

Higher Ed Pathways, Challenges, and Opportunities for Vermont's Early Childhood Education Workforce

Vermont Higher Education Landscape Analysis 2025

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What is this Study and Who is it For?

This Vermont Higher Education Landscape Analysis provides an updated review of the professional preparation pathways available to the Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) workforce in Vermont as of 2025. Between May 2024 and May 2025, faculty, program directors, administrators, and stakeholders contributed to this study through surveys and focused interviews in a mixed-methods data collection effort. This work was supported by the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC) through a HUD-funded grant secured by former Senator Patrick Leahy, and coordinated by the Vermont Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium (VTECHEC).

This summary outlines what is currently accessible to students, defined as individuals entering, exiting, or reentering the field at different points along Vermont's Early Childhood Career Ladder, maintained by Northern Lights at the Community College of Vermont. The analysis considers current program delivery models, degree and certificate options, articulation agreements, and trends in enrollment and student persistence.

To better understand changes since the last statewide review in 2017, the study focused on how early childhood education degree and certificate programs are structured and delivered today. Survey and interview questions asked about course formats, faculty leadership, enrollment patterns, and how programs are marketed and supported within their institutions. These conversations and data collection efforts helped clarify what is available to students today — whether online, asynchronous, hybrid, or in-person — and where continued challenges and opportunities remain.

The report uses the Career Ladder as a framework for analysis, which outlines a progression from entry-level coursework through associate, bachelor's, and advanced degree options for student navigators. While the Career Ladder has eight established levels (I-VI), the study also considers how learners move between levels, including stop-outs, reentry points, and alternative pathways such as apprenticeships or prior learning assessments.

Intended Audience:

- **Members of Vermont's ECE and ECSE workforce** navigating professional preparation pathways, whether as future workforce participants, current professionals, career changers, or those seeking additional credentials.
- **Higher education faculty, program directors, and administrators** seeking a current view of Vermont's ECE/ECSE degree and certificate programs, including changes to program structures, endorsement options, and transfer agreements.
- **Policy leaders, advocates, and funders** interested in understanding the challenges and opportunities within Vermont's early childhood higher education landscape, particularly as it relates to workforce preparation, program sustainability, and equitable access to professional pathways.

In addition to survey responses, some participants shared institutional marketing materials, website content, and enrollment data to help paint a more complete picture of how programs are positioned and perceived. These contributions informed the themes and recommendations shared throughout this report.

This updated analysis captures the notable changes within Vermont's higher education system since the last review in 2017, providing critical context for those working to maintain and expand accessible, aligned, and sustainable professional development systems for Vermont's early childhood education workforce.

Executive Summary

Six themes emerged from May 2024 to May 2025 within an updated higher education landscape study assessing professional Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) pathways in Vermont.

1. This study has determined that students can be categorized by their navigation entry or reentry points from Level I to VI (Northern Lights Career Ladder at the Community College of Vermont) or ECE I, II, III (proposed professional designations, aligned with national recommendations, and currently under review by Vermont's legislature). Our ECE and ECSE workforce serves a distinct group of students navigating higher education pathways. These groups include individuals currently working in the field of ECE or ECSE, those entering the field as career changers, or students from high schools or Career Technical Education Centers (CTE) identified as part of our future workforce. These themes emerged as different pathway faculty and program directors described the navigators entering each of their programs.

2. The current Vermont 2025 higher education landscape has a variety of pathway options that meet various work requirements delivered in multiple modalities online and in person, as non-credit bearing classes and courses across Levels I-VI or ECE I-III. Credit-bearing courses are most common at these levels. Some lead to certificates, meet professional milestones or Child Care Licensing regulations, or result in a conferred degree.

3. Entry-level pathways in Vermont, defined as Levels I-IIIB or ECE I and II, are scaffolded to meet milestones or professional requirements through the Community College of Vermont and Northern Lights Career Ladder at Community College of Vermont. Within the array of established options and milestones, exit data shows that students' persistence beyond 6 credits or 2 courses is often a threshold or place where students may exit a Level I pathway before achieving Level II, IIIA or IIIB via an associate degree. This is a trend notable beyond Early Childhood Education, but significant to note. These students may exit and then return to higher education at a different point in time. Further analysis of exit and reentry patterns within Level II to Level III pathways may offer valuable insight into ECE and ECSE student persistence.

4. Each degree program — defined as Level IVA and IVB at the bachelor's level, VI at the master's level — includes variables such as location, delivery method, or endorsement level that affect student participation. The array of delivery options over time were designed to avoid redundancy within the four existing institutions and five ECE or ECSE programs in Vermont. These degree plans lead to a bachelor's degree with Vermont Agency of Education licensure, though license endorsement requirements

vary significantly. Many programs have had to change to be financially viable, which includes having one faculty member direct an entire program. While program changes typically require 2-3 years, closures can be immediate, as seen with Goddard undergraduate and Champlain College's graduate programs in recent years.

