



Lessons from the Evaluation of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships Across the Educare Network: Executive Summary

The new Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership initiative was designed to promote a seamless high-quality birth-to-three system of care across early childhood education (ECE) settings. This study contributes to the small body of research that offers guidance about what it might take to build and sustain effective ECE partnerships to promote improved quality across settings through its examination of EHS-child care partnership grants in which an Educare school is a partner in the work. These partnerships not only benefited from having a local Educare program partner, but also from the support of the national Educare Learning Network, which provided support in the form of a dedicated learning community for those programs involved in a partnership as well as grant writing support.

In this report we describe the collaborative partnerships approximately one year after they began, focusing on the partnership's development, characteristics, relational, organizational and contextual factors, and the influence of these factors on quality improvement and family engagement across settings. We extract lessons learned to inform future policy and practice in child care improvement efforts.

We saw that Early Head Start-child care partnerships formed by Educare organizations can take many forms. The number of community partner programs varied, as did the number of EHS slots (from 60 to over 300), geographic distances covered, and the role of the Educare program, grantee or program partner. In all cases, having Educare as part of the partnership was seen as a benefit. Agencies with Educare schools have existing community connections that can facilitate the identification of local partners, and Educare leaders are often in communication with state leaders and can advocate for policies to support the partnership. Furthermore, Educare schools have reputations for providing high quality care, which can help agencies enroll child care partners and garner support for the partnership in the community. In some cases, programs adopt aspects of the Educare model when working with partners, for instance the embedded professional development models that are similar to the master teacher role, and Educare itself often provides trainings for members of the partnership.

Common **keys to success** across the programs included:

- **Successful models stress a relationship-based approach** with a shared commitment to genuine co-creation. In the words of one Educare leader, “in a partnership all are accountable but nobody owns it.”
- **This intensive quality improvement work takes a lot of staff time on every level** to work on and communicate about financial, operational, procedural, and process issues. Staffing structures to accomplish this work varied widely across the programs studied.
- Within center-based community partner programs, the **EHS slots can be allocated in a variety of ways**. Some centers established classrooms serving only EHS children, while other centers placed EHS children with other children in multiple classrooms. Both approaches can be successful and have benefits.

There were many **successes noted across the programs**, including positive impacts for children, families, staff and communities.

- All programs report an **increase in the availability of high quality infant/toddler care in the community**. One program reported an increase in ITERS scores from the 2-3 range to the 5s, a **substantial increase in quality**.

- While not always easy, programs were able to recruit community partners and families. All three partnership grants **reached or nearly reached full enrollment within one year.**
- **Staff are receiving education, training and embedded professional development (coaching) opportunities.** Across the nation, the partnership program is adding to the pool of qualified infant/toddler professionals.
- **Programs were able to reduce ratios in the community partner programs.** Programs found creative ways to make it economically feasible for partners to reach required ratios.
- Programs reported that the partnership efforts were resulting in **greater continuity of care for children and families.** In part, they credit the improved relationships with families and the additional supports provided, as well as the ability to continue to pay for a slot even if the family loses its child care subsidy.
- All programs describe **substantial improvements to their physical environment and available materials** for which they were very grateful.
- Community partners reported an **increase in intentional teaching practices and use of curriculum, knowledge of child development and assessment/observation.** Some programs reported that these practices were affecting *not only non-EHS children in classrooms, but also other classrooms in the settings, even preschool classrooms.*
- Programs provided **supports for parents and families** that had not been provided in the past. The provision of diapers and food to families was seen as having a huge effect on family well-being.
- Programs reported **benefits from provision of comprehensive services to families,** including family support and referrals when needed. In many programs, staff became more comfortable working with parents and addressing broader family issues, through home visits and increased communication. Again, it was reported that *in some cases this was spilling over to non-EHS children.*

Across the Network, there were **common challenges faced in implementing the Head Start Program Performance Standards.**

- A common complaint we heard was that the **timeline for implementation is too short.**
- The EHS-child care partnership programs reported that **implementing the EHS-child care partnerships is challenging financially,** because of staffing needs and difficulty obtaining consistent child care subsidy funds.
- **Some programs struggled with enrollment,** finding families who are eligible for both EHS and subsidy.
- **Transitions** between infant/toddler rooms, from infant/toddler care to preschool rooms, and graduations into other programs have been a challenge.
- **Programs struggled to find qualified staff,** both teaching and coaching staff.
- Although one Educare leader said, “programs should not be rigid about how they implement the standards...there is flexibility,” **most programs viewed the standards as inflexible, especially around issues of ratios and full-year services.**

State, local and agency contexts varied widely and are critical in determining the success of a partnership.

