KANSAS EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE: CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Joint Initiative between Department for Children and Families (DCF) and Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities (KCCTO)

Prepared by: The Kansas Change Team

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KCCTO Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities

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The Challenge

Many early childhood care and education professionals face a persistent challenge: they bring years of hands-on experience and often hold credentials like a Child Development Associate (CDA) yet remain in low-wage positions with limited access to career advancement. Despite demonstrating practical competence in supporting children's development, these professionals frequently encounter barriers when attempting to pursue higher education, including the cost of tuition, time constraints, and the need to balance work and personal responsibilities. The result is a disconnect between what they already know and can do, and the formal qualifications required to increase their earning potential or move into leadership roles.

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) offers a meaningful solution by recognizing and valuing the knowledge and skills providers have already gained through experience and nontraditional pathways. By translating CDA credentials, professional development, and on-the-job learning into college credit, CPL reduces both the time and financial burden associated with earning a degree. This approach not only creates more equitable access to higher education but also supports workforce retention and advancement by helping providers see a clear, attainable pathway forward—one that acknowledges their expertise and invests in their continued growth.

Kansas Change Team

Background

In the summer of 2025, the Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities (KCCTO) and the Kansas Department for Child and Families were accepted through an application process to participate in an ***Action Research Partnership*** (ARP) with the ***National Early Care and Education Workforce Center*** (NECEWC).

NECEWC is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. This center uses a research-to-practice model to strengthen compensation and career advancement for early educators. One of the primary focus areas of the center is supporting states with their policies and practices that strengthen career pathways and access to degrees and credentials for the ECE workforce.

Through an ARP, NECEWC lends technical assistance and research capabilities to leaders in states, territories, Tribes, and localities who are working to improve ECE career ladders, compensation, and workplace policies. A foundational component of the ARP is the engagement of cohorts of leaders from ECE oversight agencies who are ready to partner with state/community level "Change Teams" on specific practice, infrastructure, and principles changes that will lead to sustainable improvements for the workforce.

What is a Change Team?

A Change Team is a small cross-role, cross-sector group who leads the change effort of the National Early Care & Education Workforce Center's technical assistance opportunities. This team is comprised of individuals who represent multiple perspectives, experiences, and positional roles impacted by the change effort. These individuals work closely together through the technical assistance engagement to set priorities, test, learn, and adjust strategies related to the intended focus of change in the early childhood system. They engage others in their organizations, systems, and networks in testing, learning, and adjusting strategies for change. The Change Team is the group who leads the change effort, holding themselves accountable to realizing the objectives and activities required for the intended change and is the decision-making table for the effort. However, it is critical that the members of the Change Team have a plan to regularly connect with the stakeholders they represent to gather input and feedback throughout the change process. These communication loops are especially important for state-level Change Teams leading change initiatives that impact large and diverse populations.

Kansas Change Team Members

Name	Affiliation	Role
Stephanie Parks	Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities (KCCTO)	Associate Director of Career Pathway
Darcy Hoke	Department for Children and Families (DCF)	CCDF Program Initiatives Manager at Kansas Department for Children and Families
KellyAnn Bonnell	Barton County Community College	Instructor, Coordinator
Cathy Gray	Butler County Community College	Chair, Early Childhood Education
Mikaela Haendler	KCCTO	Infant-Toddler Professional Development Specialist (Director Supports)

Jennifer Burgardt	Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE)	Child Care Zones Coordinator
Heather Campbell	Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE)	Education Program Consultant on Career and Technical Education
Lorrena Kravitcz	KCCTO	CDA, Professional Growth Coordinator
Sherron Field	KCCTO	Career Pathway Coordinator
Chelsea Kusmec	KCCTO	Career Navigator
Tara Glanton	KCCTO	Lead Professional Development & Director Support Specialist
Melissa Schoenberger	Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund (KCCTF)	Early Childhood Systems Specialist
Amanda Poyser	Child Care Aware of Kansas	Community & Business Support Leader

The Work of the Kansas Change Team

Once the Change Team was convened, staff from the NECEWC facilitated an assessment and goal setting process using the NECEWC Systems Change Framework (the Change Framework). The Change Framework provides the theory of change for all work conducted by the National ECE Workforce Center. It highlights key features of systems change, including the interdependence of components of the system, and the importance of addressing infrastructure and principles components in addition to practice- or policy-based initiatives. Through the initial assessment process, each Change Team member shared their unique perspective to examine Kansas' current early care and education (ECE) workforce context and then convened together in person to collectively reflect on system strengths, diagnose system gaps, and identify feasible and relevant leverage points that inform their goals and priorities for action.

