

Understanding Obstacles to Foreign Qualification Recognition for Key U.S. Early Childhood Education and Care Positions

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Executive Summary

Strong public support and extensive research showing the value of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) are driving demand for the expansion of ECEC services across the United States. However, persistent difficulties with recruiting and retaining qualified workers—including workers with the linguistic and cultural competence skills to provide quality services to the nation’s diverse young-child population—threaten to short-circuit efforts to better support the healthy development and well-being of young children across the country. More than 100,000 ECEC workers left the field during the COVID-19 pandemic, but many of the most acute challenges predate the public-health crisis, including shrinking teacher pipelines, high turnover, and low pay.

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Federal, state, and local investments have sought to expand access to ECEC career pathways by, for example, increasing access to credential attainment

and supporting tailored workforce training programs. Yet these efforts often overlook an important pool of potential ECEC professionals: immigrants with relevant college degrees or high school diplomas and work experience obtained outside the United States. More vigorous efforts to help these individuals navigate state licensing and job requirements for key roles would help ECEC systems and service providers recruit and support the advancement of much-needed workers. And because immigrants bring valuable language skills and cultural knowledge to the field, these workers can help enhance services for the country’s ever-more-diverse young children, more than one-quarter of whom come from immigrant families.

Individuals with high-demand skills who were educated or trained outside the United States often struggle to navigate processes for verifying credentials and work experience obtained abroad. This policy brief’s analysis of foreign qualification recognition policies for key ECEC positions in the 20 states with the largest immigrant populations points to the following common challenges:

- ▶ **The ECEC field encompasses a wide range of occupations that are regulated by policies that vary from state to state, which makes seeking recognition for qualifications obtained in another country complicated and unpredictable.** In the

absence of federal regulation of foreign qualification recognition practices, states create their own processes and policies for recognizing education, work experience, and other qualifications that applicants for employment or professional licenses have obtained outside the United States. In addition to navigating the policies of whichever state entity oversees degree-recognition processes, individuals seeking recognition of degrees earned abroad are generally also responsible for hiring an independent credential evaluation service to review their education credentials—a process that can be time-consuming, expensive, and yield varied results.

► **Many foreign qualification recognition policies in ECEC systems address college degrees obtained outside the United States but not high school diplomas.**

Despite the fact that a high school education remains the primary education credential required for several key early childhood workforce positions, child-care employment policy handbooks and guidelines rarely address the question of whether or how such education obtained abroad should be recognized.

► **States often do not have an explicit policy or practice for recognizing work experience obtained outside the United States, and some others outright reject it.** With states frequently not recognizing work experience obtained by ECEC job or license applicants outside the United States, applicants whose experience is ignored or rejected face the prospect of repeating all or some of the work experience they already completed, in the process forgoing compensation and career advancement opportunities they were otherwise positioned

to obtain. The direct and opportunity costs of retaking a class or participating in an unpaid practicum may not be financially feasible for applicants, and such concerns cause some individuals to abandon their attempts to have their qualifications recognized.

► **Applicants for early childhood teacher licenses with credentials and experience obtained outside the United States are often required to complete additional tests or assessments, irrespective of their education credentials, licenses, or work experience.** Testing requirements can range from English proficiency tests to subject knowledge and competency assessments. Subject knowledge and competency tests are only administered in English, so applicants are expected to possess an advanced level of English proficiency to achieve a passing score.

These time-consuming, costly, and sometimes insurmountable obstacles contribute to the persistent stratification of the ECEC workforce. Analysis of workforce data shows that immigrants comprise nearly 20 percent of the 1.7 million ECEC workers in the United States, but they are disproportionately likely to hold lower-rung and lower-paid positions (e.g., family- or home-based child-care workers) whose formal certification requirements are more limited, and they are less likely to hold higher-tier positions (e.g., program directors or pre-school teachers). In addition, policies that prevent well-qualified workers from receiving recognition for education or work experience earned abroad may cause some to leave the field entirely.

These findings raise important questions, particularly for states that face critical ECEC workforce shortages and have not created policies or processes to smartly and fairly tap the skills of these potential workers. Removing barriers that unnecessarily impede or complicate qualification recognition for

individuals educated or trained abroad should be a priority for system leaders concerned with ensuring a robust pipeline of qualified ECEC workers across their programs. Key steps include increasing the accessibility of information on foreign qualification recognition policies, ensuring such policies cover the breadth of education and work experience requirements for common ECEC positions, and considering ways to assist and reduce costs for applicants as they navigate recognition processes. Doing so can help address the ECEC labor crisis while building a linguistically and culturally competent workforce equipped to effectively serve the country's increasingly diverse and multilingual young-child population.

