



## **CALIFORNIA'S EARLY LEARNING AND CARE PROVIDERS**

### Essential Workers Who Need Support

**The COVID-19 pandemic** has required communities across the state to wrestle with difficult questions about how to protect members of their community while still delivering critical services. On March 19, 2020, Governor Newsom issued a stay-at-home order “to protect the health and wellbeing of all Californians,” requesting that Californians “stay home except as needed to maintain the continuity of 16 work sectors identified by the federal government as essential to maintaining national infrastructure.” Although not officially considered an essential service, the Early Learning and Care system in California provides one of the most critical services to our state: supporting children’s early learning and development while enabling parents to work in those 16 work sectors and beyond. The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in widespread program closures, and the system was recently described in a [report by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment \(CSCCE\)](#) as being “at the brink,” with many programs in danger of closing for good. In addition, [advocates and stakeholders have raised concerns](#) that proposed cuts to the [state budget](#) further threaten the fragile Early Learning system.

To further understand the challenges faced by early educators and caregivers, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Early Edge California conducted seven focus groups in May with 32 Early Learning providers (including administrators, teachers, and caregivers) who work in a variety of settings (school-based; center-based; Head Start; State Preschool; family child care homes; and family, friend and neighbor care) across the state. Most

providers from center- and school-based programs, whether publicly funded or private-pay, told us they were closed for the direct provision of on-site care while the state was under stay-at-home orders. However, some centers, family child care (FCC) homes, and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care providers reported that they are serving families of essential workers and other at-risk populations. Regardless, all sites reported providing supports to families through some form of communication, distance learning, or other assistance, such as connecting families to resources.

These conversations revealed that providers are showing continued dedication to the children and families in their programs during the pandemic, and are developing creative approaches to serving and engaging them. At the same time, the pandemic has imposed severe financial, professional, and personal challenges on Early Learning programs across the state. In particular, providers highlighted the challenge of meeting the needs of dual language learners (DLLs)—the children learning two or more languages who make up 60% of the state's under-5 population—during the COVID-19 disruptions. Amid the challenges and uncertainty, they described the resources needed to continue limited operations during the pandemic, as well as to prepare for a full-scale reopening. Key findings from the focus groups are presented below.

## Early Learning Providers Are Essential to Families and Communities



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*A lot of focus is on essential workers... but we are essential to those essential workers.*

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**Early learning providers are committed to their children and families and are going to great lengths to support them during this crisis.**

Even though children may be absent from the classroom, providers are working harder than ever to help meet children's needs. Early learning providers across the state are reaching

out to maintain their connections to families. Even staff who are no longer getting paid due to program closures or who are being furloughed reported that they check in regularly with families and children and help as they can.

And communication with families goes beyond providing learning resources or ideas for the children—it also includes helping families find food, access physical and mental health supports in the community, and navigate technology. One participant said she opened each call with parents by asking, “How are you doing, and how can I help you?” Providers' relationships with families form the foundation for learning opportunities for children. As one provider explained, “Just connect. Connect with your families. Yes, teach—but connecting is first.”

**Providers are finding creative and flexible ways to support children's learning and needs during the closures.** Providers reported offering a range of ways for children and families to engage from a distance. They are adapting activities to respond to individual differences in how children under age 5 engage, stay focused, and learn. Providers reported connecting with children in real time for class meetings or circle time on virtual platforms, recording and posting videos of book readings and activities online, and delivering activity packets to children's homes. Responding with flexibility to families' concerns about competing demands of work, older children, and household tasks, some providers now offer multiple times for virtual class meetings. Others offer a variety of offline activities families can do whenever it is convenient for them. One provider, acknowledging that distance learning on a virtual platform might put additional strain on families during this already stressful time, has told families they can instead choose to reach out to her individually, any time, to connect one on one. Another provider emphasized the need for flexibility when using a virtual platform with 4- and 5-year-olds: *"You might have a plan, but then they're going to be like, 'See my dog! Oh, I want to show my cat!' And so, a lot of times it goes where they want to go, because they're just excited to see their teacher, which is good too."*

**In some cases, providers have taken advantage of the stay-at-home order to strengthen the engagement of families in their children's learning.** Because parents are generally present—often side by side—with their children during these virtual meetings or home activities, they are observing firsthand how the teacher supports their child's learning and social-emotional needs. The providers described posting videos that model particular practices (for example, reading books aloud, or singing chants or rhymes) as a way to help parents support their children's learning. Participants also reported troubleshooting behavioral or social-emotional concerns during conversations with parents, providing suggestions for how to support their children.

