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Unified Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education Teacher Certification: State Approaches

by Eve Müller

According to data collected by the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC), states are increasingly offering what they describe as a “single certificate” for early childhood and early childhood special education (i.e., certification that covers children both with and without disabilities). This document describes states’ approaches to these single certificates. Project Forum conducted its analysis as part of its cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place in three phases. First, Project Forum, in collaboration with NECTAC, identified a total of 20 states for follow-up based on information found in the *Section 619 Profile, 13th Edition* (Danaher, Kraus, Armijo & Hipps, 2005) and the NECTAC Section 619 listserv. These states either:

- reported that they offer a “single certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education,” or
- included information suggesting that they are planning to add such a certificate in the near future.

Project Forum and NECTAC then developed a brief survey to be distributed to these 20 states (See Appendix A for a copy of the survey protocol). Based on comments included by a number of states, it was apparent that states use the phrase “single certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education” to describe a variety of certification requirements. The purpose of Project Forum’s survey was to better understand what states mean when using this phrase and, thereby, to gain a clearer picture of states’ certification/licensure requirements for early childhood special education teachers. By October 1, 2005, Project Forum had gathered responses from 17 of the 20 states surveyed.

Based on survey responses reporting that states offer a truly “unified” certificate¹ for early childhood and early childhood special education teachers, Project Forum conducted in-depth interviews in seven states: *Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts* and *Nebraska*. The interview protocol was developed in collaboration with NECTAC (See Appendix B for a copy of the interview protocol). Interviews were conducted during the months of October and November 2005, and in most cases were conducted with either states’ Section 619 Coordinators or state licensure/certification staff.² Data from interviews were analyzed using ATLAS.ti – a software program designed to aid in the analysis of qualitative data. Findings from both the surveys and interviews are reported in the following section of this document.

Findings

Survey Findings

Of the 17 states that responded to Project Forum’s initial survey, 13 confirmed that they did indeed offer some type of single certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education teachers. However, there were significant differences in the way they described these single certificates:

- Eight states – *Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nebraska* and *Wisconsin* – require early childhood teachers and early childhood special education teachers to complete a single “unified” certification preparing them to work with children both with and without disabilities. Preparation for this certification includes coursework specific to children with disabilities.³
- Three states – *Louisiana, Pennsylvania* and *West Virginia* – require early childhood special education teachers to complete an early childhood special education certification

¹ For the purposes of this analysis, a unified certificate is defined as the following: Early childhood special education teachers and early childhood teachers must complete a single (common) certification preparing them to work with children both with and without disabilities. Preparation for this certification does include coursework specific to children with disabilities.

² Project Forum wishes to thank the following individuals for taking the time to be interviewed as well as to review an earlier version of this document: Paul Flinter, Chief of the Bureau of Early Childhood, Career and Adult Education, Connecticut Department of Education; Cathy Bishop, 619 Coordinator and Program Specialist, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, Florida Department of Education; Mary Bostick, 619 Coordinator and Special Education Supervisor, Bureau of Special Education, Idaho State Department of Education; Martha Gage, Director, Teacher Education and Licensure, Kansas State Department of Education; Susan Helbert, Assistant Director, Teacher Education and Licensure, Kansas State Department of Education; Annie Rooney French, Consultant, Division of Early Childhood Development, Preschool Branch, Kentucky Department of Education; Elisabeth Schaefer, Administrator for Special Programs, Massachusetts Department of Education; and Jan Thelen, Early Childhood Special Education Coordinator, Special Education Office, Nebraska Department of Education. Project Forum also wishes to acknowledge Joan Danaher of NECTAC and Mary Beth Bruder, Principle Investigator for The Center to Inform Personnel Preparation Policy and Practice in Early Intervention and Preschool Education, for providing feedback on an earlier version of this document.

³ Based on information from follow-up interviews, Project Forum learned that Florida and Nebraska *offer* a unified certificate as one option among several but do not require it.

in order to be qualified to teach children both with and without disabilities. Preparation does *not* necessarily include disability-related coursework.

