

## Caring for the Caregivers: Supporting the Mental Health and Well-Being of the Early Childhood Workforce During a Global Pandemic

*Educare Policy Workgroup Think Tank – Key Findings*

November 2020

### BACKGROUND

Educare and other early childhood system and policy leaders from around the country recently gathered for a virtual conversation hosted by the Educare Policy Workgroup (EPWG) about the most pressing issues impacting the early childhood workforce. EPWG Think Tank participants engaged in dialogue for the purpose of elevating shared challenges, effective strategies and potential policy solutions and actions designed to illuminate and address concerns about staff mental health and well-being.

### CRITICAL WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

Staff in early childhood programs engage in complex work teaching and caring for young children, but often do so under strained resources, challenging conditions and inadequate investments which are further highlighted by the pandemic. “The way we have subsidized the system on the backs of our educators is finally coming into the bright light. The resilience of the early childhood workforce is inspiring, but they can only shoulder so much,” noted a Think Tank participant.

Workforce challenges are not a new policy issue in early childhood service provision. From shortages of qualified staff to employee retention and secondary trauma, workforce issues span the early care and education system. Strains on the system brought on by what Lonnie Bunch, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, calls “the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic and structural racism” have exacerbated these challenges and dramatically increased the percentage of staff experiencing primary and secondary trauma, burnout and compassion fatigue. As such, EPWG Think Tank participants were asked to share what they see as the biggest challenges impacting the early childhood workforce right now and how these issues relate to staff mental health and well-being. Critical issues elevated through the subsequent dialogue are described below.

### Mixed Messages About the Value of the Early Childhood Workforce

Think Tank participants described a palpable and contradictory shift from the onset of the pandemic when the early childhood workforce was lauded as a tremendously valuable community resource to the more current view as a support to enable parents to return to work. These mixed messages extend into significant discrepancies between public support expressed and resources extended to the K-12 workforce when compared to the early childhood workforce not connected to a public school system. However, participants also discussed a [recent poll](#) conducted by the First Five Years Fund that indicated a significant majority of voters in swing states were most concerned with young children not experiencing the academic and social benefits of a high quality early learning experience rather than the argument associated with parents returning to work. Think Tank participants discussed the tension between voters wanting necessary early childhood supports for children and families and the lack of commitment from decision-makers.



“You’re essential, but we aren’t treating you as if you are essential. We are treating you as somewhat disposal based on broader policy decisions being made.”

–Think Tank participant

## Work-Life Imbalance and Insufficient Employment Supports

In addition to pervasive issues of low wages and lack of adequate health care, early childhood professionals are having to balance their job responsibility of caring for the children of others while also being available to care and support their own children. Think Tank participants also reported increased staff anxiety about risks to their own well-being and that of their family relative to caring for children during a pandemic. A [recent survey](#) of early childhood professional conducted by Bank Street College of Education further illustrates the issues of work-life imbalance compounded by insufficient supports affecting the early childhood workforce.

## Job Insecurity

Implementing COVID-era health and safety precautions includes lowering the number of students and staff in each classroom. Think Tank participants cited serious financial barriers to simultaneously reducing ratios and offering both in person and virtual programming to meet family needs. Staff concerns around potential downsizing, layoffs, and program funding adds another layer of anxiety to an already taxed workforce. Early childhood professionals understand that these additional pandemic-related costs are not sustainable over time.



“I have staff asking every day if we are closing.”  
-Think Tank participant



## Glaring Inconsistencies Across Educational Continuum

Numerous Think Tank participants expressed frustration with failed attempts to take cues from neighboring K-12 systems. Inconsistent recommendations and guidance around things like HIPPA, ratios and scheduling combined with gaps in information around epidemiological trends, leave early childhood programs to fend for themselves instead of adopting aligned best practices with their K-12 partners. This lack of scheduling alignment also directly contributes to workforce issues because when public schools plan to start allowing children in classrooms impacts early childhood staff who have children enrolled in those schools.

