



Be an Educated Higher Education Consumer Make the Right Choice for You!!!

ECE CREDIT PROGRAMS - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are you thinking about improving your knowledge and competencies in order to better enhance children's outcomes in your program? With the current growing interest in quality early childhood education, demand for highly qualified early childhood teachers is on the rise. If you are considering going back to school, be sure that you are an "educated higher education consumer". Here are some of the things you need to do before enrolling in a program of study:

- Make a list of questions to ask admissions people
- Make an appointment with the ECE program chairperson or coordinator of the college or university ECE program (they know more about whether the program meets your needs)
- Call admissions offices or advisors of colleges/universities and request information
- Speak with financial aid offices for information on available aid
- Talk to your co-workers, friends and/or family members who have or are pursuing higher education degrees
- Research both two and four year institutions and decide which degree you would like to pursue and which school's program best meets your needs
- Seek out additional resources to help you in your decision making process.

Additionally, you should consider your personal and/or family circumstances, including:

- Your short and long term goals, and
- How you plan to fund your college education
- Time you can commit to taking the courses and studying.

In today's early childhood environment, it is very important to have the degree and/or credential that can help you achieve your career goals. Once you have decided to continue your education, you will be faced with numerous programs from which to choose. You may find yourself asking the question – *"How am I supposed to know whether these programs are legitimate or even right for me?"* These are good questions to ask.

Below are some questions and answers to help guide you as you go through this process.

1. What should I look for when considering enrolling in an ECE degree program?

Early childhood teacher preparation programs prepare individuals to work with young children. Besides numerous research studies attesting to the critical importance of the education and professional development of early childhood practitioners to children's positive outcomes, two federal programs, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law and Good Start, Grow Smart, which

emphasize quality of teacher preparation programs, have focused national attention on the importance of “highly qualified teachers” in children’s educational success. Some of the things to consider when looking for a quality early childhood teacher preparation program are:

- Program accreditation
- Characteristics and qualifications of the faculty
- Faculty-student ratio
- The kinds of courses and degrees offered
- Age-range covered by the program
- What kind of practicum experiences provided to students
- Does the program offer ECE graduate degrees?
- Is the certification program a stand-alone program rather than a few courses added to another certification?
- Does the program cover the full range of early childhood (Birth through grade 3)?
- Accessibility of programs to students
- Relevance or adequacy of diversity and cultural competence to program.
- Support and guidance for non-traditional students
- Does the program have an on-line option?

2. What is accreditation?

Today, higher education programs are offered in a variety of ways – traditional and classroom-based on and off campus, on line in cyberspace, or what is known as hybrid which is a combination of face to face instruction and on line. Determining which programs are legitimate can be a daunting experience. That is why it is critical to know which programs are accredited and to make sure a program is accredited before you enroll. Accreditation ensures that the programs of study offered meet standards for quality higher education. An accrediting organization reviews colleges, universities and other higher education institutions in order to guarantee their effectiveness, quality and improvement efforts. Accreditation is provided by private, non-governmental organizations established specifically to review higher education institutions and their programs of study.

An institution that is accredited has undergone a review of its structure, and the nature of its program to ensure that it complies with established set of standards. By accepting accreditation status, an institution agrees to undergo a review on a rotating basis every few years. The purpose of the continuous review is to ensure that the accredited institution continuous to maintain the required accreditation standards. Accreditation organizations are held accountable for the institutions to which they grant accreditation. In the United States, the US Department of Education (USDE) and Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) also review accreditation organizations to ensure that they are using effective accrediting practice.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education defines “Accreditation” as “a means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community. The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence”.

3. Are all Early Childhood Education Programs accredited and by what body?

Accreditation means that a legitimate outside, non-profit accrediting organization has reviewed the structure and nature of the program in order to ensure that it complies with specific set of standards.

There are many types of accreditation. The highest level of accreditation an institution can get is regional accreditation. There are six regional accreditation organizations in the United States-

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
- North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Each of the above six regional accrediting associations is responsible for a specific geographic area. For Pennsylvania, Middle States Association of Colleges and Universities is the regional accreditation organization. Middle States Association of Colleges and Universities accredits higher education institutions as a whole and academic programs are reviewed as part of the evaluation of the entire institution. Because the criteria and standards by which institutions are evaluated by Middle States are the most stringent and rigorous, a degree from institutions accredited by Middle States Association carries the most weight.