5. All higher education degrees Level IVA and IVB available in Vermont connect to an institutional transfer agreement that eases transitions between degree plans. However, these agreements between associate and bachelor's degree granting institutions are inconsistent and often not visible to advisors, faculty members, or students who might use completed credits or conferred degrees as a bridge to future professional goals.

6. Enrollment drives program stability and sustainability. Low enrollment affects faculty positions and risks program elimination. Advocacy and an equity-centered recruitment and retention plan will be needed to ensure the current landscape options remain whole.

At a high level, this study shows that while Vermont offers a variety of ways for people to enter, exit, and advance within the early childhood education workforce, many of these pathways are complex for students to navigate. Declining enrollment, limited program visibility, and inconsistent transfer options create barriers for students and challenges for higher education programs. Supporting student persistence and making pathways clearer and easier to access will be important to keeping Vermont's early childhood education workforce strong.

The Vermont Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium

In 2009, the United States Department of Education allocated grant funding through the Race to the Top to reward innovation and education reform. Vermont's early education community rallied around this opportunity to create a collaborative team that included representatives from higher education programs across the state. The group now called the Vermont Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium (VTECHEC) continued to meet after funding expired and as our early childhood education faculty's capacity became increasingly limited following the Covid-19 pandemic and program cuts. Higher education partners have remained actively involved in this work.

In 2023, state advocates secured funding to help support VTECHEC, recognizing the pivotal role faculty, higher education, and community stakeholders play in the state's high-quality early childhood systems. VTECHEC discussions and projects offer critical insight into the preparation and development of Vermont's current and future early childhood workforce, directly informing workforce preparation systems. Over time, outcomes of VTECHEC have also advised around articulation or transfer agreements between institutions. The group also established and sustained a multiple-day professional development summer institute through Castleton's Center for Schools, called the Early Childhood Summer Institute, from 2016 to today, adapting to online learning during the pandemic.

At its founding, VTECHEC brought together more than ten higher education programs serving Vermont's early childhood, early childhood special education, preservice, and workforce communities. The higher education landscape has changed dramatically over the last decade. Vermont has a variety of pathways where our workforce enters to build credentials over time, which include non-credit bearing or courses for credit options. Transfer agreements and "2+2" pathways — two years of an associate degree plus two years toward a bachelor's degree — help align credit-bearing courses with degree programs.

The notable decrease in academic program options, increase in workforce needs, and state efforts to establish early childhood education as a profession have made the consortium essential to understanding the current higher education landscape, seen in this summary. Funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children (VTAEYC), in collaboration with VTECHEC, supported the study, analysis, mapping, and communication of professional preparation pathways available in 2025, as outlined in this report.

Vermont Higher Education Landscape Summary 2025

This summary is based on interviews and data collection beginning in May 2024 to map the current higher education landscape available to early childhood educators in Vermont. This analysis shares what Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) career pathways and degree programs exist today in 2025.

As part of this 2025 higher education landscape study process, interviews and survey questions were prepared to focus on ECE and ECSE classes, certificates, and course program models, degree programs, and non-matriculated offerings. The Northern Lights Career Ladder at the Community College of Vermont currently has established Levels I-VI. This document is informed by this established professional development career ladder.

Surveys were shared with full-time faculty, program directors, and administrators. Some questions focused on full-time faculty load, and some on part-time faculty credentials to understand programmatic leadership and sustainability. Some questions focused on interactions between financial aid or marketing teams within institutions. Marketing materials were analyzed online to understand each program's ideal candidate and reach. Some administrators and programs faculty interviewed felt comfortable sharing additional insights that have been included in this summary.

This survey and summary focused specifically on program delivery models which have changed significantly between 2017 to 2025. This review points to what is accessible to Vermont students online, asynchronously, synchronously, and using hybrid or traditional ground classroom models now.

The program directors, faculty, and administrators interviewed and surveyed also provided answers to additional questions, website audits, shared marketing materials, and have participated in wider conversations around this study as participants and stakeholders who participated alongside members from the Vermont Early Childhood Education Higher Education Consortium. The following themes and recommendations emerged.

Theme 1: Vermont has Multiple Pathways for Different Students

Vermont's Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) professional development system is intentionally structured to support a diverse workforce with different starting points, career goals, and educational needs. While professional development includes non-credit-bearing trainings, coursework for credit is housed within higher ed programs. Information gathered from faculty, program directors, stakeholders, and marketing materials in 2024-2025 confirmed that multiple entry and reentry points exist across Vermont's system — but navigating those pathways remains complex and often depends on a student's circumstances and access to information.