## Staffing Strained by Service Delivery Modifications

Like other industries hit hard by the pandemic, operationalizing adequate and safe staffing of early childhood programming has proved extremely challenging. Some of the key pain points identified by Think Tank participants include:

- Replacing staff who have left
- Need for both virtual teachers and on-site teachers
- Accommodating teacher availability which varies from fully in-person to completely virtual to out on leave
- Movement management relative to disease containment impacts staffing including specialists (speech, hearing, etc.)
- Low morale among non-teaching staff
- Lack of substitutes causing programming cancellations.

## Challenges with Virtual Engagement

Similar to K-12 systems, early childhood programs and staff continue to experience difficulty with offering adequate and accessible virtual programming for children and families not able and/or willing to participate onsite. Think Tank participants described the critical challenges as:

- Inconsistent availability of adults to support children with virtual learning at home
- Technology/IT issues for both teachers and families
- Family conflicts with scheduling associated with virtual learning
- Multiple barriers contributing to equity issues for families with greatest needs.

Conversely, many early childhood professionals delivering virtual programming and in-person programming also bear responsibility for supporting their own children with virtual learning (PK-12). These competing priorities cause issues with both staff mental health and availability.

“We have 9 additional staff out on the CARES Act because they have to support virtual learning happening in their homes.”  
-Think Tank participant



In addition to negatively impacting teaching and learning, Think Tank participants described an intangible negative impact of virtual engagement on staff mental health and morale related to the lack of human contact. Similar to other industries, but perhaps more important among early childhood professionals, is an increasing struggle with the loss of interpersonal interactions with children, families and colleagues. Program leaders underscored the loss of human contact with young children in service to their growth and development as a critical obstacle to their ability to retain staff.

## Compounding Trauma

Many Think Tank participants represented programs in large and diverse communities and with service populations disproportionately impacted by the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic and ongoing racism. As such, participants spoke about early childhood professionals more likely to have lost loved ones due to the pandemic or to escalating violence, or both. Although systemic racism and violence may have negatively impacted staff mental health prior to the pandemic, this trauma is now layered with pervasive fears about returning to work due to health and safety concerns. As a result, Educare leaders also described difficulties with co-regulation in relationships between traumatized children and families and traumatized faculty and staff.

## IMPACT OF WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

The early childhood workforce continues to be impacted by the pandemic in the same ways parents and the nation at-large have been impacted. However, the challenges shared by EPWG Think Tank participants provides a more nuanced picture of the multi-faceted issues facing an early childhood workforce so critical to our nation’s economic and educational success. Participants articulated the most significant impacts of these workforce challenges as follows.

### Impact on Mental Health and Well-Being

Each of the individual challenges described in the previous section has the potential to negatively influence the mental health and well-being of early childhood teachers and caregivers. As a combined force, their negative impact has and will continue to prove unsustainable for many early childhood professionals. Overall, Think Tank participants described ongoing organizational efforts to address escalating levels of stress negatively impacting the mental health of early childhood professionals.

### Impact on Turnover and Retention

Think Tank participants reiterated the harsh reality of the numerous challenges facing the early childhood workforce prior to 2020. Insufficient compensation, unmet professional development needs, and resulting high turnover has plagued the field since its inception. With a teaching workforce that has experienced little support for decades, the early childhood field is extremely vulnerable to the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, given the low compensation rates among Infant/Toddler educators, the proposition of this work when weighed against the physical risk and emotional toll is simply not worth it for current and prospective staff.



Given the extent of current stressors, uncertainty, and safety concerns, Educare leaders reported having multiple staff on leave or who have resigned. Additional leaders held serious concerns about staff retention and cited significant issues with filling vacancies with teachers with the required credentials. As one Think Tank participant stated, “We are experiencing an undermining of the very delicate and patchwork system of early learning and care. If a teacher goes on leave or resigns, they may not be willing to come back because they can easily find another job that provides less risk and better medical insurance.”

### Impact on Quality

Both early childhood research and best practice demonstrate the critical role that positive relationships with consistent, caring adults play in optimal early development. With highly qualified teachers and high standards for partnering with families, Educare Schools prioritize fostering positive child-adult relationships. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, some Think Tank participants noted observable declines since the pandemic started in their teachers’ abilities to maintain positive interactions with children exhibiting challenging behaviors –even with smaller adult-child ratios in place. Program administrators expressed serious concerns about compounding stressors for both teachers and the children in their care and how it is impacting their ability to engage in positive interactions and relationships.



