

EDUCARE INSIGHTS SNAPSHOT:

Supporting and Engaging Families of 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 ECCE workforce, in which women of color make up over 40% of early childhood professionals¹.

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 from underserved communities and their families. There are currently 25 operating Educare schools in diverse communities throughout the United States, serving nearly 4,000 children and guiding the professional development for more than 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, families, and staff.



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/>



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.

Focal Practice Area: Intensive Family Engagement

One of the pillars of Educare’s model is Intensive Family Engagement. Educare defines Family Engagement as partnering with families to build mutually respectful, goal-oriented relationships that support strong parent-child relationships, family well-being, and ongoing learning and development for both parents and children. This approach takes a whole-child perspective in which positive outcomes are achieved through addressing children’s needs within the context of the entire family. One way this can be accomplished is by offering onsite

family support services from full-time family engagement staff who work directly with families to achieve personalized goals and meet both immediate and long-term needs. Educare is committed to starting early, with an emphasis on the early years, to promote maternal and child health and well-being.

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.

Educare Schools' Approaches to Family Engagement During the COVID-19:

THEME 1:

Educare Schools Focused on Direct Supports to Families to Address Basic Needs.

Several schools have increased and reimagined the way they deliver material support to families in the context of the pandemic. More than ever before, Educare schools guided families to seek out resources from a variety of local organizations such as food distributions and pantries, in addition to directing families to public assistance and pandemic-specific resources and information. Staff at some schools coordinated 'drive thru' events and/or direct deliveries to enrolled families' homes to provide materials to support children's learning (e.g. books, toys, art supplies, activities) and well-being (e.g. diapers, wipes, formula, hand sanitizer, face coverings). Direct deliveries were particularly helpful to families typically reliant on public transportation. Educare Flint (Michigan) staff reported, "We got into a groove. We were connecting them with food or healthcare or diapers." Educare Washington DC staff said, "the comprehensive nature of our program means that we are able to address the impacts of [COVID-19] on the entire family." However, some parents noted experiencing information overload and were overwhelmed when trying to navigate the new and abundant resources available in their communities.

■ Challenge: Instability of child care, housing, and finances.

While Educare schools were closed or operating at reduced capacity or hours, families expressed concern and stress about finding alternative childcare options for their young children, while also meeting the needs of their older children during school closures. Parents who are essential workers continued to report to work in person and therefore needed to find care and support for their children during their work days, often relying on family and friends to fill in the gaps.

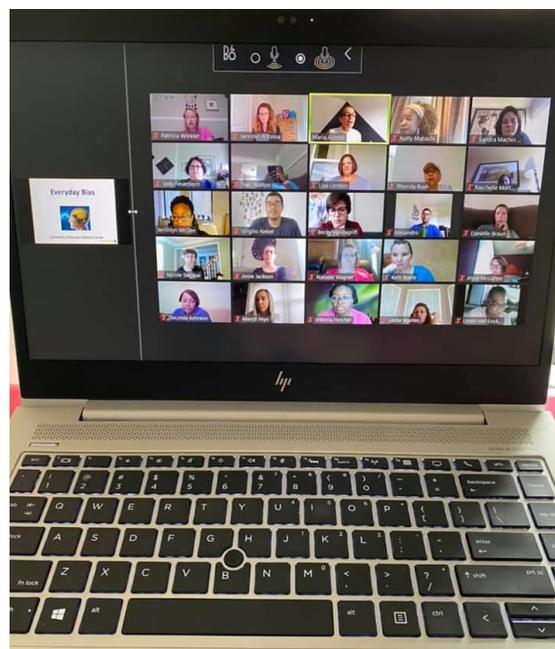


Furthermore, families across Educare schools were worried about job security and being able to pay for and maintain stable housing. Therefore, Educare staff were readily connecting families with community partners that provide supports around employment and housing as well as helping families to leverage public and other forms of financial assistance.

THEME 2:
Educare Schools Needed to Redefine and Improve Communications with Families.

