

Getting Started with Articulation: What State Partners Need to Know

Introduction

This paper introduces current issues on articulation supporting early childhood degree attainment for state partners and leaders. Key considerations are in setting up, implementing, and sustaining articulations agreements. Part I provides important background information about the value and purpose of articulation agreements. Part II provides on-the-ground strategies on developing strong, lasting articulation agreements across programs, agencies, and institutions that work to improve the competencies of the early childhood workforce.

Part I: The Role of Articulation in Improving the Qualifications of the Early Childhood Workforce

Part I provides background information on articulation, why conversations about articulation are crucial to support the current emphasis on increasing the qualifications of the early childhood workforce, and how articulation can be supported through national accreditation of early childhood programs of study within higher education.

What Is Articulation?

As states and territories look to support early childhood educators to meet growing professional development qualifications, including the attainment of credentials and degrees, the concept of articulation is increasingly important. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines articulation as, “Efforts to design associate and baccalaureate degree programs so that they fit together, or articulate, to facilitate candidate transfer with minimal loss of credits” (NAEYC, 2011, p. 76). At the high school level, articulation typically means the transfer of credit for high school coursework (college-level courses, career or

technical education early childhood courses, or others) to a post-secondary school. Articulation at this level means that the high school coursework has been evaluated under approval guidelines developed at the state level to be included in college or advanced level content and assessments.

For the early childhood workforce, focusing on articulation is crucial. Articulation helps avoid coursework repetition by early childhood educators, which wastes their time and strains their financial resources. Well-designed articulation agreements ensure that the learning objectives in the course or block of courses being waived have been met. When learning objectives are aligned with the professional standards of the field, articulation across institutions is an easier process and can support early educators' completion of credentials and degrees.

Why Now?

The recent focus on improving the quality of early learning programs by increasing the competency and qualifications of the early childhood workforce suggests that the conversation about articulation is timely. In fact, the National Academies of Science (NAS) release of the landmark publication *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* in 2015 includes several key issues related to articulation and degree attainment for the workforce. In *Transforming the Workforce*, three critical issues that undergird the need for focusing on articulation are mentioned.

1. Baccalaureate degree attainment for the early childhood workforce

Transforming the Workforce highlights the need to ensure that the qualifications of early educators in all early learning settings—such as child care and Head Start/Early Head Start—are on par with those of their colleagues in the public prekindergarten through Grade 12 sector. Specifically, the report states:

Holding lower educational expectations for early childhood educators than for elementary school teachers perpetuates the perception that educating children before kindergarten requires less expertise than educating K-3 students, which helps to justify policies that make it difficult to maximize the potential of young children and the early learning programs that serve them (IOM & NRC, 2015, p. 12–24).

To develop parity across the multiple early childhood sectors, *Transforming the Workforce* recommends that the early childhood field move toward requiring a bachelor's degree. This will help address the issues of status that result from differing educational qualifications across early childhood (birth–5 years) and kindergarten–Grade 3 sectors. Promoting articulation efforts across degree-granting institutions can be a key strategy to support consistent qualifications across all settings that care for and educate children and to help realize the recommendation in *Transforming the Workforce*.

2. Ensuring consistent content in early childhood degrees

Transforming the Workforce also outlines the importance of focusing on the content of a degree rather than requiring a specific major for early educators.

The important criterion is not that a candidate have a degree in a specified major but that he or she have a bachelor's degree and have completed a formally defined, accredited course of study in child development, early learning, and instruction to be qualified to practice as a care and education professional (IOM & NRC, 2015, p. 12–29).

Degree content should align with the standards of the field. For early educators, these standards are defined by the NAEYC [Professional Preparation Standards](#) as well as NAEYC's Commission on Early Childhood Associate Degree Accreditation, which oversees the accreditation of associate degree programs. National standards for all schools of teacher education and other educator

Higher Education Accreditation: An Overview

Successful baccalaureate and graduate program recognition from NAEYC requires a peer review of key student assignments and grading rubrics for alignment with NAEYC standards, a review of student performance data on each NAEYC standard, and a report on the program's continuous improvement work, including use of student performance data.

