



Apprenticeships: A new pathway for early childhood professionals

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Early childhood care and education keeps Nebraska parents engaged and productive in the workforce. Yet challenges remain in recruiting and retaining skilled child care staff statewide. To help remedy these challenges, stakeholders in Nebraska are developing registered apprenticeships for early childhood professionals.

Apprenticeship programs blend classroom instruction with on-the-job training, leading to higher pay, postsecondary credentials/degrees and recognized industry skillsets.

Key Points

- ▶ Apprenticeships are becoming an effective pathway to preparing and training future early childhood professionals.
- ▶ 35 states have regional or statewide early childhood apprenticeships, and another seven states, including Nebraska, are developing them.
- ▶ Early childhood apprenticeships can lead to increases in pay, development of relevant industry skills and postsecondary credentials and/or degrees, making this field more attractive to up-and-coming talent.

An emerging trend for a quality ECE workforce

Nebraska's early care and education (ECE) workforce plays an essential role in cultivating the next generation of healthy, capable Nebraskans. A quality early care and education system is essential infrastructure to ensure a fully engaged and productive workforce. Providing quality education and training pathways for ECE professionals serves as a valuable recruitment tool. To prepare the next generation of professionals in high-quality early care and education, an emerging trend across the country is the development of Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAP).

Over the past decade, new apprentices and the number of states utilizing the apprenticeship model for training and instruction of the ECE workforce have doubled.¹ According to a 2023 report from the Bipartisan Policy Center, 35 states now have regional or statewide registered early childhood professional apprenticeships. Another seven states, including Nebraska, are currently developing such programs.² To be considered a RAP, programs must blend workplace training with classroom instruction, include an experienced mentor for the apprentice and register with the U.S. Department of Labor or a federally recognized state apprenticeship agency.

There are many pathways into the field for early childhood professionals. The requirements for jobs vary by setting and funding source. A community child care center may employ a lead teacher with a high school diploma and a Child Development Associate (CDA®) credential, while a Head Start program may employ a lead teacher with an associate or bachelor's degree. Career and technical education programs are an essential part of the early care and education infrastructure because they provide pipelines to increase the number of early childhood professionals.

Career & Technical Education strengthens ECE apprenticeships

RAPs for the early childhood workforce exist within the broader context of Career & Technical Education (CTE), which blends academic and industry-led, skills-based modes of instruction or training. Within this broad context, educational institutions work in partnership with employers to help students explore an interest in the ECE profession and prepare for the workforce. To align curriculum with industry standards and work-based learning opportunities, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) oversees many elements of CTE programs within K-12 schools and coordinates efforts with community college CTE programs.

Career & Technical Education in secondary schools

- ▶ *State Model Program of Study Standards*: NDE issues State Model Program of Study Standards for career field areas that focus on skill development, including Early Childhood Development and Child, Youth and Family Services.
- ▶ *Rule 47 Career Academy*: High-school based program designed to reflect a need for career clusters identified by the community. These programs meet the requirements of Rule 47 by ensuring quality standards and operational guidelines for career academy programs are met. Students gain employer-driven technical skills, workplace experience and relevant academic experience. As of the 2023-24 fiscal year, five Rule 47 Career Academies offer the Early Childhood Education and Services Program of Study.³
- ▶ *Career & Technical Student Organization (CTSO)*: Continuation of academic and technical instruction outside the classroom using real-world application. Incentivizes participation through awards, competitions and scholarships. CTSOs such as Educators Rising and SkillsUSA offer activities designed for future ECE professionals.
- ▶ *Pre-Apprenticeship*: Training and curriculum that provides workplace simulation and volunteer opportunities. Curriculum aligns to a RAP and can be used to strengthen preparedness for ECE apprenticeships.

Early college Career & Technical Education

- ▶ *Dual enrollment*: Provides high school students with the opportunity to fulfill graduation requirements while earning college credits toward a credential such as the CDA[®] credential and degrees such as an associates or bachelor's. Often tuition-free.
- ▶ *Youth Registered Apprenticeship*: Can be housed at a high school-level CTE or Career Academy Program or at the postsecondary level. Offers part-time employment experience and credits toward a degree or the CDA[®].

Career & Technical Education for postsecondary institutions

- ▶ *Registered Apprenticeship*: Full-time, on-the-job training and course instruction resulting in a nationally recognized credential, increased pay and industry-relevant skillset. Currently, Northeast Community College is the only institution to have developed a RAP for the early childhood workforce. Development of statewide early childhood professional apprenticeships is underway.
- ▶ *Continuing Education*: Full-time, on-the-job training and continuing course instruction to complete field of study, resulting in a credential.

Elements of successful ECE apprenticeships

Successful apprenticeship programs can help establish a high-quality ECE workforce and overcome commonly experienced barriers for aspirational early childhood professionals. Some of these barriers are an inability to attend school full time, lack of financial resources, difficulty navigating the postsecondary education system and language barriers experienced by non-English speaking or dual language learners. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition in the ECE profession that RAPs can address many of these barriers.

