EDUCARE INSIGHTS SNAPSHOT:

Teaching and Learning with Young Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lessons from Educare Learning Network Schools and Staff

The purpose of this snapshot is to offer a window into the experiences and responses of our network of high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs, staff, and families and to share strategies, challenges, and lessons learned. We seek to showcase the ECCE workforce's commitment, resilience, and ingenuity and motivate continued creative problem solving and improvement among ECCE practitioners, systems leaders, and their partners.

Overall Network Experience of the Pandemic & Systemic Inequities

In early to mid-March 2020, most Educare schools across the Network closed in-person program operations and began providing services and supports remotely. However, because Educare schools span several different states, each school navigated different sets of local restrictions and guidelines and different rates of COVID-19 infections. Many of the communities in which Educare schools operate have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, highlighting both racial and economic inequities such as lack of access to health care. Moreover, communities of color and workers earning low wages have increased risk of COVID-19 exposure as they are overrepresented in essential occupations; this includes the early care and education workforce, in which women of color make up over 40% of early childhood

Data Utilization	Embedded Professional Development
High-Quality Teaching Practices	Intensive Family Engagement

What is Educare?

Educare schools provide full-day, year-round early care and education for children from six weeks to five years of age and their families from underserved communities. There are currently 25 operating Educare schools in diverse communities across the country, serving nearly 4,000 children and guiding the professional development for over 2,000 early childhood professionals in those schools. Educare schools are Early Head Start, Head Start, and/or public Pre-K providers. All Educare schools leverage public-private partnerships, bringing together local school districts, philanthropic organizations, researchers, policymakers, and families. These dynamic partnerships comprise the Educare Learning Network.

Educare's comprehensive model is grounded in research and includes four core features: **1)** data utilization; **2)** embedded professional development; **3)** high-quality teaching practices; and **4)** intensive family engagement. In the context of strong leadership and community partner linkages, these features aim to enhance achievement and overall well-being among Educare children and families.

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professionals[1]. A leader at a majority-Black Educare school underscored Educare's role in responding to the needs of Educare children and families: "given the disproportionate effects of the pandemic, [the Educare Learning Network and the broader ECCE system] are focused on creating opportunities, mitigating the impact of poverty, and empowering under-resourced communities and individuals that are experiencing inequities related to COVID-19."

Despite facing elevated risks of exposure, Educare school staff serve as crucial frontline workers themselves, in many cases helping families in essential occupations and teaching and caring for their young children. Some schools reopened earlier to serve children of essential workers, while other schools reopened to in-person instruction and supports gradually or at a reduced capacity or provided a mix of in-person and remote services. Over time, some Educare schools have returned to full enrollment capacity, but many have had reduced enrollment or needed to close and reopen individual classrooms and entire schools as positive cases were confirmed. In response to these changes and challenges, Educare leaders and staff continued to provide support and services to young children, their families, and the workforce. Throughout the pandemic, Educare schools – like many others – have had to reimagine and reinvent what ECCE practices look like and learn how to operate programs and provide support safely and effectively during a public health crisis.

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[1] McLean, C., Austin, L.J.E., Whitebook, M., & Olson, K.L. (2021). *Early Childhood Workforce Index – 2020.* Retrieved from https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/report-pdf/

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Sample, Data, and Methods

In the late spring and summer of 2020, local evaluation partners from 18 Educare schools conducted a series of virtual individual and group interviews with school leaders and staff in various roles at each site including executive and school directors, education coaches and master teachers, family engagement managers, and some classroom teachers and family engagement staff. Data collected from these staff interviews underwent qualitative analyses to identify common themes across sites and flag illustrative examples and quotes.

Focal Practice Area: High Quality Teaching Practices

One of the four core features of the Educare Model is High-Quality Teaching Practices. This pillar includes both structural and process components that comprise high-quality early learning environments for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and represent aspects that are important to provide the best care and early education for all children, especially those from challenging family environments:

- Full-day, full-year services
- High staff-child ratios and small class sizes
- Continuity of care
- Research-based curriculum
- High-quality teaching practices across all developmental domains
- Positive relationships

Educare Schools' Approaches to Teaching & Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

THEME 1:
Developing a Virtual/Remote Learning Approach.

When Educare schools across the Network closed to in-person learning and care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Educare staff needed to develop virtual teaching processes and programming from the ground up. As soon as schools closed, Educare teachers directly supported students' learning and development through virtual programming multiple times a week. Standards and processes for remote learning for young children have yet to be established in the broader ECCE field, and Educare staff discovered that supporting young children's learning in a virtual environment required them to use a wide range of platforms and strategies. Many of these virtual strategies involved supporting and encouraging caregivers to implement specific activities or lessons at home with children. Educare West DuPage reported that staff "shared their own activities at home, such as cooking and doing yoga, which helped with engagement and seeing staff as people." Teachers also provided instructional videos, written lesson plans, activity packets, materials with instructions, and learning websites, and they arranged for children to participate in live online sessions.

