

# Spotlight on Louisiana's Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate

Chantelle Dowsett, Kate Steber and Dale Epstein

## Overview

In 2012, the state of Louisiana set out to create a unified system of education from birth through grade 12. During the initial planning phase, it became clear that a critical piece missing from this system was training and education for the early childhood workforce. To address this, in 2014, the Louisiana Department of Education passed a policy requiring that, by July 2019, all lead teachers in child care centers that receive public funding must attain a new educational credential called the Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC).<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2014, a clean criminal background check was the only requirement to be a lead teacher in a child care classroom in Louisiana. There was strong support for establishing a minimum education and training requirement for lead teachers in child care settings.

To develop the ECAC as a way to support and retain a qualified early childhood workforce, the Louisiana Department of Education partnered with Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies,<sup>2</sup> technical colleges, universities, school districts, and non-profits interested in designing and implementing high-quality professional development programs for child care lead teachers. These ECAC program partners provide flexible course offerings, onsite coaching, and CLASS™ observations<sup>3</sup> for lead teachers working in publicly funded child care centers<sup>4</sup> in Louisiana. To incentivize teachers to obtain the ECAC, Louisiana developed a system of scholarships, incentives, and special recognition for completing trainings required for the certificate.

## Louisiana's Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate

Beginning in July 2019, all lead teachers in publicly funded centers in Louisiana are required to obtain their ECAC within 24 months of employment. The ECAC aims to provide foundational training that serves as the minimum qualification that is well-aligned with best practices, focused on teacher-child interactions, and is anchored in opportunities for practice.

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<sup>1</sup>All pre-K teachers in public and non-public schools are required to hold a bachelor's degree and teaching certificate. All Head Start teachers are required to follow the national credential and qualification guidelines.

<sup>2</sup>CCR&Rs are state contractors tasked with providing professional development opportunities that meet the needs of directors and teachers in their area

<sup>3</sup>Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS™) allows an observer to reliably assess classroom quality for program evaluation and research and can be used as a tool to help new and experienced teachers become more effective (see Pianta, R. C., La Paro, K. M., & Hamre, B. K. (2008). Classroom Assessment Scoring System Manual, Pre-K. Charlottesville, VA: Teachstone).

<sup>4</sup>Centers must be classified as type III, which are publicly funded centers in Louisiana that participate in the Child Care Assistance Program.

## How it works

Lead teachers who have a Child Development Associate<sup>5</sup> (CDA) credential, or an associate (AA) or bachelor's (BA) degree in early childhood or higher need to submit an application to the Louisiana Department of Education and demonstrate completion of one of these educational qualifications to obtain the ECAC.

Alternatively, teachers without these degrees or credential can earn an ECAC by obtaining a CDA or technical diploma or certificate of technical studies in an early childhood-related field through an ECAC program at a college, technical school, or private provider that is approved by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE).

The CDA credential requires candidates to complete 120 hours of professional education in early childhood development, 480 hours of early childhood education (ECE) work experience, a professional portfolio that includes feedback from families of children with whom the candidate has been working, a verification visit, and an exam. The ECAC builds on the CDA requirements to include an explicit focus on opportunities for the practice, mentoring, and coaching of teacher-child interactions. To accomplish this, lead teachers also receive training on the CLASS™ observation tool and are then evaluated using this tool twice during the ECAC program. This helps build knowledge and skills for supporting teacher-child interactions and helps lead teachers understand how the CLASS™ tool works in preparation for Louisiana's quality rating and improvement system<sup>6</sup> annual CLASS™ assessments.

ECAC programs are delivered through courses that participants attend in person, online, or in blended learning environments. All communities in rural areas have access to the Early Learning Louisiana online program<sup>7</sup>, which offers web-based courses that are aligned with Louisiana's early childhood standards and competencies so that participants can earn the ECAC and CDA in as little as 10 months. As part of this online program, teachers can connect with other teachers through communities of practice and receive individualized instructor and technical support.

## ECAC supports and incentives

The state of Louisiana implemented financial incentives for lead teachers to work toward and maintain the ECAC and stay in the ECE field. Lead teachers participating in a BESE-approved ECAC program are eligible for scholarships to cover the cost of tuition upon completion of required coursework.

Additionally, the state recognized that many child care programs may not be able to afford wage increases for teachers who earn the ECAC. Therefore, Louisiana updated the School Readiness Tax Credits incentive that was introduced in 2007 to align with the ECAC requirement and incentivize those who earn the credential to stay in the ECE field. Lead teachers with an ECAC are eligible for a refundable state income tax credit of up to \$3,429 per year if they stay in the field for three years.

## Renewal process

Lead teachers with an ECAC must renew their certificate every three years, at no cost to the teacher. Renewal requires either proof of a CDA renewal or documentation of the following:

- Employer's recommendation, based on effective performance in the early childhood classroom

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see <https://www.cdacouncil.org/about/cda-credential>

<sup>6</sup> All licensed programs are required to be a part of Louisiana's QRIS.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see <http://www.earlylearninglouisiana.com/>

- 4.5 continuing education units, or a three-credit-hour course, or 45 hours of training in early childhood care and education
- Minimum of 80 hours of work experience with young children or families with young children within the last three years.

The certificate provides recognition of the professional training and education teachers have completed. To alleviate the costs associated with renewing the CDA, the state implemented a policy that once lead teachers have an ECAC, they can allow their CDA to expire and still maintain their credential in Louisiana.