Credentialing pathways

Pathways toward obtaining a credential or degree is one of two focal elements of a successful RAP for the ECE workforce; the other is on-the-job experience. In addition to those programs that culminate in the CDA[®],

many now include the CDA® along their pathway as part of an associate or bachelor's degree. This leads to higher degree completion and retention in the field. According to a recent survey of credential holders by the Council for Professional Recognition, 78% of CDA® holders in Nebraska continued working in a role within the early childhood education field.⁴

- ▶ **Child Development Associate (CDA®) credential:** The most widely recognized credential in the ECE profession, accredited by the Council for Professional Recognition. It typically takes six months to one year to complete and requires 120 clock hours of formal early childhood education training and 480 hours of working with children within the past three year. These requirements make the CDA® the perfect choice for a RAP credential. There are four CDA® credential types: Preschool, Infant-Toddler, Family Child Care and Home Visitor. Some programs in Nebraska offer course instruction in Spanish.
- ▶ **Associate Degree:** Typically takes two years to complete and can be paired with employers looking for either a highly qualified entry level or mid-level candidate.
- ▶ **Bachelor's Degree:** Typically takes four years to complete and can be paired with employers looking for a highly qualified mid-level candidate or the next generation of leaders for the workplace.

Scholarships and aid

- ▶ **Federal Aid:** One of the primary federal sources of aid tied to RAPs comes from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). With approval from a Workforce Development Board, coverage can include tuition, fees, supplies, etc. related to course instruction. Title IV Federal Pell Grant aid also applies.
- ▶ **T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship:** Designed for ECE working professionals to obtain a CDA® credential, associate or bachelor's degree in early childhood. Includes blended funding from both federal and state sources. Can be used in conjunction with a RAP for early childhood professionals.
- ▶ **Other Scholarships:** Other state, private or public-private braided scholarships are available, which could be used for an ECE apprentice. A number of them base awards on financial need, migrant status, minority group association or other criteria.⁵

Structured training plan

RAPs include a structured training plan recognized by the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) which aligns with an accredited curriculum. RAPs are designed to give the apprentice the relevant skills needed to provide high-quality early education and care and to provide the apprentice with advancement opportunities and higher pay. Mentorship is a key component to the success of RAPs, especially for ECE professionals where the barriers are high. Some settings may include a mentor who works with the same employer as the apprentice and receives a stipend. Other settings, such as owner-operated family homes, may use an external paid mentor.

Mentors

- ▶ **Higher Standards:** A successful RAP model includes training and other credentials for mentors to effectively prepare apprentices for the ECE workforce. Best practices include mentors who have obtained the credentials the apprentice is working toward. This leads to student success and higher completion rates. Bilingual or multilingual mentors are also a great resource for significant minority populations, such as those of Hispanic or Latino origin. Mentors are involved in workplace supervision and evaluation of core competencies.

Position

RAPs for the ECE workforce include registered occupation codes through USDOL. The primary occupation titles for these codes are: Preschool Teachers, Except Special Education; Childcare Workers; and Education and Childcare Administrators, Preschool and Daycare. These titles are not all inclusive, but generally cover the majority of staff positions within the ECE workforce.

- ▶ **Staff:** A good fit for Youth Apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship resulting in a CDA® or associate degree.
- ▶ **Lead teacher:** A good fit for Registered Apprenticeship resulting in a CDA®, associate or bachelor's degree.
- ▶ **Administrator:** A good fit for Registered Apprenticeship resulting in a bachelor's or higher degree, as well as continuing education RAPs for more experienced ECE professionals.

Settings

Settings for RAPs within the child care workforce are dictated by the employer partnerships participating in the program and can include a variety of providers including Family Child Care Home, Child Care Center, private or school-based Preschool, Early Head Start and Head Start. Within those provider settings are classroom types such as infant/toddler (birth to 36 months) or preschool (3 to 5 years). Also of note are provider settings serving dual language learner populations, which is a great fit for bilingual or multilingual RAPs.

Compensation ladder and career advancement

Throughout certain steps in a RAP, there are opportunities for pay advancement as the apprentice hits certain core competency benchmarks, evaluated by a mentor or classroom instructor in consultation with the employer. RAP design can also culminate in career advancement, per agreements with partnering employers.

- ▶ *Title IV Student Aid Federal Work Study:* Helps postsecondary institutions pay for training wages of apprentices, based on financial need, enrollment status and cost of attendance.

Systems design for statewide ECE apprenticeships

There are two ways in which a RAP is developed—either through single program development (i.e., requested by employer) or through group program development (i.e., postsecondary sponsor). A more systems-wide approach is needed for expanded opportunities across the state, which is currently underway.