At the foundation of this system is the Northern Lights Career Ladder at the Community College of Vermont, Vermont's early childhood professional development career ladder, whose levels outline progressive milestones from entry-level coursework to advanced degrees.

Currently, Vermont lawmakers are considering legislation to create an early childhood education profession with individual licensure for educators working in non-public programs (licensed through the Office of Professional Regulation, not the Agency of Education). This system is aligned with national recommendations published in the *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession* (2020) and advanced by its governing body, the Commission on Professional Excellence in Early Childhood Education. The professional designations ECE I, II, and III are also signaled here in case individual licensure is enacted after this report is published.

Career Ladder levels / ECE designation:

- Level I: Non-credit training or introductory 3 credit course
- Level II / ECE I: 12-21 ECE-related college credits or CDA Credentials. (9 credit hours are recommended for an ECE I license to practice.)
- Level IIIA: 21-24 ECE-related college credits to the Child Care Certificate or Apprenticeship program
- Level IIIB / ECE II: 60 credits to associate degree
- Level IVA / ECE III: 120–128 credits to a bachelor's degree
- Level IVB / ECE III: 120-128 credits for bachelor's degree with AOE licensure endorsement
- Level VA / ECE III: Master's degree or 30-60 advanced degree credits

- Level VB / ECE III: Master's degree or 30-60 advanced degree credits with AOE licensure endorsement
- Level VI / ECE III: Terminal degree, or doctoral degree, 60-90 advanced degree credits (Ed.D. or Ph.D.)

Through interviews and surveys, four primary types of student navigators were identified informed by this analysis, each with distinct needs and preferred pathways:

Future Workforce: High school students, dual enrollees, Career and Technical Education (CTE) students, and recent graduates often begin with non-credit courses or a small number of college credits (3-6) through Fast Forward, Dual Enrollment, or Youth Apprenticeship programs. Access to clear transfer pathways, 2+2 degree maps, and early recruitment through school counselors and CTE programs are important supports for this group.

Temporary Employees, Parents, or Caregivers: Individuals working temporarily in early childhood education settings while their child is enrolled, or while between careers, typically seek short, flexible, entry-level options to meet immediate job requirements. Non-credit classes, online courses, part-time schedules, and work placements offer practical, accessible options for this group.

Current Workforce: Educators already working in the field often pursue credentials or endorsements for advancement or personal growth. Many have varied college credit histories or unrelated degrees and benefit from flexible online options, accelerated or cohort models, and transfer agreements that clarify how to finish a degree or add an endorsement.

Career Changers: Professionals entering early childhood education from other fields need options to gain a credential, certificate, licensure, or to add endorsements efficiently. This group often seeks part-time, online, or accelerated programs, with provisional licensing or alternative pathways playing a key role in supporting their transition.

These categories of student navigators illustrate how Vermont's early childhood professional development system provides multiple, interconnected pathways to meet the varied needs of its workforce. However, the system's complexity, limited program visibility, and inconsistent articulation agreements create challenges for students and advisors alike.

Takeaway

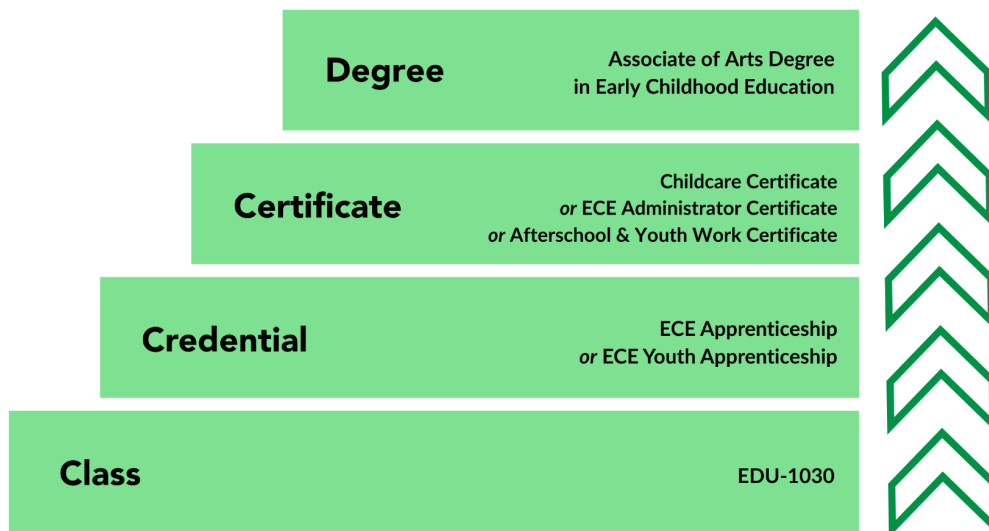
Vermont's professional preparation system offers flexible and accessible entry points for a wide range of student navigators, but clearer information, stronger pathway visibility, and coordinated outreach will be essential to help individuals successfully navigate these options and build a sustainable, well-prepared early childhood education workforce.

