

New York Early Care and Education Survey: Understanding the Impact of COVID-19 on New York Early Childhood System

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

Early care and education (ECE) plays an essential role in supporting children and families. It is vital to community well-being. In the best of times, the ECE workforce faces poor work conditions, is underpaid, and undervalued. The COVID-19 pandemic has added unprecedented stress to the field.

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on New York's early childhood workforce, the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute and Bank Street College of Education partnered to administer a survey members of the Aspire Registry. The survey strives to capture the perspectives of early childhood program leaders, teachers, and family child care providers to inform policy and practice as we identify solutions that will help us to navigate this ongoing crisis. The survey was open from May 5 to May 12, just as policies and programming decisions had stabilized for much of the ECE system in New York State.

The Executive Summary is structured in five parts: (1) descriptive data pertaining to our survey participants; (2) current program and employment status; (3) remote instruction approaches, (4) personal well-being; and (5) a discussion of the findings and questions to inform ongoing discussion with stakeholders from across the field.

KEY FINDINGS

- Participants reported that the emotional stress of the pandemic was more significant than their concerns for health and financial stress. Educators' need for mental health supports exceeds other areas of support requested.
- The majority of respondents were working remotely. Approximately 70% were engaged in distance instruction in New York City, whereas half were providing distance instruction in the rest of state. Approximately 1 in 5 program leaders reported that their program was closed and providing no services.
- Remote instruction was prevalent, yet educators reported struggling with:
 - » Delivering engaging and developmentally appropriate approaches
 - » Needing more consistent access to technology and appropriate learning materials for teachers and families
 - » Managing the expectations associated with remote instruction, particularly related to documentation of time and effort
- Approximately 60% of program leaders reported that they are fully paying their staff. Programs funded through family fees, as opposed to public funds, were most frequently closed and had furloughed or laid off staff.
- A preponderance of the data showed that survey participants were committed to providing young children and their families with appropriate and responsive early care and education.

¹ New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute's New York City Early Childhood Research Network

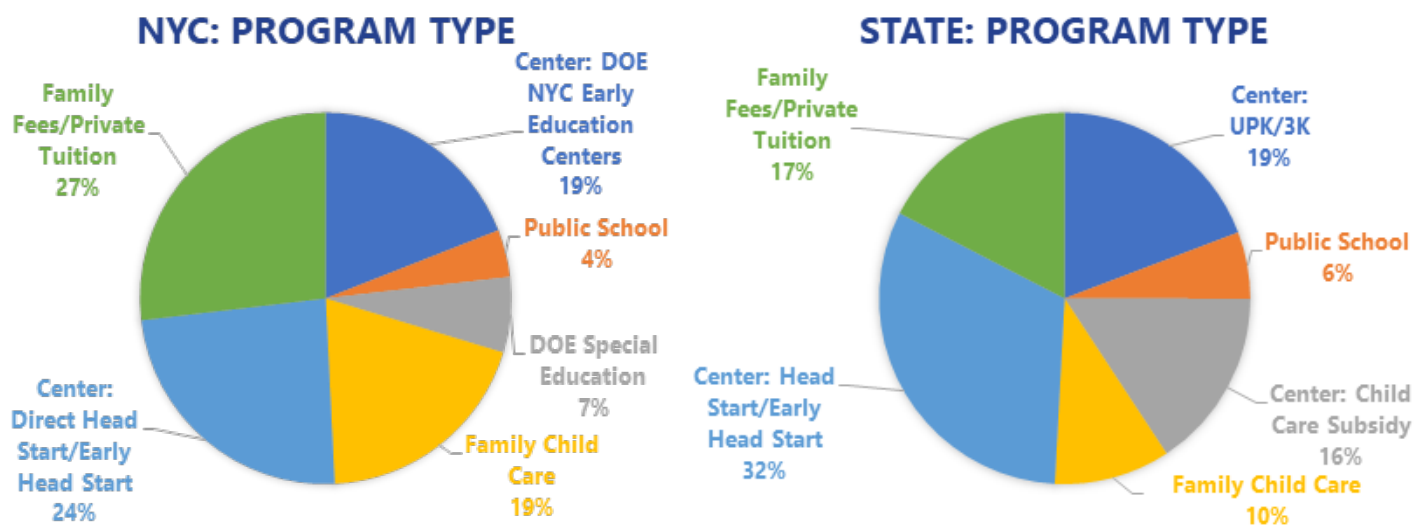
² Bank Street College of Education's Straus Center for Young Children & Families