1 Introduction

The United States' early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce has shrunk in recent years, raising concerns about whether and how ECEC systems will be able to effectively meet the developmental needs of the nation's diverse young children and their families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECEC systems were rocked by an exodus of more than 100,000 workers and the closure of 12,000 programs.¹ Of course, the pandemic is only partially to blame for the country's ECEC staffing shortages. Challenges that existed well before it—including low pay and high turnover—continue to make it difficult to fill vacancies and address persistent weaknesses in the field's staffing pipeline. With approximately 22 million children ages 0–5 and 1.7 million workers in the ECEC field in the 2018–22 period, service providers have struggled to keep up with demand, particularly for child care.² According to one analysis, an estimated 51 percent of U.S. residents in 2018 were living in what have been termed “child-care deserts”—areas where there are no ECEC providers or where there are three times more children than available licensed child-care slots.³

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These ECEC workforce shortages have had a severe impact on underserved communities, hindering access to high-quality care and pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs. Children from immigrant families, who comprised one-quarter of the country's 22 million young children ages 0–5 as of 2018–22,⁴ are among those particularly affected. For families that speak languages other than English, the challenges brought by overall ECEC shortages are compounded by a lack of linguistic and cultural diversity among ECEC workers. This often means that programs are unable to communicate with parents about their child's day-to-day health, well-being, or developmental progress, and that program staff are unable to scaffold activities or instruction and thereby make them accessible to these children. Such communication and instructional barriers cause some immigrant parents to not enroll their children in mainstream ECEC programs, despite a desire to have their children receive the benefits these programs could otherwise provide.

Federal and state investments, including COVID-19 relief funding and the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program, have been important in supporting state efforts to expand recruitment and retention of qualified ECEC workers. For example, nearly a dozen states have allocated PDG B-5 funds to expand ECEC training programs such as registered apprenticeships, while several others are revising competency standards to better support aspiring ECEC workers.⁵ These are important and welcomed initiatives, but additional policy and administrative solutions could help U.S. communities more fully tap into a pool of underutilized skills that already exists within the country—ECEC workers with education and work experience obtained

outside the United States—while also expanding ECEC systems’ capacity to provide linguistically and culturally responsive services.

Individuals who have obtained their education and work credentials outside the United States often face an array of bureaucratic and other challenges when seeking to have their qualifications recognized by state ECEC occupational certification and licensing processes. These barriers can particularly discourage highly trained workers from entering and advancing in regulated professions—of which there are many across ECEC’s subsystems—forgoing their desired career path in favor of employment opportunities with less onerous hiring or qualification recognition processes. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as “brain waste,” results in thousands of highly qualified immigrants across industries being underemployed and their skills underutilized, even where they are in high demand.⁶

This policy brief explores the issue of brain waste within the ECEC field, analyzing state policies and processes that individuals with education credentials and work experience earned abroad must navigate to qualify for key ECEC positions. Recognizing the predominance of child-care worker and teaching positions in the ECEC field, the brief examines policies in the 20 U.S. states with the largest immigrant populations for both early childhood teaching positions, for which a college degree is generally a prerequisite, and child-care or day-care positions, for which a high school diploma or equivalent is generally required. The analysis identifies numerous elements of state policies and practices that create difficult, and at times unnecessary, obstacles for workers seeking employment in the ECEC field whose education credentials, licenses, and/or work experience were obtained outside the United States. It also highlights actions states can take to ensure their ECEC hiring and licensing processes smartly, fairly, and expeditiously assess the education and other qualifications of such workers.

2 Key Characteristics of Young Children and ECEC Workers

Difficulties in attracting and retaining ECEC workers are significant and threaten the success of efforts to ensure that all children are able to access high-quality early learning programs. They are magnified where efforts to effectively meet the needs of immigrant-background children are concerned, given the lack of system capacities to provide culturally and linguistically responsive services. Scaling solutions to these challenges requires consideration of the characteristics of the U.S. young child population and of the ECEC workforce.

This section first provides a snapshot of key sociodemographic characteristics of young children in the United States and barriers that can hinder those with immigrant parents from participating in ECEC programming. It then looks at the characteristics of the ECEC workforce, including disparities that exist between foreign- and native-born ECEC workers, and of resident and recently arrived immigrant adults who may seek recognition for employment qualifications they obtained outside the United States.

A. *Young Children in the United States*

The young-child population in the United States is becoming ever more diverse. As of 2018–22, one-quarter of children ages 0–5 in the United States had at least one foreign-born parent, comprising close to 5.5 million of the 22 million children in this age group.⁷ The considerable number of these young immigrant-background children is also reflected in the nation’s rising linguistic diversity, with 2018–22 data showing that one in every three young children is a Dual Language Learner (DLL), meaning they have at least one parent who speaks

a language other than English at home (also sometimes called an Emergent Multilingual Language Learner, or EMLL).⁸ Most, though not all, of these DLLs are children of immigrants.

As children's foundational language skills and cultural identities are formed during their earliest years, staff who share the culture and language of the young children in their care can provide important continuity between their home and early learning settings and communicate effectively with parents.⁹ Research has shown, moreover, that supporting children's literacy and content knowledge in their home language facilitates English language acquisition and overall school readiness.¹⁰ Thus, the ongoing demographic transformation of the country's young child population has important implications for the future of early childhood programs, particularly in regard to building an ECEC workforce with the skills necessary to provide high-quality services to culturally and linguistically diverse children and to communicate with parents about their child's daily experiences, developmental progress, and issues related to the child's health, safety, and well-being.