Theme 2: Multiple Entry Points

The Community College of Vermont (CCV), part of the Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS), plays a critical role in Vermont's early childhood education professional preparation system. Through CCV and its partner, the Northern Lights Career Development Center, students can access flexible, affordable options that align with the Career Ladder (Levels I-VI) and meet a wide range of student navigators where they are in their professional journey.

CCV offers multiple entry points into the Early Childhood Education (ECE) associate degree program and related certificates, with courses delivered both online and on the ground at all academic centers across the state which might shift semester to semester. Not every student intends to complete a full associate degree; many enroll with the immediate goal of meeting job requirements, earning a certificate, or building toward future credentials.

Stacking Steps to an Associate Degree in ECE at Community College of Vermont



Early Entry Pathways

Several programs provide early exposure and credit-earning opportunities for high school students and new professionals:

- **VTAEYC Youth Apprenticeship (3-24 credits):** High school students enrolled in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs can pair classroom instruction with credit-bearing CCV courses and on-the-job training in early childhood education settings, supported by VTAEYC and funded by the Child Development Division.
- **Fast Forward, Early College, and Dual Enrollment (3-9 credits):** Through Vermont's Flexible Pathways Initiative, students in high school or home study programs can take ECE courses for credit at no cost, building toward certificates or degrees.

Vermont currently has 17 CTE locations within 15 school regions offering Human Services, Education, or Early Childhood Education programs. While program enrollment varies (typically 9 to 29 students), the consistent use of college-level, credit-bearing courses has grown since 2019, when CTE program enrollment ranged from 5 to 20 students. This study found that it is most common for CTE instructors to utilize Vermont's Fast Forward, Early College, and Dual Enrollment pathways and credit-bearing coursework for this student group.

Apprenticeship and Prior Learning Options

For those already working in the field or seeking to formalize prior experience:

- **VTAEYC Apprenticeship Program (3-9 credit):** Combines on-the-job learning with a series of 6–7 CCV courses and community-based trainings, offering a practical pathway to skill-building and credentialing. The program is provided in partnership with Vermont's Department of Labor and is funded by the Child Development Division of Vermont's Department for Children and Families.
- **Assessment of Prior Learning (EDU 1240, 3 credits) and Focused Portfolio (EDU 1225, 1 credit):** Through these portfolio courses, professionals can earn college credit for skills and experience gained on the job:

- The **Assessment of Prior Learning** course helps students document and demonstrate learning from multiple areas of experience and can lead to the award of **significant college credit** (often up to about 30 credits).
- The **Focused Portfolio** course allows students to earn **up to 16 credits** in a specific subject area. These options are part of the Vermont State Colleges' flexible credit programs administered and housed at CCV through the Office of Prior Learning Assessment.
- **Course Challenges:** Students may demonstrate mastery of Early Childhood Education or leadership topics by completing low-cost, asynchronous assessments for specific CCV courses (with advisor approval). While any CCV course may be challenged, VSC policy limits students to a total of **12 credits** earned via course challenge toward a degree.

Certificate Programs and Degree Pathways

CCV offers stackable certificates aligned with the Career Ladder, including:

- **Child Care Certificate (24 credits):** A stepping stone toward greater training, pay, and career advancement working within a regulated setting. The courses included are compatible with the 9 credit hours recommended for an ECE I license to practice.
- **ECE Administrator Certificate:** Coursework for those seeking leadership roles in child care and afterschool settings.

Many of these certificates are seamlessly stackable into CCV's **60-credit Associate of Arts in Early Childhood Education degree**, which integrates Level III requirements, aligns with recommendations for an ECE II license to practice, and prepares students for transfer into bachelor's degree programs through Vermont's 2+2 pathways.

Program Scale and Enrollment

CCV's ECE program remains one of the college's largest and most consistently enrolled offerings. Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2024, enrollment in ECE, Afterschool, and Youth Work programs ranged from **334 to 510 students per semester**, with notable increases following expanded financial aid opportunities. In 2024 alone, CCV awarded:

- **88** Associate Degrees in Early Childhood Education
- **33** Child Care Certificates
- **4** ECE Administrator Certificates

The program is supported by **43 faculty** flexing per semester, though this underrepresents those teaching ECE courses, as additional instructors from departments like Psychology also contribute.