There are, however, other accreditation organizations. Accreditation of teacher preparation programs is one way of ensuring quality in program standards. In the United States, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is the body that accredits colleges, schools and education departments in higher education programs at the bachelors and advanced degree levels. For the Early Childhood Education field, NCATE uses NAEYC to review program reports from institutions and provide feedback to NCATE as to program quality. Upon receipt of NAEYC review report, NCATE Board of Examiners then conducts program site visits and submits its findings to the NCATE Unit Accreditation Board. In Pennsylvania, State System of Higher Education schools are required to have NCATE accreditation. Four year institutions are accredited by NCATE and/or Middle States Association.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has established a new accreditation system to recognize high-quality Associate Degree Programs that prepare early childhood educators. NAEYC Early Childhood Association Degree Accreditation system sets a standard of quality and excellence for early childhood education programs that prepare teachers at the associate degree level. The process includes extensive self-study, submission of a Self Study Report, a site visit conducted by a Peer Review Team, and an accreditation decision made by a national commission of early childhood professionals. NAEYC accreditation standards are performance-based and describe what well-prepared graduates of associate degree programs should know and be able to do.

4. Why should I care about accreditation when I just want to get a degree?

Enrolling in an accredited degree program is of utmost importance. Accreditation is the tool used to monitor, assess, and evaluate the standards and quality of the education students receive at a college, university or other institutions of higher education. One mission of accreditation

organizations is to ensure that institutions of higher education achieve positive student learning outcomes.

There are many reasons why you should research institutions to ensure that an institution is accredited by a legitimate accreditation organization before enrolling in its program of study. Among them are the following:

- **Quality Education:** Accreditation status indicates that an institution or program meets the standards of quality set by the accreditation organization, with regards to curriculum, faculty, administration, libraries, student services and financial well-being. It also assures a student an overall quality educational opportunity at the accredited institution.
- **Federal Financial Aid and State Grants:** Federal loans and often State grants are available to students who enroll in colleges, universities or other institutions of higher education that have been accredited by an accreditation organization reviewed and approved by the United States Department of Education (USDE).
- **Credit Transfer:** Accreditation is an important factor when an institution is deciding whether to accept transfer credits from a student's previous school. Most colleges and universities will not accept transferred course credits from an institution that has not earned appropriate accreditation status from an authentic accreditation organization.
- **Employment and Workplace Success:** Most employers often prefer to hire job applicants who graduated from an institution with an appropriate accredited status. Employers review job applicants' educational history to make sure that they received their education from an accredited institution. A degree, diploma or certificate from a non-accredited school could hurt one's chances of employment.
- Moreover many employers look to see that employees have been educated at appropriately accredited institutions when making decisions about promotions and advancement in the company.
- Employers also prefer to give tuition coverage or assistance to employees who seek to further their education in an accredited institution.

You cannot be too careful in choosing an institution. It is your education, after all. Accreditation ensures a basic level of quality in the education you receive from an institution. By attending an accredited institution, you can rest assured that you will be getting an education that is worthy of your money and time. It is advisable to research institutions and their program offerings thoroughly before you enroll. You should know how to recognize and avoid "Diploma Mills" and "Accreditation Mills".

5. How can I tell if the college I am considering is accredited or not?

To ensure that the program you are considering is accredited by a legitimate accreditation organization, visit either:

- www.UCEAdirectory.org. or
- The Department of Education's website: www.ed.gov.

You may also contact the institution itself to find out if it is accredited and by which body, and then research the accreditation organization to verify its legitimacy.

6. What is a “Diploma Mill”?

A “Diploma Mill” offers education, degrees, diplomas and certificates that are bogus. Such degrees, diplomas or certificates are not recognized by other schools or potential employers. Schools that are part of a “Diploma Mill” are not accredited by a legitimate accreditation organization. They may obtain their accreditation from an “Accreditation Mill” and there are not approved by the PA Department of Education to offer PA Teacher Certification..

7. What is an “Accreditation Mill”?

An “Accreditation Mill” offers an inauthentic accreditation status to colleges, universities and other institutions of higher education. Neither the US government, the US Department of Education (USDE), nor the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), recognizes such schools. Colleges, universities and programs that acquired their accreditation through “Accreditation Mills” are not considered to be accredited.

