



Early Achievers Provider Equivalencies Pathways – Updated Accreditation Policy



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Current Accreditation Policy	1
Goals of Revisiting the National Accreditation Crosswalk	2
Process for Updating the Cross-Accreditation Policy	4
Updating our Accreditation Crosswalk	4
Review of Updated Applications.....	4
Inviting Stakeholders to Partner in the Work	5
Outcomes.....	6
Decision and Rationale.....	6
Resources and Timelines Necessary to Implement Outcomes.....	7
Ongoing Evaluation or Updates	7
Conclusion.....	8

Executive Summary

During the 2019 Legislative Session, the Washington State Legislature passed [House Bill \(HB\) 1391](#) which asked the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to submit a plan to “implement a robust cross-accreditation process with multiple pathways for that allows a provider to earn equivalent Early Achievers credit resulting from accreditation by high quality national organizations.”

To accomplish this, DCYF invited stakeholders to participate in the planning process, including reviewing the updated Early Achievers Quality Standards and determining point awards based on the accreditation agency’s updated Accreditation Crosswalk.

The plan for this accreditation process includes:

- Continuing the process of offering additional bonus points – over and above the 100 Early Achievers Quality standards points – for national accreditation.
- Increasing the points awarded for accreditation from five to 10.
- Instituting a regular review process every three years to account for system and standards updates.
- Institute a review process with stakeholders of the data received from nationally accredited sites, with a goal toward continuous improvements in the cross-accreditation process.

This plan takes into account changes in the system which have increased aligned intent while recognizing that Early Achievers remains one of the most rigorous programs in the nation.

Additionally, while National Accreditation is a valuable process to assess processes, record keeping and policies, Early Achievers focuses on teacher-child interactions, engaging learning environments and the evidence of policies and practices which lead to improved child outcomes.

Current Accreditation Policy

Under current policy, DCYF grants five additional credit points to programs that have current accreditation through one of the following agencies:

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children's Administration (NAEYC)
- The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)
- American Montessori Society (AMS)
- National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NAC)
- AdvancED

To receive the five additional points as well as an Accreditation Area of Specialization on their rating certificate, providers must:

- Present a certificate or other documentation during data collection that states the facility was fully accredited by an agency that meets the Early Achievers accreditation requirements. The accreditation must be current at the time the request for on-site evaluation was approved.
- Document current accreditation on the Interactive Rating Readiness Tool (IRRT).
- Meet the minimum score requirements in the Environmental Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ERS-R) and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

This policy was developed in 2016 after a robust process with a workgroup of stakeholders and was approved by the Early Achievers Review Subcommittee. An accreditation workgroup developed a detailed standards crosswalk and application process. They then explored multiple accreditation recognition models, ultimately deciding that programs would receive a set number of points for

accreditation in addition to the points earned through on-site evaluation. This is a block of points, not tied to specific components or criteria in Early Achievers.

One reason for this decision was that it was simple for participants and partners to understand. Also, by not waiving any standards, it still allowed for data collection and feedback to participants on all components of the Early Achievers Quality Standards. This decision also maintained equity within our system by not unduly rewarding programs with the means to be accredited over non-accredited programs in Washington State.

Ultimately, the accreditation workgroup and the Early Achievers Review Subcommittee agreed that would have been an issue of equitable access.

A recent review of the data showed that accredited programs that are rated in Early Achievers tend to have slightly but not significantly higher average scores than the average scores for all participants:

	Average Child Outcomes	Average Curriculum and Staff Supports	Average Family Engagement and Partnership	Average Learning Environment	Average Staff Professional Development	Average Total Points
NAEYC	1.8	4.4	3.9	34.2	1.8	49.5
AMS	2.8	6	2.5	31.3	4.3	48
NAFCC	1.3	4.8	2.3	33.9	1.6	45.6
NAC	2.2	5.5	4.1	33.4	1.4	50.1
AdvancED	1.7	5	3	33.3	2	45
All Participants	2.1	4.72	2.91	32.2	1.64	44.9

Goals of Revisiting the National Accreditation Crosswalk

Since 2016, updates were made to the Early Achievers Quality Standards. The purpose of these updates was to develop a set of unified standards that create a clear progression from licensing through Early Achievers and the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).

Updates were also made to the quality standards of national accreditation agencies, such as NAEYC, NAFCC and AMS. As part of a review of the Early Achievers system, HB 1391 recognized those changes and mandated that DCYF review the accreditation policy.

