

Interdisciplinarity@WMU- Phase One

Proposal from the College of Education & Human Development:

Early Learning & Development Major

Brief Overview: *Provide a brief overview of the proposed interdisciplinary initiative. What types of questions would the initiative ask? What types of complex problems would it seek to solve?*

In response to recently approved Michigan Department of Education (MDE) [Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Early Childhood General and Special Education Birth through Kindergarten \(BK\)](#) as well as best practice in the field of early childhood and early intervention, the Departments of Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS), Special Education & Literacy Studies (SPLS), and Teaching, Learning and Educational Studies (TLES) propose an interdisciplinary major entitled “Early Learning & Development (ELD).” This major would prepare teacher candidates to meet the needs of the “whole child” and their family.

The Michigan Department of Education developed this certification area in acknowledgement of the importance of education and service delivery to young children and their families. By providing high quality services to our youngest children and support to their families and other care providers, we can prevent or reduce the impact of risk factors and provide positive early learning experiences that enable them to succeed in K-12 education and beyond. All graduates of the ELD major will be eligible for credentialing as early childhood education (ECE)/early childhood special education (ECSE) teachers in the state of Michigan. Graduates could pursue careers as teachers in publicly funded early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, the Great Start Readiness Program; in early childhood special education programs; or in private childcare settings.

This major will afford students three career pathways, each leading to an area of specialization within early childhood that is in high demand. These pathways are depicted in the Figure 1. The first option is designed to provide candidates with teaching certification in the MDE BK grade band as well as the MDE Preschool through grade 3 (PK3) grade band. Graduates of this pathway will be eligible to teach young children from infancy through third grade. The second option will provide candidates with the opportunity to specialize in serving children with disabilities. Students opting for this path will complete the ELD major as undergraduates and initiate a Master of Arts degree offering a special education endorsement in autism using a “4+1” model. Students selecting the third option will complete the ELD major and a family studies minor. Graduates of this path will be eligible to serve as the teachers of young children in early childhood settings. In addition, they may pursue careers as family educators, family support specialists, juvenile court workers, or home visitors for agencies such as Head Start.

Impacted units: *What existing units, programs, and colleges would be involved in the proposed initiative? What other possibilities for collaboration across campus or in the broader community might exist now or in the future?*

The primary location of the Early Learning and Development is proposed as the College of Education & Human Development (CEHD) as it will have significant (and roughly equal) contributions of three CEHD departments. As stated earlier, this program is an interdisciplinary effort between the Departments of Family & Consumer Sciences, Special Education & Literacy Studies, and Teaching, Learning and Educational Studies. The faculty committee that developed the ELD major recommend that the program be developed as an interdisciplinary major with representation and major contributions from the following programs: Early Childhood Education, Family Sciences, Special Education, and Literacy Studies. The department offering a particular pathway would assume primary responsibility for advising and mentoring students in their respective pathways, i.e., early elementary, special education, or family sciences.

Other partners include Mathematics Education and Elementary Education. Other potential university partners include the Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESOL) program, the Applied Behavior Analysis Program, Social Work, Blindness and Low Vision, and Counselor Education.

The major requires significant collaborations with the early childhood intervention and education community in order for students to complete field experiences. Teacher candidates will complete a range of practicums and internships in early childhood settings serving infants and toddlers, preschool children, and kindergarten students. Candidates will be placed in settings serving diverse student populations, including young children with disabilities, children who may be at risk, and children who are learning English as a second language. The opportunities for community partnerships are substantial and include partnerships with area educational agencies (e.g., Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency or Van Buren Intermediate School District), Head Start and Early Head Start Centers, local school districts, private and publicly funded childcare centers, and social and healthcare agencies. Community partners will provide multiple and diverse opportunities for collaboration on teacher preparation, i.e., clinical field experiences, service to the community, and both unfunded and funded research.