- One state – *New York* – requires early childhood special education teachers to complete both early childhood certification and early childhood special education certification in order to be qualified to teach children with disabilities. This results in “dual certification.” Early childhood teachers who do not intend to teach children with disabilities are only required to complete the early childhood certification. A similar certification system will go into effect in *Arizona* in October of 2009.

Twelve of the 17 states provided information on when their single certificates for early childhood and early childhood special education were first approved. Seven states reported that their single certificates were approved since 2000. Four reported, however, that their single certificates were approved in the 1990s; and one reported that its single certificate was first approved in 1989.

Thirteen of the 17 states provided information on the age and/or grade ranges covered by their single certificates. In five states, the age/grade range is quite broad – including birth to either second or third grade. Two additional states each offer two separate, overlapping certificates covering the same range (e.g., a birth through kindergarten certification as well as a preschool through third grade certification). In the remaining five states, ages/grades covered are narrower in scope (i.e., three to four years, three to five years, three to eight years or birth to five years).

Interview Findings

The following section summarizes findings from the seven interviews conducted with states reporting that they offer a single “unified” certificate for both early childhood and early childhood special education teachers.

Background

State interviewees described a variety of motivating factors for creating a unified certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education teachers, including the following:⁴

- desire to promote inclusion (4 states);
- response to recommendations from a variety of national professional organizations (e.g., the Association of Teacher Educators, the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children [CEC] and the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC]) for a birth to third grade early childhood license (2 states);
- need for personnel to staff the significant number of inclusive early childhood programs throughout the state;
- response to an OSEP monitoring visit and the newly reauthorized Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) mandate that children receive services within natural environments to the maximum extent possible [20 U.S.C. 1432 §632(4)(G)];

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, each motivating factor was listed by only one state.

- result of agreement among stakeholders (e.g., early childhood special education, early childhood, institutions of higher education [IHEs]) that “this was the right thing to do”;
- response to a mandate from the state legislature to develop early childhood certification;
- pressure from faculty from early childhood programs at state’s IHEs; and
- response to a routine review of existing early childhood endorsement, including a survey of other states with unified endorsements.

Of the seven states interviewed, three reported that their unified certificates were introduced in 2000 or later (*Idaho, Kansas and Nebraska*) and four reported that their unified certificates were first introduced some time in the 1990s (*Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky and Massachusetts*).

States, however, interpreted “introduced” in different ways – with some providing dates when their unified certificate were first adopted as law and others providing dates when their unified certificates were actually implemented. Several states noted that the entire process of getting the unified certificate “up and running” was both lengthy and multi-faceted, including many if not all of the following components: convening a group of stakeholders, generating a proposal, getting the proposal approved by either a state-level board or state legislature, creating appropriate personnel preparation programs at state IHEs and waiting for the first cohort of teachers to complete a personnel preparation program. States reported that the process took anywhere from three to 15 years. As the interviewee from *Kentucky* noted, “It is very important to know that this is not something that can easily be done. It is a very long and complex process.”

Age/grade ranges varied considerably for the unified certificates in the seven states interviewed:

- *Idaho, Kansas and Nebraska* each offer birth through eight years/third grade.⁵
- *Florida* and *Connecticut* each offer two unified certificates covering different, overlapping age/grade ranges (e.g., *Florida* offers birth through age four and age three years through third grade certificates; and *Connecticut* offers birth through kindergarten and pre-K through third grade certificates).
- *Kentucky* offers a birth through kindergarten.
- *Massachusetts* offers a pre-K through second grade.

Nature of Unified Certificate

Educational contexts wherein the unified certificate is considered a requirement vary significantly from state to state. For example:

- *Massachusetts* requires the unified certificate for all teachers teaching in inclusive pre-K through second grade classrooms.

⁵ *Kansas* also plans to add an additional, narrower unified certification for early childhood and early childhood special education teachers working exclusively with children from birth through kindergarten.

