

Position Statement on House Bill 1386, Printer's Number 2607

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Position

The Pennsylvania Association for the Education of Young Children (PennAEYC), Pittsburgh AEYC (PAEYC) and the Delaware Valley AEYC (DVAEYC) oppose House Bill 1386, PN 2607. It is imperative we put our youngest learners first and ensure they receive developmentally-appropriate classroom instruction. This legislation would take Pennsylvania a step backwards in that regard.

Bill Summary

HB 1386 would expand instructional certificate grade spans and age levels. Of interest to our organizations are the following sections of the bill:

- 1) Expansion of the elementary instructional certificate span and age level to kindergarten through grade six (ages four through 11), further overlapping with the early childhood span and ages (pre-kindergarten through grade four, ages three through nine).
- 2) Combination of the two special education spans and age levels into one and eliminating the requirement for dual certification.

Individuals with certificates under the current grade spans and age levels would remain valid for the term of the certificate. The bill allows for the Department of Education to develop a process for individuals currently holding certificates to expand the scope of their certificate. The bill is effective in 60 days and would apply to instructional certificates issued after December 31, 2021.

Background

Changes to instructional certificate grade spans and age levels were adopted in 2007 and became effective in 2013. These grade spans and age levels are as follows related to early childhood, elementary and special education, as outlined in regulation (22 Pa. Code, §49.85):

Early Childhood: Pre-kindergarten through fourth grade, ages three through nine

Elementary/Middle: Fourth through eighth grade, ages nine through 14

Special Education:

- Special Education – PK-8 – Pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, ages three through 14
- Special Education – 7-12 – Seventh through twelfth grade, ages 11 through 21
- Special Education PK-8 and 7-12 require dual certification in early childhood, elementary/middle, secondary or reading specialist as appropriate per the age group.

Current spans and age levels recognize the importance of the teacher/child relationship in early childhood. Preschool education has been deemed a critical period for cognitive development, school preparation and success, language development and learning motivation, as well as for developing children's social and emotional competence¹. During this period, teachers are the second most influential force in the development of children, after their parents. The teacher is defined as the person whom a child will face

¹ Yoleri, Sibel, "[Teacher-child Relationships in Preschool Period: The Roles of Child Temperament and Language Skills](#)", International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 2016, Cited from Essa, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000; Vasta, Miller, & Ellis, 2004.

and who will influence them in their life the most after their relatives/parents. The teacher has a critical role in causing the child to enjoy school and in introducing work habits in the child².

The regulations were adopted in part to ensure children had teachers in the classroom that were prepared with backgrounds in early childhood. The timing of the changes aligned with the creation of Pre-K Counts and the regulation applies to pre-kindergarten teachers in school and community-based settings, such as high-quality child care programs. The goal of the regulation was to create a highly-qualified pre-kindergarten workforce.

Recommendations and Rationale

Keep the current instructional certificate structure for early childhood and elementary certificates, rather than expanding the latter, to ensure teachers trained in early childhood are instructing our youngest learners and pre-kindergarten teacher pipeline is not weakened.

New America's research paper, "One Size Doesn't Fit All: The Need for Specialized Teacher Licenses in the Early Grades"³ highlights Pennsylvania and makes the case for an early child educator license without overlap of a broader elementary license for the following reasons of which we concur:

- **Teaching effectively in the early grades requires understanding of child development and the need for licensing structures to align with developmental science.** Young children need creative instruction and hands-on activities to link current learning to past experiences. They learn best by interactions that have meaning and connect. In addition, younger children will be guided by their teachers in learning social skills like sharing, taking turns, and communicating appropriately, which are the foundations for all learning and differ from what and how older children learn. The Education Commission of the States further backs this position, stressing the need for a pre-k to three or kindergarten to three teacher preparation program and licensure requirements⁴.
- **K-6 training programs tend to focus on older grades, which will leave teachers unprepared to instruct younger children in a developmentally-appropriate way.** Teachers without strong early childhood backgrounds could be placed in the younger grades with broader elementary instructional certificates. In addition, it is possible administrators will place stronger teachers in older grades that focus more on required state testing. The report cites that professors in teacher training programs report broader licenses lead to programs that cover too much and cannot adequately focus on the developmental needs of younger children.
- **Broader licenses are likely to be chosen by prospective teachers over more narrow ones, resulting in a reduced pipeline of pre-kindergarten teachers.** The report notes that if there were a choice between a pre-kindergarten to third grade and kindergarten to eighth grade license, prospective teachers may decide to earn the broader license. It is understandable that an individual would choose the certificate that provides them with better marketability to school administrators. HB 1386's proposed spans would likely have this result as the early childhood certificate would remain at pre-kindergarten to grade four, but the new elementary license would be from kindergarten through grade six, only eliminating the option of teacher pre-kindergarten.

² Yoleri, Sibel, "[Teacher-child Relationships in Preschool Period: The Roles of Child Temperament and Language Skills](#)", International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 2016, Cited from: Pianta, 1999.

³ Jackson, Sarah, Orenstein, Natalie and Bornfreund, Laura, New America, "[One Size Doesn't Fit All: The Need for Specialized Teacher Licenses in the Early Grades](#)", June 2017.

⁴ Atchison, Bruce, Diffey, Louisa and Workman, Emily, Education Commission on the States, "[K-3 Policymakers' Guide to Action: Making the Early Years Count](#)", November 2015.

In addition, existing grade spans and age levels recognize the importance of the kindergarten transition and need for alignment between pre-kindergarten and early elementary years. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act recognizes the importance of the pre-kindergarten through third grade continuum. Both the federal law and the Pennsylvania state plan prioritize the transition to kindergarten as a way to support our youngest learners. The transition to kindergarten marks a critical moment in a young child’s educational journey – both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers play a significant role in the transition to elementary school. Coordination between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers help children’s ability to function successfully within a new classroom environment, setting the stage for future school success. For the impacts of high-quality pre-kindergarten to reach their full realization, educators must provide high-quality and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences, particularly in kindergarten through third grade.⁵ Policies and practices for young children, including teacher licensing regulation, should strengthen the connections and alignment between preschool and the early elementary grades. The current instructional grade spans and age levels promote alignment in the licensing of early childhood educators that acknowledge the importance of continuity in the transition from preschool to elementary school.

Keep the current instructional certificate structure for special education, rather than combining the separated grade spans and eliminating dual certification to ensure teachers trained in early childhood are instructing our youngest learners with special needs.

The teacher/child relationship and training in early childhood is arguably even more critical to Pennsylvania’s youngest children in the special education system. The current requirement for dual certification in special education and either early childhood, elementary/middle, or reading specialist helps ensure these teachers are equipped to focus on a specific grade and age range of children. In addition, the current split of grade/age spans for special education is already very broad. Diluting them further into one certificate for all grade/age spans will mean special educators could be working with younger children without appropriate preparation for this age group.

The exemption process provides the opportunity for individual schools struggling to meet current requirements to request relief.

While broader licensing structures allow school administrators more flexibility to move teachers and address teaching shortages, they are not in the best interest of the children as indicated by the research cited in this position paper. However, it should be recognized that specific school districts may experience issues with regulatory compliance. Current regulation at 22 Pa. Code, §49.85(d) allow for the Department of Education to grant exceptions related to the early childhood, elementary/middle, and special education certifications on a case-by-case basis. It is the better to address specific district and building issues through the current process rather than making sweeping changes to the certificate spans that could be detrimental to young children.

⁵ Stipek, Deborah, et al., “[PK-3: What does it mean for instruction? Society for Research in Child Development](#)”, 2017.