Strengthening the diversity of the ECEC workforce would also help address language barriers that can hinder some families' access to important early childhood services and programs. As of 2018–22, 42 percent of all DLLs ages 0–5 (or about 3 million children) had at least one parent who was Limited English Proficient (LEP), meaning they spoke English less than “very well.”¹¹ Although all federally funded and federally conducted programs are required to provide LEP individuals with meaningful access to services, many ECEC providers are not equipped to ensure that LEP parents with young children are able to communicate with program staff.¹² In fact, ECEC program directors and staff regularly cite English proficiency and literacy as barriers that make it difficult to engage and communicate with immigrant parents.¹³

B. *The ECEC Workforce*

Given high rates of linguistic and cultural diversity among the nation's young-child population, ECEC systems will need to continue building the capacities needed to effectively serve these children and their families. A core part of this involves hiring, retaining, and recognizing the skills of workers able to build trust with immigrant families, effectively meet children's particular language development needs, and communicate with their parents. Immigrant workers,¹⁴ who comprise nearly 20 percent of the ECEC workforce, often possess such skills. However, they are more likely to be in positions that are lower-paying and require less training (such as family-based and home-based child-care workers), as shown in Table 1. By comparison, U.S.-born ECEC workers are considerably more likely to be employed as preschool teachers or program directors, two of the highest-paying positions in the field.

It is important to note that immigrant workers are disproportionately likely to be employed within the family-based child-care sector, often referred to as family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care. FFN care providers are disproportionately immigrants, low-income, LEP, and/or women of color who care for children from their family or community in unlicensed or informal settings.¹⁵ It is the most common form of child care in the United States, and immigrant and LEP families often rely on FFN care because of the higher likelihood of finding providers who share their language and/or culture in this sector.¹⁶ Many FFN providers are either underpaid or do not receive any monetary compensation.¹⁷

ECEC workers with in-demand language skills are also largely concentrated in lower-paying positions. For example, in 2018–22, only 10 percent of program directors and 12 percent of preschool teachers spoke Spanish compared to 22 percent of family-based child-care workers.¹⁸ Notably, wages in the field have remained low even as minimum edu-

TABLE 1

Share of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Workers in Various Positions, 2018–22

Position	Share of All ECEC Workers	Share of Immigrant ECEC Workers	Share of U.S.-Born ECEC Workers
Family-based child-care worker	14%	21%	13%
Private home-based child-care worker	12%	20%	11%
Teacher assistant	7%	7%	7%
Preschool teacher	32%	23%	34%
Center-based child-care worker	29%	26%	29%
Director of programs	5%	3%	6%

Source: Migration Policy Institute tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2018–22 American Community Survey data.

cation requirements for many positions have shifted upward from a high school diploma or associate degree to a bachelor's degree or higher.¹⁹ This has simultaneously made it harder to attract workers with the required credentials, while also undervaluing the other valuable assets—including language skills and cultural knowledge—of many immigrant workers already in the field.

C. *Resident and Recently Arrived Immigrant Adults*

The skills and educational attainment of immigrants who already reside or recently arrived in the United States are also worth considering when exploring ways to grow and sustain the country's ECEC workforce. Immigrants with a university-level education who are experiencing underemployment, also known as “brain waste,” are one relevant population. Approximately 2.1 million immigrant adults with a bachelor's degree or higher were underemployed in 2022, meaning they were either unemployed or employed in jobs that required no more than a high school diploma. Of these underemployed college-educated immigrants, about 4,000 individuals had degrees in early childhood education and 22,600 had degrees in elementary education.²⁰ Moreover, these numbers do not fully capture the population of immigrants who were educated or

trained abroad and who may seek employment in the ECEC field. They do not, for example, count immigrants who have a college degree in another subject but could decide to pursue an ECEC work opportunity, nor do they capture immigrants with ECEC work experience who have less than a college degree. And because data take time to collect and publish, these figures also do not account for the most recent immigrants to arrive in the United States.

Of these underemployed college-educated immigrants, about 4,000 individuals had degrees in early childhood education and 22,600 had degrees in elementary education.

U.S. Census Bureau data do, however, show a marked increase in the share of newer arrivals with more advanced education credentials. Between 2020 and 2022, for example, 48 percent of immigrants who entered the country held at least a bachelor's degree,²¹ compared to 34 percent of recent arrivals as of 2000.²² Recent humanitarian migration from Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Venezuela are adding to college-educated arrivals. For example, among Venezuelans—one of the fastest growing U.S. immigrant

groups—46 percent of those who arrived in the United States between 2020 and 2022 held at least a bachelor's degree.²³

The overall growth in the U.S. immigrant population, and particularly those who are college graduates, indicates that more immigrants will be looking to enter and navigate the U.S. workforce. Many of them, including both those with college degrees and those with high school diplomas, will need to obtain recognition of their education credentials and work experience as part of hiring and licensing processes—administrative processes that can be opaque, complex, and costly.

3 Foreign Qualification Recognition Policies and Practices

Foreign qualification recognition policies vary across states, reflecting the fact that states generally hold the power to set their own occupational standards, including certification and licensing requirements. Although certain occupations, including many in the health-care field, share uniform requirements across states to enable reciprocity of certain occupational licenses, this is not the case for other occupations, including many in the ECEC field.

