half of educators to have three years of early childhood experience and documentation of enrollment in a CDA training program.¹⁵ Similarly, New Jersey centers can't reach the highest rating of five stars unless 50 percent

of their teaching staff has a CDA.¹⁶ Oregon's QRIS program, called Spark, requires most staff in three-, four- and five-star programs to have a CDA.¹⁷ And at least one teacher in every classroom must have a CDA for Alabama centers to get four out of five stars.¹⁸

PROGRAMS TO PROMOTE QUALITY INCLUDE THE CDA®

Elsewhere, plans are underway to expand the role of the CDA. In Washington, DC, the CDA will be a requirement for all assistant teachers by December 2019.¹⁹ In Louisiana, the CDA qualifies educators for an early childhood ancillary certificate, which will be required for lead teachers at the end of June 2019.²⁰ In Pennsylvania, Keystone Stars will put more emphasis on the CDA over the next 10 years by requiring 25 percent of teachers to have a CDA or higher for providers to earn a four-star rating.²¹ And in several states, strategic partnerships have produced promising efforts to expand the CDA workforce.

There's an especially vigorous CDA program in Alabama, where the Council for Professional Recognition and the state's department of early education have partnered to recruit early childhood professionals with CDAs. Together, they also worked to identify opportunities for high school students to enter the early childhood field by earning a CDA. And the joint endeavor produced results, according to Jeana Ross, secretary of the department.²²

“Our First-Class Pre-K program has been among the nation's best for quality for more than a decade,” she said, “in part because of our emphasis on recruiting a workforce

Plans also are ongoing to promote the CDA in Alaska, where the Council has partnered with the state's QRIS, Learn and Grow. The goals of the state's three-year development plan for its early childhood workforce include giving them more opportunities to earn a CDA, especially in rural locales, more access to mentors and more CDA PD Specialists for

Some young people in Arizona already have earned their CDA through secondary school Career and Technical Education (CTE); they are on the road to success, thanks to a partnership between Coconino Community College, the Arizona Department of Early Education and other agencies in the state. Their joint efforts have opened avenues for high schoolers such as Helene Curtis, who enrolled in the early childhood class as a sophomore elective.

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“I really enjoyed the opportunity to work with young children and earn a CDA credential,” she said. “I plan to attend Coconino Community College to further my education and become a preschool teacher. This program gave me a head start in my college and career preparation.”²⁶

There will be more hopeful young folks like her in Michigan, where the CDA is an accepted credential for lead teachers. Last year, the state partnered with five community colleges to offer online CDA courses, including some with infant-toddler content, that will be transferable to an associate degree. The state also targeted some of the new classes toward home-based child care providers, who serve the majority of special-needs children and worked with T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood, a nationwide initiative that supports early educators in earning college credit for their CDA coursework.²⁷ Michigan’s QRIS, Great Start to Quality, joined in the effort by identifying home-based providers to make up the program’s first cohort.²⁸

The members of this pioneering group included Elizabeth Hall, a mom who had begun a Family Child Care program to help support her family. Her entrepreneurial venture turned into a career pathway after she learned about the CDA.

“I loved every minute of it,” Hall said. “I feel like it fills a need because it allows child care providers to get a college education and to do it in a time frame that works.”

It also left her with a stronger grasp of the state’s quality standards, as she explained.

“The CDA program gives you a reason why you are asked to do all the things Great Start to Quality asks and why the curriculum is the way it is,” Hall said. “You start learning and it’s like a light bulb turns on.”²⁹

AN INVESTMENT THAT PAYS OFF

Many educators such as Hall are seeing the light because QRIS systems offer them financial incentives for ramping up their skills. Providers can take advantage of bonuses and tax credits tied to quality levels, merit quality grants or awards and professional development opportunities linked to QRIS participation. QRIS systems also fund scholarships for tuition, and they favor programs that lead to national accreditation — such as the CDA.³⁰

In Delaware, for example, T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood provides scholarships for those who want to work toward a CDA and helps them get the college credits required to meet the educational standards of Delaware Stars, the state’s QRIS. The program is “an integral part of our professional development system” and “the single most important initiative to increase the quality of early childhood programs in the state,” the Delaware Early Childhood Council noted in a report to the governor and Legislature on the progress made to answer the needs of Delaware’s young.³¹

Like Delaware, other states are investing in the CDA because it’s an investment that pays off in quality returns. In California, experts from the American Institutes for Research and RAND compared educators who had earned their CDAs through T.E.A.C.H. funding with educators who didn’t get the credential. The researchers found that the educators with CDAs made greater gains on the state’s environmental rating scales and were more likely to engage in developmentally appropriate practice with children.³² But you don’t have to be an analyst from an eminent

think tank to see the difference a CDA makes and know that it's worth supporting.