8. How can I recognize a “Diploma Mill”?

While it is not easy to recognize a “Diploma Mill”, there are however certain common characteristics that should indicate to you the need to research further.

Some things to look for include:

- Their degrees, diplomas and certificates are available for purchase.
- Their inability to support their accreditation claim with authentic proof.
- You can obtain their degree, diploma or certificates in a very short time.
- Create degrees, diplomas, or certificates from review of someone’s resume.
- Offer education, degrees, diplomas or certificates at ridiculously low cost.

9. How can I recognize an “Accreditation Mill”?

It is not always easy to recognize “Accreditation Mills”. But there are some characteristics that should prompt you to investigate further to find out if it is a legitimate accreditation organization. These include:

- Selling accreditation status.
- Charge much higher accreditation fees than the fees charged by recognized and authentic accreditation organization.
- List higher education institutions they have accredited whereas those schools have no relationship with them
- Claim to be recognized by USDE and CHEA without any proof of such recognition.
- Offer permanent accreditation status with no review and renewal
- Offer accreditation status in a very short time.

10. What should I be looking for in the characteristics and qualifications of faculty in early childhood preparation programs?

Members of faculty in early childhood teacher preparation programs play a critical role in ensuring that our future teachers are able to provide high quality experiences for young diverse learners. Early childhood faculty members should have either a Masters or Doctorate degree in Early Childhood Education with actual classroom teaching experience. The reputation of the college program in the community should be an indication of its success. But compared to faculty members at 4-year schools, faculty members at 2-year institutions had more direct employment experience working with children ages birth to pre-school. Faculty members at 2-year institutions are also more likely to have an early childhood education degree that covers children ages birth to five years.

11. What kinds of degrees and courses are offered in ECE teacher preparation programs?

There are many different combinations of degrees offered by 2- and 4- year institutions. Most 2-year institutions typically offer either a 1-year certificate or diploma, CDA and Associate degree (AA or AS/AAS) programs. Some certificate or diploma programs are used to acknowledge specializations such as infant-toddler, pre-school. About a fourth of the 4-year institutions offer a Bachelor's and Master's degrees in ECE. Degree programs (AA, AAS, BA, or BSED) have a cluster of general education courses and a cluster of courses specific to ECE. An AA or AAS degree is usually a total of 60 credits and a BA or BSED is 120 credits.

12. What is the difference between an AA and AAS degree?

AS and AAS degrees are terminal degrees. This means that AS and AAS degrees are designed to prepare students for careers without advanced degrees. The credits may or may not be transferable to 4-year institutions. Therefore, students may lose credits or repeat same classes when they enter a 4-year school; thereby prolonging their graduation date. Students who graduate with AA degrees are more assured that all their general education courses and credits will count towards their graduation requirement in a 4-year institution. However many 2-year and 4-year schools that have established articulation agreements between them, thereby making it easier for AS and AAS degreed students to transfer their credits and continue their education at the four year level. Students should check with college Advisors to find out about transfer possibilities.

13. Can I go on and obtain a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education if I graduated with an AAS degree?

Yes, it is possible. Depending on the 4-year institution that you are enrolled in and its specific graduation requirement, you may have to repeat some or all of the general education courses that you took to obtain your AS or AAS degree. This means that it may take you longer to graduate with a bachelor's degree if you have to repeat courses for that reason. There is also the additional expense if you have to repeat courses that you took for your AS or AAS degree.

14. What are some of the things that I should be looking for in course content areas of an ECE degree program?

You should consider asking the following questions –

- Does the program align its curriculum with NAEYC’s Two and Four Year Teacher Professional Preparation Standards and the PA Early Learning Standards?
- How many complete courses in the different content areas are required?
- Does program require an entire complete course or more in various content areas?
- Do the curriculum and methods courses focus on children from birth through grade three?
- Are play and aesthetics strongly emphasized in the methods course?
- Do candidates have experience working in inclusive settings?
- Is there an early intervention or early childhood special education component to the program?
- Is working with bilingual children and families a required part of the curriculum?
- Do field placements provide opportunities to work with children for whom English is a second language?
- How relevant and adequate are diversity, cultural ethnic and linguistic competencies to the program?
- Are faculty members from a variety of disciplines included in an integrated or interdisciplinary approach?