■ **Challenge & Success:** Increased demand for families to support/facilitate children's learning.

When schools began to close, teachers relied on parents to replicate the classroom experience at home and lead virtual instruction to the best of their abilities. To support parents in this added responsibility, Educare teachers provided families with a variety of resources, information, and supports and helped parents participate in children's remote learning experiences. As a result, family engagement and caregivers' participation in children's learning and development became a key ingredient to virtual teaching success. Nonetheless, this shift challenged many families as they juggled work and other responsibilities. As teachers developed strategies for supporting parents as teachers, it became clear that effective remote teaching required the distribution of a large amount of resources and information to families. Educare staff recognized that the influx of information and resources, as well as the time required for caregivers to lead and participate in online learning opportunities, could become overwhelming for families. Despite high levels of

support from Educare staff, caregivers inconsistently and infrequently documented children's learning and development at home, and participation varied widely across schools and among families within schools.

■ **Challenge:** "Kitchen sink approach" to virtual learning.

During the initial transition to remote services, there was limited information available about virtual learning for young children. As a result, Educare staff initially did not have clear guidance or evidence-based information about best practices or developmentally appropriate teaching methods, and remote teaching strategies were experimental at first. To determine which approaches would yield the greatest child and family engagement, participation, and understanding, staff employed a "kitchen sink approach" to virtual/remote teaching and learning, offering a variety of content and information in multiple formats. Educare schools also had to forego guidelines and concerns regarding screen time in order to provide effective virtual learning. Educare staff appreciated the increased connections that they were able to make with families as a result of virtual learning and also reported that the occasional in-person events, such as socially distanced outdoor activities, were particularly effective and engaging.

THEME 2:
Supporting children's social emotional needs and development from a distance.

As the pandemic continued, prioritizing children's social-emotional needs and developing strategies to support children's social-emotional development from a distance became key concerns and areas of focus for many Educare schools. Educare staff engaged in a variety of activities and provided a multitude of supports to children and families, including pre-recorded videos, written resources, and trainings and workshops. Educare staff also offered one-on-one video conference sessions with children and/or caregivers. Schools provided mental health referrals, remote mental health consultations via video conferencing, texts, messages, individualized plans, and live sessions. One Educare school created a hotline for parents to call and discuss children's behavioral concerns. Educare Chicago reported spending time addressing parent concerns about behavioral regressions and provided families "with tips on what they would do in the classroom." In addition, some schools focused on racial identity and issues of racism as a social-emotional teaching and learning strategy and sent families online resources, activities, and books on these topics.

Schools provided mental health referrals, remote mental health consultations via video conferencing, texts, messages, individualized plans, and live sessions.

THEME 3:
Making accommodations/ modifications for students needing additional support.

Many students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) for disabilities were able to receive services remotely using video-based technology, in a similar format to a telehealth appointment. Meeting student needs required reimagining individual interventions and therapies, both one–on-one services and play groups. These services typically rely on in-person contact, and some schools experienced slow or delayed transitions to a virtual delivery model. Many noted that a virtual delivery model, while necessary, was insufficient, and reported a lack of clarity about services from Early Intervention and Local Education Agencies. Educare Chicago staff reported, "It's extremely hard to support them as much as we were Schools found it easier to adjust to the needs of Dual Language Learners (DLLs), who continued to receive written content that had been translated into the family's primary language, and schools provided virtual interactions in the home language "as much as possible." One school mentioned using interpretation services via video, while others reported relying on application-based or Google translation of materials.
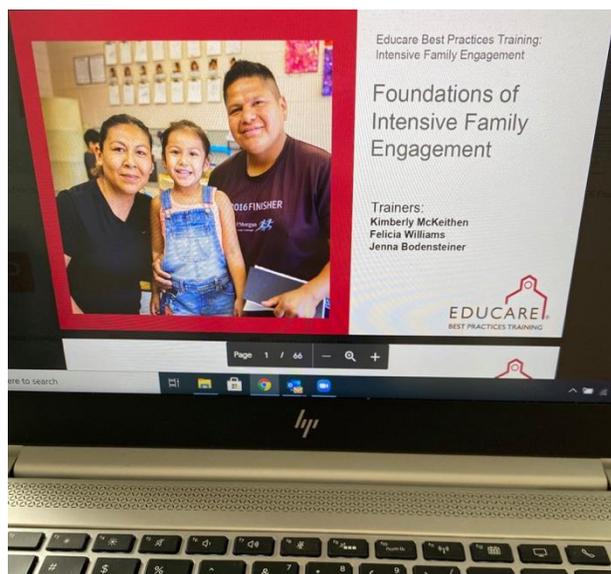
■ Challenge: Eligibility and enrollment in services.

One major area of concern arose for students who were referred or under evaluation for a disability but had not yet been determined eligible for IEPs or IFSPs. Most evaluations for services were cancelled, which prevented access to resources and supports that are usually offered after eligibility determinations. Educare Flint staff indicated that "It's a challenge to get students evaluated right now…we want to continue to prioritize children that were referred and in process, to complete the evaluation and receive services."