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–Think Tank participant

## SHARED STRATEGIES

While the Think Tank dialogue surfaced a multitude of complex and serious challenges currently impacting the early childhood workforce, participants also shared strategies for addressing some of the issues at the program level.

### Create Joy

As the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic continues to wear on staff and families, program leaders emphasized the importance of creating joy and contributed ideas for creating it:

- Play music at arrival and departure times
- Share positive stories about what is happening with children, families, or staff
- Keep systems and structures as normal as possible
- Build in reflective experiences
- Offer weekly coffee time, all school meetings, and daily check-ins
- Integrate Gratitude, Congratulations and Kudos (GCKs)
- Share successes.



### Leverage New Strengths

Participants also identified elements of early childhood programming that has improved as a result of their pandemic response. These areas of strength could be leveraged to address some of the ongoing challenges.

- Enhanced health and safety protocols (health check system, handwashing, cleaning)
- Prioritization of staff mental health and well-being
- Improved engagement with families
- Increased sense of collective responsibility and trust among staff

### Expand Staff Mental Health Supports

With the compounding stressors negatively impacting early childhood professionals, Think Tank participants underscored the critical importance of expanding efforts to support staff mental health and well-being. Strategies discussed included both supports that have been implemented and those under consideration.

- Weekly or bi-weekly reflective consultations sessions to process both personal and professional issues
- Utilization of mindfulness app
- Assistance with setting up separate home workspace
- Host drive-through pickup of goodie bags
- Incorporate fun (agency-wide TikTok video)
- Share self-care strategies in every staff communication
- On-site wellness space for meditation, mindfulness, prayer
- Contract with mental health therapist for group reflection and/or individual reflective supervision
- Daily mindfulness exercises facilitated by community partner
- Encourage utilization of EAP supports
- Behavioral health staff provide therapy for students and reflective supervision and coaching to staff
- Have an established mechanism or place for staff to safely share their concerns and receive support
- Ensure employees feel valued and supported
- Provide training around trauma, racial inequities and secondary traumatic stress

## Address Equity Issues and Concerns Related to Current Events

Think Tank participants also offered strategies for acknowledging and addressing workforce issues related to equity and/or staff processing of current events.

- Provide additional training on DEI, conscious discipline and trauma-informed care
- Facilitate shared reading of different articles with small group discussion
- Distribute books with diverse characters for classrooms and home libraries
- Develop classroom/home activities that foster positive self-image
- Utilize mental health consultants
- Agency-wide DEI initiatives
- Host inter-race dialogues and affinity groups
- Utilize coaches with expertise in supporting dialogues around race and diversity
- Ensure program/agency pandemic response team led by and heavily representative of those who provide direct service

## Support Staff and Family Use of Technology

With the shift to virtual and hybrid programming, varying levels of comfort and skill relative to technology among the adults supporting young children’s learning have become a growing concern. Think Tank participants identified specific strategies that have proved effective in fostering competency and skill with virtual programming and technology.

- Deploy devices (laptops, iPads) and the necessary connections (WiFi, hot spot/s) for staff who do not have technology and connectivity at home
- Provide WiFi-enabled tablets for students/families to be able to access services
- Send documentation to parents via email/text through apps (COR/HighScope, TSG, etc.)
- Utilize Remind app to routinely send captioned pictures to parents of their children actively engaged in an activity
- Send supplies (i.e. musical instruments) home with students and facilitate a virtual group activity (music gathering)

## Deploy Flexible Staffing Models

Meeting the different needs of students, families, and staff in the era of COVID-19 has required creative, flexible and innovative staffing that prioritizes health and safety. Various models and strategies have proven effective and were shared by Think Tank participants.