This geographic variation is further complicated by the dense and segmented nature of career lattices and occupational titles that sit under the ECEC field's umbrella of systems. Nevertheless, in order to meet the basic education requirements for widely utilized occupational titles in child care and early education, an applicant usually must possess either a college degree or a high school diploma or its equivalent. These two credentials play important roles in determining the types of opportunities, positions, and professional pathways that one might pursue in the field. Not surprisingly, heavy reliance on these two

credentials has shaped a bifurcated job market in which advancement is largely contingent on having a college degree: college degrees are generally required to obtain an early childhood teaching certification or license, whereas individuals with a high school diploma primarily qualify for child-care worker positions.

This section examines the practices and policies that immigrants with education and training obtained outside the United States must navigate to meet hiring and/or certification requirements for these key ECEC positions, which often entail additional steps and requirements beyond those for all applicants. Because these processes differ significantly for positions requiring a high school diploma versus a college degree, it explores the distinct processes associated with each. The section highlights a range of challenges affecting individuals who seek recognition of these two common education qualifications as well as those seeking recognition for work experience obtained abroad.

A. College Degrees

A good deal of research and policy debate in recent decades has focused on questions related to the skills workers should possess to maximally support the goals of various ECEC services. At the same time, expanding scientific research on children's development and early learning has included examination of how a teacher's education credentials correspond to a child's development and performance in the classroom. The results of these studies have consistently argued the benefits of hiring pre-K/early childhood education teachers with at least a bachelor's degree,²⁴ leading many early childhood system leaders and programs to raise the minimum education requirements for such positions to a college degree.²⁵

Although early childhood certificates or licenses that require at least a college degree are defined differently across states, they are commonly needed

to qualify for employment as a teacher in a publicly funded and/or licensed pre-K program. Depending on the state, these certificates or licenses may also be required to hold positions as a lead teacher, group teacher, or head teacher in a publicly funded and/or licensed center-based child-care/pre-K program.

Table 2 provides an overview of key aspects of early childhood teacher qualification policies and practices across the 20 U.S. states with the largest immigrant populations, with a focus on policies for applicants with college degrees and work experience obtained abroad.

While most of the states examined have designated their department of education or a division within it to oversee early childhood education credential evaluation and licensure, four have designated other entities—ranging from professional commissions or licensing boards to departments of early childhood—to fulfill this role. The subsections that follow take a closer look at three key components of these policies: processes for the evaluation of foreign education credentials, for recognition of work experience in another country, and any additional testing requirements for applicants seeking certification or licensing.

TABLE 2

Qualification Policies and Requirements for Early Childhood Teacher Licensure in Selected States, as of August 2024

State and Credentialing Entity	License/Certificate	Foreign Credential Evaluation Policy	Accept Work Experience in Another Country?	Require Testing?
Arizona Department of Education	Birth–Age 8 Grade 3 Certificate	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes
California Commission on Teacher Credentialing	PK–3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Credential	Degrees must be evaluated by a commission-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No	Yes
Colorado Department of Education and Department of Early Childhood	Initial Teacher License: Early Childhood Education (Ages 0–8)	The Department of Education accepts evaluations approved by the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services.	No	Yes
Connecticut State Department of Education	Integrated Early Childhood/Elementary Education N-3	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	Yes	Yes
Florida Department of Education	Preschool Education (Birth through Age 4) Certificate	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Qualification Policies and Requirements for Early Childhood Teacher Licensure in Selected States, as of August 2024

State and Credentialing Entity	License/Certificate	Foreign Credential Evaluation Policy	Accept Work Experience in Another Country?	Require Testing?
Georgia Professional Standards Commission	Pre-K Lead Teacher	Degrees must be evaluated by a commission-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information. However, local or regional education agencies must recognize experience earned abroad for placement on state salary schedule.	Yes
Illinois State Board of Education	Early Childhood Education Professional License	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a board-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes
Maryland State Department of Education	Early Childhood Education (PreK–3) Certificate	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	Yes	Yes
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Educator Licensure	Early Childhood (PreK–2) Initial License	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes
Michigan Department of Education	Lower Elementary (PK–3)	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	Yes	It depends. An applicant who is certified abroad and has at least three years of work experience may be exempt from certification testing.
Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board	Early Childhood (Birth–Grade 3)	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a board-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes
Nevada Department of Education	Early Childhood Education (Birth–Second Grade) License	Degrees must be evaluated by a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	Yes	Yes. Testing can be waived under Nevada’s reciprocal licensing policy, which allows the state to conduct evaluations on a case-by-case basis.

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Qualification Policies and Requirements for Early Childhood Teacher Licensure in Selected States, as of August 2024

State and Credentialing Entity	License/Certificate	Foreign Credential Evaluation Policy	Accept Work Experience in Another Country?	Require Testing?
New Jersey Department of Education	Preschool through Grade 3 Standard Certificate	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a foreign credential evaluation service.	No	Yes
New York State Education Department, Office of Teaching Initiatives	Early Childhood Education (Birth–Grade 2) Initial Certificate	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No	Yes
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction	Birth through Kindergarten Professional Educator License	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	No
Ohio State Board of Education	Early Childhood (P–3)	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a board-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	Yes	Yes
Pennsylvania Department of Education, Division of Certification Services	Grades Pre-Kindergarten–4 License and Lead Teacher	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes
Texas Education Agency	Early Childhood: EC–Grade 3 License	Applicant must submit an evaluation from an agency-approved foreign credential evaluation service and meet certain Texas-specific requirements.	Yes	It depends. An applicant may be exempt if their license, previous work experience, and prior exam history meet Texas standards.
Virginia Department of Education, Office of Teacher Education and Office of Licensure and School Leadership	Early/Primary Education PreK–3 or PreK–6 License	Applicant must submit an evaluation from a department-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	No information	Yes
Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction	Residency Teaching License with Early Childhood Endorsement	Applicant must submit an evaluation from an agency-approved foreign credential evaluation service.	Yes	Yes

Note: The 20 states included in this table are those with the largest immigrant populations.