Impact on teaching, learning, and curricula: *Describe the anticipated impact of the proposed initiative on teaching, learning, and curricula. How might this initiative help to grow enrollment, including by reaching new audiences of learners through continuing education, dual enrollment, or professional certification? How will the proposed initiative positively impact the training of undergraduate and graduate students? How does it enhance our institutional commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion?*

WMU has long offered programs in early childhood, family sciences, and special education. *Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Early Childhood General and Special Education (Birth through Kindergarten)*, approved by the Michigan Department of Education on January 14, 2020, requires interdisciplinary preparation for teachers of young children. These standards were developed based upon best practices in the fields of early childhood education and early childhood special education (both of which have strong emphasis on family participation and collaboration) and were carefully vetted by higher education professionals, early childhood professionals, special educators,

kindergarten through grade 12 teachers, school administrators, health, mental health, and social service providers, and families of young children. In order to continue to offer teacher preparation in the area of early childhood education, it is necessary for WMU to develop and offer the Early Learning & Development major.

Historically, enrollments in early childhood, family sciences, and special education have typically been strong and consistent. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, growth rate in jobs that graduates of the ELD major might pursue are likely to see a 2-4% growth rate through 2029. These professions include [preschool teachers](#), [preschool and childcare directors](#), [early elementary teachers](#), and [special education teachers](#). Though the national growth rate in these professions ranges from slightly below average to average, at least two of these positions are on the 2020-2021 [MDE Critical Educators Shortage list](#), including elementary education teachers (including kindergarten) and special education (all subjects). Moreover, numerous reports indicate that the pandemic has resulted in [increased teacher shortages](#) as teachers and thus it is likely that demand for teachers will continue to increase.

We anticipate, based on previous student interest in early childhood professions as well as the option of the three distinct pathways allowing students to specialize in their respective areas of interest, the ELD will attract many new students to WMU. Furthermore, as noted in the MDE *Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Early Childhood General and Special Education* a key impetus for creation of these standards was to address the needs of the “whole” child and that of their families. Prospective students interested in education are likely to be aware of the importance of this focus and to seek enrollment in a program that provides it, like the one we are proposing.

The proposed initiative will benefit undergraduate students by offering them high-quality preparation to serve young children and their families. Students majoring in ELD will have the opportunity to pick a specialization in either early elementary, special education (autism) or family sciences. These pathways will differentiate WMU’s program from other universities in Michigan. Furthermore, because early childhood education and service delivery is inherently interdisciplinary, formally pulling together faculty with expertise from special education, family sciences and early childhood will provide significant resources to offer an excellent teacher preparation program. At present, we offer an undergraduate ELD major. Within the next two academic years, we will develop a graduate version of this professional preparation program.

The ELD major will support WMU’s commitment to diversity and inclusion in multiple ways. First, evidence-based practices from early childhood education, family sciences, and special education support preparation to meet the needs of diverse learners and their families. Our proposed major will include courses focusing on preparing students in culturally responsive practices. Furthermore, the ELD major will feature at least four field experiences in a plethora of early childhood settings. These experiences will be diverse and inclusive in multiple ways. First, our students will be placed in settings serving children of various ages, e.g., birth through toddlers, preschool, and kindergarten. Second, our students will have experiences in inclusive (general education settings serving students

with disabilities) preschools as well as in early childhood special education programs. Third, our placements will be selected to ensure that teacher candidates have wide exposure to children from differing socioeconomic backgrounds, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and geographic locations, as well as young children whose first language is other than English.

Impact on research and creative activity: *Describe the anticipated impact of the proposed initiative on research and creative activity. How will this initiative promote discovery and creative scholarship? How might it result in increased external funding?*

We anticipate that there will be substantial opportunities for unfunded and funded research, as well as opportunities for securing external funding for personnel preparation in these critical shortage areas. Many of the faculty from the three contributing departments have secured extramural funds to support research and personnel preparation in the past. Collaboration from these strong departments affords a foundation for continued success. To illustrate opportunities, the US Department of Education (DOE), Office of Special Education Program sponsors multiple annual funding competitions to which we could apply. For example, US DOE competition H325.K entitled *Interdisciplinary Preparation in Special Education, Early Intervention, and Related Services for Personnel Serving Children with High-Intensity Needs*, is one such competition. It supports personnel preparation in the area of interdisciplinary preparation of school professionals, including teachers of young children. Scholars at WMU have had significant success of securing funding in this competition in related areas. For example, at present the Special Education Program and the Behavior Analysis Program have a \$1.2 million dollar award to prepare behavior analysts to work with children with autism. Also, the Adapted Physical Education (PE) Program and the Special Education Program have another award to prepare adapted PE specialists and special education teachers to provide positive behavior intervention supports in schools. Although WMU has never received funding in the area of early intervention services from this competition, development of this major will afford us with the opportunity to do so, as well as to secure funds from other sources.