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

The survey was sent to more than 25,192 members of New York State’s ECE workforce who are active members in the Aspire Registry system and who are in direct care roles working with children and families. The Aspire Registry houses information about members’ experience, qualifications, and training. All staff in centers licensed by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene are required to participate in the Aspire Registry as part of the licensure process whereas participation is voluntary for most educators in the rest of the state. We received 3,355 responses, which represents a 13% response rate.

Survey respondents work across the state in a variety of settings that include community-based child care centers and family child care that takes place in homes, as well as in private and public schools. Participants’ programs are funded in several ways including, family fees, universal prekindergarten funding, Head Start and Early Head Start funding, and child care subsidies. As such, the respondents reflect different segments of the early childhood system and are supported by different policies and guidance. They include program leaders, family child care providers, lead teachers, assistant teachers, and support staff.

- 2,116 (67%) of the respondents were from programs in NYC, while 1,063 (33%) were from the rest of the state. This is consistent with participation rates in the Aspire Registry and consistent with data that indicate that more than half of the children in ECE programs reside in New York City.
- The vast majority of respondents were in direct care roles working with children and families: lead teachers (31%), assistant teachers (26%) and family child care providers (5%). Additionally, 17% are program leaders, and 5% were in other roles such as special education providers.
- Participants represented a cross section of program types that reflect various settings, funding sources, and governance structures.



PROGRAM AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted different types of ECE settings (e.g., independent child care centers, publicly funded Head Start programs) in disparate ways. On March 16, all public schools were required to close across the

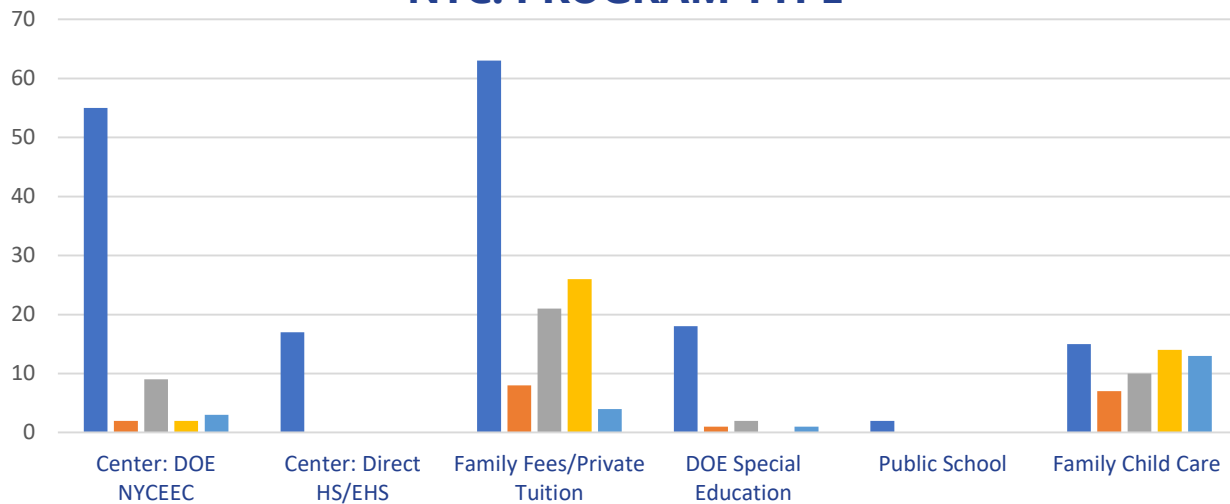
state, which impacted early education located in public schools and in community-based settings that implement the state’s universal prekindergarten program. The child care sector was designated an essential business and child care centers and family child care were permitted to operate. Some of these programs were designated to provide emergency care to the children of essential employees. The DOHMH in New York City ordered the closure of child care centers at the end of March, except for those designated as emergency child care programs serving essential workers.