Source: See Appendix A for a state-by-state list of citations for these policies and requirements.

Foreign Qualification Evaluation Policies

For immigrants seeking to study, work, or practice a licensed profession in the United States, receiving recognition for education credentials and other qualifications obtained abroad is a critically important step. Numerous private, nongovernmental entities provide credential evaluations for a fee. Once an individual has obtained an evaluation of their credential, they can submit it to an employer, state licensing authority, or other entity, depending on the relevant process. These entities then determine which of the individual's qualifications they choose to recognize.

All 20 states examined in this analysis have foreign credential evaluation policies that require an applicant to submit an evaluation from a credential evaluation service. While some states provide a list of the credential evaluation companies from which they will accept such documentation, others do not. If no list is provided, the applicant is responsible for selecting a credential evaluation service that meets their needs. This can be a daunting task, especially for applicants who are unfamiliar with U.S. licensing processes or feel unprepared to judge the quality of different companies. Meeting credential evaluation requirements can also be an onerous undertaking for immigrants and refugees who have fled war-torn countries or situations of political disorder that prevent them from obtaining copies of personal records such as academic transcripts and occupational or professional licenses.

Accepting Work Experience from Another Country

When applying for state teaching licenses, applicants may be required to submit verification of previous work experience, which can serve as an indicator of skills previously acquired on the job. This can pose a serious barrier for those whose work experience was obtained outside the United States, since many states do not recognize such work ex-

perience or do not have a policy that explicitly indicates whether they recognize it.

Of the 20 states examined, only Connecticut, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, Texas, and Washington State explicitly recognize work experience obtained abroad. In contrast, California, Colorado, New Jersey, and New York State explicitly do not accept work experience in another country, while nine other states (Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) do not explain their policies for accepting such experience.

With California, New York, and New Jersey ranking among the top five states with the largest immigrant populations... the impact of policies that deny recognition of work experience obtained abroad is greatly magnified.

The inability to have prior work experience recognized often means an applicant must complete additional training in supervised positions or internships before qualifying for an early childhood education license. Or, applicants may need to enroll in (and pay the fees for) a state-approved preparation program or practicum. With California, New York, and New Jersey ranking among the top five states with the largest immigrant populations and topping the list of those where immigrants make up the highest shares of a state's overall population,²⁶ the impact of policies that deny recognition of work experience obtained abroad is greatly magnified; needless to say, these policies present a significant obstacle for skilled immigrants and refugees seeking to join their state's early childhood education workforce. Other states' ambiguity regarding recognition of work experience outside the United States also poses obsta-

cles, leaving applicants unsure of whether or how to proceed with obtaining licensure.

Among states with an explicit policy of accepting work experience obtained abroad, each has its own requirements and processes for doing this. For example, applicants in Connecticut can submit documentation showing that they have completed a teaching program or have teaching experience outside the United States.²⁷ In Maryland, by contrast, applicants can receive recognition by submitting a verification of experience form that documents at least three years of satisfactory work experience in the area in which they are seeking licensure.²⁸ Other states, such as Michigan and Texas, have policies that exempt applicants from testing requirements if they submit verification of work experience abroad.²⁹ And in Ohio and Washington, applicants trained abroad can receive recognition for credentials and work experience obtained outside the United States by submitting a work experience form alongside a copy of their license or credentials.³⁰

Testing Requirements

When applying for professional licensure, states may instruct applicants to complete tests to demonstrate subject knowledge relevant to a specific license. For early childhood education positions that require at least a bachelor's degree, professional and subject knowledge tests are a common additional strategy for evaluating applicants' competencies.

Testing requirements vary by license and state, as demonstrated in Table 3. In some states, applicants who have significant work experience or who have obtained a license from another state or country may be exempted from standardized testing. In others, applicants may be required to complete additional tests or assessments regardless of previous experience. The four most common types are: state professional and subject knowledge tests, compe-

tence assessments for reading and writing, Praxis tests, and English language proficiency tests. These assessments and tests cannot be taken in languages other than English, meaning applicants must have an advanced level of English proficiency to achieve passing scores.

