
NEW MEXICO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CERTIFICATION PROGRAM PLAN

May 2015

Project of the Environmental Education Association of New Mexico

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Executive Summary

The New Mexico Environmental Education Certification Program establishes high standards for the professional qualifications of environmental educators in New Mexico. A diverse team of experienced environmental educators from across the state worked to set specific standards of knowledge, skills and experience which highly qualified environmental educators in New Mexico should be able to demonstrate.

The New Mexico Environmental Education Certification Program Advisory Committee (NMEECPAC) worked from September 2009 to April 2015 to develop the plan.

This certification process is based on competencies and experience - where the applicant will demonstrate what they know, have done and can do. The certification competencies are those from the North American Association for Environmental Education's *Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators* (NAAEE, 2004), and the *Requirements for NAAEE Accreditation of State/Provincial Certification Program* (NAAEE, 2006).

This certification program requires the candidate to have a level of mastery in EE areas that cover 6 themes: Environmental Literacy, Foundations of EE, Professional Responsibilities of the Environmental Educator, Planning and Implementing EE, Fostering Learning, and Evaluation and Assessment. Each theme includes a listing of competencies — statements of what individuals are expected to be able to demonstrate. The competencies are listed in the New Mexico EE Certification Program Self-Assessment.

The certified environmental educator will match the requirements for a nationally transferable certification. The competencies are based on the knowledge and skill levels of expert environmental educators.

Certification includes (the first-year pilot program will have an abbreviated time schedule):

1. Initial Application by April 15
2. Program Acceptance or Deferral by June 1
3. Optional Advisor Assignment
4. Initial self-assessment (used to determine professional development plan)
5. Portfolio Development and Submission by May 31 of year 2
6. Application Review by NMEECPAC
7. Notification by September 1 of year 2
8. Recertification every 5 years

The assessment mechanism for the competencies and self-assessment will be an electronic portfolio. Portfolios may include narratives, lesson plans, papers, videos, or other supporting documents. The use of portfolios was selected because of the overall flexibility for applicants and professional value.

The self-assessment, which is used initially to determine the areas of strengths and weaknesses to guide the professional development plan, is filled out again at the end of the program. It is submitted as part of the portfolio and articulates mastery of all six themes.

Applicants will have the option of working with an advisor to complete their portfolio.

A team of peer reviewers (NMEECPAC) will serve as the certifying agent for the certification program, will review applications, and approve or defer applications.

The certification will last for five years. Recertification requirements are based on ongoing professional development and reflection.

Fees are necessary to cover the cost of the administration of the program. The initial non-refundable application fee is \$20 for EEANM members and \$30 for non-members. An additional non-refundable fee of \$180 for members or \$200 for non-members will be collected when the applicant is accepted into the program.

A pilot program will be held in 2015. Frequent evaluations will inform improvements to the program.

Acknowledgements

This program is made possible through two small grants from the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), funded by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Office of Environmental Education, the Albert I Pierce Foundation, and countless volunteer hours of the planning committee.

The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the United States Environmental Protection Agency or the North American Association for Environmental Education nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

A committee of EEANM was tasked with drafting a certification program for environmental educators that is inclusive, inviting and worthwhile. This diverse group of dedicated individuals represents the interests of many sections of the EE community including public agencies, non-profit organizations, school teachers, higher education and interpretation. This committee began meeting in September 2008 to develop this plan.

Members of the program development committee:

NAME	ORGANIZATION
Barbara Garrity	EEANM
Cass Landrum	Cass Landrum
Jaye Gilmore	USDA Forest Service
Christy Tafoya	NM State Parks
Deb Thrall	Albert I Pierce Foundation
Colleen Langan-McRoberts	Bernalillo County Open Space
Kim Scheerer	BEMP
Molly Madden	Friends of Whitfield Wildlife Cons. Area
Karen Temple Beamish	Albuquerque Academy
Carolyn Nesbitt	Manzano Day School
Rink Somerday	Asombro Institute for Science Education
Ruby Estrada	NMSU
Brittney Van der Werff	Valles Caldera National Preserve

Introduction

An on-going need exists to maintain a high level of integrity and credibility when it comes to environmental education programmatic content and delivery. The quality of materials or other educational resources is inherently affected by the skill level of the educator who is using them. Some New Mexico EE providers possess an abundance of training and expertise while other practitioners require additional professional development. In addition, environmental educators come from a variety of backgrounds and may not have formal training in both the content areas (science/social studies/math/reading) and the delivery (education/communication) of EE.