Efficiencies and/or cost savings: *How might the proposed initiative contribute to increased efficiencies and/or cost savings, for example by reducing administrative positions (e.g., chairs/directors), sharing staff support services and/or by sharing facilities?*

The (MDE) *Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Early Childhood General and Special Education (Birth through Kindergarten)* place a strong emphasis on preparing WMU students to meet the needs of families of young children and to collaborate with families and community agencies, such as health and mental health care providers and other social agencies. Collaborating on this major with faculty from Family Sciences at WMU provides an efficiency for WMU. Rather than requiring a faculty line from ECE or ECSE with expertise in working with families we can draw upon the expertise of our colleagues from FCS.

The College of Education & Human Development (CEHD) has considered restructuring the teacher education units into a school of education. Although not a key feature of this proposal, the

nature of this proposal may support the notion that restructuring is beneficial for the teacher education units. For example, merging TLES and SPLS may be a logical step given the need for more collaboration between early childhood, literacy studies, and special education faculty. Such a restructuring may be a way to reduce administrative positions, such as one department chair rather than two and may decrease the need for administrative staff.

Impact on course offerings and workload: *At present, proposed initiatives will only be feasible and sustainable if they can be supported by existing resources, including instructional capacity, faculty and staff time, and facilities. Will the proposed initiative streamline existing course or program offerings? Could the initiative help create more equitable and sustainable workload for faculty, for example, by reducing the need to offer under enrolled courses, reducing the frequency of course offerings or eliminating the need to teach some courses?*

At present, demand for preschool through high school teachers is high in virtually all areas, but recruitment of students into the field is a challenge. The proposed interdisciplinary major with the three distinct pathways will support existing programs at WMU, such as the autism endorsement in special education, the early elementary education major, and the family sciences minor. Students electing the ELD will add enrollment to existing courses and programs to ensure they are fully enrolled. The proposed curriculum will be built primarily by using existing courses, a few that will require minor modifications to meet the MDE standards. The exception to this being the core special education courses required for the ELD major. Presently, the WMU special education program prepares teachers for kindergarten through grade 12 instruction, offering no ECSE courses. Therefore, two ECSE courses and an internship will be developed to support the major. Though two special education faculty have expertise in early childhood special education, it will be necessary to hire an additional faculty member to offer courses for the new major and to maintain our existing special education undergraduate and graduate programs. Over the last five years, the special education program has lost four tenure-track lines, three to retirements and one faculty colleague took the position as director of the Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations. We anticipate the increased enrollment from market demand will generate revenue to support the new faculty line.

Additional Information: *What additional information would you like to provide in support of this proposal?*

In response to the new MDE standards for teacher preparation, faculty in Departments of Family & Consumer Sciences, Special Education & Literacy Studies, and Teaching, Learning and Educational Studies were charged with developing a major in this area and work on this commenced long before the Interdisciplinarity@WMU initiative was started. A committee of dedicated faculty and administrators, including Angel Gullon-Riveria and Melinda Holohan (FCS), Kate LaLonde and Kristal Ehrhardt (SPLS: special education), Lori Farrer, Ariel Anderson and Andrea Smith (TLES), Elizabeth Isidoro and Laura Teichert (SPLS: Literacy Studies), Laura Ciccantell, Director of Teacher Certification, and Regena Nelson, Marcia Feters, and Suzan Ayers (chairs of TLES, SPLS, and FCS), have spent significant time in preparation and planning of the ELD major. For more than a year, we have met weekly in large-group or sub-committee meetings developing an overall vision,

writing program objectives and student learning outcomes, developing curriculum, planning the major pathways, and selecting assessments. This has truly been both an interdisciplinary effort and a labor of love. All involved are dedicated to creating a high-quality early intervention program to meet the needs of young children and their families and to serve our community.

Contact

Kristal Ehrhardt, SPLS