- *Idaho* requires the unified certificate for teachers working with children birth through five receiving services under Part C or Part B Section 619.
- *Kansas* and *Connecticut* require the unified certificate for working with birth through third grade although *Kansas* teachers with early childhood or early childhood special education certificates will continue to be permitted to work in appropriate settings for their certificates. *Connecticut* teachers with older certificates are “grandfathered” into the new system and can continue to work with these children until they retire.
- *Kentucky’s* unified certificate applies to children ages birth through kindergarten, and is currently required for all new teachers in the state-funded preschool program. The state plans to extend the requirement for teachers working with children birth through two served under Part C.
- *Florida* and *Nebraska* offer a unified certificate as one certification option among several and do not require it in any educational contexts.

Several states noted that the unified certificate is not required in contexts serving young children without disabilities (e.g., child care, Head Start programs, Title I programs or public school classrooms) and several interviewees emphasized that there actually is not *any* mandated licensure for early childhood educators or child care personnel within their states. *Idaho* noted, however, that if/when the state adopts a universal preschool model, the unified certificate will be considered a requirement for all preschool teachers, not just those working with students identified as having disabilities.

Finally, although the unified certificate may not be a *requirement* in non-special education contexts, the unified certificate does qualify teachers to teach in many of these contexts. The unified certificate also qualifies teachers in many of the states interviewed to work with children with disabilities in segregated settings.

Personnel Preparation

All seven interviewees reported that there are personnel preparation programs at one or more IHEs in their states designed to help students meet the requirements of the unified certificate. The total number of IHEs offering these programs within states ranges from three (*Idaho* and *Nebraska*) to 35 (*Massachusetts*). Additionally, four interviewees indicated that there are several community colleges in their states offering some coursework necessary for completion of the unified certificate and that articulation agreements have been established between the two- and four-year institutions. Teacher candidates are thus able to transfer their credits to one of the participating four-year IHEs in the state. *Kentucky* reported that temporary probationary certification is also available for use in local education agencies (LEAs) unable to find a teacher with a unified certificate.

When asked about the relationship between the state education agency (SEA) and the state's personnel preparation programs, most interviewees reported that the SEA was responsible for approving and periodically reviewing IHE programs and ensuring that coursework is properly aligned with the program competencies outlined in the state's certification regulations. One exception to this is *Kentucky*, where the certification board is separate from the SEA. *Connecticut* state staff described an approval/review process that not only includes SEA staff, but also LEA staff and faculty from other IHEs within the state. In two states, *Idaho* and *Kentucky*, the SEA holds biannual or quarterly meetings with IHE programs to provide and receive input on topics such as state-level professional development needs. *Florida*, partners with state IHEs to offer a variety of professional development opportunities. The partnerships are funded through discretionary grants from the state.

Three of the states highlighted in this report offer financial incentives to IHEs and/or teacher candidates pursuing a unified certificate.

- *Massachusetts* has offered, and continues to offer, several types of incentives over the years. For instance, the SEA has sponsored the development of new courses by IHE faculty, a tactic which has eased the process of restructuring personnel preparation programs throughout the state. The SEA also offers a variety of tuition reimbursement programs: recruiting teachers from Head Start and child care programs, matriculating them in degree programs and providing scholarships to cover tuition for some or all of their courses.
- *Kentucky* offers two scholarships, one a trainee scholarship for individuals with a bachelor's degree who are hired by an LEA but have not completed the unified certificate. These individuals can enroll in an IHE program and the scholarship pays for up to 90 percent of their tuition costs for up to four consecutive semesters. Kentucky also offers a Kids Now Scholarship, part of the governor's initiative for early childhood, which pays tuition for child care providers and teacher assistants in the state-funded preschool program who are pursuing an early childhood credential, including – but not limited to – the unified certificate.
- *Nebraska* issues a request for proposals (RFP) each year for IHEs. Proposals frequently include money for tuition reimbursements for individuals pursuing a unified certificate.

A fourth state, *Idaho*, used to offer tuition reimbursement for teacher candidates, but no longer does so.

Several interviewees described the crossover certification process in their states; i.e., what happens when a teacher who already has an early childhood or special education certificate wishes to complete a unified certificate. In most of these states, the IHEs rather than the SEAs determine this process. As the interviewee from *Nebraska* noted, "One [IHE] might say you need 12 more hours and another might say you need 18 more hours." The interviewee from *Kentucky* described a "proficiency evaluation" that exempts teacher candidates from certain courses,

enabling them to be more readily recommended for unified certification based on prior experience and knowledge. In two states, interviewees reported that crossover certification is not always smooth. For instance, *Idaho* described the state's IHE programs as "requiring people to take piles more coursework." *Connecticut* reported that state law requires a 30 credit plan for crossover students – a situation the interviewee described as "a little daunting" and something "we need to adjust."