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Practice and Policy Considerations

Suggestions for ECCE agencies or programs

- Help families navigate challenges related to remote teaching and learning by providing them with clear materials, lesson plans, and activities that clarify teaching responsibilities, identify areas of focus, and suggest effective strategies.

- Develop strategies to help children and families prepare for changes in routines and environments ahead of time, so they are prepared for transitions such as the return to in-person classroom instruction after periods of learning at home.

- Continue to support children's understanding and implementation of health and safety routines and behaviors (e.g., social distancing, handwashing, mask-wearing).

- Engage in communities of practice (CoPs) or peer learning groups to share and learn best practices and effective virtual learning techniques.

- Provide training and professional development opportunities for staff related to social-emotional learning (SEL) to help teachers create or adapt relevant SEL curricula and support children's social-emotional development and functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Pursue alternative methods of assessment and data collection to ensure child and family needs and goals are being met – especially considering uneven education experiences resulting from the pandemic.

Suggestions for policies and systems-level efforts

- Ensure strong supports for DLLs and their families, including remote services and materials that are linguistically and culturally appropriate.

- Develop policies and procedures to prevent gaps in IEP/IFSP evaluation, placement, and services for children with or at-risk for disability.

- Expand access, funding, and supports for technology to enable families to effectively engage in virtual learning at home.

- Develop policies and procedures that promote equity and reduce racial disparities encountered by children and families of color who were disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic.

NETWORK SPOTLIGHT:

Highlighting one example of outstanding practice or innovation in the
Educare Learning Network

TULSA EDUCARE - MACARTHUR

Tulsa Educare - MacArthur opened in Tulsa in 2012 and serves 164 children (six weeks through four
years of age) and their families about half of which are dual language learners. Throughout the COVID-19
pandemic, Tulsa Educare - MacArthur has been committed to developing virtual learning materials, supporting
children's social-emotional needs, and creating an individualized and innovative approach to transitioning from
home learning to in-person classroom instruction.

Home-school communication and connections. For example, when the school was fully closed, teachers
video recorded themselves reading books in both English and Spanish and sent recordings to families along
with virtual learning materials to use for remote learning. A COVID-19 Committee was also developed
specifically to send home materials, activities, and videos to families to show them virtual learning strategies
and activities to do at home with their children. In particular, staff focused on how to best socially and
emotionally support and connect with children. This was especially apparent when classrooms started to
reopen and staff developed transition plans for children to return to school. Teachers were concerned that
children would not be able to clearly see teachers' emotions or communicate in the same way due to mask
wearing. To prepare children for these changes, one teacher created a video about masks for each individual
child in her classroom so that they knew what to expect when they returned. The video showed each teacher
and child with and without masks and explained the reasons for masks being worn. The videos also showed
children and families how basic routines in the classroom would change or stay the same so that they were
readily prepared.

Innovative transition planning. A team of interdisciplinary staff completed transition meetings with each
individual family using Google Hangouts, which required a lot of coordination and preparation. These meetings
familiarized and prepared children and families for what to expect when they returned to school regarding staff,
classroom setup, and school policies and procedures. Each week, families are provided with information about
what teachers and staff will be in the classroom the following week so that children are prepared and
understand who they will be interacting with. By thoughtfully planning and communicating clearly in advance,
Tulsa Educare - MacArthur has been able to create smooth transitions for children and families as they were
returning from remote to in-person learning and for those that were newly enrolled or experiencing changes in
classrooms or teaching staff.

Related Educare Learning Network Resources:

Educare Learning Network. (2020). *Policy recommendation informed by COVID-19 impact on Early Head Start-Child Care partnerships.* Educare Learning Network, Start Early. Retrieved from
https://www.educareschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Educare-EHS-CCP-Policy-Recoms_5.1.20.pdf

Palomares, M., Smith, P., Reaves, L., Syrjanen, M. (2020). *Partnerships deliver on quality early learning in Wisconsin & Colorado.* Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

Stein, A. G., Tavassolie, T., Katz, R. C., Rasher, S., & French, M. C. (2021). *Educare insights snapshot: Supporting the early childhood workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.* Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

Tavassolie, T., Stein, A. G., Katz, R. C., Rasher, S. & French, M. C. (2021). *Educare insights snapshot: Supporting and engaging families of young children during the COVID-19 pandemic.* Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

Other Suggested Resources:

Barnett, S., Jung, K., & Nores, M. (2020). *Young children's home learning and preschool participation experiences during the pandemic.* New Brunswick NJ: NIEER.

Epstein, D. & Sotolongo, J. (2020). *5 ways early care and education providers can support children's remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.* Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

Sethi, S., Johnson-Staub, C., & Gallagher Robbins, K. (2020). *An anti-racist approach to supporting child care through COVID-19 and beyond.* Washington, DC: The Center for Law and Social Policy.