Takeaway

The Community College of Vermont (CCV) functions as a central, flexible access point for Vermont's early childhood education workforce. It offers multiple, affordable, and practical pathways for high school students, current professionals, career changers, and experienced educators alike. Its range of entry points, stackable credentials, and transfer agreements illustrates how Vermont's higher education system is designed to meet diverse needs, though continued attention to pathway visibility and alignment will be essential to sustaining these options.

Theme 3: Student Persistence

Early data from CCV and conversations with partners show a common exit point ahead of achieving the Level II coursework milestone. Many students in higher education pause after completing 6 credits, or two college courses. This pattern is typical in higher education, not specific to Early Childhood Education, but reflects a broader need to support continued progress.

In 2025, based on Career Technical Education data, fewer future career student navigators are using non-credit options, and more are starting off with college-level coursework. CCV's Dual Enrollment, Fast Forward, Early College, Apprenticeship, and Certificate pathways all provide flexible, credit-bearing options for this wide range of student navigators. Completed coursework can count toward certificates and degrees, and students can also earn credit for prior experience. These pathways are designed to help students build skills over time and reach meaningful milestones. Non-credit options, like the Fundamentals course offered by Northern Lights at the Community College of Vermont, are also offered consistently.

A few key benchmarks:

- **Associate Teacher (center-based programs):** Vermont's Child Development Division (CDD) requires **at least 21 ECE-related college credits plus relevant experience** for this role in a regulated child care setting.
- Child Care Certificate: **24 credits**
- Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education: **60 credits**

Encouraging progress beyond the 6-credit mark should remain a priority. More exit data is needed to understand what supports or barriers student navigators encounter along the way.

Takeaway

Many students get started in college coursework, but fewer continue past 6 credits. With more early childhood educators entering credit-bearing pathways, Vermont has an opportunity to better understand what helps students stay on track and reach key milestones like 21, 24, or 60 credits. This momentum matters for students and for the field.

Theme 4: Variation

Variation and complexity continue to shape how students access bachelor's degree programs and Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) licensure endorsements. As of 2025, five early childhood teacher preparation programs, offered through four Vermont institutions and one based in Massachusetts, lead to both a bachelor's degree and AOE licensure.

Between May and August 2024, faculty from each of these five programs were interviewed and completed follow-up surveys. Their responses, along with a review of program marketing materials and institutional websites, helped illuminate how these pathways are structured and communicated to prospective students.

Overview of Program Offerings

All five programs lead to a bachelor's degree with either an ECE or ECSE endorsement, but they differ significantly in how they are structured and delivered. Some use in-person instruction, while others are fully online and asynchronous.

At the University of Vermont (UVM), students can pursue a B.S. in Early Childhood Education with a 0–PreK/K–3 AOE license endorsement, along with a newly launched non-AOE-licensure minor in Childhood Studies. A CCV 2+2 pathway is also in place. The program is staffed by four full-time ECE faculty and one is tenured. Students can pursue a B.S. in Special Education (birth through age 21) and choose early childhood age-bands for AOE licensure — early intervention, birth to age 2, and early childhood special education, ages 3–6. There is also an Early Childhood Special Education master's program which is delivered online. UVM uses a variety of marketing tools — including student stories and funding resources — and its College of Education and Social Services manages dedicated social media and recruitment efforts.

Champlain College offers a B.S. in Education with the option to add a 0–PreK, PreK–Grade 3, or 0–PreK/K–3 AOE license endorsement options for Education majors. One full-time, tenure-adjacent ECE faculty member leads the program, which benefits from an updated, dynamic web presence and includes incentives for student teaching. Champlain's M.Ed. program was discontinued in 2023. The institution maintains a Vermont Transfer Guarantee agreement with CCV.

At Saint Michael's College, students earn a B.A. in Education and can elect to add a PreK AOE license endorsement. The program is led by a faculty member who also provides instruction in child development. Unlike other institutions, at Saint Michael's the PreK endorsement can be challenging for students to access due to the common expectation to double major; beginning in Fall 2025, students will no longer need to

double major but will need to declare a required minor giving the flexibility to take the PreK endorsement classes. The endorsement is an optional addition or concentration. Faculty have developed their own internal marketing materials to recruit education students. The institution maintains a Vermont Transfer Guarantee agreement with CCV.

Vermont State University (VTSU) offers two distinct degree tracks: Students can pursue a B.S. in Early Childhood Education online (asynchronous, 0–PreK AOE license endorsement) or a B.A. in ECE/ECSE delivered in person at the Castleton campus (dual AOE licensure: 0–PreK/K–3 and ECSE birth–age 6). The program includes three full-time, tenure-track faculty — one hired in 2025 — and maintains two different transfer pathways. The ECE Online program has an approved CCV 2+2 pathway. The ECE/ECSE continue to use the Vermont Transfer Guarantee agreement with CCV. VTSU partners with Rutland Head Start and the Hand in Hand program. Notably, the Elementary Education/PreK concentration endorsement option at the Lyndon campus was discontinued in 2022.