In Louisiana, the motto of the State Department of Education is "Louisiana Believes." And Louisiana really does have good reasons for believing in the CDA. After the state gave a tax credit to CDA holders, more educators earned the credential, more child care centers participated in QRIS — and more families used rated programs.³³

In Utah, the Office of Child Care has gotten so much positive feedback about the CDA, especially from the Spanish-speaking community, that it's giving the credential more funding and support in July 2019.³⁴ Independently, Utah educators have enthused that "I was able to improve my daily teaching activities with children," that "it made a difference when I received my CDA" and that "families now have more respect for my professionalism and dedication to help their children develop."³⁵

The benefits of the CDA inspired Pathways to Quality, Indiana's QRIS, to launch a Non-Formal CDA project, which provides scholarships for books and training.³⁶ The state's Office of Early Childhood and Out-of-School Learning (OECOSL) supports the CDA, saying, "Young children's learning and development depend on the educational qualifications of their teachers."³⁷ And the state saw that the CDA produced results when several educators gathered in the northern and central parts of the state to earn their CDA in Spanish. The class allowed individual students to boost their skills and whole programs to raise their ratings, said Amy Torres, Hispanic Provider Support Manager for Early Learning Indiana, who directed the program. "There are three sites that will be advancing to Level 3 very soon and two sites that have already moved to Level 2."³⁸

PROVIDING A PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

The CDA also allows people who want to work in the early childhood field to take their career to a higher level. And the states are helping because QRIS systems encourage workforce development through coaching, technical assistance, improved compensation and college coursework.³⁹ A number of states, including New York, Pennsylvania Oregon, Virginia, New Jersey and Indiana, already are helping CDA students get ahead by forming articulation agreements with community colleges. The agreements let students gain college credits for their CDA coursework, so they can later put it toward an associate degree in early childhood education.⁴⁰

More steps on the path from high school to a solid career come from Maryland in its master plan for developing the early childhood workforce. The state advocates:

- Working with high schools to align their early childhood career and technical education (CTE) program standards with CDA requirements, many of which are already in sync with the course content of community college early childhood programs
- Encouraging high schools to work with community colleges in tracking the number of high schoolers who earn post-secondary credits each year in early childhood education
- Providing career mentoring and intense support to help students in CTE child-development programs navigate career pathways and opportunities for further education
- Expanding opportunities for CTE students to interface with mentors through paid and

unpaid internships within their local high school settings.⁴¹

Most important of all is to give educators the resources and tools they need to provide a rich early learning environment, according to JoAnn Clarey, coordinator for the CDA Enhanced Experience in New Orleans. In this role, she helped build the Bayou State's first ancillary certificate program, based on the environmental rating scales, Louisiana's birth to 5 early learning guidelines and the CDA Competency Standards. The group sessions Clarey led included coaching, assessment, feedback and demonstrations of activities, along with lively discussions, she recalled.⁴²

And as Clarey looked back on the first year of the program, she found it one of the most rewarding in a long career.

"Relationships were built, meals shared, songs were sung, props were made and demonstrated, pictures taken," she remembered fondly, though she admitted having some concerns. "At first, we worried that this model wasn't working, until during coaching visits and small group professional learning circles, we noticed teachers practicing strategies picked up in class and speaking with developmentally appropriate language. Wow! What more could we ask for? They are on their way to becoming more successful, confident teachers, benefiting countless children and families in the future."⁴³

Clarey knows, as many states also acknowledge, that the CDA is a signpost on the road to ensuring quality care and education for the youngest children. The states have shown it by funding the credential, forming partnerships to support it and making growing use of it in their rating systems. Educators who earn a CDA can

raise their centers' ratings and build a strong foundation for their own success. The CDA lets them reach for the stars in their careers.

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