Supporting diversity and cultural competence is essential to quality both in early childhood teacher preparation and early childhood programs. The demographics of our nation and our State are rapidly changing. Research indicates that by 2010, no single ethnic or racial group will constitute a majority. Educators must understand the impact of a young child’s culture on their approaches to learning. As Pennsylvania faces a rapid growth in the diversity of its population, a majority of whom are children, diversity issues are highly relevant to teacher preparation requirements for individuals who will be working with children birth to eight years.

NAEYC position statement on diversity recommends that early childhood educators be professionally prepared in the areas of culture, language, and diversity. (“Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education. NAEYC, Washington, DC.1995).

15. What age-range do Early Childhood Teacher Preparation programs cover?

Research indicates that most of the degrees in the early childhood teacher preparation programs covered a wide age range from birth to eight and even beyond. There are broad combinations of age range such as:

- Infants/Toddlers (under 3 years }only
- Infants/Toddlers and preschoolers
- Preschoolers (3 and 4 years only)
- Preschoolers and elementary age only (3-8 year)
- Preschoolers and school-age only (3 years and older)
- Infants/Toddlers, preschoolers and elementary age
- Infants/Toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age (birth and older).

In Pennsylvania, at least seven out of ten of the Master's, Bachelor's and Associate degree programs cover infants through grade 3, (children 0 – 8 years of age). In order to teach in a public school system, individuals must enroll in programs leading to Pennsylvania Instructional 1 Certification.

16. What is the difference between having an ECE degree and being certified in ECE?

An ECE degree is a degree awarded by a 4-year college or university that basically says that the student has completed all the course work required for certification as a teacher by the Department of Education. But in order to become actually certified in ECE, the student must not only complete the required coursework in a BSED or BA program leading to certification at a higher education institution; he or she must take and pass the Praxis I and Praxis II teacher exams and meet QPA standards of 3.0. Once these requirements have been met, the student then applies to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) for teacher certification in ECE. The Teacher Certification Division of the PA Department of Education approves teacher certification.

Once a teacher has been certified in ECE, he or she can teach young children from nursery or pre-school through third grade (early elementary). Many students seeking higher education degrees in ECE often start out attending community colleges to complete general education courses before transferring to four year institutions to complete their education and obtain a baccalaureate degree in ECE.

Additionally, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has established a volunteer certification process to recognize what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do. Colleges and universities have incorporated the NBPTS standards into their pre-service teacher education programs. For more information about the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, please visit the NBPTS Website at www.nbpts.org.

17. If an institution has an on-line option, what are the characteristics of a good on-line program?

On-Line learning can be a rewarding and enjoyable experience. It is also an excellent way to further your education or gain specialized professional development instruction. But on-line learning is not for everyone. Neither are all on-line programs of high quality. So before you enroll in an on-line class, you should do the following:

- Check to ensure that you can thrive on the freedom and independence offered through on-line classes compared to traditional classroom setting
- Consider your own learning style: Do you learn best in conversation with others in classroom setting or do you prefer to work alone and then get feedback from colleagues and instructor?
- Investigate the on-line program thoroughly for quality.

Some of the things to consider with regards to your ability to thrive in an on-line learning course include the following personal characteristics:

- Effective time management skills

- Excellent reading, and writing skills
- Ability to study independently
- Access to computer with internet connection
- Ability to troubleshoot technical problems or have someone who can help with trouble shooting problems
- Availability of online help desk support for problems with the technology.

You will also need to research the institution offering the on-line program, the quality of its course offerings, and the instructors of the on-line courses to verify the legitimacy, accreditation status and quality control. For more information on on-line education, access www.pakeys.org.

18. What is the Praxis exam?

The Praxis exams are the tests that states use as part of their teaching licensing certification process. The Praxis test is in three parts. The Praxis I: Pre-Professional Skills Assessments (PPST) are designed to measure basic academic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. This test is offered in two formats: paper-based and computer-based. Colleges and universities may use Praxis I test to evaluate students who apply for entry into their teacher education programs.