Vermont Higher Ed Programs offering a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education



University of Vermont	Vermont State University ECE Online	Vermont State University Castleton Campus	Champlain College	Saint Michael's College
Degree Type: BS 4-year degree or 2+2 pathway with CCV	Degree Type: BS 2+2 pathway with CCV	Degree Type: BA 4-year degree	Degree Type: BS 4-year degree	Degree Type: BA 4-year degree
Course Type: In-person	Course Type: Online	Course Type: In-person	Course Type: In-person	Course Type: In-person
Transfer agreement: 2 + 2 pathway	Transfer agreement: 2 + 2 pathway	Transfer agreement: Vermont Transfer Guarantee	Transfer agreement: Vermont Transfer Guarantee	
AOE Endorsement: ECE 0-PreK/K-3	AOE Endorsement: ECE 0-PreK	AOE Endorsement: ECE 0-PreK/K-3 ECSE 0-6	AOE Endorsement: ECE 0-PreK ECE PreK-3 ECE 0-PreK/K-3	AOE Endorsement: Concentration / add on ECE 0-PreK
Qualifications: Level IVB/ECE III	Qualifications: Level IVB/ECE III	Qualifications: Level IVB/ECE III	Qualifications: Level IVB/ECE III	Qualifications: Level IVB/ECE III
Additional: ECE minor / certificate options BS Special Education option with age 0-6 focus				

Springfield College, which relocated from Vermont to Massachusetts, now offers an online asynchronous degree with an elective sequence in early childhood education. While the institution once maintained a CCV articulation agreement, it is no longer listed. In 2024, new synchronous course options were introduced to supplement the asynchronous core.

Program Shifts and Closures

Two major closures in 2024 further reshaped the early childhood higher education landscape: Goddard College and Union Institute & University ceased operations. Meanwhile, Springfield College formally moved its Vermont-based programs to its main campus in Massachusetts. Other core programs including ECE specific concentrations or ECSE content sequences also were eliminated or adapted, including Champlain College's graduate degree option.

Insights from the 2024 Faculty Survey

One faculty member from each of the five institutions participated in a survey focused on program structure, advising, faculty roles, and inter-institutional collaboration. While degree length is consistent, ranging from 120 to 128 credits and generally completed in two to four years, the way programs are delivered and supported differs notably.

Most programs still rely on in-person instruction, with VTSU as the only one offering a fully asynchronous online learning option.

Sixty percent of programs allow students to earn credits as non-degree learners, an important access point for career changers and those exploring early childhood education. However, advising presents challenges: many faculty are passionate about supporting students, but 60% said they aren't able to advise as fully as they'd like. All reported no direct engagement with their institution's financial aid team, and involvement in marketing and recruitment efforts varies significantly from one campus to another.

Takeaway

Bachelor's degree and AOE licensure pathways in early childhood education remain available in Vermont, but they are increasingly fragmented and difficult to navigate. Program models, transfer options, and communication strategies vary widely, and faculty often lack the tools or institutional support to provide comprehensive guidance. For adult learners, especially those working in the field or returning to school, this lack of clarity presents a significant barrier. Coordinated advising systems and better alignment across institutions could help more early childhood educators reach and complete this degree with AOE licensure.

Theme 5: Institutional Transfer Agreements

Transfer agreements remain a critical tool for supporting students on their path from an associate to a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. The Community College of Vermont (CCV) maintains articulation agreements with all higher education institutions in Vermont, including active Vermont Transfer Guarantees with Champlain College and Saint Michael's College. Vermont State University (VTSU) and the University of Vermont (UVM) offer a different structure that includes a 2+2 pathway: mapped transitions from an associate to a bachelor's degree.

Despite the existence of these systems, many students and advisors still find them confusing. Transfer maps are not consistent across institutions, and terminology can vary widely. According to the faculty survey, 40% of respondents said they were unaware of any current articulation agreements at all. When faculty themselves aren't fully informed, it's no surprise that students may have trouble understanding their options or taking advantage of them.

These agreements, first developed in 2000 and reviewed in 2017 by the Vermont Higher Education Consortium, continue to be updated and maintained by each institution. These agreements continue to serve as crucial entry and re-entry points for early childhood educators pursuing credentials. But to work well, they need to be clearly communicated. Greater visibility and transparency could lead to more students completing certificates or degrees, and make advising more straightforward for everyone involved.

