

Strengthening Standards for NJ Early Childhood Teachers



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Introduction


National standards require that teachers of children under 8 have a strong foundation in both child development and in mastery of subject areas, known as “content knowledge.”

In 2016, New Jersey looks to revise its teacher certification regulations to better meet national standards, Advocates for Children of New Jersey took a closer look at the state’s two certifications for teachers of young children. New Jersey teachers who earn an Early Childhood Education (P-3) certificate tend to receive more training in child development, as opposed to content-specific preparation. Conversely, Elementary Education (K-6) certification programs tend concentrate more on subject area content knowledge and training, with less focus on child development.

To address this apparent difference between K-6 and P-3 certification programs, ACNJ recommends that both certifications be bolstered to provide complete child development and content-area training for all teachers of young children, regardless of which certificate they earn. Additionally, ACNJ recommends that kindergarten be removed from the K-6 certification to ensure that only teachers trained with an emphasis in child development are certified to teach kindergarten – a critical transition year for young children.

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Background

In 2007, seven years after the creation of the P-3 certification, ACNJ published a report on the differences between the Early Childhood and Elementary certifications.ⁱ The report noted that the distinctions between the two certifications left open potential gaps in teacher preparation to meet the learning needs of young children. The 2007 report recommended that steps be taken to reduce the grades covered by overlapping certifications and that teacher training include a balance between preschool and elementary grades, specifically in student-teaching placements.

ACNJ revisits this prior report with a review of course descriptions and programs of study at each of New Jersey’s 4-year teacher preparation programs where both K-6 and P-3 certification programs are offered, as well as relevant state statutes, regulations and policies. (This analysis did not include a review of course syllabi or textbook choices.) To supplement this report, this issue brief is based on phone interviews with six noted early childhood experts from across the state in different New Jersey colleges and universities.ⁱⁱ

Giving Every Child A Chance



Differences Between the P-3 and K-6 Certifications

Although undergraduate teacher preparation programs vary widely, a pattern of differences between the P-3 and K-6 certificates emerged in the interviews with early childhood experts and the review of course offerings and descriptions at teacher preparation programs. P-3 preparation programs tended to include more in-depth coursework on child development and focused on developing early literacy with a holistic curriculum approach that looked at family and emotional support. K-6 preparation programs tended to include more coursework on content-specific pedagogy, notably math and science, geared toward older children.

Child Development

Despite the importance of child development in national standards for teaching young children in “developmentally appropriate” settings,^{viii} the interviewed experts, which included professors specializing in early childhood education and development, noted that New Jersey K-6 certification programs often lack principles of child development.

Completing a certification program is no guarantee of specific coursework in child development. In a review of all 12 certifying programs that offered both K-6 and P-3 programs, five required no child development credits beyond a child psychology prerequisite for their K-6 certificate.

Even in programs requiring child development coursework for K-6 certification, interviewees worried about the depth of understanding provided in the coursework.

One expert noted that there was “less focus in K-6 programs on creating developmentally-appropriate classrooms” that provide an optimal learning environment for young children.

This concern was reflected in programs of study that required fewer courses in child development for K-6 programs and a greater emphasis on measurement and evaluation. The interviewees described this trend as a general shift in elementary education, as the focus on testing has intensified in the elementary grades.

Why Two Certifications for the Same Grades?

New Jersey’s two paths to certification to teach young children have their roots in the 2000 *Abbott v. Burke* Supreme Court school funding decision,ⁱⁱⁱ which recognized the critical role that well-educated preschool teachers play in the lives of young children.

At the time of the decision, the only available early childhood education certificate was a Nursery through Grade 8 (N-8) credential.^{iv} The court decision required that preschool teachers receive an early childhood certification and that all teachers who did not have a college degree attain a bachelor’s degree and become certified within four years.

To meet the court’s mandate, New Jersey quickly strengthened the training of its early childhood workforce by creating a P-3 certification.^v The New Jersey Department of Education adopted the framework in compliance with the court decision shortly after. The state paired the P-3 certification with a Kindergarten through Grade 5 (K-5) Certification (now the K-6 certification after a change in 2013), which covered some of the same grades but had different requirements. An educator teaching grades kindergarten to 3rd grade could hold either certificate.

Overlapping certifications provide flexibility to school administrators when staffing teaching positions and more options for teachers in finding jobs.^{vi} The overlapping certifications attempted to balance the importance of training early childhood teachers with the need to staff positions with appropriately certified teachers within four years.^{vii}

Content-Specific Knowledge

While K-6 programs had less focus on child development, they differed from P-3 programs by having more focus and detail on specific subject-area content training, such as science or social studies.

The difference in focus was not identical at every institution. Indeed, several institutions had identical content-specific coursework for K-6 and P-3 certification programs. Nonetheless, the experts generally agreed that differences in philosophy persisted between programs. One education professor said that P-3 programs may not provide candidates who want to teach 2nd and 3rd grades with the content training they might find more applicable to the realities of teaching those grades.

Differing philosophies in approaching curriculum in younger and older children play a role as well, according to the interviewed experts. Older elementary grades are broken into distinct subjects, such as math or history, while early childhood classrooms have an integrated approach to content but do not necessarily look at specific content areas.