- ▶ **Professional and subject knowledge.** Some states have developed and administer tests tailored to their specific expectations of mastery of the knowledge and skills needed to effectively teach a particular subject or age group. As a result, these tests differ across states.
- ▶ **Reading and writing competence.** Some states require applicants to receive a passing score on a competence assessment evaluating communication, reading, and literacy skills. These assessments also tend to vary across states, with states including California choosing to develop their own standardized version.³¹ Other states, such as Maryland, take a less formal approach by requiring early childhood education certificate applicants to complete reading coursework.³² Foundations of Reading tests, which gauge one's understanding of the scientific principles of research-based reading instruction, are also included in this category.
- ▶ **Praxis.** Praxis tests are administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), a national organization that develops and administers standardized tests widely used in K-12 school systems and post-secondary education. ETS's Early Childhood Education 5025 exam and the Principles of Learning and Teaching: Early Childhood (5621) test are the Praxis exams commonly used to assess license applicants' knowledge and preparation for teaching students in an early childhood

education setting. Praxis test costs range from \$50 to more than \$200, with additional fees for scheduling, score reports, and other special services.³³ Some states may require an applicant to complete more than one Praxis test.

- **English language proficiency.** Applicants educated in another country may be required to complete a test to demonstrate their proficiency in English. For example, Pennsylvania's Department of Education, which oversees the state's Pre-Kindergarten–Grade 4 license, requires applicants who are not U.S. citizens and who have credentials earned in a country where the primary and official language is not English to demonstrate their proficiency in understanding and speaking English by passing the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) English Language Oral Proficiency Interview.³⁴

TABLE 3
Type(s) of Standardized Tests Required by Selected States for Early Childhood Education Licensure, as of August 2024

Standardized Test Type	State
State professional and subject knowledge test	Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York State
Competence assessment for reading and writing	California, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Washington State
Praxis test	Colorado, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, Virginia
English language proficiency test	Pennsylvania, Texas

Note: The states in this table are those with the largest immigrant populations. North Carolina does not appear in this table because it does not require additional testing.

Source: See Appendix A for a state-by-state list of citations for these requirements.

Similarly, licensure applicants in Texas must demonstrate English language proficiency by receiving a satisfactory score on the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-Based Test (TOEFL iBT).³⁵

B. High School Diplomas or Equivalent

Educational attainment levels vary significantly across the ECEC workforce, and between immigrant and U.S.-born workers. For example, immigrants are more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to have a high school diploma as their highest education credential.³⁶ A high school diploma or equivalent also remains the most widely held credential among ECEC workers in entry-level positions,³⁷ even as educational attainment requirements rise in the field overall. Although position titles and their respective minimum education requirements are defined differently across states, as demonstrated in Table 4, common examples of entry-level positions include: teacher-caregiver, primary caregiver, lead caregiver, center lead teacher, child-care teacher, and child-care center staff member. In addition to holding at least a high school diploma or equivalent, almost all states examined for this study require a significant number of hours of ECEC work experience to qualify for such entry-level positions.

One of the most recognized credentials in the ECEC field—the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, overseen by the Council for Professional Recognition—wraps together these two requirements and combines them with a significant dose of learning focused on early childhood topics. A CDA is transferable nationwide, is commonly used to fulfill education and experience requirements for center-based child-care programs, and can be completed in either English or Spanish. To obtain the credential, applicants must have a high school diploma or equivalent, complete 120 hours of professional

early childhood education, and fulfill 480 hours of work experience.³⁸

Although high school diplomas earned in other countries meet the CDA diploma requirement, work experience obtained outside the United States does

not count toward its work experience requirement. As depicted in Table 4, many states require individuals to have completed on-the-job training to qualify for center-based child-care staff positions, and many recognize and count work experience earned under the CDA toward this requirement.

TABLE 4

Qualifications for Common Job Titles in Center-Based Child-Care Programs in Selected States, as of August 2024

State and Licensing Entity	Job Title	Require at Least a High School Diploma or Equivalent?	Require Work Experience?
Arizona Department of Health Services	Teacher-Caregiver	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or credit hours from an accredited university.	It depends. An applicant with a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential does not need additional work experience. An applicant without a CDA must have six months of child-care experience.
California Department of Social Services, Child Care Licensing Program	Day Care Center Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or credit hours from an accredited university.	Yes. An applicant with or without a CDA must also have at least six months of work experience or on-the-job training in a licensed child-care center or comparable program.
Colorado Department of Early Childhood, Division of Early Learning Licensing and Administration	Early Childhood Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or completion of department-approved training course and/or credit hours from an accredited university.	No. An applicant with or without a CDA does not need work experience. However, verified experience can be used to meet job requirements.
Connecticut Office of Early Childhood, Division of Licensing	Head Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or credit hours from an accredited university.	Yes. An applicant with or without a CDA must have a certain number of hours of documented supervised experience.
Florida Department of Children and Families	Child-Care Professional	Yes. Note: High school diplomas earned abroad are accepted.	It depends. An applicant with a CDA does not need additional work experience. An applicant without a CDA may or may not need work experience, depending on their level of education.
Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning	Teacher/Lead Caregiver	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or completion of department-approved training course and/or credit hours from an accredited university.	It depends. An applicant with a CDA does not need additional work experience. An applicant without a CDA may or may not need work experience, depending on their level of education.
Illinois Department of Children and Family Services	Early Childhood Teacher	Yes	It depends. An applicant with a CDA does not need additional work experience. An applicant without a CDA or 60 semester hours of credits from an accredited college or university must have at least one year (1,560 hours) of work experience.

TABLE 4 (cont.)

