

EDUCARE INSIGHTS SNAPSHOT:

Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce 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,

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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in which women of color make up over 40% of early childhood 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.

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/>

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 interviews underwent qualitative analyses to identify common themes across sites and flag illustrative examples and quotes.

Focal Practice Area: Supporting the ECCE Workforce

Supporting the ECCE workforce is connected to one of the core pillars of the Educare model: embedded, ongoing professional development that occurs every day and is defined by what Educare leaders and staff do to enhance their work and grow as practitioners. Each Educare school builds professional development activities into its program structure and routines so that they are grounded in the day-to-day practice of teachers and family engagement staff. Professional development activities are designed to enhance staff's inquiry and learning about content-specific interactions and instructional practices, to improve children's kindergarten readiness and the learning and development of children and families. This core feature focuses on supporting and maintaining a well-qualified workforce by increasing their competence through intensive staff development using an interdisciplinary approach with reflective practice, supervision, and data utilization.

Educare Schools' Approaches to Supporting the Staff During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

THEME 1:

School leaders prioritized supporting the ECCE workforce's physical and mental health and overall well-being.

Schools throughout the ELN recognized that it was imperative to focus on the most immediate needs of ECCE staff as the COVID-19 pandemic required them to reinvent their practices while facing tremendous changes in their home lives and ongoing fears about contracting the COVID-19 virus. In addition, events in 2020 drew

greater attention to systemic racial inequity and injustice that impact many ECCE staff members as well as the children and families they serve, which emphasized the need to support the health and well-being of staff. Educare school leaders understood that in addition to providing ongoing professional development opportunities that continue to refine and deepen staff's knowledge and skills to develop their own professional practice, it was especially critical to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of their teams. In terms of physical health, this meant securing the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitation supplies for those staff returning in person; developing extensive procedures for screening and maintaining social distancing for staff, children, and families once schools reopened; and developing and communicating detailed

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plans for communication, contact tracing, and quarantining when cases of COVID-19 were identified in the school community. Regarding social-emotional well-being, this included increasing and adapting outreach and communication, prioritizing opportunities for positive connections and socialization among leaders and staff, and providing more access to mental health services and supports during this period of high stress, large-scale and personal adjustment, and potential trauma.

■ **Challenge: The ECCE workforce are essential workers; but are often undervalued!**

Early in the pandemic, some Educare schools chose or were required to stay open or reopen as emergency sites to provide care and education to the children of essential workers deemed to provide necessary in-person services. Staff at these Educare schools became essential workers themselves, risking exposure to COVID-19 and transmission of the virus to their own families. However, ECCE workers providing education and care to the children of other essential workers did not receive the same nationwide support, attention, or pay as essential workers in fields such as health care, emergency response services, or retail and delivery. Therefore, demonstrating care and compassion for Educare staff doing essential work on the front lines during a public health crisis became paramount. One Educare leader said, “There are opportunities to impact policy on the concept that ECCE is an essential element of our community and to continue to work on the landscape of equity and diversity. Our school and Network have already started this work; yet the need to focus and give attention to the concepts of equity is huge.”



■ **Challenge: Securing PPE and basic supplies was difficult for ECCE programs.**

After the initial round of sheltering in place, business shut-downs, and shock, ECCE programs were one of the essential services that needed to resume operations and provide care for young children so that their family members could return to work. However, ECCE programs were not afforded priority access to PPE and cleaning supplies as healthcare facilities were. Although Educare leaders worked to coordinate with state departments of health and human services, school districts, and even private donors, many Educare schools, like other ECCE programs and providers, were left scrambling to source basic supplies and often overpaying or experiencing lengthy waits before reopening to keep children, families, and staff safe.

■ **Success:** Stable funding meant maintained wages, health coverage, and work options.

Educare schools blend public and private funding streams to deliver high-quality ECCE programming. For many schools in the Network, public funding sources remained stable, which allowed schools to maintain staff's wages and benefits during the period when sites were closed and in-person services were therefore unavailable. This funding support was also critical to stabilizing and sustaining operations and staff at child care programs connected to the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants in the Network; these Partnership grants mitigate some of the challenges many child care programs experience, especially during the pandemic.

Stable funding and flexibility with program delivery also enabled many Educare school leaders to give staff the option of returning to work in person or working remotely once sites reopened. Many staff were fearful of returning to work in person because of the potential risk to their health or a family member.

