

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ Michigan Adds Certificate for Birth to Kindergarten Teachers

By Winona Hao and Joseph Hedger

Teacher certificates often span broad grade bands, such as K-5, K-6, or even K-8. To earn these certificates, teacher candidates often spend more time learning content designed for older children and less on early childhood development and early literacy and numeracy. Yet children from birth to kindergarten need teachers with unique skills who have met rigorous preparation standards and qualifications that are consistent across early education settings.¹

State boards of education can improve early educators' preparation. For example, the Michigan State Board of Education adopted new early childhood general and special education teacher preparation standards in January 2020, and it added a birth-K certificate that better aligns with classroom needs and helps professionalize the early childhood workforce.

Of all 62 state-funded pre-K programs across the United States, only 37 programs in 30 states require lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree. Outside these state-funded systems, however, no state requires bachelor's degrees for teachers in pre-K, and only 11 require a child development associate credential or vocational training. Most states require only a high school diploma, some training, or nothing at all.²

These low minimum qualifications jeopardize development of a quality workforce, codify old norms for what children should gain in early education, and deprive teachers of opportunities for professional development and adequate compensation. They also perpetuate the

false notion that teaching in early education requires less skill than teaching older children.

Quality prekindergarten substantially improves student success in later years. To generate meaningful impacts, that education must be rich and engaging.³ Yet Black, Hispanic, and low-income children typically have less access to high-quality pre-K programs.⁴

The Michigan state board works closely with the state superintendent and state education agency to meet the state's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan's goals, updated by the board in August 2020 and focused on expanding early childhood learning opportunities and increasing the number of certified teachers in areas of shortage. This work includes promoting and elevating the profession, helping districts develop grow-your-own and future teacher programs, and promoting diversity and equity in the workforce, according to board president Casandra Ulbrich. "Having a high-quality educator workforce to meet the growth of our early childhood learning programs is foremost important to developing children ready to succeed when they enroll in kindergarten," Dr. Ulbrich said.

RESTRUCTURING BIRTH-K

To ensure focused preparation for new teachers, in 2019 Michigan split its previous K-8 certificate into separate preK-3 and 3-6 grade bands. The state agency then convened a stakeholder engagement committee to examine the early childhood general and special education endorsement standards. Ultimately, the committee recommended that the board adopt an additional band for birth-K certification that can be earned as a stand-alone grade band or alongside

the preK-3 band.⁵ The committee was first convened in January 2019 and ultimately submitted its draft standards to the state board in August 2019. The first group of candidates for this certificate are expected to graduate in spring 2023.

These new standards align with existing preK-3 standards, which used the same development process and similar task forces. Michigan's intentional overlap of grade bands is one of several flexibility strategies in professional development and placement that is meant to address the worsening of teacher shortages.⁶ The birth-K grade band also signals that early childhood educators are vital to a birth-12 educational system that supports young children through their schooling and ensures that preparation programs focus on the specialized skills necessary for reaching this age group.

During the restructuring, the team that developed Michigan's new certificate began by asking what educators need to know to teach across the birth-K range, including at the infant and toddler level. "Part of the buy-in was thinking about this as not entirely a new concept," said Kelli Cassaday, strategic implementation consultant with the Michigan Department of Education's Office of Educator Excellence. "It's about identifying gaps in preparation but not reinventing the wheel."

Because previous sets of teacher preparation standards focused almost entirely on elementary grades, the new certification band needed to incorporate emerging and developmental skills specific to birth-K children and address elements not yet covered by other certificates. Thus it includes

sections on whole-child development, including social-emotional development and the role of play; special education, including working with an individualized education program team; building family and community relationships; and content knowledge and pedagogy.

Similarly, the previous K-8 endorsement content mostly focused on the upper grades of elementary from a functional point of view and did not include much at the kindergarten level or on child development, said Richard Lower, director of preschool and out-of-school time learning in the department's Office of Great Start. New content about infant and toddler physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development may be brand new to educators, administrators, and even those who employ early childhood educators. "It's exciting to think of the depth of influence we're going to have on the future educator workforce," he said.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

The early childhood community had shared that an essential feature of preparation standards must be relationship building skills, Cassaday said. "It's about communicating with families. It's understanding the needs of an individual child and whether those needs are academic or otherwise. Those were areas that were really built out in this set of standards that had not been in previous iterations or were not as clear."

The Michigan Department of Education convened several stakeholder committees, including a drafting committee and review team for standards development. Throughout the process, they leveraged the expertise of researchers, professors, practitioners, teachers, and principals to develop standards for what a birth-K teacher needs to know and be able to do.

During development, they reached out to people who had previously expressed interest in the early licensure work as well as those who had differing perspectives. They considered geographic representation, including stakeholders from Michigan's upper peninsula and the Detroit area, city and rural programs, and from home visiting and

preschool programs. "[Consider] who are the voices that would be affected by any change in this work, and make sure they have a voice at the table," Cassaday advised.

Diverse perspectives are essential, including those who prefer a more cautious approach. "You don't want all the 'yes sirs' and 'yes ma'ams' and speaking-to-the-choir people," Lower said. "You need multiple perspectives at the table to be able to debate how far you can push the boundaries toward that ultimate goal."

Being open about the restructuring built trust and support, Lower added, and engaging stakeholders early helped anticipate objections during the state board's public comment period. "You know who will be the naysayers, who will be the supporters, and you can prepare for that," he said.

Many of the changes largely affect postsecondary preparation programs, so the team also had to engage colleges and universities.

Gina Garner, higher education consultant with the state's Office of Educator Excellence, currently works with Michigan's postsecondary institutions to design teacher programs that align with the new standards. First enrollment begins in fall 2021, and Garner has been working with community college groups to ensure that they understand their role, as well. "They're looking at the birth-K standards and thinking, 'How do we align our program to these standards so that the transition to a four-year institution is more seamless?'" she said.

LESSONS LEARNED

Other states wishing to do similar work must approach what the system could be with an open mind, Cassaday said. "The idea of having an early childhood endorsement that could stand apart from an elementary program was not something that our stakeholders could easily wrap their heads around in the very beginning," she said. "An important part is thinking about what are the nonnegotiables and how we can work with the tensions to meet those nonnegotiables."

One obstacle they encountered was raising

the salaries of early childhood education teachers so their compensation is comparable to other teachers with similar qualifications.

During the pandemic, preschool enrollment across the country dropped as families made difficult budgetary decisions, and many program quality standards were relaxed. Some analysts predict demand will rebound in fall 2021.⁷ The federal American Rescue Plan provides \$39 billion in child care relief funds, paving the way for further investments in the early childhood workforce. States can prepare for the new year's pre-K classrooms by taking steps, as Michigan has, to ensure that its educators are well prepared to address students' developmental, social-emotional, and academic needs.

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NOTES

1 LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015).

2 Allison Friedman-Krauss et al., "The State of Preschool 2020: State Preschool Yearbook" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2021).

3 Beth Meloy, Madelyn Gardner, and Linda Darling-Hammond, "Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers" (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, January 2019).

4 Allison Friedman-Krauss, "How Much Can High-Quality Universal Pre-K Reduce Achievement Gaps?" (New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER, 2016).

5 Michigan Department of Education, "Introduction to the Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Early Childhood General and Special Education (Birth-Kindergarten)" (Lansing, MI, January 2020), https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Prep_Standards_Early_Childhood_B-K_688046_7.pdf.

6 Winona Hao and Valerie Norville, "Michigan Narrows Licensure Bands to Improve Early Learning" *State Innovations* 24, no. 3 (June 2019).

7 Friedman-Krauss et al., "State of Preschool 2020."