

Who Should Be Defining Early Childhood Education's Future?

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Vermont's early childhood education practitioners are engaged in tremendously important conversations about early childhood education's (ECE) future. Under the broad leadership of VT-AEYC, early childhood educators and other ECE practitioners are exploring the choices involved in redirecting ECE's developmental trajectory toward becoming a recognized professional field of practice. Using the facilitated structure of [Conversations with Intent](#), exploration of the pros and cons of professionalizing with "an end in mind" is underway. By engaging in these conversations, those of you 400+ individuals who've already participated in these conversations have taken a first step in exercising leadership because (1) you've chosen to engage in determining ECE's future as a field of practice and (2) you've begun the process of moving past reliance on individuals such as policymakers and "influentials" (e.g., senior executives in business, philanthropy, and ECE organizations) to make decisions on the field's behalf—especially when those decisions are shaping ECE's purpose, identity, and responsibilities as a field of practice. In other words, it's your role as early childhood practitioners to assume authority when it comes to **defining ECE as a field of practice**.

The definitional process of becoming a profession includes questions such as the field's *defining* purpose, the age span of children served, required educator competencies and qualifications, ethical responsibilities, and public accountabilities. These and similar questions have to be answered by all occupations that are considering whether to move toward recognition as a profession. When it comes to ECE, the conversation revolves around whether the ECE field could better support children's early learning and development if it were to transform itself into a profession. A decision in the affirmative, I might add, would also facilitate families', states', and the general public's acknowledgement of early childhood educators as true professionals. (See [Fact Sheet on Professions](#).)

Your Leadership As ECE Practitioners Is Essential to Change

If this definitional process is to succeed, though, ECE's leadership needs to include you, the field's workforce—those of you who on a daily basis fulfill the responsibilities of directly fostering children's early learning and development, plus higher education faculty, and those of you who are part of ECE's crucial infrastructure support¹. In other words, when it comes to decisions that impact the field's practice with children and families and will inform ECE's future, you and your colleagues need to be prominently involved in answering the question of whether ECE should become a profession, and if so, what an ECE profession would "look like."

But I'm getting ahead of myself! Prodded in part by [Power to the Profession](#) (P2P), a task force convened by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Vermont decided to say, "wait a minute." Before jumping on board with this change initiative, the field's workforce needs to better understand what it means to be a profession. How does it differ from what already exists given that the field's practitioners typically are called professionals? How

¹ As defined by P2Ps task force, ECE's infrastructure is made up of the individuals and organizations that support early childhood educators' ability to capably execute their role and responsibilities, e.g., coaches, QRIS staff, and program accreditation assessors, and to make their services available to families.

would things be different if we were instead to increase the field's competence by becoming a better-organized occupation rather than a recognized profession? How should ECE be defined as a field of practice, and what should early childhood educators' responsibilities and accountabilities be going forward?

These questions highlight that becoming a recognized profession is a choice needing thoughtful consideration. To be transparent, I've made my choice: I'm an advocate for redirecting ECE's developmental trajectory and moving forward to become a recognized profession. Because I've deeply studied professions and am aware of what's involved in changing ECE's current "way of being," I strongly believe that early childhood educators, along with other ECE practitioners have to participate in this conversation. Not only will you be most directly affected by the decisions ultimately made, your energy, enthusiasm, and long-term commitment is essential to creating transformational change.

This is why your involvement as change agents is so important at this defining moment in ECE's development. It's important for you to play a front-and-center role in co-creating ECE's future. Your participation as thinkers, decision makers, and change agents is core to determining what distinguishes ECE from other fields of practice and what will be necessary to ensure that ECE's future early childhood educators have the knowledge, skills, and dedication necessary for fostering children's optimal learning and development regardless of setting.

By stepping forward now and into the future to exercise leadership, you can help develop the ECE field beyond its current fix-it approach to the ECE system's weaknesses. You can create a future that fosters a shared sense of pride and accomplishment because of the differences you, and those who follow you, make in the lives of children and families. This means you'll be stepping into the role of pioneers, too, forging pathways for others whose commitment to continuing the journey will be essential to transforming ECE's destiny.

So it's up to you and your colleagues to decide if ECE should step up to its aspirations for children and families by "upping its game" and whether to become a profession. If a groundswell exists to redirect ECE's developmental journey, the "how to" will then come into play. But the "how to" is only necessary if a decision is made to transition ECE toward becoming a profession. *And this is the crucial decision-making work you're presently doing.*

"Who's going to make this happen?" is a frequently asked question. And there's an answer: *It's you*, each of you working together in tandem as change agents and in conjunction with others (including policymakers, senior executives in business, philanthropy, and ECE organizations) so the future being envisioned for ECE can come into focus.

What Are Next Steps?

Here are three next steps:²

Step #1: Ground your choices in foundational values and principles. What are the values and principals that you think should guide ECE's choices about its future?

Step #2: Recognize that each of us owns some of the responsibility for what we don't like about ECE and how it's presently functioning. Each of us needs to acknowledge how our

thinking and actions are contributing to ECE's current status as a field of practice. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that others are to blame, we need to be willing to consider how we might be contributing to the problem and to change *our* thinking, attitudes, and behaviors—individually and collectively. This isn't easy; but this step is essential to changing ECE as a field of practice.

Step #3: Make the conscious choice to embrace change and become active learners. We have much to learn from each other—and also from people outside of the ECE field—about professions, how to work together effectively, and how to create the changes we want to bring to fruition.

Evolving ECE toward becoming a recognized field of practice — if that's the choice VT's early childhood educators and other ECE practitioners make — will be both demanding and exhilarating. It will require perseverance, too. So, it's helpful to know in advance that:

- No single right answer exists for how best to fulfill the aspirations people have for ECE.
- Answers to every question about the future can't be known at the start. .
- The journey will involve learning to live with uncertainties and conflict—and to benefit from them.

ECE's integrity as a field of practice is at stake. Children and families are counting on each of you to make *choices that prioritize their well-being and developmental potential*. This is why participating in VT's statewide conversations about ECE's future as a field of practice is so important. Your participation in Vermont's statewide conversation provides an open gateway for exercising your leadership on ECE's behalf.

² Adapted from Goffin, S. G. & Washington, V. (forthcoming May 2019). *Ready or Not: Early Care and Education's Leadership Choices—12 Years Later*, 2nd edition. New York, NY: Teachers College Press

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