To receive NAEYC recognition, institutions of higher education must also hold CAEP accreditation, which includes an onsite peer review. Currently, there are over 400 NAEYC-recognized baccalaureate and graduate programs in 38 states.

preparation providers are set by the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). CAEP standards apply across all teacher certification areas. NAEYC standards are the national standards specific to early childhood education. Relying upon existing national standards of the profession, which are shown by accreditation of the higher education program by NAEYC as well as CAEP (if teacher certification is involved), can help ensure that early educators graduate with degrees that are built on a consistent body of knowledge in child development, early learning, and instruction.

3. Ensuring consistent quality in early childhood degrees

A third salient point on early childhood degrees in *Transforming the Workforce* is the importance of quality assurance processes for early childhood courses of study. Quality assurance processes, such as those provided through a national higher education accreditation process, can help to ensure content alignment (IOM & NRC, 2015). Educator preparation program accreditation is important because it provides a quality assurance process in line with the standards of the accrediting agency. Accreditation promotes students successfully attaining degrees by increasing students' access to financial incentives and allowing them to transfer credits across institutions more easily.

Accreditation: A Key Lever for Quality Assurance and Student Access

Degree program accreditation by national accrediting bodies can play an important role in degree program accreditation by ensuring the consistency of content and the overall quality of early childhood degree programs, thus facilitating articulation. We will first describe what is meant by accreditation of degree programs and provide the rationale for using accreditation as a key lever for increasing quality assurance and student access in the context of articulation and transfer.

What Does Accreditation for Early Childhood Educator Preparation Programs Mean?

Most states want to ensure that their institutions of higher education are accredited by a regional or national accreditor that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Institutional accreditation processes review and approve the quality of the operations of the college or university as a whole; however, institutional accreditation does not indicate that individual degree programs meet the standards of their professions. Specialized program accreditors review and approve specific degree programs within the scope of their field or discipline. "Specialized and Professional Accrediting organizations in the United States operate to ensure that students in educational programs receive an education consistent with standards for entry practice or advanced practice in each of their respective fields or disciplines" (Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, 2015).

Specialized program accreditation for associate degrees in early childhood teacher education is earned from the NAEYC Commission on Early Childhood Associate Degree Accreditation. Specialized program accreditation for schools of teacher education is also earned from CAEP. CAEP accreditation, along with NAEYC recognition, indicates a baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate program meets national standards for both teacher education as a whole and for early childhood education. CAEP accreditation without NAEYC recognition indicates either that the program did not seek NAEYC recognition or did not meet NAEYC standards.

Using Accreditation as a Key Lever for Increasing Quality Assurance and Student Access

By completing a self-study accreditation process, such as those within the NAEYC and CAEP accreditation systems, early childhood degree programs commit to aligning their content, student performance assessments, and student practice experiences with the standards of their accrediting body. These degree programs also undergo an external quality assurance process that acts as another lever to ensure consistent quality. Taken together, these assurances about the content and quality of early childhood degree programs can work to support easier articulation for students moving from one institution to another or from an associate degree of study to a baccalaureate course of study when both programs of study align with the same national standards. Easing articulation and student transfer supports increased access for students by creating a clear pathway toward degree attainment for those who have already begun to work toward an early childhood degree.

Implications of the NAS Findings for Approaching Transfer and Articulation

In the section "Considerations Across Institutions," *Transforming the Workforce* supports the transfer and articulation of early educator professional coursework for people who wish to improve their qualifications or receive specialized education or certification to increase their competency in teaching young children. The report recommends collaborations and connections across institutions to meet the need for higher and more consistent quality in early childhood degree programs as well as the increased demand for degree programs that higher qualification requirements will demand.