Family engagement staff and teachers are the primary practitioners communicating with families. Most schools reported using a variety of tools for family communication: phone, text, email, video conference calls, learning applications or websites, online classroom platforms, school-related communication applications, and outdoor conversations during materials/food pick-up or delivery. By using multiple mediums for

communication, schools aimed to bridge gaps in information and ensure that parents were receiving everything they needed. Educare Chicago staff made an effort to create “interactive activities that use things families already have at home” to make participation less laborious for caregivers. Moreover, Educare schools that serve majority dual language learner populations expressed an increased need to ensure that all written materials distributed to parents were translated into multiple languages. Nonetheless, the pandemic provided opportunities for schools to implement practices that will improve family engagement in the long run as well as respond to immediate needs. Schools reported setting weekly goals around the number of parent/family outreach attempts. Some schools highlighted that the pandemic has given them more reasons and opportunities for home-school and parent-to-parent connections and social capital building both virtually and in-person, such as drive-up and drive-by events and virtual support groups for parents and families.



■ **Challenge: Technology-related barriers and learning curves.**

Many families face limitations in accessing technology, which creates significant challenges in communicating with families. Barriers include access to reliable wireless internet; availability of working devices/hardware; caregivers’ varying degrees of familiarity with different technologies; and families’ capacity to keep track of multiple electronic platforms, especially if

they have children in the K-12 system that are using different technologies. In addition, since many families are weaving together patchwork child care, grandparents or other family members may be watching their children, and these caregivers have different levels of comfort with new technologies like smartphones or tablets.

THEME 3:
Educare Staff Faced Challenges in Meeting Families' Continually Changing Needs.

Families' needs and circumstances changed continually during the pandemic. Families moved in and out of employment, encountered challenges obtaining unemployment benefits, faced ever growing concerns about housing, and experienced stress related to the day-to-day uncertainties of living during a pandemic. As a result, family engagement staff had to continually respond to changes in families' situations and needs, which many staff at Educare schools reported as a major challenge². Educare staff put a tremendous amount of energy into providing general information about the virus and how to stay safe, specific information about reopening, reassuring families about the school's health and safety procedures, and delivering both individualized and community-wide support, with families responding positively to these efforts. Educare West DuPage staff stressed that "even if families are not constantly participating in activities, they are thanking us and expressing concern for staff."



² 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.

■ **Challenge: Identifying evidence of trauma.**

Prior to the pandemic, family engagement and teaching staff would meet with families face-to-face to discuss their needs, concerns, and accomplishments. Based on these strong relationships and individualized in-person contacts, staff could determine if families were struggling at home, if new needs or challenges had arisen, and observe potential evidence of trauma. However, during the pandemic, it has become increasingly difficult to determine family needs at time when loss of income, jobs, and loved ones has increased. Factors such as stress and extended isolation exacerbated the risk of child maltreatment and domestic abuse. Family engagement staff said that it was more difficult to observe signs of abuse and neglect within the family or home, and in many cases it was impossible to screen formally. It has also become harder to identify and respond to everyday trauma and stressors because of communication challenges and lack of direct access to children and families via face-to-face interactions.

Furthermore, young children and families may be facing increased stress and trauma related to racial inequity and injustice during the pandemic³, an effect that can be difficult for staff to pinpoint and can cause families' engagement and trust to waver. To foster trust, Educare family engagement staff described strategies such as being available to families on-demand, ensuring a parent is in a private, safe space before discussing sensitive topics, connecting families to virtual mental health services, and doing outdoor in-person check-ups as needed. Moreover, all families were provided information about supports related to domestic violence, abuse, or trauma.

³ Padilla, C. M., & Thomson, D. (2021). *More than one in four Latino and Black households with children are experiencing three or more hardships during COVID-19*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

Practice and Policy Considerations

Suggestions for ECCE agencies or programs

- Material resources and guidance help families feel engaged and supported during pandemic uncertainty.
- Using innovative technology strategies helps families, but some may need extra support to use them well.
- Access to technology (including both hardware and software), reliable Wi-Fi, and technology training and support resources help families feel engaged and supported.
- More communication is not always helpful, but effective communication is! Be cautious of information overload and tailor information to families' individual needs.
- Regularly seek input from families regarding how well staff and program practices are meeting their changing needs, priorities, and goals.
- Family engagement staff benefit greatly from additional supports, such as mental health resources and supplementary professional development training, to help staff meet families' needs including mental health; trauma-informed care; accessing public assistance and pandemic-specific resources; and promoting family engagement.
- It is critical to establish and maintain community-based partnerships to link families to needed resources, services, and information.