Faculty Conditions

Most faculty in early childhood educator preparation programs carry heavy teaching loads. Four out of five institutions surveyed use part-time adjunct instructors to teach at least one course. Full-time faculty typically teach four (e.g., tenure-track or tenured faculty), and others eight courses (e.g., lecturer or senior lecturer). While most said they can sustain this pace for the next 2–3 years, 100% of respondents reported they do not have enough time to meet research expectations associated with their positions, particularly at institutions that require terminal degrees like an Ed.D. or Ph.D.

Every faculty member surveyed anticipates institutional or programmatic changes in the coming year that will directly affect ECE students. For some, this may include budget-driven restructuring. In fact, 80% of respondents said their institutions had eliminated or discontinued ECE or ECSE courses or programs due to low enrollment.

This underscores a pressing need: Vermont's early childhood education higher ed system depends on visibility and demand. Without better outreach and student recruitment efforts, strong programs risk disappearing not because of quality concerns, but because too few people know they exist.

Advanced Coursework

Since 2017, Vermont has seen two early childhood education master's programs close: Goddard College and Champlain College both discontinued their M.Ed. offerings, leaving a notable gap. Today, the **University of Vermont** is the only institution offering a fully online Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) master's degree, along with a M.Ed., Ed.D. and Ph.D. track in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. An online cohort of early childhood educators is currently moving through that program.

In the absence of a well-defined graduate or post-baccalaureate pathway for early childhood educators, many professionals pursue advanced credits through flexible, non-degree programs offered by organizations such as the **Vermont State University Workforce, Economic, and Community Development Center** (formerly Castleton Center for Schools), the **Vermont Higher Education Collaborative** (VT-HEC), and the **Early Childhood Educator Leadership Institute** (ECLI). These programs currently serve an important role in supporting licensure, endorsement, and professional growth. Over time, a more coherent graduate-level system could strengthen and formalize these opportunities within the broader early childhood education career continuum.

In an interview, the Director of the **VTSU Workforce Center** described their offerings as a good fit for "someone already in the workforce, re-entering, or completing requirements for advancement." The Center for Schools provides year-round, credit-bearing coursework online or in hybrid formats. The program is designed to be accessible, affordable, and not focused on completing requirements for licensure through AOE.

The Center also hosts an annual Early Childhood Summer Institute that attracts up to 170 participants, offering low-cost or free professional development, often in partnership with state agencies like the Child Development Division.

The ECE/ECSE Program Director at **VT-HEC** explained that their hybrid program offers flexible coursework pathways to AOE licensure or endorsement: "Our ideal candidate is someone who already has a bachelor's degree or an initial endorsement and is seeking either their first license or an added endorsement." She noted that the ECSE endorsement pathway is particularly popular among career changers or educators on

provisional licenses. In 2024 alone, VT-HEC served 25 students earning or adding ECE or ECSE endorsements. Most find the program through word of mouth, the Agency of Education, or email update. The program is also known for its low barriers to entry — no prerequisites and affordable tuition — along with the individualized advising and supervision provided throughout.

A smaller but growing option is the **Early Childhood Educator Leadership Institute (ECLI)**, where a cohort of thirteen early educators is currently moving through master’s-level coursework using credits from both VTSU and UVM. While still new (the current model launched in January 2025), ECLI may emerge as another flexible pathway for credit accumulation and leadership development with credits from both Vermont State University and the University of Vermont.

Many of these programs don’t currently map to degrees, licensure, credential, or certificate but they fill an important gap by allowing educators to stay in the field and grow professionally.

Vermont Graduate Degree and Endorsement Options for Early Childhood Educators



Early Childhood Leadership Institute <i>Snelling Center for Government</i> Degree/Credits: 3 Course Type: Online/Hybrid Emerging pathway to: University of Vermont <i>M.Ed Educational Leadership and Policy Studies</i> Degree/Credits: M.Ed/30 Course Type: Online/Hybrid AOE Endorsement: None Qualification: Level VA ECE III	University of Vermont <i>M.Ed Early Childhood Special Education</i> Degree/Credits: M.Ed/30 Course Type: Online AOE Endorsement: ECSE 0-6 Qualification: Level VB ECE III	Center for Schools in the Division of Workforce, Community, & Economic Development Center for Innovation at Vermont State University Degree/Credits: Credits only Course Type: Online/hybrid AOE Endorsement: None Qualification: Level IV+ (varies) ECE III	Vermont Higher Education Collaborative (VT-HEC) at Vermont State University Degree/Credits: Credits only Course Type: Online/hybrid AOE Endorsement: ECE 0-PreK/K-3 ECSE 0-6 Qualification: Level IV+ (varies) ECE III
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Takeaway

Students navigating Vermont's higher ed system in early childhood education need more than flexible options; they need clarity, visibility, outreach, and support. Whether they're transferring into a bachelor's degree program, building credits toward AOE licensure, or seeking a graduate degree the process should be easier to follow and more consistently communicated. Faculty and higher ed leaders are doing creative, often under-recognized work to meet students where they are. The next step is to ensure the ECE higher education system includes all the components students need to navigate the preparation programs and career options available.