Purpose of this Report

One of the primary goals of The Change Team was to gather information from the Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) across Kansas with ECE/ECU degree programs. Data gathered for this report included the degrees and certifications offered, stackable credentials/certificates, policies and practices regarding Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), formal and informal articulation agreements, and affiliations with Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in high schools. The Change Team examined publicly available information from IHE websites. Team members also sent out a questionnaire to be

completed by a faculty member in the program. In some cases, faculty were directly contacted to confirm publicly available findings.

Results and Discussion

The following information, reported by faculty from Early Childhood IHE programs, includes data by IHE regarding a) Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), b) certificates, degrees, and stackable credentials, and c) transfers and articulation practices across Kansas Institutions of Higher Education with Early Childhood Education/Early Childhood Unified programs.

Key Findings

- 60% of higher education institutions (4-year Universities, Community Colleges, and Technical Schools) offer ECE Certificates; 68% offer associate degrees; 28% offer bachelor's degrees; 16% offer master's degree
- 92% of higher education institutions have a CPL policy
- 8 higher education institutions report EC department-specific CPL policies and offer CPL for CDA; however not all ECE CPL policies are publicly available
- 36% of higher education institutions offer credit toward practicum hours
- 45% of higher education institutions offer stackable credentials
- 7 higher education institutions offer articulation with EC CTE high school programs offering 1 – 6 credit hours

Early Childhood Education Pathways

Early childhood education (ECE) pathways in Kansas are heavily concentrated at the entry and mid-levels. A strong majority of institutions (particularly community colleges and technical schools) offer certificates (60%) and associate degrees (68%), indicating relatively accessible entry points into the field. However, there is a significant drop-off at the bachelor's level, with 7 schools offering four-year degrees. This suggests a potential bottleneck in the workforce pipeline, where providers who begin their education locally may face limited options for continuing to a bachelor's degree without transferring or relocating.

Table 1. Participating Institutions Overview

Institution	Sector	Offers ECE Certificates	Offers Associate	Offers Bachelor	Offers Masters	Stackable Credentials
Allen Community College	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

Barton Community College	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Butler Community College	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Cloud County Community College	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Colby Community College*	Community College	No	Yes	No	No	No
Cowley Community College*	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Dodge City Community College*	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Emporia State University*	Four Year Institution	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Flint Hills Technical College	Technical School	Yes	Yes	No	No	Uncertain
Fort Hays Northwest Tech*	Technical School	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Fort Hays State University*	Four Year Institution	No	No	Yes	No	No
Garden City Community College*	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	No data
Highland Community College*	Community College	Yes	No	No	No	No
Hutchinson Community College	Community College	No	Yes	No	No	No
Independence Community College*	Community College	No	Yes	No	No	No
Kansas State University	Four Year Institution	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Kansas City Kansas Community College	Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Labette Community College*	Community College	No	Yes	No	No	No
Manhattan Area Technical College*	Technical School	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

Pittsburg State University	Four Year Institution	No	No	Yes	No	No
Salina Area Technical College	Technical School	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
University of Kansas*	Four Year Institution	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Washburn Institute of Technology*	Technical School	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Washburn University*	Four Year Institution	No	No	Yes?	No	No
Wichita State University*	Four Year Institution	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
* Indicates information was completed on the institution's behalf using publicly available data						

CPL Policies

CPL is widely recognized across institutions, suggesting strong statewide acknowledgment of prior learning as a valid pathway. However, consistency in implementation is less clear. Based on the data provided or publicly available for 25 Kansas higher education institutions, the vast majority have an official Institutional CPL Policy (92%) and make that policy publicly available. However, only 32% have Early Childhood department-specific policies, and 0% count CPL toward GPA. Some institutions offer substantial credit, while others offer little to none. See Table 2. *CPL Policies* below.

