

The Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children has launched an initiative to engage the state's early childhood education practitioners with the question of whether the ECE field has the depth of interest and commitment required to shift its developmental trajectory in the direction of becoming a recognized profession.

In the Association's March 2019 newsletter, executive director Sonja Raymond introduced the first of my two blog as follows: "Is early childhood education a profession? This may seem like a straightforward question, but to answer that question we have to answer other questions first. What does it mean to be a profession? Are ECE practitioners willing to accept and lead the charge?" This second blog focuses on the distinctive knowledge and skills necessary when an initiative is dominated by the need for systemic and adaptive vs. regulatory change.

Over 1000 Vermont ECE practitioners have engaged in conversations about professionalizing the ECE workforce, and the initiative's next phase will soon be launched. Want to learn more about the VT-AEYC initiative? Go to <https://conta.cc/2EiOp9s>

Transforming ECE As a Field of Practice: Who Should Take the Lead?

Stacie G. Goffin, Ed.D.

I've been given access to the latest survey results on your conversations about re-forming early childhood education (ECE) as a recognized profession. I'm impressed by how many of you are participating in VT-AEYC's statewide conversations. It's energizing to learn from the responses that a majority of you appears to be leaning toward redirecting ECE's developmental trajectory.

In light of this emergent finding, understanding how the journey of becoming a recognized profession differs from the process states typically use to develop and/or implement new rules, regulations, and procedures is important. Even though effecting change can be challenging for both, the differences, although not absolute, matter. In contrast to state-led change efforts, ECE needs to be in the forefront of re-forming the field, when, for example, it comes to establishing practice standards for developmentally effective interactions with children. Three differences, described below, distinguish developing and executing a shared vision for ECE as a field of practice from a regulatory change process.

Difference #1: Early Childhood Educators Assume Responsibility as Co-Creators of ECE's Future

Typically, when states explore the possibility of new a rule, procedure, and regulation or see the need for an update, they either draft a document for public review or convene a group of individuals to inform the development and/or review process. The authorized agency usually sets the boundaries for what's acceptable, positioning those who will be affected by the suggested changes, e.g., early childhood educators, as reactors to proposed changes. Further,

final decisions regarding new rules, procedures, or regulations rest with the state agency and/or legislators versus with early childhood educators and the field of which it is a part.

If the ECE field decides to forge ahead and re-form ECE as a recognized profession, early childhood educators shift from being reactors to changes proposed by others to becoming co-creators of decisions regarding defining questions. Examples of defining questions include “what should the age scope of ECE as a field of practice: Birth to five or Birth to age 8?” or “what roles should be included in ECE as a field of practice (e.g., teachers? home visitors? program administrators? higher educator faculty?), and “what level of formal preparation should be required to be recognized as an early childhood educator?”

Experience tells me that a variety of answers co-exist for these kinds of questions. When you realize you’re creating answers to define ECE as a field of practice in ways that reflect its knowledge base and values, such as the centrality of developmentally appropriate practice and partnership relationships with families, engaging with these tough questions can be energizing. Decisions about best practices emerge from agreed-upon consensus building and decision-making processes, that, in turn, are driven by the field’s knowledge base plus defining values and principles. While state-designed rules, procedures, and regulations may strive to do the same, state limitations, including politics, typically determine decision-making outcomes.

Difference #2: Orchestrating Transformative Change Requires Specialized Knowledge and Skills

Typically, when developing new rules, procedures, and regulations, information needed to inform decision-making already exists for refining, updating, revising, and/or creating something new—[though not always](#). The primary challenge usually comes from applying what’s known to an individual state’s unique context.

In contrast, existing answers aren’t available for questions needing to be answered as part of developing a recognized ECE profession. Whether, for example, [the age scope for ECE as a field of practice should be birth to five, preK-3rd grade, or birth through age 8 doesn’t have an evidence-based answer](#). This is why the [Conversations with Intent](#) you’re been part of are structured to explore diverse viewpoints. These conversations are intended to extend the field’s collective thinking, enable new possibilities to emerge, and ultimately, to facilitate a future-oriented destiny as well as near-term next steps.

These conversations therefore, are designed to lead to action, and when it comes to transforming ECE as a field of practice, actions should be informed by an understanding of adaptive change and system thinking.

Adapting to new expectations and accountabilities requires challenging choices; inevitably, some will experience a sense of loss as a result of the choices made. As expressed by one recent survey respondent, “I am nervous that I won't have a place in the system because I don't have a degree.” Another participant wrote, “I am mostly very excited about the idea of being respected and compensated for the great work that we do, but I worry about losing some very qualified employees who have barriers to continuing their education.”

Consequently, among the leadership skills needed for this work is learning to navigate conflict, facilitate mutual understanding, and boost understanding of why personal and collective changes will be necessary if ECE is to achieve recognition for its specialized knowledge and practice expertise.

Additionally, professions are comprised of intertwined systems designed to facilitate consistently high levels of practice competence, regardless of setting. Understanding and effecting systems change requires learning how these systems function. When attempting to reform a field of practice, one has to learn how to attend simultaneously to present needs as well as future aspirations. As baseball player Yogi Berra expressed it, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you might not get there.”

Being purposeful in the present and maintaining a never wavering eye on the final destination is essential to getting to a desired future. Continuous learning, dealing with uncertainty, and persevering, therefore, will be essential to becoming a self-determining field of practice.

Difference #3: Becoming a Recognized Profession Will Be a Development Journey

When a state develops new rules, procedures, and regulations and/or revises them, a ground plan specifying the tasks to be performed is typically outlined and a timeline for the task’s completion is established.

Admittedly, moving away from this structured experience can feel daunting. As one participant expressed it, “I think [becoming a recognized profession] would be amazing, but the amount of work it will take and looking down the road is something hard for me to imagine. So, my excitement is met with anxiety about that.”

A fixed timeline for becoming a recognized profession can’t be determined in advance, however. Because of its complexity, systems change doesn’t follow a known, predestined pathway or timeline. Similar to efforts to support children’s optimal development, continuous learning, ongoing experimentation, and exploration of new possibilities — always with the end goal in mind — will have to be a central part of the field’s developmental journey.

Let the Journey Begin: Becoming a Unified, Recognized Profession

Fulfilling aspirations for ECE as a field of practice can feel daunting, even overwhelming. Yet sidestepping the challenge tacitly accepts of the status quo. Whether talking about children’s optimal early learning and development, families’ equitable access to excellent programs, or the level of respect given to competent early childhood educators, I’d argue the status quo no longer is acceptable.

So, what do we need to do? First, ECE’s practitioners need to collectively decide the status quo no longer is okay. Then, as a field, we need to take first steps, followed by a second and by a third, each thoughtfully and carefully deliberated to move ECE and its practice towards recognized professionalism.

Not all our questions will be answered at the start of the process. Yet we need only look to other recognized professions to know we can succeed. Each, at some point in their evolution, made a commitment to changing their field's developmental trajectory. To those of you committed to beginning a similar journey, know that your actions will lay the groundwork for the field's future.

Stacie G. Goffin is principal of the Goffin Strategy Group. She has authored seminal publications, including *Ready or Not: Early Care and Education's Leadership Choices—12 Years Later*, 2nd edition); *Early Childhood Education for a New Era: Leading for Our Profession*; and *Professionalizing Early Childhood Education as a Field of Practice: A Guide to the Next Era*. She is the series editor for *Moving Beyond False Choices for Early Childhood Educators*, a New America blog series. She was chosen in 2018 by *Exchange* magazine and its partners as a Doyen (the most respected or prominent person in a field).

Copyright, 2019, Goffin Strategy Group, LLC