Components of Unified Certificate

All interviewees described a system whereby states establish program standards for their unified certificates and IHEs develop coursework aligned to those standards. *Kansas* noted that the SEA is also interested in how teacher candidates are scoring on assessments developed to measure the standards and, if students aren't doing well in one or more areas of the standards, IHEs are required to develop an action plan to ensure continuous improvement.

Several program components were common across states. For example, six states reported that disability-specific coursework is required and six reported that coursework in early childhood development is required.⁶ Other coursework areas that were frequently mentioned included diagnosis, assessment and evaluation; curriculum development and implementation; and family and professional collaboration. All seven states reported that either a practicum experience or integrated field experience involving students with disabilities is required, although three noted that the practicum does not necessarily take place within an inclusive environment. According to one interviewee, creating "high quality inclusive environments for people to do a practicum in" is a "big issue." Three states also described additional program components either currently in place or in the planning stages:

- *Kentucky* requires an internship prior to full certification during the first year of employment that includes observations, review of lesson plans, mentorship and an evaluation or recommendation by a committee that includes IHE faculty, the school principal and a resource teacher.
- *Massachusetts* has three different levels of licensure: (1) the preliminary license requires passing an early childhood subject matter test with specific questions regarding children with disabilities; (2) the initial license requires 300 practicum hours; and (3) the professional license requires one of the following: 50 hours of mentored experience, a performance assessment, 50 hours of continuing education credits or an approved masters degree.
- *Connecticut* requires that teachers in kindergarten through 3rd grade settings participate in a mentorship and portfolio assessment, although teachers teaching in pre-K settings are currently exempt from this requirement. Furthermore, Connecticut currently requires teachers in most areas to pass a rigorous subject matter test (i.e., PRAXIS II) and eagerly awaits the development of such a test for teachers completing the unified certificate.

⁶ The interviewee from the seventh state was unaware of the coursework requirements at IHEs within her state.

Outcomes

All seven interviewees provided information on the total number of teachers who have received the unified early childhood and early childhood special education certificate. In the three states where the unified certificate is new within the last five years, a relatively small number of teachers have completed it: approximately 100 teachers in *Idaho*; approximately 85 teachers in *Nebraska*; and “only a handful” of teachers in *Kansas*. States where the unified certificate has been implemented for five to ten years, on the other hand, have significantly higher numbers of teachers who have completed it. In *Massachusetts*, a total of 8,361 teachers have completed the unified certificate; in *Florida*, a total of 7,120 teachers have completed the unified three years through third grade certificate and 459 teachers have completed the unified birth through four years certificate; in *Connecticut*, approximately 1,200 teachers have completed the unified pre-K through third grade certificate and approximately 100 teachers have completed the unified birth through kindergarten certificate; and there are more than 370 teachers with unified certificates currently teaching in *Kentucky’s* state-funded programs with several hundred additional teachers having received the unified certificate over the years.

Interviewees reported a wide range of challenges related to establishing a unified certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education in their states. Most frequently, interviewees (five states) expressed concerns that IHEs might not be able to provide adequate personnel preparation because the unified certificate is “too broad,” particularly in those states covering a birth through third grade age range. As one interviewee noted, “It is a nightmare to implement. You can imagine trying to have people prepared in elementary education, kindergarten through third grade, plus early childhood special education and early childhood.” Another issue raised by four states was the concern that the lack of a state-level *requirement* that early childhood and/or early childhood special education teachers have a unified certificate weakens efforts to create a truly unified early childhood system. Securing stakeholder support (including faculty and administrators at IHEs, early childhood staff, local special education directors and teachers’ unions) was identified as a challenge by three states, as well as the lack of adequate numbers of inclusive early childhood practicum sites and classrooms, particularly in rural areas. Three states reported that the complexity of the cross-over certification process and/or the certification process for out-of-state teachers who wish to teach in unified programs but lack a unified certificate is a barrier; and two states mentioned the lack of legislation supporting licensure of child care personnel. Other challenges, each reported by no more than one state, included:

- length of time involved in getting the unified certificate implemented;
- inadequate numbers of personnel programs in place, particularly in rural areas, where teachers can complete requirements for the unified certificate;
- lack of financial support and incentives for participating IHEs;
- shortage of adequately prepared staff;
- anxiety on the part of early childhood and early childhood special education teachers with older “non-unified” certificates regarding changes to the state certification system;

- difficulty with articulation agreements between two- and four-year IHEs (e.g., electives and practicum experiences that are not necessarily transferable);
- lack of legislation that mandates provision of early child care;
- disproportionately high numbers of children with disabilities in “inclusive” early childhood classrooms; and
- financial burden for LEAs resulting from paying early childhood teachers on a certified, as opposed to classified, scale.

Several states identified one or more strategies designed to address these challenges. For example:

- *Massachusetts* stressed the importance of providing financial incentives and support to personnel preparation programs at IHEs; as well as providing policy guidance and support to administrators, principals, individuals operating inclusive early childhood programs and others (e.g., identifying the appropriate ratio of disabled to non-disabled children and describing what curriculum should look like and how to handle the blending of funds). *Massachusetts* also recommended that early childhood and early childhood special education departments be combined into a single entity at the SEA level and housed under general education. *Massachusetts* uses IDEA and SEA discretionary funds to build support for inclusion, funding various training activities that provide teachers with expertise in inclusive methods.
- *Kentucky* granted letters of exemption to teachers with a K-5th grade certificate, special education certificate or child development degree who were hired between 1998 and 2002. These letters allowed certain teachers to be exempted from the requirement of a unified certificate. Teachers with a Child Development Associate degree were allowed to continue in their position, but they could not be hired into another district. This process of attrition allowed for a gradual transition to the unified early childhood system.
- *Idaho* described the importance of facilitating open, ongoing dialogue among various stakeholder groups.

Finally, interviewees described a variety of benefits resulting from the implementation of a unified certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education. Most frequently, states reported that a unified certificate promotes inclusion at the classroom level. As one interviewee noted, “Because we’ve married these two things together so much [early childhood and early childhood special education], the culture just *is* inclusion, and people just really believe that this is better for kids.” Another interviewee remarked that, “It [inclusion] is the bottom line for doing a better job for *all* young children.” The increase in the numbers of inclusive classrooms within states, as well as the numbers of children with disabilities being educated in such classrooms, was also related to the certificate. For instance, *Massachusetts* reported that since implementing the unified certificate, the percentage of children with disabilities in inclusive early childhood classrooms had grown from 20 percent to 90 percent.

Interviewees also reported improved cross-disciplinary dialogue among IHE faculty and administrators and greater integration among staff at the LEA and SEA level. Two states described combining early childhood and early childhood special education departments at the SEA level. According to one interviewee, this “evolution of the department on a state level [means] we [special education staff] are no longer the ‘stepchild’.”

Other commonly noted benefits included the tremendous flexibility of where a teacher can be placed, making the certificate particularly attractive to small LEAs. As one interviewee noted, “It’s a huge advantage...to get the unified endorsement because they’re so much more marketable.” Interviewees also stressed the increased professionalization of the field resulting from a significant number of teachers moving from ‘classified’ to ‘certified’ status – a transformation that one interviewee described as “truly awesome.” Another interviewee noted that shifting teachers from classified to certified status was correlated to greater job retention, as well as increased respect and recognition from the rest of the education system. Other benefits reported included a better prepared staff of more reflective practitioners, stronger IHE faculties and the integration of preschool into the public education system.