While COVID-19 has disrupted service provision across New York State’s ECE mixed delivery system, government agencies have taken steps to sustain ECE programs as the pandemic forced closures. For example, the NYC Department of Education required its contracted care programs to continue to operate by providing remote instruction and the NYS Office of Children and Family Services and the New York City Administration for Children’s Services continued child care subsidy payments. A significant portion of the system, however, is independent and without funding assurances or protections, thus the data related to employment and compensation status is highly variable.

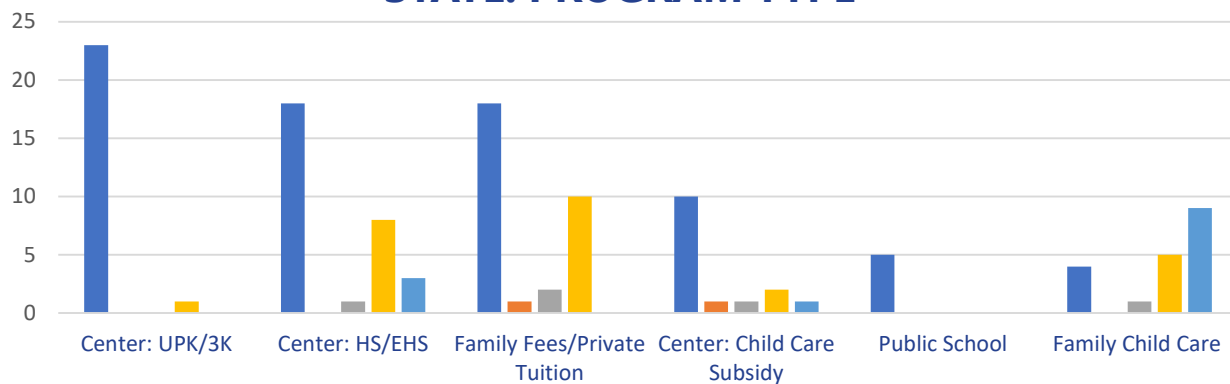
Program Leaders Report on Employment Status and Compensation

- Across all program types, 58% reported that their staff were being fully paid in NYC and 62% reported fully paying staff across the rest of the state
- For family fee-based programs, 22% of staff were furloughed in NYC and 30% of staff were furloughed in the rest of the state

NYC: PROGRAM TYPE



STATE: PROGRAM TYPE



- Paying all teachers/staff at their full rate of pay
- Paying all teachers/staff less than their typical full rate of pay
- Paying some teachers/staff but not others
- Furloughing teachers/staff
- Not applicable

Voices from the Field

Many participants shared insights about the financial stress they have experienced associated with the disruptions to the ECE system. Although participant comments revealed that the federal CARES funding has been essential to sustaining programs that operate with family fees, access to funding is uneven, causing tremendous strain for some programs. One survey participant said:

“I co-own a small preschool. We closed on March 16th for safety reasons and remain closed providing some online learning and resources. We have applied twice for a SBA loan, being denied twice while more than qualified to receive it. [The bank] keeps telling us to reapply, they see no reason for the denial. My husband is undergoing chemo for cancer, an added stress during this time.”