Qualifications for Common Job Titles in Center-Based Child-Care Programs in Selected States, as of August 2024

State and Licensing Entity	Job Title	Require at Least a High School Diploma or Equivalent?	Require Work Experience?
Maryland State Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood, Office of Child Care, Licensing Branch	Child-Care Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or credit hours from an accredited university.	It depends. An applicant with or without a CDA must have at least one year of supervised experience working primarily with preschoolers in a licensed child-care center or one year of college, or have an equivalent combination of college and work experience.
Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care	Preschool Lead Teacher	Yes	Yes. An applicant with a CDA must complete 27 months of supervised experience. An applicant without a CDA must complete work experience, with the amount determined based on the degree they hold.
Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, Child Care Licensing Bureau	Lead Caregiver	Yes	It depends. An applicant with a CDA must complete 480 hours of work experience. An applicant without a CDA may need work experience, depending on their level of education.
Minnesota Department of Human Services	Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or completion of department-approved certificate and/or credit hours from an accredited university.	Yes. An applicant with a CDA must complete 1,560 hours as an assistant teacher, aide, or student intern. An applicant without a CDA must complete work experience, with the amount determined based on the degree or certificate they hold.
Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Welfare and Supportive Services, Child Care Licensing	Teacher	It depends. An applicant must either hold a high school diploma or higher education, have a CDA with a relevant endorsement, or have an equivalent combination of education and work experience, as determined by the administrator of the Division of Welfare and Supportive Services on a case-by-case basis.	Yes. An applicant with a CDA must complete at least 2,000 hours of verifiable experience in a child-care facility. An applicant without a CDA must complete work experience, with the amount determined based on the degree they hold.
New Jersey Department of Children and Families	Group Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or completion of department-approved certificate and/or credit hours from an accredited university.	It depends. An applicant with a CDA does not need additional work experience. An applicant without a CDA may or may not need work experience, depending on their level of education.

TABLE 4 (cont.)

Qualifications for Common Job Titles in Center-Based Child-Care Programs in Selected States, as of August 2024

State and Licensing Entity	Job Title	Require at Least a High School Diploma or Equivalent?	Require Work Experience?
New York State Office of Children and Family Services, Division of Child Care Services	Preschool Group Teacher	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or completion of department-approved certificate and/or credit hours from an accredited university.	It depends. An applicant with a CDA must complete one year of experience related to caring for children. An applicant without a CDA may or may not need work experience, depending on their level of education.
North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education	Lead Teacher	Yes	It depends. An applicant needs to either have one year of experience working in a child-care center or two years of verifiable experience as a licensed family child-care home operator, or alternatively to have completed a qualifying early childhood education program in high school or training in child development.
Ohio Department of Children and Youth	Child-Care Center Staff Member	It depends. High school diploma/equivalent or completion of department-approved training course and/or credit hours from an accredited university.	No. No additional work experience is required.
Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Child Development and Early Learning	Assistant Group Supervisor	Yes	It depends. An applicant may or may not need experience working with children, with the amount determined based on their level of education and training.
Texas Health and Human Services, Child Care Licensing	Primary Caregiver	Yes. Note: High school diplomas earned abroad are accepted.	Yes. An applicant with or without a CDA must complete at least one year of experience in a licensed child-care center or home, with the amount depending on their level of education. Note: Work experience abroad is accepted.
Virginia Department of Education, Office of Child Care Health and Safety	Program Leader	Yes	It depends. An applicant with a CDA must complete at least three or six months of supervised programmatic experience. An applicant without a CDA may or may not need work experience, depending on their level of education.
Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families	Center Lead Teacher	Yes	No. No additional work experience is required. However, an applicant can meet role qualifications using previous experience.

Note: The 20 states included in this table are those with the largest immigrant populations.

Source: See Appendix B for a state-by-state list of citations for these policies and requirements.

Foreign Qualification Recognition Policies

Many questions remain for those seeking recognition for high school diplomas and/or work experience obtained outside the United States in order to qualify for key positions in the formal child-care sector since state regulations are largely silent on whether such qualifications should be counted. Furthermore, information on these state qualification recognition processes is limited and difficult to locate.

Of the 20 states examined for this brief, Florida and Texas are the only states that explicitly acknowledge individuals with high school diplomas or work experience earned outside the United States in their child-care policies. Florida's foreign credential recognition policy directs applicants with a high school diploma earned abroad to submit it to a state-approved credential evaluation agency, but it does not address work experience in another country.³⁹ Texas policies address both education credentials and work experience. The state not only accepts high school diplomas earned outside of the United States,⁴⁰ it also recognizes work experience obtained abroad if it involved working directly with children in a licensed or certified child-care center.⁴¹ No other state in this sample explicitly recognizes work experience in another country for individuals applying for the child-care positions studied.

4 Implications and Recommendations

This analysis points to a range of weaknesses and gaps in state policies and processes that can hinder experienced ECEC teachers and child-care workers with education credentials or work experience obtained abroad from putting their skills to use in U.S. communities. In some cases, there are straightforward steps that can be taken to address these issues,

while others require a deeper level of review and decision-making by system administrators.