The goal set by the legislature was “to explore and implement a robust cross-accreditation process with multiple pathways that allows a provider to earn equivalent Early Achievers credit resulting from accreditation by high quality national organizations.”

As seen in the table below, there are currently 70 nationally accredited sites in Washington State that are rated in Early Achievers:

Nationally Accredited Sites Rated in Early Achievers				
Timeline by Facility Type	Level 3	Level 3+	Level 4	Grand Total
Child Care Center	31	26	8	65
Existing ECEAP	0	1	6	7
Existing Subsidy	4	14	2	20
New Subsidy	24	8	0	32
Private Pay	3	3	0	6
Family Child Care Home	3	2	0	5
Private Pay	3	2	0	5
Grand Total	34	28	8	70

In total, there are more than 200 nationally accredited providers in the state that are eligible to participate in Early Achievers. This represents 4% of the sites statewide that are eligible to participate in Early Achievers.

Awarding additional points for providers that are nationally accredited may lead to improved outcomes for children by incentivizing additional providers to participate in Early Achievers. This has the potential to increase the number of providers accepting state subsidy, which increases access to quality child care for low-income children.

DCYF reviewed the updated crosswalks from three national accreditation agencies – NAEYC, NAFCC and AMS – to identify areas where the intent of the Early Achievers standards were met through accreditation. The hope was to acknowledge the hard work that nationally accredited providers put into their early care and education programs.

Another goal was to award Early Achievers points in a way that was equitable, meaning that the cross-accreditation system did not unfairly give advantage to providers that can afford the cost of national accreditation over those that cannot.

Early Achievers allows families to choose a rated site and to expect to receive a similarly high level of quality, no matter which program they choose or where in the state they live. Therefore, it was necessary in our review that accreditation agencies fully meet the intent of the Early Achievers standards to demonstrate alignment.

The final goal was to keep things simple for providers, accreditation agencies and the department, which is a value that we’ve heard repeatedly from providers.

Process for Updating the Cross-Accreditation Policy

Updating our Accreditation Crosswalk

The accreditation workgroup began by revising the current accreditation crosswalk with the updated Early Achievers Quality Standards. Three of the five quality standard areas were included in the crosswalk for consideration. They were:

- Child Outcomes
- Interactions and Curriculum
- Family Engagement and Partnerships

The other two quality standard areas – Learning Environment and Professional Development and Training – were not included for consideration of cross-accreditation.

The Learning Environment quality standard area is assessed with an on-site observation using the Environment Rating Scale 3rd Edition (ERS-3). Meeting a minimum threshold on ERS-3 is required in order to rate at a Level 3 in Early Achievers, and national accreditation agencies lack alignment with this assessment tool. Data from this assessment tool is also valuable for the relationship-based professional development that Early Achievers emphasizes. Therefore, it is still required that participating programs be observed using ERS-3.

The Professional Development and Training quality standard area is automatically calculated in MERIT as part of data collection. This quality standard area gives credit to programs based on the educational attainment of their staff or their equivalent experience in the early learning field.

The accreditation workgroup reached out to three national accreditation organizations – NAEYC, NAFCC and AMS – to begin the updated cross-accreditation process.

Respondents were given the opportunity to update their accreditation crosswalk and provide any additional notes or feedback for consideration. For each component of the Early Achievers quality standard areas, respondents had the opportunity to provide evidence of the same or similar standard in their own standards, assessment tool or data collection processes.

We chose to begin this process with the three accrediting agencies that represent the largest number of providers in Washington State. The other agencies currently included in Early Achievers – NAC and AdvancED – will participate in the same process and DCYF will incorporate their information accordingly. Additional accreditation agencies are also welcome to apply.

Review of Updated Applications

The workgroup closely reviewed the updated applications to examine aligned indicators of quality between the Early Achievers Quality Standards and those of the national accreditation agencies. We also had follow-up conversations with each of the agencies for further clarification and we were able to reach an agreement with the agencies on the level of alignment between our two systems. The results for each of the agencies are as follows:

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Comparing NAEYC and Early Achievers, we found alignment for the following indicators that total 10 points in Early Achievers:

- Policy to ensure that all children receive a valid and reliable screening tool.
- Results of a valid and reliable screening tool are shared with families.
- Share assessment or observation information with family at least two times a year.

- Policy is in place to individualize instruction for all children.
- Documentation of individualized instruction for all children.
- Policy is in place for supporting children with challenging behaviors and developmental needs through family partnership, staff training and consultation

For all other areas, NAEYC requirements do not meet the intent of our Early Achievers indicators.