The NNEECP establishes high standards for the professional qualifications of environmental educators in New Mexico. A diverse team of experienced environmental educators from across the state have set specific standards of knowledge, skills, and experience, which highly qualified environmental educators in New Mexico should be able to demonstrate.

The focus of the program is on encouraging high-quality EE and professional growth. These standards better define the environmental education profession within New Mexico, and meeting these requirements fosters the professional development of EE providers as individuals and as a professional community. Defining our profession will help build support and appreciation for the field.

The certification program is designed for those who have considerable experience in the field. Educators must meet certain minimum requirements to begin the certification program. Once admitted, each candidate works on a portfolio to demonstrate that he or she has the experience, knowledge and skills necessary for certification. Candidates for certification must also understand and agree to uphold high ethical standards in the practice of EE.

The following plan outlines both strategic and tactical processes to support a statewide system of certification for environmental educators in New Mexico. This plan is intended to be the model program the Environmental Education Association of New Mexico (EEANM) offers as a support service to members and/or constituents in the environmental education community in New Mexico.

Background

In the late 1990's, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) developed the National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education (NPEEE), which includes a five-volume set of guidelines for the best practices in EE. One of these volumes is the *Guidelines for the Preparation and Professional Development of Environmental Educators* (NAAEE 2004), a set of recommendations about the knowledge and abilities needed by educators in order to provide high quality EE. By 2001, discussions had begun among key EE leaders concerning the development of these Guidelines into a certification program for environmental educators.

Four state EE associations — Utah, Texas, Kentucky, and Georgia — began developing certification programs for environmental educators based on NAAEE's *Guidelines*. Other states then began to develop programs and certify educators. The NMEECP development committee gathered documents from all known programs and used them to gain perspective on the range of ways to structure our program. The draft accreditation document

from NAAEE was used as well to ensure that New Mexico's program would meet the requirements for national accreditation.

This foundation helped the New Mexico EE community take the next step and develop the *Guidelines* into an active certification program to set specific standards of knowledge, skills and experience highly qualified environmental educators should be able to demonstrate.

Summary of Benefits

The certification program is designed to benefit career environmental educators interested in increasing and documenting their level of professionalism and mastery of the Core Competencies outlined by NAAEE.

For Accreditation

NAAEE has developed a process whereby state EE associations can participate in a national process. The proposed certification program for New Mexico will meet the NAAEE accreditation requirements. As a part of the national program, New Mexico's certification process will:

- Increase recognition of New Mexico's program nationally
- Strengthen the credibility of New Mexico's certification program
- Enable applicants to transfer certification among states with accredited certification programs
- Allow New Mexico to continue to be a model state and to assist other states in building their models

For Environmental Educators and Employers

Candidates may include formal and non-formal educators who work in variety of capacities in the environmental education field. A certification program will:

- Professionalize the field of environmental education
- Set a baseline understanding for skills and knowledge expected of environmental educators
- Ensure best practices in environmental education
- Raise the credibility of the environmental education profession
- Broaden the community of environmental educators
- Foster professional development among environmental educators
- Help employers identify well qualified staff
- Develop common ground in a diverse and varied field
- Build a strong foundation and consistency in skills and knowledge for EE providers

Certification Program

This certification process is based on competencies and experience - where the applicant will demonstrate what they know, have done and can do.

There are several steps involved in receiving certification, including:

1. Initial Application
2. Program Acceptance or Deferral
3. Optional Advisor Assignment
4. Candidate Self-Assessment
5. Portfolio Development and Submission
6. Application Review by NMEECPAC
7. Notification
8. Recertification

An NMEECP guide and checklist will be provided on the EEANM website for the candidate to understand the process and what is expected for a successful application. If applicants need more than the allotted 12 months to complete a portfolio, the application can be extended for an additional six months upon email request.