Some participants were facing extreme economic stress, as articulated by one leader:

“We were told to prepare for a huge influx of kids because of this and 2 weeks later I had to temporarily close because I couldn't make payroll. I let the essential parents I had down because the operating cost far outweighed the income. I am a single mom with 4 kids that live in the same building as my daycare center. Here we sit with no way to pay rent, utilities, no stimulus check or unemployment (not for lack of trying). If it wasn't for the school sending breakfast/lunches for my kids I don't know what I would do. I've never felt so broke and alone in my life and if the PPP loan (I have applied 4 times and have heard nothing each time) doesn't come through, I don't even know if I can get back on my feet and open. I have no idea what I'm going to do at that point. I will have no job, no place to live, no income and 5 mouths to feed. So disappointed in NYS right now.”

Participants provided insights about the supports that could help them reopen and recover. Specifically, program leaders are seeking clear and consistent guidance about reopening procedures and policies related to health and safety as well as health and safety supplies. One participant articulated her concerns regarding all the uncertainty, as follows:

“Do we have supplies? ... Do we have gloves to change diapers? Do we have gloves to feed the children? Will we be wearing masks? Will infants be wearing masks? How do we keep infants 6 feet from one another? ...I would like to be able to do my job the best I can to protect the health of each of the infants in my care, and to protect my co-workers, and to protect myself and in turn protect my family and the community at large.”

KEY FINDINGS

- Government-issued recommendations, especially in NYC, led the majority of programs to terminate in-person services, but many also decided that it was unsafe to remain fully open.
- A majority of the participants are engaging in remote instruction and almost 1 in 5 participants' programs are closed, providing no services.
- Most programs intend to reopen yet there is tremendous uncertainty about when and how this will happen.
- Programs that are supported by family fees represent the majority that have closed and have furloughed or laid off staff.
- 20% of the participants are unemployed and experiencing great financial stress.

REMOTE INSTRUCTION

COVID-19 required the closure of school buildings across the state and all licensed child care centers in New York City. During this period, most survey participants reported that they were engaging children and families through remote instruction.

For the percentage of the state's ECE programs that are funded by the NYC DOE, the Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) issued guidance, indicating that "all DOE-contracted programs are expected to offer remote instruction during the closure period, including emergency child care centers that have enrolled children who are not receiving on-site services." To assist educators, DECE has provided resources for programs and families that are available on the DOE's [InfoHub](#) and [family website](#). Site support staff continued their work remotely, and a device-lending program was implemented that provided approximately 22,000 devices for families with young children.

Although these supports have been important for the educators and families enrolled in those sites with DECE support, a significant portion of the more than 13,000 licensed ECE programs throughout the state are not publicly financed and do not have this level of public investment to support remote instruction.

Survey participants noted that they are engaging children and families using a variety of techniques that involve synchronous learning, such as live video morning meetings, as well as asynchronous learning, such as pre-recorded story times.

- The most prevalent remote instructional strategies was sending emails or texts with activities or assignments for families to do with children followed by individual calls and emails.
- Small group video meetings were the least prevalent strategy used.

Voices from the Field

Participants reported several challenges with providing remote instruction. Teachers, leaders, and parents need support thinking through the challenge of providing developmentally appropriate early learning experiences, particularly for infants and toddlers. One participant suggested:

"A curriculum specifically built for at home learning. Not making a school learning curriculum fit at home. For example, center times in 3k for all cannot be the same at home."

Furthermore, certain respondents raised key issues of appropriately supporting children's developmental variation and emerging multilingualism, while also maintaining compliance with regulatory requirements, with one calling for,

"A universal policy that provides DAP [developmentally appropriate practice] allowance for children with special education services. Children receiving only community-based services have to participate for the full length of the IEP service time for the therapist or special educator to be paid for preschool special ed community-based services (not center based)."

Participants also expressed concern and stress associated with the demands of remote instruction and noted that expectations need to be consistent and realistic, especially related to documentation.

"I am working harder now, and for more hours, than I did at school. The families have different needs, time schedules and some are very disorganized in their new lifestyles. The amount of documentation required is enormous."