Concluding Remarks

Almost all of the unified EC and EC special education certificate options available today have been introduced within the last ten years. Although there is significant variation in the way the seven states interviewed approach a unified certificate, all report that the certificate has – for the most part – been positive. Most significantly, a unified certificate seems to have contributed to increasing opportunities for inclusion, better trained personnel, improved status for the EC field as a whole and more job flexibility for those holding a unified certificate. While most interviewees reported one or more challenges relating to implementation of a unified certificate, all felt that creative solutions were possible and many offered recommendations as to how other states considering the possibility of adding a unified EC and EC special education certificate might overcome such barriers.

Reference

Danaher, J., Kraus, R., Armijo, C., & Higgs, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Section 619 Profile (13th Edition)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Development Institute, National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

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Ph: 703-519-3800 ext. 312 or Email: carla.burgman@nasdse.org

**APPENDIX A – Project Forum Survey on
Early Childhood Special Education Certification
August 2005**

Name of Person Completing Survey _____
Position: _____ State: _____
E-mail: _____ Telephone: _____

(1) The sources of information that we reviewed indicate that your state – as one of its early childhood certification options – offers a “single certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education” and/or that it will soon be offering such a certificate. Please indicate which of the following descriptions best describes your state’s “single certificate.”
(Note: Please read all options closely before selecting, because several options are similar):

_____ Early childhood special education teachers must complete an **early childhood certification** plus **early childhood special education** certification in order to be qualified to teach children **with** disabilities.

_____ Early childhood special education teachers must complete only an **early childhood special education certification** in order to be qualified to teach children both **with and without** disabilities.

_____ Early childhood special education teachers must complete only an **early childhood certification** in order to be qualified to teach children **with** disabilities. This also qualifies them to teach children **without** disabilities. *Preparation for this certification does not necessarily include coursework specific to children with disabilities.*

_____ Early childhood special education teachers and early childhood teachers must complete a **single (common) certification** preparing them to work with children both **with and without** disabilities. Preparation for this certification **does** include coursework specific to children with disabilities.

_____ Other (Please describe): _____

(2) In what year was your state's single certificate (as described above) first approved?

(3) To which age range does your state's single certificate option apply? _____

(4) Please include any additional comments you would like to make regarding your state's "single certificate" in the space below: _____

(5) Would your state be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview on this topic?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Thanks for taking the time to complete this survey!

APPENDIX – B
Unified Certificate for Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education
Final Interview Protocol
October 2005

I. Background

- When was your state’s unified certificate for early childhood and early childhood special education first introduced?
- What age range does the unified certificate cover?
- What were the motivating factors underlying your state’s decision to introduce a unified certificate?
 - Significant numbers of inclusive early childhood programs within state?
 - Tied to APR and state performance plan goals designed to promote inclusion and least restrictive environments (LRE)?
 - Other?

II. Nature of Unified Certificate

- Are both early childhood and early childhood special education teachers currently required to have a unified certificate?
- What does the unified certificate qualify you to do?
- Under what educational conditions is the unified certificate considered a requirement (e.g., when teaching specific age ranges or within specific educational settings, etc.)?
- Are other early childhood and/or early childhood special education certificates permitted when working under other conditions (e.g., when teaching children birth through 3, etc.)? If so, please describe.

III. Requirements for Unified Certificate

- What components are required to obtain a certificate?
 - Disability-specific coursework?
 - EC-specific coursework?
 - Practicum hours?
 - Assessment?
 - Other requirements?

IV. Personnel Preparation

- Are there personnel preparation programs at one or more institutions of higher education (IHEs) in your state that are designed to help students meet requirements of the unified certificate? If so, please describe how the state is involved in these programs (e.g.,

program approval, supporting link between IHE and LEAs for things like student teacher placement, etc.) [PROBE: If not, are there programs that provide *some coursework to support students* as they work to meet the requirements of the unified certificate?]

- Are there special provisions for crossover certification to help people meet the requirements who already have an EC or special education certificate and are seeking the unified certificate?
- Does the state offer any incentives to students for completing a unified certificate (tuition reimbursement, grants, student loans, increased salary on the state pay scale, etc.)?

IV. Outcomes

- How many teachers in your state have received a unified certificate?
- What barriers might a state run up against if it chooses to initiate a unified certificate?
- What has your state done to address these barriers?
- Can you describe the positive outcomes of a unified certificate for your state, as well as what might be the benefit for other states?