■ **Challenge & Success:** Building and maintaining relationships, making social connections, and supporting mental and emotional well-being virtually.

Social isolation and its effects on emotional and physical health have been major concerns during the pandemic.

Therefore, Educare school leaders focused on implementing strategies for effective and engaging virtual and adequately distanced (often outdoors) collaborative activities. These activities included more formal professional development and planning opportunities such as team meetings, lesson planning, and data dialogues, as well as social events, such as virtual t-shirt making, geared toward alleviating isolation. Also,

school leaders emphasized supporting and protecting mental health and wellness by offering staff opportunities such as virtual mindfulness and meditation sessions, yoga, access to a mental health consultant focused on staff, and self-care ideas and supplies. Schools fostered collaboration during the pandemic by helping staff develop skills and comfort with technology to stay connected with each other as well as with children and families. Educare staff used platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams like never before, for purposes ranging from video-based social activities to collaboration on written documents in web-based shared spaces. Although there was an initial learning curve, working from home allowed for time and flexibility to learn to navigate the new technologies and platforms.



THEME 2:

School leaders and staff worked together to redefine expectations, roles, and mechanisms for accountability.

With the initial closing of schools during government-ordered shut-downs, Educare leaders had to redefine what a typical work day looked like for all staff. It became clear early on that neither children and families nor staff would be able to fully replicate a typical day of early learning in the exact order, duration, and manner as it had occurred in person.

Instead, accommodations to schedules, expectations, and approaches would need to be made. For instance, supervisors and managers developed systems for documenting work-from-home tasks and regularly checked in with staff by videoconference, phone, email, and text to provide support, solve problems, and adjust expectations and plans.

■ **Challenge:** Adjusting to working from home realities and navigating work-home life balance took a lot of time and effort.

Educare school leaders and staff in all positions had to make adjustments or accommodations for the various realities of working from home, even when not all staff members were working remotely. Like the families they support, staff were navigating changes in their personal responsibilities such as caring for children or family members, supporting children participating in virtual learning, or engaging in ongoing work or school responsibilities for themselves or their partners. While working remotely with most members of their household at home, staff members experienced numerous challenges to their productivity: many did not have a dedicated office or workspace removed from background noise and distractions, and some did not have adequate access to high-speed internet connections or equipment such as laptops and tablets. Educare school leaders partnered with staff to establish new expectations, such as being able to work different hours or schedules, connecting with individual children and families in shorter chunks of time rather than expecting full group instruction or school-wide parent events, and encouraging or requiring more dedicated time for professional learning.

■ **Success:** Communication and maintaining a positive organizational climate.

Both leaders and staff recognized that with many team members unable to work onsite or social distancing restrictions limiting proximity and group size, an effort would need to be made to bolster communication and sustain camaraderie and a positive work culture. Many Educare schools implemented more regular routines and opportunities for all staff to hear progress updates, share challenges and successes, and address questions and concerns. Staff used multiple modalities and platforms for communicating with one another including videoconferencing technology (Zoom), classroom- and school-based apps (Remind, ClassDojo), collaboration tools (Microsoft Teams, Google Meet), and traditional emails, phone calls, and text messages. This newfound flexibility in work schedule and environment also allowed for greater connections among staff in different classrooms and roles. One leader from Educare Flint noted that a silver lining of the pandemic was “seeing the connections between the staff strengthen and grow. They have definitely established themselves as a true family.”

THEME 3:

The ECCE workforce remained committed to engaging in ongoing professional development.

Overall, Educare schools either maintained or increased the frequency and quantity of professional development during the pandemic. With fewer staff working onsite, greater flexibility in work schedules, and an expectation of making good use of the time in which staff were unable to directly work with children and families, leaders often guided staff to perceive the pandemic as a unique opportunity to advance their own learning and develop their practice. In most cases, the professional development opportunities were virtual workshops or trainings; staff could select some of their own professional learning activities based on individual needs and goals. Leaders and supervisors supported staff in considering how virtual learning impacts attention and engagement, and efforts were made to manage expectations and choose appropriate activities. The most common topics for professional development included technology, health and safety, children’s social emotional development, mental health and wellness for staff and families, and trauma-informed care.

- **Challenge:** Reimagining more intensive, embedded professional development experiences and implementing them under unique conditions.