The certification program is open to all who meet the minimum eligibility requirements regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, socio-economic background, political affiliation, age or sexual orientation.

Initial Application and Self-Assessment

The applicant must submit an initial application, resume, and signed Ethics document by April 15 of each year. The NMEECPAC will determine whether the applicant is ready to enter the program or should further develop their EE experiences, knowledge and skills. It will accept or defer the application.

Candidates not yet ready to enter the program will receive specific feedback, examples for improvement and information about available resources to encourage them to continue working toward certification. Applicants will receive admission notification by June 1. If deferred, they may reapply after one year.

If accepted, candidates will pay the associated fees (\$180 members, \$200 non-members). They will have the option of being matched with an advisor and then complete a self-assessment to determine their strengths and weaknesses as an environmental educator. The self-assessment will list the competencies and contain the scoring rubrics. The candidate will work with their advisor to create a professional development plan to address areas of weakness.

Optional Advisor Assignment

Candidates have the option of working with an advisor to complete a portfolio exhibiting competency in all certification areas. Advisors will help candidates produce an effective portfolio providing sufficient evidence for certification. It is expected that NMEECPAC members and Certified Environmental Educators will serve as advisors.

Portfolio Development and Demonstrating Competency

Candidates will provide an electronic portfolio of experience in the field of EE. These experiences will be only those closely related to EE such as those jobs, volunteer positions, presentations, courses or other occurrences that have given the candidate's knowledge in the theory and practice of EE.

Each portfolio may include:

- Articles
- Brochures
- Case studies
- Third party observation evaluation
- Documentation and records
- Evaluation tools and results
- Essays
- Examples from experience
- Completed products
- Lesson plans/activity outlines
- Letters of recommendation
- Narratives
- Papers or other supporting documents
- Proof of coursework
- Publications
- Reading reflections
- Records of recent projects, assignments or excerpts from work diary
- Report from colleagues, advisor, or managers
- Research
- Resume
- Review of lesson plans/activity outlines
- Special assignments devised by advisor and candidate
- Transcripts
- Visuals (video, photos)
- Workshop certificates

Each submitted document should list the competencies that it is intended to address and terms and language used must be self-explanatory or properly explained. For example, if a workshop is used as a piece of evidence, a description of how it meets the competency should also be included.

The response mechanisms are flexible meaning that candidates can use any item from past experience to demonstrate a competency (including a description of how the item meets the competency).

Successful candidates will demonstrate that:

- All evidence is *valid*. Valid evidence relates directly to, and is appropriate for, the standard that is being assessed and its associated performance criteria.

- There must be sufficient evidence on which to make a judgment. (For example, knowing one teaching method is not enough to show competency under theme 4's "understands various teaching methods and strategies.")
- Evidence is authentic, that is belonging to the candidate. If the evidence was part of a group effort, the candidate's individual contributions need to be considered instead of the end product.

Submission of Final Application

The candidate will submit their electronic portfolio and updated resume (if needed) by May 31 of the following year.

Application Review

The NMEECPAC, composed of Certified Environmental Educators, will review each portfolio and score level of mastery of each competency. Competencies will be evaluated by any three members of the NMEECPAC. There must be consensus among reviewers for each candidate.

Notification

Certification will be confirmed or deferred in writing from the NMEECPAC no later than September 1 of year 2. If a candidate does not meet the requirements for certification, the candidate may reapply after one year from the date of deferral. All fees will be charged for a second application.

Recognition

Newly certified environmental educators will be formally recognized via:

- Ribbons on nametags at conference/special events
- Announcements in the EEANM newsletter
- Postings on the EEANM website
- Certificates presented to applicants
- Recognition at the EEANM annual meeting

Certification Management and Coordination

The NMEECPAC and EEANM staff will operate the certification program. EEANM will provide a staff member to handle daily administration of the program including marketing, communications, funding, etc. Clear, accurate, and secure records of applications and certified educators are essential.