The report suggests mechanisms for collaborations across institutions:

- Establishing agreements between and among 2- and 4-year colleges in the same locality to develop consistent pathways and efficient transitions between institutions and into specialized programs (IOM & NRC, 2015, p. 12-36). Examples listed in the report include:
 - articulation agreements regarding credit transfers,
 - agreements about cross-enrollment of students in courses,
 - collaborative program development,
 - convening of faculty across institutions to share information about programs and to participate in joint planning and implementation of cross-institutional agreements; and
 - building professional communities for faculty across institutions in the same locality (IOM & NRC, 2015, p. 12–36)

These mechanisms for collaboration offer important strategies to promote relationships across institutions to ensure that early childhood course content is consistent, that faculty across the institutions trust the quality of one another's instruction, and that limited resources can be shared across institutions. These collaborations can pave the way for strong and sustainable articulation agreements.

Part II: Making It Happen in Your Context

This section focuses on “on-the-ground” considerations and strategies for moving accreditation efforts forward in your state, program, or organization. These suggestions are written in broad terms to engage the full spectrum of accreditation stakeholders. Implementing these strategies in your unique context will demand that you tailor these approaches to your specific state, program, or organization’s needs. Developing articulation agreements is a nuanced and context-specific activity that requires strong relationships among stakeholders and a clear and shared purpose for your agreement.

Determining the Purpose of Articulation: Key Considerations

Central to establishing any articulation agreement is establishing its purpose—namely, what are you trying to achieve with articulation? It may be that your workforce has been successful at achieving entry-level credentials and you wish to promote an agreement whereby those credentials may count for credit in an early childhood associate of arts degree; or you may wish to support career pathway advancement across 2- and 4-year degree granting institutions. Your purpose helps to determine the type of agreement you need (program-to-program, statewide agreement, etc.). Different types of agreements will require slightly different approaches, such as which stakeholders will need to be involved to establish and sustain such an agreement. Most important, your purpose must account for the ways in which an agreement will be beneficial within your program, state, or regional context.

State Context: Partnerships Are Critical

Whether the purpose of your articulation agreement is to establish statewide agreements, to establish program-to-program agreements, to establish specific agreements to award credit for a particular training sequence, or to address issues related to the infant toddler workforce, identifying key stakeholders needs to be a first step in your process. The institutions that must sign the agreements—whether they are state agencies, colleges and/or universities, or others—are crucial to the process. Groups working to establish articulation agreements need to determine who is critical to the planning and implementation process early

on so that these critical stakeholders are included from the start. Consider including expertise on infant/toddler development and learning along with preschool and early elementary.

Including key stakeholders often requires reaching across state agencies and sectors of the early childhood system. For instance, any agreement to articulate coursework or other types of professional development into a teacher preparation degree will likely require collaboration with the state agency that oversees teacher certification or licensing. Including professionals from this agency at the start can help build buy-in for articulation while also ensuring that your agreement addresses the required content, quality assurance, and teaching experience requirements outlined by teacher certification or licensing agencies as well as higher education partners at both the state system and system institution levels.

In addition to stakeholders from agencies with direct influence on articulation issues, other key partners within your state context who set standards can also be included to ensure that once an agreement is in place, it is well used and can be leveraged for system integration. Other partners include professionals from the licensing, Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Head Start, or other quality improvement systems, as well as generalists from higher education institutions who set general policies within which agreements may be accepted or who establish the number of credits that need to be completed at the institution from which a student graduates.

To prepare for establishing your approach to articulation, consider these steps:

- Learn about the context of the other state agencies that have to fit together to ensure that your process addresses agency-level culture and process issues;
- Identify partners by name and what their roles might be so that people understand why they are included;
- Conduct outreach to ensure the right people are at the table (e.g., it may not be the head of the agency who is most closely related to what you are trying to accomplish with your agreement);
- Establish regular communication channels and opportunities to stay informed about the work in coordination with partners; and

- Consider and respect higher education scheduling issues (summer schedules for key early childhood faculty, times of year when higher education commissions/board meet to make decisions/consider proposals, etc.).