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)

Comparing NAFCC and Early Achievers, we found alignment for the following indicators that total eight points in Early Achievers:

- Ongoing informal observation and documentation evidence is on file for all children.
- Policy is in place to individualize instruction for all children.
- Documentation of individualized instruction for all children.
- Early learning program leaders provide job-embedded professional development for lead teaching staff to support improvement in curriculum and teacher-child interactions at least three times a year.
- Policy in place for how staff work with families to establish and implement a behavior support plan for children with persistent challenging behaviors.

For all other areas, NAFCC requirements do not meet the intent of our Early Achievers indicators.

American Montessori Society (AMS)

Comparing AMS and Early Achievers, we found alignment with the following indicators that total seven points in Early Achievers:

- Policy in place to ensure that all children receive ongoing formal assessment or informal observation and documentation.
- Ongoing informal observation and documentation evidence is on file for all children.
- Policy is in place to individualize instruction for all children.
- Documentation of individualized instruction for all children.
- Policy in place for supporting children with challenging behavior and developmental needs by working with families to establish and implement a behavior support plan.

For all other areas, AMS requirements do not meet the intent of our Early Achievers indicators.

As a result of the conversation around curriculum and assessment, each agency was given both our Curriculum Alignment Tool and our Assessment Alignment Tool to complete. Should their standards for curriculum and assessment align with ours, the total number of points associated with aligned standards could increase.

Inviting Stakeholders to Partner in the Work

The accreditation workgroup also invited a variety of stakeholders from across the state, including members of the Early Achievers Review Subcommittee and participants from the original accreditation workgroup, to participate in an informational webinar before finalizing our plan. During the webinar, DCYF shared the updates from HB 1391, as well as the steps that the department took to reconsider cross-accreditation. We also shared the results of the cross-accreditation applications from the national agencies.

Stakeholders provided feedback on the Early Achievers' assessment process as it pertains to nationally accredited programs. They saw the value in continuing to use ERS-3 as an observational assessment in all nationally accredited programs. However, they were disappointed that the review of the standards

did not demonstrate more alignment between the various accreditation agencies and the Early Achievers Quality Standards. They believed that if the department does not reduce the duplication around data collection and offer more points to nationally accredited sites, it would not encourage greater participation from accredited providers. Finally, they felt that the system leaves little room for flexibility in demonstrating quality. Their thoughts provided valuable information that was taken into consideration in the department's final decision-making process.

We also invited our partners from the University of Washington and Child Care Aware of Washington to participate in the review process and to give feedback. They voiced concerns around the validity of data collected from programs that receive national accreditation, should we decide to accept the results of a national accreditation visit rather than collect our own data. Many of these agencies have different methods of collecting data than Washington State and different thresholds for achieving credit in a given standard area.

If we grant automatic credit for other standards, our partners on the data collection team at the University of Washington cannot verify that the indicator is met. Because accrediting agencies review a sample of their standards and the threshold for receiving credit is lower than Early Achievers, the site may have not actually met the standard. This means Early Achievers data would include site-level information that may be incorrect, which may result in invalid data on early learning quality in our state. Giving point-by-point credit complicates the process both for participants and the department.

Although we understand the frustration of some stakeholders, both DCYF and the national accreditation agencies agreed that there is limited alignment between our two systems. We also feel that it is important for our data to remain valid and reliable by continuing to work with our partners at the University of Washington to collect it. DCYF and our partners will continue to do our best to support providers in looking for ways that their hard work of accreditation can be easily demonstrated within our state system. The national accreditation agencies we spoke with were also interested in working on strategies to support their providers through the process of the state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

Outcomes

Decision and Rationale

To reach a decision, we weighed the goals of our process with the applications that we received and verified with the accreditation agencies, as well as the feedback from statewide stakeholders and our partners in quality rating and improvement. We hoped to develop a pathway that is robust, equitable and simple.

It is important to keep in mind that Washington State standards, both the Foundational Quality Standards of Child Care Licensing and the Early Achievers Quality Standards, are among the most rigorous in the nation. National accrediting bodies must create standards that strike a balance between the nation's most rigorous standards and those that are less so. National Accreditation is a valuable process to assess processes, record keeping and policies, whereas Early Achievers focuses on teacher-child interactions, engaging learning environments and the evidence of policies and practices.