Finally, participants expressed the need for greater access to hands-on learning materials and technology for teachers and families:

“Some of our families do not have the simple supplies at home (no crayons, paper, puzzles etc.) and that is one of our biggest challenges. We try to be creative and help them use household items. Our families are overwhelmed (stress, money issues, illness) and we talk to them and help in any way we can.”

KEY FINDINGS

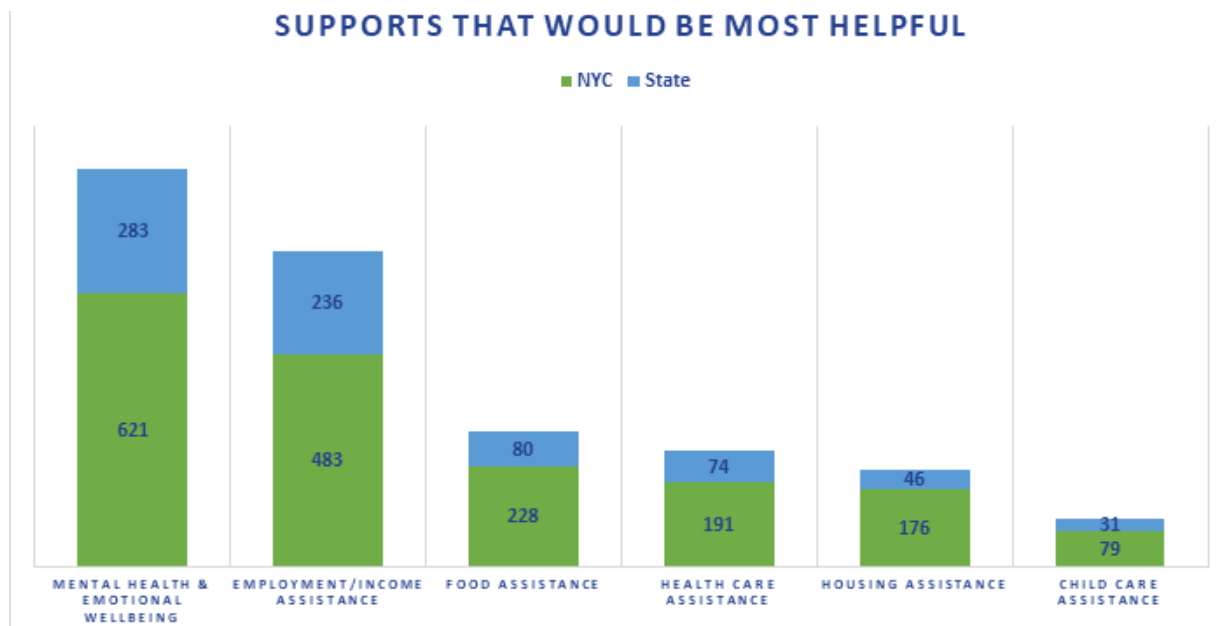
- Across the state, the most prevalent remote instructional strategies were sending emails or texts with activities or assignments for families to do with children, followed by individual calls and emails.
- The following strategies are recommended to improve remote instruction:
 - » Engage children and families with developmentally appropriate and responsive approaches
 - » Shift expectations to emphasize emotional and mental well-being for educators, children, and their families
 - » Provide greater access to developmentally appropriate learning materials
 - » Offer greater supports for educators working with children with special needs
 - » Limit documentation demands

PERSONAL WELL-BEING

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many stressors. The survey participants repeatedly addressed their well-being throughout the responses. It is clear from the data that the ECE workforce has experienced stress related to their own and their family members’ health and emotional well-being.

Main Stressors Affecting Respondents

- Emotional Health/Health Stressors: 90% in the state said they were affected and 91% in NYC said they were affected
- Physical Health of Family/Neighbors/Coworkers: 89% in NYC were affected and 84% in the state were affected



KEY FINDINGS

- Across the state, the pandemic has caused tremendous strain on educators' emotional well-being.
- In New York City, more than 25% have experienced loss of loved ones.
- The most helpful supports would address educators' mental health and emotional well-being.