The Certification Coordinator will develop a system to track and evaluate reviewer performance.

New Mexico Environmental Education Program Advisory Committee (NMEECPAC)

Individuals appointed to the NMEECPAC must exemplify high standards of professional judgment, competence and integrity. The NMEECPAC has the sole authority to confer certification. Commitments for the NMEECPAC will be two-year terms. Initial members of the NMEECPAC will be approved by the EEANM Board of Directors and then become self-determining.

Those who have been involved in the development of the New Mexico EE Certification Program will be requested to serve as the first reviewers for certification of the pilot program candidates on the NMEECPAC. Thereafter, the NMEECPAC will be constituted from certified environmental educators.

Members of the NMEECPAC:

- Serve in an advisory capacity to guide the certification program
- Receive and review quarterly communications from the Certification Coordinator about the program
- Meet at least annually in-person or by phone to discuss certification program progress, challenges, changes or other issues
- Review grievances from participants
- Self-evaluate and make improvements to program and processes
- Serve as the certifying agent for the certification program
- Review applications and approve or reject applications
- Are certified environmental educators
- Complete reviewer training
- Have five years combined education or experience in environmental education or closely related field.

An NMEECPAC job description form is required from each volunteer and will be kept on file. The NMEECPAC will be selected entirely on a nondiscriminatory basis with respect to age, race, color, ethnic background, creed, disability, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, marital status, military status, political affiliation, religion or socio-economic status. The form will include:

- Basic contact information (organization, address, phone, email, etc.)
- Expertise
- Education
- Location
- Qualifications
- Time available to review
- Code of Ethics
- Conflict of interest statement

Ideally, the NMEECPAC will include representation from:

- EEANM
- the formal education community
- a graduate from a recognized EE certification program
- a federal or state/provincial natural resource agency
- an environmental education non-profit organization,
- a higher education institution
- a business or industry
- an environmental NGO

Candidate Review Parameters

The review team of NMEECPAC members is defined by the following criteria:

- Each team consists of three trained peer reviewers per application.
- Team members have diverse backgrounds and mixed expertise.
- Reviewers will not communicate with one another regarding a review until his/her review is complete and then only to resolve a discrepancy.

- Each team member reviews the submission for all competencies.
- Reviewers will assess if a competency is addressed based on the rubrics.
- Reviewers will not be identified with a specific application.

Support Considerations

Applicant Training

EEANM will host trainings to assist educators in understanding the certification process and identify the gaps in their experience where they do not meet the competencies. Workshop emphasis will be on certification process details and skills and knowledge of master level environmental educators. The goal of this basic certification workshop will be to give participants a working familiarity with the competencies and instruct them in using these guidelines to develop a portfolio. This training is for anyone interested in certification, including applicants and reviewers.

The Certification Coordinator and the Advisor will assist candidates in finding appropriate professional development opportunities that address core competencies.

Reviewer Training

Training is a very important aspect of this process and will directly affect the quality and consistency of reviews. Each peer reviewer must have a working knowledge of the competencies and participate in a reviewer webinar.

The goal of the reviewer webinar will be to reduce the variability and subjectivity among reviewers. This creates a pool of individuals capable of producing more consistent reviews of a professional quality. Reviewers will be trained in the competencies and rubrics, as well as the scope of the certification process. As part of the reviewer workshop, participants will conduct a test review (to assure some degree of standardization) and will be trained on how to recognize components. Reviewers will also be encouraged to state their rationale through comments.

If a reviewer does not complete three reviews in one year, training may be necessary to re-familiarize the reviewer with the process. In addition, the Certification Coordinator may assign more than three reviewers to a submission to ensure that newly-trained reviewers have something to review within the first year of training.

Pilot Design

A pilot program will test the practical application of the Certification Program as detailed in this plan. The pilot will be open to any educator who wants to develop a portfolio; and the committee will seek no less than 3 and no more than 10 applicants. If possible, applicants will represent diverse backgrounds in environmental education (teacher, nonprofit educator, etc.).