Potential Impacts of these Differences

The differences between P-3 and K-6 certification programs may lead to differences in teaching and learning for young children. High-quality teachers need both robust content knowledge and understanding of how child development affects learning and growth.

Interviewees in our expert panel said they were concerned that teachers holding a K-6 certification might not have sufficiently specialized training to teach young children in kindergarten or 1st grade, while a P-3-certified teacher might flounder in the elementary grade levels.

In addition, the differences in the certifications might affect the types of degrees that teacher candidates pursue, as well as their attractiveness to employers for particular openings. In its 2007 report, ACNJ noted that the overlapping certifications run the risk of stigmatizing early childhood teachers. The P-3 certification covers a smaller age range and might encourage administrators to hire elementary teachers with K-6 certifications because of the increased flexibility in grade placement.



This concern was reflected both in the course offerings and in interviewee responses. Multiple teacher preparation programs offered the P-3 certification coursework as an add-on to an existing K-6 certification program, while one education professor training P-3 teacher candidates stated that they “worried about the older grades and are looking to be marketable.”

Recommendations

Based on this revisiting of the certification structure discussed almost 10 years ago, ACNJ proposes a set of common-sense changes to help address differences and potential gaps in preparation among programs and teachers.

Bolster Both P-3 and K-6 Certifications

In reviewing the requirements for receiving both Early Childhood and Elementary certifications, the Department of Education and the New Jersey Board of Education should include more robust requirements for each certificate. The K-6 certification should better incorporate child development, family support and communication, and instructional approaches appropriate for young children. Similarly, the P-3 certification should be strengthened to include additional content-based coursework reflective of the reality of elementary classrooms.

For example, Colorado’s state standards for educator preparation programs require that elementary educators demonstrate “incorporate documented and proven theories of child development and learning, as

appropriate for all learners”^{ix} New Jersey’s standards, regulations and procedures for approving certification programs should include similar criteria that require all teachers of young children to have the same foundation of knowledge in both specific content and child development.

Remove Kindergarten from the K-6 Certification

The K-6 certification now spans seven years of child development, almost twice as much time as any other certificate, but as noted above, K-6 certification programs often lack robust training on child development.

Kindergarten is a critical year for transition from early childhood to elementary school, and New Jersey’s Department of Education recognizes that “[h]igh-quality kindergarten programming hinges on fostering children’s development and learning in all domains – physical, social-emotional, cognitive, and language.”^x Child development research and common sense tell us that 5-year-old kindergartners are much closer in their development stage to 3- and 4-year-old preschoolers than 11- and 12-year-old 6th graders.

Other states, such as Connecticut, have recognized that kindergartners are best taught by teachers with specific training in early childhood development and the learning needs of young children and have removed kindergarten from their elementary certifications.^{xi} As in Connecticut, a delayed phase-out over multiple years of kindergarten from the K-6 certification would give current kindergarten teachers without the P-3 certification time to pursue appropriate certification.

The certifications have regularly changed over time to reflect the needs of children and educators. For example, 6th grade was added to the Elementary Education (K-6) certification in 2013, expanding it from K-5.^{xii}

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Endnotes

- i. Cynthia Rice & Jill McLaughlin, *Providing the Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey* p. 1 (Sept. 2007). Retrieved at <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/09-11-07%20ToolsToQuality.pdf>
- ii. The six New Jersey early childhood experts consulted were: Gerry Costa (Montclair State University), Ana Berdecia (Thomas Edison State College), Zeynep Ercan (Rowan University), Arlene Martin (Kean University), Regina Adesanya (New Jersey City University), Sharon Ryan (Rutgers). An additional interview was conducted with Laura Bornfreund of the New America Foundation.
- iii. *Abbott v. Burke* (Abbott VI), 163 N.J. 95 (2000).
- iv. *Abbott VI*, 163 N.J. at 105.
- v. Carrie Lobman et al., *Reconstructing Teacher Education to Prepare Qualified Preschool Teachers: Lessons from New Jersey*, 7 *Early Childhood Research & Practice* (2005). Retrieved at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v7n2/lobman.html/>
- vi. See Laura Bornfreund, *Preparing Teachers for the Early Grades*, 69 *Educational Leadership* at 36-40 (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may12/vol69/num08/Preparing-Teachers-for-the-Early-Grades.aspx>
- vii. Cynthia Rice & Jill McLaughlin, *Providing the Tools Towards Quality: The Status of P-3 Teacher Preparation Programs in New Jersey* p. 1 (Sept. 2007). Retrieved at <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/09-11-07%20ToolsToQuality.pdf>
- viii. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that all young children under age eight years old be educated according to “developmentally appropriate practice,” in which a teacher bases decisions and practices on a child’s developmental stage, skills and cultural background. National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Position Statement: Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8* (2009). Retrieved at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSDAP.pdf>
- ix. 1 CCR 301-37, 8.02(2)(a).
- x. New Jersey Department of Education Division of Early Childhood Education, *New Jersey Kindergarten Implementation Guidelines* (2011), p. 7. <http://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/KindergartenGuidelines.pdf>
- xi. Connecticut Public Act 12-63, amended by Public Act 13-122 (Section 11).
- xii. See 45 N.J.R. 1605(a). The Register summarizes comments in response to proposed changes including the extension of the K-5 certificate to K-6. No comments are noted in opposition to the proposed change.