Suggestions for policies and systems-level efforts

- Prioritize funding for programs serving young children and families in Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous communities experiencing disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Secure adequate funding, access, and resources for staff to attend professional development related to supporting families' technology use and accessing mental health and public assistance supports for families in ECCE programs.
- Expand funding, access, and resources for programs to provide virtual and/or safe, socially-distanced in-person family engagement opportunities and trauma-informed practice and mental health supports (e.g. teletherapy, screenings, hotlines, mental health consultation, and referrals to substance use & domestic violence services) within ECCE settings and communities to address spikes in unemployment, social isolation, food insecurity, health concerns, and other trauma.
- Develop and implement policies that offer greater flexibility in program and subsidy eligibility determination requirements and processes (e.g. longer eligibility periods, waiver of employment requirements, variable income eligibility thresholds based on local conditions and needs).
- Make personal family technology resources available to help families purchase data plans, cell phones and expanded plans, computers, and hotspots to close the digital and resource gaps that lead to inequities in remote learning and access to community resources.

NETWORK SPOTLIGHT:

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

EDUCARE WINNEBAGO

Educare Winnebago, located on the Winnebago Indian Reservation in northeast Nebraska, is the first Educare school to primarily serve Native American children and families. Educare Winnebago family engagement staff and leadership worked hard to be creative in meeting the needs of families in their close-knit community. They provided financial support directly to families using their Red Nose Day Fund grant to distribute grocery vouchers, zoo passes, and gift cards. When the school was closed to in-person instruction, teachers and staff drove to families' homes to drop off supplies and activities like paint, play dough, markers, and worksheets.

Grief and Loss. Research has shown that Native American communities are some of the hardest hit by the pandemic⁴, which Educare Winnebago has seen firsthand. Staff have stepped up to provide additional support around grief and loss. Because Educare Winnebago is situated within a small community where “everybody knows everybody,” the grief support was individualized to each family’s situation. Family engagement staff developed intimate relationships with families so that even if families did not feel comfortable talking with others, they would often still engage with their family engagement staff.



A new way forward. Staff at Educare Winnebago said it was challenging at first to conduct orientation and recruitment virtually, but over time, their innovative approaches have strengthened their relationship with the community. Family engagement staff mentioned that having one-on-one phone calls or Zoom meetings related to orientation and onboarding has enabled families to be more open and comfortable with staff. Staff even got creative with Halloween and planned a pandemic drive-thru trick-or-treating event which can be viewed here: <https://fb.watch/3nZ8hTzuX3/>.

⁴ Hatcher SM, Agnew-Brune C, Anderson M, et al. *COVID-19 among American Indian and Alaska Native persons — 23 states, January 31–July 3, 2020*. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020, 69, 1166–1169. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6934e1external icon](http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6934e1external%20icon)

Related Educare Learning Network Resources:

Educare Learning Network. (2020). *A path to high-quality child care through partnerships*. Educare Learning Network, Start Early. Retrieved from <https://www.educareschools.org/ehs-ccp-series/>

Educare Learning Network. (2020). *Helping parents provide quality education to children while at home*. Educare Learning Network, Start Early. Retrieved from <https://www.educareschools.org/covid-19-parent-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

Educare Springfield. (2020). *Educare Springfield COVID-19 updates*. Retrieved from <https://www.educarespringfield.org/covid-19-updates>

Jackson, C. D., Ward, G., Gerth, S. (2020). *Educare stands with the Black community*. Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

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Kohler, C. (2020). *Partnerships provide critical supports to sustain family child care*. Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

Montes, G. (2020). *Partnerships rising amid COVID-19 in Miami-Dade*. 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.

Other Suggested Resources:

National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness. (2020). *Engaging families: Head Start heals-frequency asked questions*. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/hs-heals-faqs-engage-families.pdf>

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.

Vivrette, R., & Dym Bartlett, J. (2020). *Trauma-informed strategies for supporting children and youth in the child welfare system during COVID-19*. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

Suggested Citation: 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.

Acknowledgements: We gratefully acknowledge funding support from the Buffett Early Childhood Fund (BECF) and other Network funders supporting research, evaluation, and dissemination. The authors would like to thank our Educare schools including the incredible children, families, leaders, and staff that engage in the Network's research and evaluation and share their innovations and lessons learned with the ECCE field. We are incredibly appreciative of the exceptional Network researchers and evaluators that contributed to gathering these data.