- **State policy context, especially policies related to subsidies, is critical to the success of EHS-child care partnerships.**
- While there were some notable success stories of collaboration with child welfare agencies, **the issues around subsidy continuity for this group of extremely vulnerable children varied across states.**
- **Geographic location has a big effect on the partnership.** In rural communities, providers are more isolated and communication can be made difficult by distance.



- **The grantee agency history with and commitment to partnerships is crucial.** Those organizations with past partnership experience and the resulting community reputation for fairness and trust, as well as existing relationships in the community had a much easier time locating and enrolling partners and successfully launching the program.

Educare Network Organizations with EHS-CC Partnership Grants or Leads in Other Grants

State	Educare Organization	Educare School
AZ	SW Human Development	Educare Arizona
CO	Clayton Early Learning	Educare Denver
FL	United Way Miami-Dade	Educare Miami-Dade
GA	Sheltering Arms	Educare Atlanta
KS	Project Eagle	Educare Kansas City
LA	Kingsley House	Educare New Orleans
ME	Kennebec Valley Community Action Program	Educare Central Maine
MI	Genesee Intermediate School District	Educare Flint
NE	Educare Omaha	Educare Omaha
NE	Winnebago	Educare Winnebago
OK	Sunbeam Family Services	Educare Oklahoma City
OK	Educare Tulsa	Educare Tulsa
WA	Puget Sound Educational Service District	Educare Seattle
WI	Next Door Foundation	Educare Milwaukee

Messages to policy makers:

- This is a very costly model, especially if cost per child is generated based on the number of slots per program. That is an underestimate of the number of children and families who are impacted by the program. Children in classrooms with EHS children benefit from the teacher professional development, and children in other classrooms may benefit in programs in which aspects of EHS are being implemented more broadly. Moreover, the cost per slot does not take into account the influence of the program on the broader community, for instance the training of a workforce that then goes on to work in other settings and in some cases, the addition of additional child care slots or programs. **Federal accounting should take into consideration these broader influences of the partnership programs to count all the children affected.**
- While the federal government has tried to ease the way for collaboration between child care and Head Start programs, **more needs to be done to coordinate EHS and child care funding in communities across the country.** More federal leadership is needed to encourage state and county child care subsidy agencies to support the partnerships. Federal leadership is also needed around coordination of ground rules affecting Early Head Start and child care partners so grantees don't struggle with different expectations around enrollment and subsidy. To date, we only have the perspectives of the EHS-child care grantees and partners. **More systematic research across the country is needed that also gets at the perspective of the state child care subsidy agency.** A deep look into the ways different states have crafted the subsidy arrangement and eligibility for the partnerships, together with the rule requirements for Head Start and the national EHS-child care partnership program, could inform the federal government in how to make improvements. It would be helpful to continue to explore how these different state situations affect partnerships in the long run. In the short run programs have been creative in finding solutions, but it is unclear if they will be sustainable in the long term.

- **The 18-month start up time appears to be insufficient and should be lengthened to two years** to allow time for the establishment of relationships, recruitment of partners and families, restructuring of programs, infrastructure improvements, education of staff, and identification of long term feasible funding models.

Perhaps there could be **additional flexibility in the Head Start standards for partnership programs**. There is flexibility within the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and some differences between the regulations for the EHS-child care partnership program and for EHS programs have been outlined already. Some additional options or flexibility may be beneficial, such as greater flexibility in ratios to accommodate school-age children and part-time slots, which are not issues that could come up for EHS programs but are issues for EHS-child care partnership programs. Another issue is full-year services in some cases where subsidies do not go full-year, for instance child care programs for teen mothers