



Northern Essex Community College – Competency-Based Education (CBE) Courses in Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Summary of Innovation: Northern Essex Community College (NECC) collaborated with Middlesex Community College (MCC) to develop seven Early Childhood Education (ECE) courses¹ in a competency-based education (CBE) format. Supported by a Performance Incentive Fund (PIF) grant from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (DHE), the project was designed to make courses more readily available to current and future early childhood educators and thus help address an existing shortage of certified teachers.

CBE allows students to earn college credits at their own pace online while benefitting from one-on-one academic coaching. These flexible courses allow students to quickly demonstrate mastery of material they already know by completing authentic assessments. The online nature of each course also allows students to take additional time when necessary to focus on topics or new material they find challenging. They create an easier work / life / school balance, as students can work ahead on their schoolwork when they have more time and pull back when life demands it. They do this with the support of faculty, who work closely with individual students, and with an academic coach, who helps keep them on track through their courses.

While most NECC ECE courses are offered in multiple delivery methods, including online/hybrid courses, the CBE project creates additional options for accelerated coursework and a clear pathway for those seeking work in the field. The initial seven courses allow educators to meet coursework requirements for Lead Teacher Certification from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, with the appropriate amount of required field experience through CBE coursework. ECE students may verify work experience through their employer or gain field experience by completing a practicum in the ECE program. The pathway will also support incumbent teachers in early childhood education centers who do not hold an academic degree in ECE; these learners can use the pathway to achieve state certification as a Lead Teacher and/or Center Director.

The costs to students for CBE courses will be the same as the cost of existing online or classroom courses. The CBE Early Childhood Education certificate and degree programs are eligible for financial aid.

The courses will be first offered in the fall of 2018. NECC also received a FY18 PIF grant to develop three more CBE courses needed for EEC certification as Center Director 1 and 2. These additional courses will be created during 2018, and NECC will develop a certificate program where all courses for EEC Director certification can be completed in CBE format. The full program will be available by FY19.

¹ NECC developed four courses: Child Growth & Development, Introduction to Early Childhood Education, Math & Science in Early Childhood Curriculum, and Learning Environments for Infants & Toddlers. MCC developed three courses: Child Growth & Development, Curriculum in Early Childhood Programs, and Program Planning & Environments for Children.

NECC is also developing Open Educational Resources (OER) for the program, specifically the development of a free Child Growth and Development textbook that will be openly licensed for use across the state. This will build upon NECC's role as the lead college for the community college consortium's "Go Open" OER initiative supported by the USDOL GPSTEM grant.²

Targeted Population of Learners: Incumbent early childhood educators are a target, as only one-third have a college degree and are not equipped with an academic background in early childhood education. Individuals wanting to enter the field would also benefit from the flexibility of CBE courses.

Partners: NECC and MCC worked together to design the first seven ECE courses in the CBE format. Together with six additional community colleges³ and Cambridge College, the two colleges are now collaborating to create a pathway to an ECE bachelor's degree delivered in a competency-based format.

Bringing the Innovation to Scale: NECC is also working with the seven other community colleges to train their early education faculty in developing CBE courses. The CBE Design Studio will include a series of workshops that teach faculty why and how to develop these courses. An online version will also be developed, with training on developing accessible materials. Planning for CBE courses/programs does have to take into account obtaining approval from NECC's accreditation authority, New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

² Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant to the Massachusetts Community College Consortium, awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration, Grant #TC-26450-14-60-A-25.

³ Berkshire Community College, Bunker Hill Community College, Holyoke Community College, MassBay Community College, North Shore Community College, and Quinsigamond Community College.