Early in the pandemic, staff found effective solutions to stay in regular communication with one another, and many were participating in online trainings. However, intensive, embedded professional development activities such as coaching, communities of practice, team lesson planning, and data dialogues were more difficult to adapt to primarily virtual formats. For example, most effective coaching strategies integrate regular in-person observations of practice, but doing so safely and effectively during the pandemic required strategies such as video recording, observing one-on-one exchanges with children or parents rather than with groups, or observing and offering feedback on different kinds of practices, like engaging children or families on virtual platform. In addition, those individuals planning and implementing professional development experiences needed to consider best practices for virtual learning and engagement such as engagement strategies, screen fatigue, and compensating for distractions and technical issues. Furthermore, Educare leaders and staff acknowledged the value of peer-to-peer learning and hearing stories and lessons learned, especially how professionals in the Educare Learning Network “have come together to support each other.”



Practice and Policy Considerations

Suggestions for ECCE agencies or programs

- Expand access to a range of mental health and wellness resources for staff, including mental health consultation.
- Readily integrate opportunities for gratitude, celebration, and fun.
- Maintain, right-size, or strengthen the frequency and modality of communication and regular routines of professional collaboration and learning.
- Experiment with new approaches to scheduling and staffing focused on work-life balance.
- Focus professional learning experiences on staff's knowledge, skills, and mindset around diversity, equity, and inclusion – particularly recognizing and addressing racial inequities and bias.
- Expand access and supports for staff to increase comfort level and skills in using technology.

Suggestions for policies and systems-level efforts

- Secure adequate funding, access, and resources related to staff's well-being and learning needs such as better pay and benefits, technology, professional development opportunities, physical and mental health supports, and health and safety supplies.

NETWORK SPOTLIGHT:

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

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Since the beginning of the pandemic, the leadership team at Educare New Orleans knew it was more important than ever to prioritize the emotional and physical well-being, social connectedness, and overall happiness of the staff at their school. Although the program had to close to in-person services from March through June 2020, staff have since returned to work in the school building. The school director noted that leadership's main priority when it comes to supporting the ECCE workforce has been self-care and mental health for staff. In particular, the leadership team recognized the increased potential for burnout or stress given the heightened sense of risk associated with health and safety for themselves, the members of their households, and the children, families, and other staff they work with.

Staff emotional and social well-being. One important strategy employed by Educare New Orleans leadership to offer staff much-needed emotional support during the stressful events of the pandemic was to provide access to a licensed provider of mental health services; the same provider was used for mental health consultation with the families of children enrolled in the program. In addition, staff meetings began with a structured opportunity for mindfulness such as meditation, shared readings and reflection, and chair yoga. In fact, the organization that Educare New Orleans partnered with to lead yoga for staff and children also offered school staff the opportunity to join Saturday morning yoga sessions free of charge. Some examples included adding a "Zen Zone," a dedicated quiet space for relaxation and decompression to the multi-purpose room and regularly playing fun music in the lobby.

Professional learning and appreciation. While the school was operating with a more limited schedule, Fridays were dedicated to staff professional development, support, and planning time. This structured time on Fridays also allowed for more individualized access to and feedback from supervisors. Supervisors and managers at the school also emphasized embedding little ways to show care and appreciation for staff such as doing themed gift exchanges and holding a surprise staff appreciation day. For this event, staff thought they were showing up for a busy day of professional development, but instead they were welcomed to a socially-distanced, outdoor event with decorations, food, and staff awards and gifts. The positive impact of these efforts centered on caring for and supporting staff's well-being is reflected in staff retention, especially for lead and assistant teachers.

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.

Educare Policy Workgroup Think Tank. (2020). *Caring for the caregivers: Supporting the mental health and well-being of the early childhood workforce during a global pandemic*. Educare Learning Network, Start Early.

Katz, R. C., Stein, A. G., Tavassolie, T., Rasher, S., & French, M. C. (2021). *Educare insights snapshot: Teaching and learning with young children 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:

Child Care Aware. (2020). *Picking up the pieces: Building a better child care system post COVID 19*. Arlington, VA: Child Care Aware of America.

Daily, S. & Kazi, A. (2020). *Supporting families and child care providers during the pandemic with a focus on equity*. 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.

Suggested citation: 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.

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.