Furthermore, while the intent of a few of the standards of the national accrediting bodies aligns with Early Achievers standards, their data collection process reviews only a sample of the standards and the expectation is to meet a percentage of the sampled standards in order to earn accreditation – this means there is no guarantee that sites have met the standards.

Therefore, we recommend the continued process of offering additional bonus points for nationally accredited sites. However, since the crosswalks that we reviewed indicated greater alignment with Early Achievers, we recommend offering 10 bonus points rather than the five that were previously offered. These points are over and above the 100 points tied to specific Early Achievers Quality Standards and are not tied to specific components or criteria. We will collect data over the next three years to monitor the performance of accredited and non-accredited sites. We will analyze this information and make improvements to the process of recognizing accreditation based on those findings.

The decision to award 10 points to accredited providers will meet our goals in providing a robust pathway for participants and partners while maintaining our drive to improve outcomes for children through high-quality programming. It recognizes the updates that were made both in Early Achievers and in national accreditation agencies' standards, which increased aligned intent. It also maintains equity within the system without awarding excessive advantage to programs that paid for national accreditation over programs that may not have access to the same opportunity.

Finally, it meets our goal of simplicity by not requiring that multiple pathways be created within our technology systems for data collection. Our assessment partners will also be able to maintain their current process for data collection and full data about program quality will be available to both the state and participating providers. Families will know that choosing an early care and learning program that is rated by Early Achievers means that the program has met a specified and rigorous level of quality.

Resources and Timelines Necessary to Implement Outcomes

The revised approach of recognizing national accreditation will coincide with the roll-out of Early Achievers functionality in DCYF's WA Compass data system which is scheduled for the summer of 2020. The department must update the WA Compass system so that it recognizes nationally accredited programs and is easily navigable by system users, including coaches, data collectors and providers. This request will require time to build the system. It will also require time in the future for updates when additional accreditation agencies apply for and are granted Early Achievers credit. This is a significant request for our IT system and there may need to be a manual process before full automation.

As additional agencies apply for recognition in Early Achievers, staff time is required to review and approve the applications. An estimated eight hours is required for each accreditation application. Time will also be needed for a cycle of review in subsequent years as we will collect data over the next three years and monitor the performance of nationally accredited sites.

Resources will also be necessary for training and communication purposes. Early Achievers participants, data collectors and coaches must understand the options and expectations related to the revised recognition of national accreditation within the rating system. Accredited programs and their accreditation agencies must understand the process to apply. Training and communication efforts will need to begin as soon as possible so that partners and providers are successful in the transition.

Ongoing Evaluation or Updates

After the initial review and approval of accreditation crosswalks, we propose that a review process occur at least every three years to allow system and standard updates.

Further, depending on resources allocated for this purpose, we propose that DCYF's Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability, along with the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, collect and analyze data over the next three years in order to understand outcomes for children who attend an accredited program as compared to children in non-accredited programs participating in Early Achievers. How will we know that children that go to accredited programs will have the same outcomes,

or better outcomes, as Early Achievers participants? Are we reaching our goal of equity and access by allowing accredited programs to participate in Early Achievers in a different way than other programs? We do not currently have the funding to evaluate the effectiveness of accredited programs.

We also suggest that the data be revisited at least every three years to evaluate whether a robust cross-accreditation pathway encourages more nationally accredited programs to join Early Achievers. In order to increase access to quality child care for low-income children, this goal needs to be evaluated.

Finally, we propose a semi-annual process to engage our stakeholders in the review of the data we receive from nationally accredited sites. In this way, we could collect their ongoing feedback and make continuous improvements.

To review and approve nationally accredited sites for an Early Achievers pathway, make needed system changes and updates, analyze appropriate data and engage partners and stakeholders, the Early Achievers team will require a 1.0 FTE in the position of Management Analyst 4.

Conclusion

The cross-accreditation framework within Early Achievers presents an opportunity to move forward with some of the recommendations from work with national accreditation agencies, partners and stakeholders. By awarding 10 additional points to nationally accredited sites, we create a pathway that is easy to understand and reaches our goals of alignment and equity. This is not the first time Early Achievers has reviewed the cross-accreditation process and having a foundation for what this process looks like for participants gave insight into what works and where we can make improvements.

To build this robust cross-accreditation process within the Early Achievers system, the department must update the WA Compass system so that nationally accredited participants receive the additional credit in Early Achievers and they can easily navigate the process to receive this recognition. This updated cross-accreditation process in Early Achievers is a great opportunity to honor nationally accredited providers while still supporting them within the Early Achievers system.