Praxis II test measures general and subject knowledge of specific subjects that educators will teach, as well as general and subject-specific teaching skills and knowledge. There are also Specialty Area Assessments, Principles of Learning and Teaching (PLT) and Fundamental Subject Tests. The Principles of Learning and Teaching (PLT) test, an assessment of the student's general pedagogical knowledge at four grade levels, is no longer used in Pennsylvania.

- The Subject Assessments test measure general and subject-specific teaching skills and content knowledge.
- Teaching Foundations Tests. These tests measure student's knowledge in five areas, namely: English, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Science.

For Early Childhood Education:

Praxis I – Reading, Writing, Mathematics

Fundamental Subjects – Content Knowledge

Praxis II – Early Childhood Education.

19. Where can I find financial assistance to help me with the high cost of college education?

Pennsylvania recognizes the critical importance of practitioner education and professional development as a key component of program quality. Research findings underscore the correlation between well-educated and credentialed early childhood practitioners and better child outcomes in school and later in life. (“Better Teachers, Better Pre-schools: Student Achievement Linked to Teacher Qualifications”, Barnett, W.S., 2004).

In the light of the above, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) and Pennsylvania Key offers a variety of financial support and scholarships to early childhood and

school-age practitioners, working in Department of Public Welfare (DPW) certified Keystone STARS programs, who seek to further their education and become credentialed.

Low cost Professional Development opportunities through the Regional Keys:

Non-credit professional development opportunities are provided at no cost or for a nominal fee (usually \$5 - \$10 per event) to assist practitioners who are working on meeting the requirements of Levels 1 and 2 on the Career Lattice. For more information on the no or low cost professional development opportunities, contact your Regional Key office or (Search the [Professional Development Calendar](#)).

There are also funds available to off-set the cost of college work for practitioners who are committed to earning college credits for the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential, associate, or bachelor's degree. Such financial assistance includes the PA Keys to Quality Professional Development Refund Voucher program, the TEACH Scholarship project and the Keystone STARS Education Retention Award program.

PA Keys to Professional Development Refund Voucher Program:

The PA Keys to Quality Professional Development Refund Voucher program reimburses actively employed practitioners in STAR 1 and above child care centers, family child care and group homes for up to six college credits (up to \$500:00 per credit) per year, including the Child Development Associate Professional Development Programs and payment for the CDA Assessment Fee (\$325) that is required to complete the CDA Credential process. For more information and to find out if you qualify for this program, [\[Download the Voucher Program Guidelines and Application\]](#)

Keystone STARS Education Retention Award (ERA Award):

Keystone STARS Education Retention Award is another financial assistance available to practitioners working in Keystone STARS sites at STAR 2, 3 and 4 facilities. Practitioners are recognized and receive financial award as they increase their level of professional development and educational attainment in the early childhood education field. Find out more information about ERA Award from your program director or Regional Key.

TEACH Scholarship Program:

Additional support for college coursework in Early Childhood Education is available through the TEACH Scholarship project. TEACH is a comprehensive scholarship program that funds 80% of tuition, books and transportation expenses while the student and sponsoring early childhood facility contributes 10% of the expenses each. Students also commit to remain with the sponsoring childcare program for every academic year they complete. TEACH Scholarship recipients pursue bachelor's, associate's degrees, credit-bearing CDA Credential in Early Childhood Education or credit-bearing Director's Credential coursework. For more information

on TEACH Scholarship and to download an application, visit www.pacca.org or contact Stacy Moyer at Stacey@pacca.org or 877-51-TEACH.

20. Where can I find further resources about:

- (a) going to college or university for an ECE degree, and
(b) teaching in Pennsylvania?**

- www.collegeboard.com
- Pennsylvania Department of Education website (www.PDE.org) lists all approved teacher certification programs in the state as well as all the program review guidelines for early childhood (and other certification areas)
- Individual college websites offer a wealth of information on their programs
- Career and counseling departments at colleges and universities
- South East Regional Key (SERK) Career Advising Guide (Contact 877-660-2273)
- Meeting with the dean or ECE coordinator at the college or university.

www.PDE.org/Teaching in Pennsylvania.

For information about teaching in Pennsylvania, you may access the PA Department of Education (PDE) website or contact the PA Department of Education (PDE) if you need to be certified.

Those seeking employment as teachers with the public school district, the Intermediate Unit (I.U.) or Pre-K Counts programs in Pennsylvania must hold PA Teacher Certification.