It is expected that those who participate in the pilot program will be the first certified environmental educators in New Mexico. Pilot applicants will be asked to commit to the evaluation of the process and to be a part of a focus group to assisting the committee in continually improving the program. The pilot will help evaluate if the certification program effectively identifies quality environmental educators in New Mexico and if the certification program is valuable to participants.

The pilot program will be announced via EcoEd Listserve, EEANM's website (www.eeanm.org), and via our partners' distribution lists. Interested pilot participants may apply for admittance to the program by August 15, 2015. Accepted candidates will be notified by September 30, 2015. They will be required to submit portfolios by August 15, 2016. The NMEECPAC will meet then to review portfolios and hold focus group discussions with the applicants. The first group of NM EE-certified educators will be announced by December 1, 2016.

Where to Apply

Applications will be submitted online at www.eeanm.org/ee-certification/application. An acknowledgement of receipt will be emailed immediately after submission.

Program Records

A centralized, confidential system of record keeping will be maintained by EEANM. Applicant records will be kept for a period of at least ten years and will consist of each applicant's application, portfolio, completed scoring tools and self-assessment.

Appeal Process

Applicants will have the opportunity to appeal any decision made by the NMEECPAC. Appeals will be submitted via the Appeal Form via email within 6 weeks of the decision. The NMEECPAC will review the appeal and issue a final decision within 6 weeks of receipt of the appeal.

Recertification

Recertification must be initiated by candidates between 3 months prior and 6 months after the expiration date of their original certification. The official date of renewal will be 5 years from the date of the original certification, so there is no benefit or detriment whether the recertification occurs before or after the date, but must occur within that 9 month window. If certification lapses beyond the 6 month grace period, the certification process must be started again from the beginning.

Cost of recertification will be \$50 (member) or \$65 (non-member).

Certified environmental educators will record professional development activities including attending advisor training, the advising of a candidate, and attending and presenting at conferences, trainings, courses or workshops.

To be recertified, the applicant will fill out the Recertification Application and submit a list of professional development activities with the name of the event, date, number of hours and signature. In addition, the applicant will provide evidence of continuing education in the Core Competencies of NAAEE.

Reciprocity of EE Certification

Reciprocity of EE Certification is granted to applicants who have received certification from NAAEE accredited state programs, with evidence of familiarity with New Mexico ecology and environmental issues. Applicants will provide evidence of their involvement in New Mexico environmental education, knowledge of the bioregions of New Mexico, familiarity with 5 community EE resources and what they provide and two local environmental issues.

Website

The EEANM website (<http://www.eeanm.org>) supports the web pages relevant to EEANM and its members. The site will include an area for the certification program. General public pages will post basic information about the certification program including process development, competencies, and NMEECPAC requirements. The applicant page will include the instructions, deadlines, initial application, self-assessment, and program guidelines.

Finances and Fiscal Management

The intent is that this program be financially self-sustaining, periodically supplemented with grant funding. The EEANM Board will assess the value to the organization and the priority of providing this service with regard to other support services (e.g., annual conference, awards program, etc.). In addition to funding considerations, user demand/interest and management, the board will also consider implications of timing and proactive leadership in determining the start-up and long-term viability of this project.

The goals for the certification program include 5 applicants in first year, with an additional 1-3 people per year (Yr 2=7, Yr 3=9, Yr 4= 11, Yr 5=13) to total 45 certified educators by the end of year five. As the program grows, EEANM may need to hire staff to handle the time commitment.

Estimated time and expense for the program in the first year:

Administration Requirements – 5 hours/ applicant

- 1 hour – analyze complete application and organize review panel
- 1 hour – answer applicant questions and pair with advisor
- 3 hours – finalize review from panel for applicant

General Administrative Support (year 1) – 25 hours

- Marketing Materials and Dissemination – 20 hours
- Volunteer Coordination – 2 hours/year
- Advisory Board Coordination – 3 hours/year

General Overhead Costs

Phone, web and email hosting, rent, supplies, postage, recognition items, and display items
Estimated: \$400/year

NAAEE Accreditation Costs

Currently, the first year's fees to NAAEE are \$1250 and \$250 for each subsequent.