Voices from the Field

The respondents spoke of the great impact of the pandemic and the uncertainty that lies ahead. Educators described many contributors to this increased stress, with some expressing thoughts of depression. For example, one participant shared:

"The impact of trauma has been heavy. Not only for our children and families, but also for our teachers and ourselves. Real grief is being experienced in real time and vicariously. Our profession does not do enough to support teachers with trauma informed care, nor does it educate leaders in trauma informed supervision. COVID 19 is a collective trauma and the aftermath will change all of us."

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this survey was to provide a snapshot of how the field was faring during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to stimulate dialogue to help the field navigate this crisis. As we look forward and consider the recovery of the early childhood system, we are underscoring several key take-aways from the survey that have significant implications which warrant ongoing discussion with stakeholders from across the field. In our brief discussion of the findings and associated implications we address: (1) mental health and emotional well-being; (2) program and employment status; and (3) remote instruction.

Mental Health and Emotional Well-being

The survey respondents' top request was for needed support with their mental health and emotional well-being (n=910). This raises questions about how early childhood educators can be better supported, both for their wellness but also because of their role in supporting children and their families:

- What policies and practices can be shifted to alleviate educators' work-related stress?
- What mechanisms are in place or need to be developed to address early childhood educators' need for mental health support?
- How can educators be supported to incorporate trauma-informed practices into their work?

Program and Employment Status

While professionals' well-being was an issue that extended across program types, the results from this survey raise important issues regarding program and employment status. The findings support a hypothesis that programs that rely on family fees are struggling and need support. Further, while there is optimism about ECE programs reopening, there is also uncertainty about this possibility, with program leaders identifying financial assistance as the top program support needed for reopening (n=294). ECE financing is a large policy issue that will not be resolved in the short term. However, there are both current and proposed supports that may address survey respondents' needs, such as the Payroll Protection Program (PPP). Questions raised from this survey include:

- What are existing structures or mechanisms to address programs' need for financial support?

- How might coordinated information and application assistance for the PPP be provided to the field?
- What federal, state, and local resources can be leveraged to stabilize early childhood programs?
- What structures or mechanisms exist or need to be developed to address individual professionals' need for financial support, either for programs who cannot reopen or for those that close in the future?
- For professionals who are unable to return to their previous employer, how might they be assisted to stay in the field?
- How might coordinated information and unemployment insurance application assistance be provided to individuals?
- In what ways are providers and parents included in deliberations about safety guidelines?
- How will health and safety guidance for reopening be communicated with educators, leaders, and parents?

Remote Instruction

Because the majority of respondents were engaged in remote instruction (64% overall) and, given the uncertainties about the future spread of COVID-19, there is a reasonable possibility that some versions of remote work will remain a feature of the ongoing pandemic. Therefore, attention is needed to ensure that technologically-mediated approaches are supportive of children, families, and educators. Key questions include:

- What policies and practices can be shifted to alleviate educators' work-related stress?
- What are the existing structures or mechanisms for supporting teachers as they navigate these unprecedented practice dilemmas?
- How can distance learning strategies that are responsive, flexible, and supportive of families and their young children be emphasized? These include strategies that:
 - » Bolster families' resources and assets
 - » Recognize families' pandemic-related challenges
 - » Look to promising practices from home visiting programs that emphasize family and child connections
 - » Provide key learning materials so children can engage in hands-on, developmentally meaningful learning
 - » Limit documentation demands that are a source of stress for educators
- How might the field's collective creativity be mobilized and shared?

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this survey was to collect and analyze data to identify patterns, illuminate challenges, and consider important issues in the ECE field. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched resources in the already challenged ECE field. It has also highlighted longstanding structural inequities and fragmentation within the system. The ECE field impacts the well-being of many including individual families and teachers. It is also a vital part of the state's economy. As we consider re-opening it is incumbent upon us all to generate short-term and long-term change to stabilize and strengthen our early childhood system.

[Read the full survey report](#)