Table 2. CPL Policies

Institution	Institutional CPL Policy	Has Department-Specific CPL	EC CPL Publicly Available	CPL Counts Toward GPA
Allen Community College	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Barton Community College	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Butler Community College	Yes	Yes	No	No
Cloud County Community College	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Colby Community College*	Yes	No data	Yes	No
Cowley College*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Dodge City Community College*	Yes	No data	Yes	No

Emporia State University*	Yes	No data	Yes	No
Flint Hills Technical College	Uncertain	Yes	Unknown	No
Fort Hays Tech Northwest*	Yes	No data	Yes	no
Fort Hays State University*	Yes	No Data	Yes	No
Garden City Community College*	Yes	No data	Yes	No
Highland Community College*	Yes	No data	Yes	No
Hutchinson Community College	Yes	No	Yes	No
Independence Community College*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Kansas State University	Yes	TBD	Yes	No
Kansas City Kansas Community College	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Labette Community College*	Yes	No data	Yes	No
Manhattan Area Technical College*	Yes	No data	Yes	No
Pittsburg State University	Yes	No	Yes	No
Salina Area Technical College	Yes	No	Yes	No
University of Kansas*	Yes	No	Yes	No
Washburn Institute of Technology*	No data	No data	No data	No data
Washburn University*	No data	No data	No data	No data
Wichita State University*	Yes	No data	Yes	No

CPL Types Accepted

Kansas higher education institutions show promising but uneven adoption of CPL, with some alignment around CDA but limited use of experience-based approaches. Based on faculty report, displayed in Table 3, the CDA is recognized by 8 IHEs, indicating that institutions appear most confident in its relevance to ECE coursework. Four institutions award credit for work experience, while 2 IHEs accept portfolios.

Table 3. CPL Types Accepted

Institution	CDA	Work Experience	Portfolio	CLASS Scores	First Aid	Other
Allen Community College	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Barton Community College	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
Butler Community College	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Cloud County Community College	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Cowley Community College	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Dodge City Community College	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
Flint Hills Technical College	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
Fort Hays Northwest Tech	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Fort Hays State University	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Highland Community College	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Hutchinson Community College	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Kansas State University	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Kansas City Kansas Community College	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗
Manhattan Area Technical College	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Pittsburg State University	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Salina Area Technical College	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

	8	4	2	1	2	3

Maximum Credit Hours for CPL

When asked about the maximum credit hours given per degree levels where CPL is applied, the data shows significant variation and inconsistency in policies and procedures across institutions. There is a wide variation in CPL credit limits as shown in Table 4 in which students may receive different value for the same experience depending on the institution impacting transferability. At the certificate level, CPL maximum credit granted ranges from 0 to 21 credits. Associate-level CPL ranges are from 0 to 15 credits. There is stronger use of CPL credit offered at the Certificate and Associate levels demonstrating that CPL is functioning primarily as an entry or early pathway strategy.

Table 4. Maximum Credits for CPL

Institution	Certificate Max	Associate Max	Bachelor Max	Notes
Allen Community College	6	12	75%	CDA capped
Barton Community College	9	15	90	Depends on credential
Butler Community College				unknown
Cloud County Community College	9.75			
Cowley Community College*	12			
Dodge City Community College*	3			EC Elective
Flint Hills Technical College	11	11	N/A	CPL given after 12 credit hours completed
Fort Hays Northwest Tech*	21			
Hutchinson Community College	N/A			
Kansas State University	N/A	N/A	0	TBD on policies
Kansas City Kansas Community College				9-13 Depends on CDA
Pittsburg State University				unknown
Salina Area Technical College	0	0	N/A	No CPL given

Career and Technical Education Agreements with IHEs

Seven (28%) institutions of higher education (IHEs) offer articulated credit with high school early childhood Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs. This represents a significant gap in alignment between secondary and postsecondary systems, meaning more than two-thirds of institutions are not formally recognizing or building on students' prior CTE coursework. This lack of articulation potentially limits the effectiveness of early pipeline strategies, where high school students are intentionally introduced to early childhood careers with the expectation of continuing their education.

Among the institutions that do offer articulated credit, the **range of 1 to 6 credit hours for the same CTE pathway completion** reveals a lack of standardization that creates inequities for students. This inconsistency may also create confusion for students, advisors, and CTE educators, and could discourage participation in pathways that do not reliably translate into meaningful postsecondary advancement. Establishing more consistent, statewide articulation guidelines would help ensure that students' prior learning is valued equitably and that CTE pathways function as true on-ramps to higher education. See Table 5 below.

Table 5. IHEs with Post Secondary Partners offering Articulated Credit

Institution	Offering CTE Articulated Credit	Credits
Butler Community College	✓	3
Cloud County Community College	✓	3
Cowley Community College*	✓	6
Dodge City Community College*	✓	3
Pittsburg State University	✓	1
Washburn Institute of Technology*	✓	3
Washburn University*	✓	6
Total	7	Range 1 - 6

Barriers Reported

When asked to report potential barriers, respondents report several consistent implementation challenges related to CPL, with **lack of guidance** emerging as the most significant barrier.

