CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF
Child Care Employment

**University of California at Berkeley**

# Comparison of K-12 and Early Care and Education Systems

Adapted from *Preparing Teachers of Young Children: The Current State of Knowledge, and a Blueprint for the Future, Executive Summary*. (Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009)

Both the K-12 and early care and education (ECE) communities grapple with similar questions about developing strong teachers and ensuring that all children, particularly those most at risk, have access to them. As efforts to bridge K-12 and ECE policies, professional pathways, and best practices continue to develop, it is necessary to first understand each system, and compare their differences and similarities. The table below does so along the following dimensions and factors of the teaching environment:

**Dimensions**

| | **K-12** | **ECE** |
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| **Delivery systems, standards, and educational requirements** | Public K-12 education was established to provide free access to education for all children in the nation, because a well-educated populace was viewed as a public good. Across states and communities, schools are typically organized into districts with local governing bodies, state and federal over-sight, and local, state, and national funding. Federal funds are a minority portion of K-12 financing, but federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) sets standards for teacher qualifications, and requires accountability and reporting from states and school districts. | ECE programs originate in two separate historical traditions – some primarily to care for children while their parents worked, others to promote early learning. U.S. society has not fully embraced ECE as a public good. As a result, more than 20 federal ECE funding and regulatory streams exist, and all 50 states have their own array of differently funded and governed programs. There are no structures akin to school districts for all ECE programs, no federal laws like NCLB that set uniform expectations about teacher qualifications, and no uniform accountability or reporting systems. |
| **Teacher education, certification, and career pathways** | Professional standards define teachers relatively uniformly across school districts and states, and require all public school teachers to have at least a BA degree and provisional or actual certification before they can begin teaching. All states have procedures for certifying public school teachers, and all public schools are expected to hire teachers who are state-certified. | Teacher qualification standards vary widely, based on program types and funding requirements – from little or no pre-service preparation, to a BA or higher – as do the actual qualifications of the teaching corps. Each state sets its own ECE teacher standards; the only exceptions are federal programs such as Head Start and Military Child Care. There is a far greater emphasis in ECE on in-service training, and/or on part-time college/university attendance while teaching, either to complete required credits or to earn a degree. Community colleges and community-based training organizations play the central roles in ECE teacher preparation. |
| **Teacher preparation vs. professional development** | In K-12, the term “teacher preparation” refers to pre-service education and training; “professional development” means in-service education and training. For all K-12 teachers, there is a presumed baseline of a BA degree, typically from a college or university school of education, followed by induction and ongoing professional development after one begins teaching. | There is no common baseline of pre-service preparation. “Professional development” is a catchall phrase covering nearly the entire spectrum of education and training avail-able in the field – from introductory training, to informal workshops or other continuing education, to college-level work for credit or a degree. Many ECE settings do not have a continuing education requirement for teachers. |
| **Clinical preparation** | Thirty-eight states require beginning K-12 teachers to engage in fieldwork, such as student teaching – ranging from 5 to 20 weeks, and varying from community placements early in one’s educational career, to stints of student teaching only after completing most coursework. New efforts are underway to reform these disparate practices and implement more rigorous, clinically-based student teaching practices (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). | Since many teachers enter the workforce with little or no pre-service training or education, one’s first teaching job typically doubles as “fieldwork,” but rarely with the formal structure that this term implies. |

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| **Induction, mentoring, and professional development** | K-12 education widely assumes that new teachers need a period of support in order to develop into effective practitioners who will remain in teaching careers. Federal (Title II) funding supports teacher quality improvement, including induction programs – which often pair a new teacher with a mentor who can model teaching practices, observe the teacher in the classroom, and provide feedback – and systems of ongoing professional development. | Induction is a much less familiar concept in ECE, and tends to be offered only to teachers in publicly funded preschool programs, e.g. those in school-based settings subject to NCLB. Professional development is often much less systematic, covering workshops, classes and other programs. Increasingly, however, ECE teachers are participating in professional development for a degree, and states are linking their professional development activities to an established set of competencies. |

**Factors of the teaching environment**

| | **K-12** | **ECE** |
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| **Number of adults in a classroom** | Most often, teachers in K-12 are the only teachers in their classrooms, although they may work with an assistant, aide, or other paraprofessional. Co-teaching by peers with the same professional status is uncommon. | Co-teaching among a group of adults is frequent in classrooms and centers, because even a small number of young children requires the presence of more than one adult. |
| **Class size and adult-child ratios*** | A single teacher often works in a classroom environment with no assistant or aide, and adult-child ratios are rarely calculated or reported at the classroom level. | Class size and adult-child ratios are governed by state licensing regulations; these vary by the age of the child, with younger children typically in smaller groups with a higher adult-child ratio, but are often less stringent than the consensus judgment of the ECE field about standards for high quality. |
| **Compensation** | K-12 public schools offer uniform pay scales, typically subject to collective bargaining, which detail benefits, raises, and rewards linked to teachers' educational levels, completion of continuing education, and tenure. "Merit pay" is also increasingly under discussion in states and school districts. | Teachers in ECE typically work for much lower wages than teachers in K-12, and formal pay scales are rare; the main exceptions are public school-based ECE and pre-K programs, and some unionized ECE centers. Compensation varies by funding source, often carrying little or no reward for education or ongoing professional development. |
| **Unionization** | All 50 states have teachers' unions and tenure laws, and 35 states and the District of Columbia have laws guaranteeing collective bargaining rights for K-12 teachers. In addition to salaries and benefits, unions can advocate for other improvements in teachers' work environment. | Unions do not have a strong presence in ECE field, with the exception of some Head Start programs and public school-based preschools, but unionization efforts appear to be increasing, especially in home-based settings, with 14 states allowing unions to represent home-based providers (Blank, Campbell, & Entmacher, 2010). |
| **Teacher retention and turnover** | The K-12 and ECE fields face widely differing turnover rates. Total replacement needs in 2006 – i.e., the estimated job openings resulting from the flow of workers out of an occupation – were 9.8% for elementary school teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). | Total replacement needs in 2006 were 29.5% for those self-identified as child care workers, and 13.5% for preschool teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). But because ECE programs typically run year-round (not on a 9-month school calendar), and rely more heavily on a team approach, a child in ECE is much more likely to experience the departure of one or more teachers in a given year than is a child in K-12. |
| **Administrative climate** | K-12 principals typically need an administrative credential, and/or a master's degree, and some prior teaching experience. | Only 20 states have some type of ECE director credential, and many set few or no pre-service training or education requirements. |

* "Class size" refers to the maximum number of children permitted in a given classroom. An "adult-child ratio" is the maximum number of children permitted per adult.


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