- Maintain separate staff for virtual learning and for in-person learning
- Distinct (5-teacher) teams for each classroom with 2 teachers on-call each week (on-call teachers provide support for enrolled families as well as their co-teachers, while serving as subs for that team)
- Staff who cannot return onsite due to family or medical reasons provide virtual programming
- Alternate in-person model of 10 humans in each room (8 children and 2 teachers)



## **POLICY & SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite the innovative and responsive measures taken at the program level to address the multitude of challenges facing the early childhood workforce, additional investments and policies must be realized at the system and policy level to sufficiently mitigate the negative impacts on staff, students and families. EPWG Think Tank participants collaboratively generated recommendations for both the Educare Learning Network and for the broader early childhood system.

### **Recommendations for Broader System and/or Policy Efforts**

- + Prioritize workforce challenges with a racial equity lens, including supporting staff mental health and well-being, across child care and early education system policy and investments
- + Advocate for investment in technology grants for early childhood programs on a statewide level to increase family and staff access to necessary equipment and connectivity
- + Establish state early childhood workforce wellbeing committee or task force
- + Include mental health supports for the early childhood field and/or the essential workforce in future COVID stimulus bill

### **Recommendations for the Educare Learning Network**

- + Continue to host conversations and create community to help address challenges across the field through collective efforts and partnerships
- + Develop and disseminate guidance around adapting Educare Model elements to a virtual format (coaching, assessment, LEPs, etc.)
- + Implement common metrics and data collection across Network partners relative to human resources and staffing, utilization of paid sick leave and CARES leave, impact of COVID testing delays on program, mental health/staff stressors
- + Power map interactions and partnerships occurring across the network
- + Operationalize story telling campaign that highlights the challenges and growing inequities facing young children, their families and the early childhood professionals who support them (including resource comparisons across policies and resources supporting child care, Head Start, and K-12; call out of racial disparities and impacts on historically under-resourced communities; impacts on broader system)
- + Increase alignment between workforce challenges and local evaluation partner (LEP) scope of work including data collection on mental health and well-being, staff supports, etc.; utilize data in storytelling efforts
- + Incorporate relevant recommendations into EPWG letter to the Office of Head Start including advocacy for reduced enrollment without loss of funds and increased funding for staff mental health and supports
- + Engage with state system leaders and in broader child care system conversations to ensure representation of Network perspective and priorities
- + Initiate collective action effort with Start Early/EPWG, NAEYC, ZTT and NHSA to bridge what field is experiencing with state and federal policy priorities
- + Develop and utilize consistent bi-partisan messaging that can function at the local, state and federal levels

## POTENTIAL ADVOCACY/ ACTION STEPS FOR LEADERS + ORGANIZATIONS

- + Connect with your state child care administrator or state systems leaders about workforce challenges
- + Engage with your state Head Start association around related topics
- + Schedule regular calls with your regional Head Start manager
- + Engage with the Educare Policy Workgroup
- + Participate in ongoing dialogue and resource sharing specific to these issues via the [Early Childhood Connector](#)
- + Reach out to Think Tank participants below for additional discussion and/or resource sharing

## THINK TANK PARTICIPANTS

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## THINK TANK BACKGROUND RESOURCES

[The Physical and Mental Health of Head Start Staff: The Pennsylvania Head Start Staff Wellness Survey, 2012](#)

[Is Child Care Safe and School Isn't? Ask An Early Educator](#)

[Your Surge Capacity is Depleted – It's Why You Feel Awful](#)

['It Makes Us Better Teachers Because We're Not Carrying It Inside': How a Detroit Preschool Helps Teachers](#)

[Cope with the Stress of the Job](#)

[Black Communities on the Frontlines: The Inequality Crisis and COVID](#)

[Teachers Are Living in a Tinderbox of Stressful Conditions. These Scientific Approaches Can Help](#)

## RESOURCES SHARED BY PARTICIPANTS

[First Five Years Fund 2020 National Poll Results](#)

[A Video Tribute to COVID-19 Heroes](#)

[Facilitating Attuned Interactions, Erikson Institute](#)

[Virtual Vitality Tip Sheet, Design 4 Learning, Advancing Health Equity](#)

[Report: "Who Will Care for the Early Care and Education Workforce?", Bank Street College of Education](#)