

How One Local Program Is Preparing the Next Generation of Early Childhood Educators

At Keene High School's Cheshire Career Center (CCC), students are already stepping into the vital work of early childhood education, and a new partnership is helping them go even further. Through the Child Care Expansion project, CCC's Careers in Education program added a powerful tool to its curriculum: the nationally recognized Child Development Associate (CDA) certification.



Students enrolled in Careers in Education at the Cheshire Career Center were able to obtain their CDA.



Students proudly pose with their teachers after earning their CDA.

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Fifteen high school students recently earned their CDA, including Cadence Longley, for whom the Careers in Education program was more than just a class. “I originally started in marketing,” says Longley. “But once I began babysitting and working in a preschool setting, I realized how much I loved it. This class gave me the experience and confidence to say, ‘I can do this.’”

Throughout their journey in the Careers in Education program, students complete intensive coursework in child development, behavior, and curriculum planning. They also spend time in real-world placements, gaining hands-on experience and building a professional portfolio of lesson plans, teaching strategies, and photos from their time in the classroom.

“It’s something we can actually show to employers,” says Javier John Garcia, another program graduate. “It’s proof of what we’ve learned and what we can do.”

Through the CCC, students receive CPR and First Aid training, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) certification, along with other credentials that give them a serious edge in the job market. Danielle Ulitsch, a rising senior, says, “We’ve already done so much work that will carry over to college or wherever we go next. I feel really prepared.”

For area childcare centers, the addition of the CDA certification couldn’t have come at a better time. Providers across the Monadnock Region are facing serious staffing shortages, and the need for qualified early educators continues to grow.

This enhanced curriculum, made possible through the Child Care Expansion project, aims to strengthen the pipeline from high school to careers in early childhood education. The project introduced the CDA to CCC and has already helped deepen collaboration between secondary and post-secondary education in the region.

“This is just the beginning,” says Deirdre McPartlin, Director of the Child Development Center at Keene State College. “We’ve seen these students grow, create, reflect, and now take this big step into their future. It’s inspiring, and it’s how we make a real shift in the early childhood field: by building meaningful, local connections.”

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“It’s incredible to see how many of our graduates are now working in nearly every school and childcare center in our community,” says Jennifer Antosiewicz, the Careers in Education program leader and a Keene High alum herself. The high school students she works with now have the opportunity to graduate with the qualifications to work as lead teachers, a major shift from starting in assistant roles.

“This changes what they can do,” says Alissa Tyler of Keene Day Care Center, who also went through the Career Center program in the ’90s. “In most centers, getting a CDA helps with their pay, their responsibilities, and their confidence.”

Tyler, who now trains new early educators, says the hands-on structure of the program, including a preschool located right in the high school, is what makes it so effective. “They’re definitely coming in at a different level. It’s a huge benefit to our field.”

“No matter what path you take, working with kids teaches you communication, patience, and confidence,” says Longley. “And if I ever need a summer job, I’m more qualified than most other teens.”

For Garcia, the experience also made job interviews feel less intimidating. “If you feel unsure about presenting yourself as a strong candidate, the CDA gives you a boost. It shows you’ve put in the work.”

Antosiewicz says she is thrilled by the number of students who jumped at the opportunity to pursue

their CDA. “I hope this inspires them to continue their education and stay in the field.”

The Careers in Education program is part of a larger effort to support the early childhood workforce in our region. Centers like Keene Day Care Center and Montessori Schoolhouse are eager to encourage the next generation of educators, recently participating in a job fair held right at CCC so students could explore local career opportunities. Some local colleges, including Keene State, also accept the CDA certification for credit, giving students a head start if they choose to continue their education.

MUW and Keene State College, along with childcare centers and other nonprofits in the region, are exploring even more ways to connect young people with real opportunities in the field. As this collaboration continues to grow, so does the potential to transform how we support early childhood education.



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