The more you can consider and respect partners' unique contexts throughout the process of establishing an agreement, the more likely you are to define an agreement that all parties accept, buy into, and support over the long term. Doing this important partnership work up front can save valuable time and help to clarify misunderstandings early in the process of developing an agreement. Ensuring that all partners understand the process along the way and have been able to contribute to the creation of an agreement can help avoid getting well into the process only to find that key partners are not on board or cannot uphold the agreement as it is written.

Leverage Existing Quality Supports Toward Strong Articulation Agreements

Leveraging existing early childhood system supports can also help to set the conditions under which strong articulation agreements are likely to emerge. For example, states and territories can require that higher education programs that receive financial supports are accredited by the national accrediting body for the profession.

States could require that care and education professionals can qualify for licensure only if they have graduated from programs that adhere to the national standards. Similarly, grants and other funding mechanisms could be contingent on adherence to the national standards for professional qualifications, (IOM & NRC, 2015, p. 12–52).

To promote accreditation of degree programs, states and territories can incentivize the collaborative process and program self-assessment activities that are required by funding institutes of higher education to work on accreditation. Providing release time for faculty to lead and participate in accreditation processes, developing early childhood faculty learning communities for peer support, and offering other opportunities for higher

education personnel to collaborate across institutions can help to ensure the development of high-quality agreements based on consistent national standards.

Finally, aligning articulation agreements by embedding their components in other early childhood systems can also promote sustainability. For instance, requiring that the training or course that educators take to meet professional development standards in a state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) be eligible for articulation under an existing agreement may entice educators to pursue professional development that can help them advance toward higher educational milestones.

Sustaining Agreements through Transitions in Partner Leadership

Once agreements are in place, you'll need to think through strategies to sustain the agreements. The following suggestions (Lutton, 2013) can help to sustain articulations agreements through changing times and leadership:

- Use evidence-based quality-assurance mechanisms, such as national professional accreditation, rather than relying on personal knowledge of program faculty and students;
- Use a program-to-program rather than a course-to-course approach so that changes in course content, name, or numbering over time do not negate the articulation agreement. Look at equivalencies between blocks of courses or between exit assessments in the completed program and comparable level assessments in the next program;
- Encourage the completion of each certificate or degree program along the way to build portable, stackable credentials on a career pathway and to sustain enrollment and graduation rates necessary for the economic survival of the certificate or degree program;
- Link stackable credentials to new career opportunities to sustain interest in enrollment and document opportunities for gainful employment;
- Link the certification or degree programs clearly to credentials recognized in state career pathways so that there is broad interest across the system in sustaining the programs and their articulation agreements;

- Use the national standards of the profession as a unifying framework for competencies, standards, and training approval systems across settings, sectors, and states in the early childhood professional development system; and
- Help students maintain both enrollment continuity and intensity through grants, loans, and special initiatives.

In addition, partners need to enact strategies to ensure agreements are updated regularly and remain relevant. The following suggestions (Lutton, 2013) are recommendations that partners can use to do so:

- Include timelines and processes for review and renewal in written articulation agreements;
- Convene key stakeholders regularly to share any proposed state changes in regulation or any institutional changes in program requirements and curriculum that could create barriers or could negate the agreement; and
- Attend to the economic viability of the programs included in the agreement. For example, the transfer program in either institution may close if enrollments are not large enough to sustain it. Recruitment, retention, scholarships, and links to expanded career opportunities and other supports may be needed to sustain enrollment in the transfer programs.

Summary

Having professionals who care for and educate children attain a degree in early childhood is a critical lever for ensuring that they have consistent qualifications and competencies across all sectors. To help support early education professionals in their degree pursuit, we need to ensure effective, accessible pathways that help professionals move forward and avoid having them repeat professional development where they have already effectively demonstrated competency. Successful articulation agreements that support such pathways are a critical piece of making degree attainment a reality for the early childhood workforce.

References

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