Statewide Program Development

- ▶ *Convening Stakeholders:* Leading this work is the RESPECT Across Nebraska Project.⁶ RESPECT is a collaborative partnership that includes institutions of higher education, state agencies, early childhood professionals and other partners across the state to identify components of a successful statewide model.
- ▶ *Design & Implementation:* State partners have contracted with the Child Care Services Association

(CCSA) for consultation, technical assistance and access to resources to develop and implement a statewide model. CCSA is a national industry intermediary registered with the U.S. Department of Labor and is designed to work with the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship.

Partnerships

Since an apprenticeship program is a mixed-delivery, nontraditional mode of instruction and training, it involves various partners and institutions. The key to success in any apprenticeship program is the identification of all needed partnerships.

- ▶ *Employers:* Employer partnerships could include private for-profit and nonprofit or community providers in child care and preschool, school-based preschool programs and Early Head Start and Head Start programs.
- ▶ *Agencies:* Partnerships with agencies involved in the implementation of a RAP could include the Office of Early Childhood and Office of Career & Technical Education at NDE, the Nebraska Department of Labor and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS).
- ▶ *Higher Education:* All postsecondary institutions that wish to participate in RAPs are integral partners for academic and classroom instruction.
- ▶ *Accreditation Institutions:* The identification of relevant credentials to be included in a RAP and partnership with these institutions is necessary for the credential to be awarded, such as the Council for Professional Recognition or NDE's Early Childhood Teacher Certificate.
- ▶ *Schools:* Partnership with school-based CTE is a necessary part of a successful RAP to prime students early to enter a desired career field in ECE.
- ▶ *Other Partnerships:* Can include private philanthropy, nonprofits advocating for the ECE profession, community and economic developers and businesses interested in providing high-quality care and education for their communities.

Funding Streams

Braiding of multiple funding streams is needed to support a successful RAP for the early childhood workforce. There are many entry points for these

funding streams, including apprentice training and wages, classroom instruction, tuition and educational supplies and scholarship supports. Entry points to support employer partnerships include training costs and wage raises. Additional entry points include mentor training and coaching costs. Finally, systems-wide entry points include program development costs for postsecondary institutions, secondary education institutions and agency partners.

Federal

- ▶ *Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act:* Federal funding that can be used to assist with training and tuition costs for apprentices, employer training expenses and supervisory coverage, recruitment and placement support services and child care for apprentices. In Nebraska, child care assistance through WIOA supportive services cannot be duplicated with other child care assistance funds. Funding through WIOA is determined by local Workforce Development Boards.
- ▶ *State Apprenticeship Expansion Formula Grant:* Annual formula funding provided by USDOL which assists in the establishment of RAPs. Includes base formula funding available to states. Additional competitive funding available to states that commit to increasing diversity in apprentices among in-demand industries.
- ▶ *Federal Work Study:* Funding made available to postsecondary institutions through Federal Title IV student aid to help pay for training wages of apprentices.
- ▶ *Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG):* Federal funding that can be used by lead agencies to help pay for ECE apprenticeship programs. Federal requirements also provide for matching state funds to leverage additional federal funding. In Nebraska, the lead agency for CCDBG is NDHHS.
- ▶ *Perkins V:* Federal funding that supports CTE programs.
- ▶ *T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship:* Blended federal funds with state sources.

State

- ▶ *Child Care Development Block Grant:* State funding matches the federal CCDBG program, calculated per federal formulas. Can be leveraged to support ECE apprenticeship programs.

- ▶ *Biennial Budget:* The Nebraska State Legislature provided \$5.316 million per year in state funds for CTE during the 2023 legislative session.⁷
- ▶ *Dual enrollment:* State funding as aid to postsecondary education to support dual enrollment and early college initiatives. Strengthens CTE in the state.
- ▶ *T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship:* Blended state funds with federal sources.
- ▶ *Other State Funding:* Other state funding could help support RAPs for the early childhood workforce.

Other

- ▶ *Private:* Other private funding sources could be leveraged in tandem with state and federal funding sources to support apprentices through scholarships, endowments to fund program development at postsecondary institutions, employer incentives to offer more opportunities for apprentices or otherwise community investments that see supports for the ECE workforce as a key component of nurturing thriving communities.

Conclusion

Like other Nebraska businesses and industries, child care programs require access to skilled, job-ready workers to remain viable and meet the needs of families, employers and communities statewide. Given the fact that 30% of Nebraska’s child care workforce turned over between 2022 and 2023,⁸ it is increasingly urgent to pursue innovative ways to recruit, prepare and anchor new talent.

Momentum has been building around early childhood apprenticeships as an important recruitment and development tool for creating new credentialing pathways. The information in this brief is intended as a guide on how early childhood RAPS operate and the components that make them a viable option for the state of Nebraska.

Citations

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