Theme 6: Enrollment for Sustainability

The current higher education system is aligned, has transfer agreements, and maps using credit-bearing courses set with varying milestones, certificates, and degree programs to meet our current and future ECE workforce.

Programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels often face challenges not only in enrolling students, but also in identifying and securing partnerships with quality local child care programs, with early childhood educators qualified to mentor student teachers, and in classrooms at the age bands required for their endorsement programs. Many higher education ECE programs have been reduced or discontinued due to frequent restructuring, low enrollment, and other changes within higher education institutions.

Takeaway

A well-mapped system is not enough. Sustained investment in student support, professional structures that make it simpler to identify and nurture effective placement partnerships, and preparation program stability is essential to keep ECE pathways open and effective.

Conclusion

The six themes identified through Vermont's 2025 Higher Education Landscape survey and interviews highlight a complex, interconnected system of early childhood education pathways. These include credit-bearing courses, certificates, and degrees that together shape how students enter, move through, and complete their education in the field. This conclusion also contextualizes some of these themes against proposed and actual policy changes at the state and federal levels, and signals how these changes create challenges and opportunities against this analysis of Vermont's current early childhood education higher ed landscape.

Entry and Reentry

Vermont's system offers multiple **entry and reentry** points for students at different stages of their educational and professional journeys. Recognizing, marketing, and funding these varied starting points is key to building inclusive access to the early childhood education workforce.

Distinct Students

To meet the needs of **distinct students**, institutions should consider recruitment strategies that reflect students' needs. This includes using welcoming, accessible language and strategic outreach that helps prospective and current students understand the full range of pathway options — from Career Ladder Levels I-VI or ECE I-III — and how those options connect to professional advancement and the funding resources available..

Bring Transfer Agreements into Full View

Transfer agreements and pathway maps already link many parts of the system, but they are often underused. Institutions have an opportunity to **bring these transfer agreements into full view**, especially for the staff, faculty, and advisors who work most closely with students. Increased transparency and proactive advising can increase enrollment in ECE preparation programs and help students make more informed and confident decisions.

Risk of Low Enrollment

Bachelor's and some advanced degree programs remain **at risk due to low enrollment**. Since 2017, when the Vermont Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium last reviewed the statewide articulation agreement, institutional changes have accelerated resulting in program closures, restructuring, and instability. In the current survey, 100% of faculty respondents anticipate further institutional or programmatic change in the year ahead. While entry level programs and courses continue to enroll year to year, the degree programs at the bachelor's and master's levels do not have a measured or sustainable enrollment.

Enrollment and Student Persistence

Strong post-secondary programs depend on **enrollment and student persistence**. For pathways to succeed, students must clearly understand how a program aligns with their goals. Clear career pathways, like those proposed through ECE I-III professional licensure, allow students to see concrete connections between higher ed, qualifications, accountability, and compensation. Clear preparation pathways to a career in ECE will provide current and prospective students an increased ability to navigate their career options.

As the Vermont Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium and the Vermont Association for the Education of Young Children continue to assess and map the state's evolving landscape, the need for coordination is clear. Vermont faces a decreasing number of academic programs, strong and growing demand for qualified early childhood educators, and increasing investments in workforce recruitment, retention, and program quality — including supports to raise the qualifications of its workforce. Stronger visibility, navigation, and retention across pathways is essential. Aligning higher education programs with professional pathways can help students see the long-term value of a career in early childhood education.

Higher education programs need targeted support and long-term strategies to remain viable, and students need accurate, accessible information to make the best choices for their futures. This includes understanding the implications of national policy and Vermont's opportunities to mitigate negative impacts. For example, the 2025 federal budget reconciliation bill introduced limits to federal student loan access for students pursuing majors deemed “low-earning,” defined as majors that do not lead to a median

higher income than that of individuals with no college degree. Nationally, early childhood education is the lowest-earning major. Ongoing changes to public service student loan repayment programs add further uncertainty, making clear guidance and support from institutions and state partners even more critical.

However, Vermont has opportunities to address this challenge. Low-earning major metrics are determined state-by-state. By increasing early childhood educator investment and compensation in alignment with higher ed preparation, Vermont could avoid the “low-earning” major designation, maintaining federal student loan access for ECE students. Raising compensation would reinforce ECE as an attractive career, continue a flow of engaged students to Vermont’s higher ed ECE programs, and ensure a vibrant and sustainable workforce to staff its child care programs and support Vermont’s youngest learners.

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