## ECAC planning and development

Strategic planning for the ECAC involved collaboration among representatives from Louisiana Early Childhood Care and Education Networks (ECCEN),<sup>8</sup> state agencies, Louisiana Pathways workforce registry, teacher preparation programs at universities and community colleges, community child care resource and referral (CCR&R)<sup>9</sup> agencies, child care program directors, and child care employees. The result was a comprehensive strategy to support child care center teachers by providing scholarships to cover the cost of training, a level of oversight for the training's use of classroom observations, and financial incentives that would not cause undue burden on the child care centers or teachers.

When designing the ECAC programs, institutions of higher education needed to adapt to make sure that nontraditional students throughout the state were able to complete the ECAC within the required time frame. University and community college departments focused their efforts to redesign and realign their programs to support those who were currently in the workforce, many of whom have had no prior experience with higher education and some of whom who did not complete high school. They had to grapple with issues such as how to reach all communities statewide, including in rural areas; how to address transportation barriers; and how to support those with limited access to computers and internet.

To address these barriers to continuing education as they scaled the program statewide, Louisiana worked through their strong partnership with local CCR&Rs. CCR&R agencies visit programs to check in on student progress, provide job-embedded coaching, and provide local training opportunities on topics of regional interest. Every CCR&R offers or partners with an ECAC program to provide additional tutoring, one-to-one technical assistance, coaching, and online support to reach all nontraditional students and those in rural areas. Many CCR&R programs also provide transportation, childcare, and/or incentives for attendance in order to address the needs of their communities.

In addition, the Louisiana Department of Education certificate representatives host quarterly phone calls with every ECAC program to discuss challenges and then formulate and implement solutions so that ECAC works well within communities and across the state. The CCR&Rs connect local directors and students for mentoring and assistance with transportation, finances, and day-to-day strategies to increase the success of ECAC programs. Many programs offered a variety of solutions to support nontraditional learners and incentivize participation, including providing prepaid gas cards, child care, tutoring, mentorship, and graduation ceremonies for participating teachers.

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<sup>8</sup> The ECCEN is comprised of 65 local early childhood community networks that include every publicly funded pre-K, child care, and Head Start program within the state.

<sup>9</sup> CCR&Rs are state contractors tasked with providing professional development opportunities that meet the needs of directors and teachers in their area.

# Successes and Challenges

The ECAC requirement was phased in over a five-year period, which allowed for time to coordinate quality improvement efforts, create a financial incentives structure, and align all aspects of the policy work with Louisiana’s outcomes framework for children and families. This section describes some of this initiative’s successes and challenges.

## Successes

Stakeholders have identified the following markers of success:

- More than 4,700 teachers have earned the ECAC.
- Stakeholders familiar with the program report that the ECAC supports a professional identity among those in the early childhood workforce. Teachers from early cohorts that earned the ECAC report they are recognized as leaders in their own field and within their communities.
- Quality improvements have been documented with CLASS™ in each successive program year. A growing number of publicly funded early care and education programs—from 60 percent in 2015-2016 to 80 percent in 2017-2018—were rated as meeting the threshold for minimum quality standards or above.<sup>10</sup>
- More than \$4.8 million in scholarship money<sup>11</sup> has been awarded to support teacher education.
- A growing number of teachers—from 3,894 in 2014 to 4,350 in 2017—have been able to claim a refundable state income tax credit to increase their overall earnings.

## Challenges

Regular communication exchanges between certificate providers were essential to address challenges as the ECAC was brought to scale statewide. These exchanges include monthly community of practice calls that allow certificate providers to share best practices and support those at lower levels of readiness for implementation by trouble shooting issues together. For example, in the early years of ECAC implementation, some communities had trouble finding people in their region to serve as classroom observers to meet the CDA requirements. They sought guidance from a program that already had experienced classroom observers in place for several years and found solutions. Another opportunity for programs to learn from each other occurs during the annual Teacher Leader Conference where directors and teachers can see how ECAC programs work, engage providers in dialogue, and facilitate a culture of learning across programs and communities. This continuous loop of feedback between the programs and the state has helped the ECAC overcome challenges and improve over time.

Louisiana chose to build upon the CDA as a minimum training requirement in part because it can be completed in about 12 months. However, as with most continuing education initiatives, supporting individuals from the time they begin coursework all the way through certificate completion is a major challenge. It is sometimes difficult to tell when students are taking a break from coursework and when they are at risk of dropping out. The state of Louisiana is currently examining different approaches to structure the ECAC tuition payment effectively in order to encourage success.

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<sup>10</sup> Quality threshold means that teacher-child interactions are effective some of the time, as indicated by classroom observations using the CLASS tool (e.g., scores of 3 or above).

<sup>11</sup> These scholarships are funded through the Child Care Development Fund.

## Next Steps

At the administrative level, the state of Louisiana is developing an accountability pilot study for the ECAC which will begin in early 2020. The pilot study is designed to understand the experience from the ECAC candidate's perspective, including how ECAC candidates are applying newly acquired skills in their classrooms and how the ECAC is meeting the workforce needs. This pilot study will inform next steps for the ECAC.

## Additional Information

For more information, please visit

<https://www.louisianabelieves.com/early-childhood/preparing-and-certifying-teachers>

### Project Overview

This project aims to understand how state policies, funding, and practices support the strengthening of the early childhood education (ECE) workforce.

The purpose of this series of "Spotlights" is to highlight strategies and initiatives being implemented by state and local agencies designed to support the development of the ECE workforce.

### Acknowledgments

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