*Total hrs/yr: 50 @ \$20/hour = \$1000 (5 applicants) **Total Cost for 5 applicants = \$2650***

This program depends significantly on volunteers to contribute their time and energy. Reviewers will likely spend at least 4 hours per application as follows:

- 3 hours to review application and comment
- 1 hour – communication with EEANM/other reviewers
- Other – advisor time

Certification Fees

Fees are necessary to cover the cost of the administration of this program. Grants and other funding sources will be sought to provide scholarships (up to ten per year) to ensure that fees do not exclude eligible participants from this process.

Initial Application Fee: \$20 members, \$30 non-members

Reciprocity Application Fee: \$20 members, \$30 non-members

Certification Application Fee: \$180, \$200 non-members

Recertification Fee: \$50

If a candidate does not meet the requirements for certification, the candidate may reapply after one year from the date of deferral. All fees will be charged for a second application.

State-National Relationship

This program is intended to meet the *Requirements for NAAEE Accreditation of State/Provincial Certification Program* (NAAEE, March 2006). EEANM will apply for accreditation from NAAEE after completion of the pilot program. This accreditation program for state certification programs will create a system of reciprocity among the states (certified educators will receive national certification which will be transferable among states with accredited certification programs).

Program Marketing

The program will be marketed as a professional development opportunity for EE professionals and is defined as an optional program where the decision to participate is the choice of the applicant.

A marketing plan will:

- create ownership in the EE provider community for the certification program;
- recruit applicants and reviewers to be part of the program;
- create a demand by employers and other decision makers for the program;
- inform New Mexico decision makers that the certification program professionalizes the EE field.

Initially, large organizations employing several environmental educators will be targeted to create momentum and participation.

A certification program does not immediately result in quality programs and/or buy in from every park, organization or agency in the state. Professional EE certification takes time to develop and implement. It also requires that organizations such as EEANM educate communities about the value of certified professionals. A quality certification program which measurably increases knowledge and decreases risk will, over time, influence organizations to adopt the standards and require certified staff members.

The program will be marketed by the following means:

- EEANM's website will be the main information portal.
- EcoEd Listserve
- Email
- Conference presentations
- Word of mouth

Evaluation

Evaluation of certification processes will be assessed regularly and findings used to improve the program. Several different forms of evaluation will be used to determine the success of the certification program. Quantitative and qualitative data will be collected and used to evaluate on-going performance of specific aspects of the process:

- Monthly, technical data regarding the number of hits to the certification website will be collected. This information will be tracked and evaluated for trends and evidence of the success of marketing or recruitment efforts.
- Surveys will be developed to request that applicants, reviewers and employers evaluate the ease of use of the application and review process. Data from these surveys will be tracked and evaluated to help determine the program value.
- The Certification Coordinator will develop a system to track and evaluate reviewer performance.
- An applicant database will be maintained to track themes and competencies that are missing from applications so that a recommendation be developed to address the needs of the EE community.

EEANM staff and board along with the NMEECPAC, will periodically assess the “big picture” of the certification program. They will answer the following key questions prior to project implementation, and again annually as an ongoing project evaluation.

Sustainability

Is the program fiscally sustainable?

Is the fee structure correct?

Is the program creating results that have a positive impact on New Mexico’s EE community?

Does the cost/benefit analysis support the continuation of the program?

Is the marketing plan being followed? Is it effective?

Is there a greater degree of confidence in EE demonstrated by the public (targeted audiences)?

Usefulness

What is the demand from Program Managers to have their employees certified?

Is the Self-Assessment process creating high quality applications?

Is there a demonstrated increase in demand for professional development training?

Do applicants value certification?

Reviewers

Is the pool of reviewers adequate in number, expertise, quality of participation?

Is the act of reviewing a valuable professional development experience?

Training — What is the level of confidence demonstrated by the reviewers?

Performance — Are the reviewers providing consistent, judicious reviews?