1. Lack of Guidance (7 institutions)

This is the most frequently reported barrier, suggesting that institutions struggle with unclear standards, absence of rubrics, or inconsistent evaluation processes. Without clear criteria for assessing prior learning, faculty and departments may be hesitant to award credit. This can lead to inconsistent decisions, equity concerns, and reduced student access. The fact that this barrier is reported more than any other indicates a strong need for standardized tools, shared rubrics, and clearer statewide or institutional frameworks.

2. Time to Evaluate (4 institutions)

Time and staffing constraints are the second most common challenge. Portfolio review and individualized evaluation require faculty labor, administrative coordination, and follow-up. When evaluation processes are manual and not well-structured, CPL can feel burdensome. This suggests that even where policy exists, operational capacity may limit implementation. Streamlined processes, standardized documentation, or dedicated CPL coordinators could reduce this strain.

3. Restrictive Policy (3 institutions)

Some institutions cite structural barriers such as credit caps or transfer limits. These policy-level constraints may limit the impact of CPL even when faculty are willing to award credit. This indicates that institutional or system-level rules—not just faculty practice—can restrict meaningful application of CPL.

4. Compensation Concerns (2 institutions)

Although reported less frequently, compensation concerns (e.g., unpaid faculty labor) are notable. Evaluating portfolios or experiential learning often requires significant faculty effort without clear compensation models. While not the most common barrier, it directly connects to sustainability and faculty buy-in.

Overall Interpretation of Barriers:
The primary challenge reported is **inconsistent infrastructure, not lack of interest**. Institutions appear open to CPL, but unclear guidance creates inefficiencies that ripple into time constraints and faculty burden.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several practical, systems-level recommendations emerge to strengthen early childhood education (ECE) pathways in Kansas and reduce barriers for the current and future workforce.

First, prioritize developing 2+2 articulation agreements statewide, ensuring that associate degrees transfer seamlessly into bachelor's programs without loss of credit. Additionally, institutions could explore co-located or hybrid bachelor's completion programs (e.g., online, evening, or partnership models offered through community colleges) so that working providers do not have to relocate. Incentivizing four-year institutions to partner with community and technical colleges—especially in rural areas—would help close this gap and support upward mobility in the workforce.

Second, standardize and strengthen Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) practice, especially within ECE programs. While CPL is widely recognized, the inconsistency in implementation limits its effectiveness. Addressing this with clear rubrics, standardized processes, and supportive policies would likely reduce multiple barriers at once and lead to more equitable and scalable CPL implementation. Strategies may include:

- Minimum standards for EC department-specific CPL availability
- Transparent, centralized information about CPL options across institutions
- Common expectations for practicum credit, including recommended credit ranges tied to demonstrated competencies (e.g., CDA, years of experience). This would reduce confusion, increase equity, and ensure that experienced EECE professionals receive meaningful and consistent credit regardless of institution.

Third, address inequities in how CPL applies to academic progression. Although it is standard that CPL does not count toward GPA, institutions and state leaders could explore alternative strategies to mitigate unintended consequences, such as:

- Allowing CPL to satisfy prerequisites for program entry
- Creating bridge or competency-based assessments that can translate into graded credit where appropriate
- Ensuring scholarship and financial aid policies do not disadvantage students who accelerate through CPL

These adjustments would help ensure that CPL supports not just access, but also continued advancement.

Fourth, expand and align articulation between high school CTE pathways and higher education. With only 28% of institutions offering articulated credit, and wide variation in credit awarded, building a statewide articulation framework for early childhood CTE pathways could benefit alignment across the state. This could include:

- A standardized credit recommendation (e.g., 3–6 credits) for EC pathway completion
- Alignment of high school CTE competencies with entry-level EC post-secondary coursework
- Formal agreements across all—or most—public institutions

Improving this alignment would create a clearer, more reliable pipeline from high school into ECE higher education programs, reducing duplication and encouraging continuation.

Finally, improve transparency and communication for students and admissions advisors. Even where strong policies exist, inconsistent or unclear information limits utilization. Kansas could develop a centralized, user-friendly EC CPL and career hub that clearly outlines:

- Which institutions offer CPL and how it applies within ECE programs
- Practicum credit options for EC programs
- EC pathway CTE articulation agreements and credit amounts
- Transfer pathways from certificate → associate → bachelor's

Together, these recommendations focus on consistency, alignment, and accessibility. These are key levers for building a more efficient, equitable, and responsive early childhood workforce pipeline in Kansas.