The most straightforward concern evident from this analysis is the need for transparency related to system policies. State and local ECEC agency and program administrators and other stakeholders (for example, ECEC workers, community organizations, local media, and elected officials) should be aware of and able to readily access information about their system's policies and processes for recognizing education, work experience, and other qualifications obtained outside the United States. Steps states can take to ensure this basic information is available include:

- ▶ Ensure all policies and public information related to education and work experience qualifications for ECEC positions describe whether and how qualifications obtained outside the United States will be recognized. This includes policies for the major ECEC positions explored in this brief as well as others relevant to the field, such as those that require social work, medical, or other advanced degrees and work experience. If qualifications earned in another country are not considered a valid means of meeting some or all elements of a state's requirements for a position, this too should be noted in order to save employers and potential applicants the time, frustration, and expenses associated with engaging in hiring processes that do not have a chance of succeeding.
- ▶ Make website notices and other public forms of communication related to qualifications for ECEC positions available in languages other than English to ensure they are accessible to LEP individuals. Under federal language access policies, this is required for all programs receiving federal funding.⁴²

- ▶ Provide information regarding foreign qualification recognition policies and processes in training materials for relevant agency staff, in training and other materials shared by the state government with ECEC system partners inside and outside government, and in service providers' employee recruitment and outreach campaigns.

The analysis also shows that many states have only partially addressed the major elements of foreign qualification recognition in their policies for key ECEC positions. For example, although states often have policies in place to recognize university degrees earned abroad, many of those same states fail to address the question of high school diplomas or work experience obtained abroad or overlook certain opportunities to maximize license recognition or reciprocity. To ensure a state has fully addressed foreign qualification recognition questions in its ECEC employment policies and processes, system leaders can:

- ▶ Ensure all elements of ECEC position qualification requirements (including educational attainment, licensure, and work experience) have been reviewed and determinations made with regard to whether and how qualifications obtained outside the United States should be recognized to meet each requirement.
- ▶ As part of regular reviews of state ECEC foreign qualification recognition practices, consider the feasibility of streamlined policies for recognizing education, work experience, and other qualifications earned abroad (for example, recognition of professional licenses obtained in particular countries and/or work experience obtained with licensed service providers abroad).

- ▶ Review the procedures and costs of foreign credential evaluation agencies and either provide guidance to ECEC licensing applicants on how to select an evaluator for their credential evaluation needs or provide a list of preferred providers.

Finally, it became clear during this analysis that some states have gone beyond standard foreign qualification recognition policies to proactively support ECEC workers with qualifications obtained outside the United States. While such efforts continue to evolve and are most effective when tailored to the characteristics of a state's ECEC applicant pool and workforce needs, initiatives to date offer many ideas for potential approaches. These include:

- ▶ Covering the fees associated with foreign credential evaluation processes, testing, and other elements of qualification review can be part of system or program efforts to alleviate the financial burden on ECEC job applicants. The Pennsylvania Key, an organization created by the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning, is an example of such an effort.⁴³ It reimburses up to \$150 per evaluation for individuals with degrees earned abroad who are looking to work in Pennsylvania's early childhood education system.⁴⁴ Aspiring educators interested in reimbursement can apply for the funds online through the Pennsylvania Key's website. By removing or reducing costs, such initiatives can help address one of the major barriers associated with qualification recognition and help ECEC systems meet their pressing recruitment and retention needs, particularly the need for staff with the linguistic and cultural competence skills to effectively serve immigrant-background children and their families.

- ▶ Because the foreign qualification recognition process is often fraught with obstacles and uncertainty for job applicants in ECEC and other fields, developing trusted sources of specialized guidance and career navigation support has proven useful in meeting applicant and system needs. In the health-care field, the Welcome Back Initiative has been providing career navigation support for professionals educated or trained abroad for nearly 25 years in community college and local organization settings.⁴⁵ Supporting models such as this, particularly in highly diverse settings, can not only assist job applicants but also give state and local system leaders ready access to information regarding credentialing barriers and potential solutions, such as the need for particular content courses that could speed up the licensing of well-qualified individuals.

5 Conclusion

Despite the pressing need to attract, grow, and retain workers in the ECEC workforce, obstacles in state hiring systems continue to impede recognition of education, work experience, and other qualifica-

tions obtained outside the United States for individuals seeking employment in the field. Too often, the complexity of foreign qualification recognition processes—exacerbated by the lack of access to licensure information and fragmentation in the administration of ECEC systems—prevents well-qualified individuals from meeting employment or licensure requirements. This is particularly concerning given that immigrant early childhood educators and caregivers often possess the linguistic and cultural competence skills critical to providing effective ECEC services to the nation’s increasingly diverse young-child population.

States ultimately hold the power to establish hiring and licensing standards, foreign qualification recognition policies, and associated implementation processes, meaning it is within their power to address many of these obstacles. However, as this brief demonstrates, much work remains to be done to improve these policies and processes within ECEC systems. With efforts underway in numerous states, ECEC system and program leaders have many opportunities to borrow and learn from existing initiatives and to develop new approaches that allow them to more fully tap the talents and skills of these workers and to support high-quality education and care for young children across the United States.

Too often, the complexity of foreign qualification recognition processes... prevents well-qualified individuals from meeting employment or licensure requirements.

Appendices

Appendix A. Sources for Information on State Qualification Policies and Requirements for Early Childhood Teacher Licensure

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