**Some providers are finding ways to connect with DLL families, serving as a valuable support and resource during the pandemic.** As described in the next section, one notable challenge identified by the focus group participants was engaging DLL children and families in their homes during the pandemic. But we heard success stories here as well. Some programs have multilingual staff who are able to connect directly with these families and provide support. Others have found technology solutions, such as using parent communication apps that translate teacher messages into the family's home language. Providers highlighted communication with DLL families as especially important because the providers are often a primary conduit for community connections for these families. One provider explained that *"the connection that we are trying to keep—that's really priceless."* In addition to finding ways to communicate across languages, providers are also learning from parents about their linguistic and cultural customs at home—hearing about parents and children making tortillas side by side, engaging in oral storytelling, or singing songs together in their family's home language. [Research](#) suggests that children benefit from these rich home language experiences, as a strong home language foundation can facilitate English language acquisition over time. Some providers are using the closures as an opportunity to encourage parents to use their home language with their children. Although the challenges of distance learning, especially for this young group of DLLs, can be overwhelming, the potential for increased learning opportunities at home and deeper family–school connections is a bright spot that could be built upon in the future.



## Providers Face Significant Financial, Professional, and Personal Challenges



“*We’re in the dark about what we’re supposed to be doing.*”

### Limited, delayed, and changing guidance has left providers to figure things out on their own.

Early learning and care was not named in the March 2019 stay-at-home order as an essential work sector, and guidance for providers related to COVID-19 has varied by setting and funding source. The California Department of Social Services left the decision about whether an Early Learning facility

should close to the discretion of the licensee (unless it was ordered to close by local, state, or federal authorities). Some programs stopped providing any onsite child care in mid-March; others stayed open to serve children of essential workers or children in certain at-risk categories, such as children who are homeless or in foster care.

Most providers said they were not getting enough information, or that the information was not always timely or helpful. According to one provider in a state-funded program, “*There was a period of maybe 2 weeks where no communication was going out... We didn’t know how long it was going to be until we were able to go back.*” One FCC provider explained, “*In the beginning, it was really unclear if we could stay open and what that meant.*” The Child Care Program Office of the Community Care Licensing Division has since hosted calls to provide licensees with more information about topics related to COVID-19 and to address questions about licensed facilities. However, not all providers in the focus groups were aware of these calls, and some were unable to join the calls due to call capacity issues, so uncertainty lingers.

**The COVID-19 crisis has taken a financial toll on Early Learning programs.** According to [research by CSCCE](#), nearly two thirds of programs that were open in mid-April said they could not weather a closure of more than a month. In an effort to help state-contracted programs during the pandemic, California is offering them payment through June 30, even if the children they were contracted to serve cannot attend. But private centers and home-based programs rely on tuition payments from families to stay afloat, and programs that are closed have seen their incomes cut substantially. As one FCC provider shared, she “*struggles every month*” over whether to request tuition fees from her families, since the children are not able to attend. “*I haven’t even billed my parents, just because I’m having a hard time billing them when their kids are not here. It has been very difficult for me... It breaks my heart dearly. And then I think—I have to pay my bills myself. So it puts me in a tough spot too.*” Even some programs that are open have reported that parents are sometimes opting not to send their children, either out of concern for their own children’s safety or for fear that their children will expose other children or staff to the virus.

Without tuition, whether because the program is closed or because families are afraid to bring their children, some programs have had to furlough staff. CSCCE estimates that 78% of programs have made staffing changes, including reducing benefits or letting staff go. Programs that have reduced their capacity and are focusing on serving the children of essential workers also told us they have eliminated staff positions.

### Programs that are still open struggle to get the supplies they need.

Sites that are open are still facing resource challenges. For example, securing food for the children in their care has been challenging for some. One provider who is serving 10 children could not find a vendor to deliver meals to the program because it was not financially feasible to fulfill such a small order. As a result, this provider said, *“I’m picking [food] up at the local grab-and-go from the school sites every day—picking it up and dropping it off at the center—because I can’t get anybody to help us.”* And something that has become universally challenging—shopping at the grocery store—is a major concern for another FCC provider, who said, *“Just to go grab a gallon of milk or bread and the shelf [is] cleared... [it’s difficult] not knowing how I’m going to provide for the kids that I do have in my care.”*

Providers from all types of programs also noted that obtaining enough cleaning supplies to meet health and safety requirements has been a struggle.



### Distance learning is a significant challenge, and providers need more guidance and the resources to do it well.

With the institution of the stay-at-home order, many Early Learning programs had to abruptly switch from serving children in their home or center to providing learning opportunities from a distance. While many providers have taken on this challenge, it is not without costs. For example, not all staff have the hardware (e.g., computers or tablets), software (e.g., subscriptions to virtual meeting platforms), or high-speed internet access they need to provide distance learning from their homes, and their programs may not have the funds to cover these costs. Providers noted that many families lack adequate access to technology as well, limiting the reach of their distance learning efforts.

Even with sufficient access, though, providing virtual learning experiences for very young children is fraught with challenges, and most providers have not received sufficient training on how to do it. Providers noted that many children are simply too young to pay attention for long periods, and their parents are often busy helping their older children with online schoolwork and cannot participate in online sessions with their preschooler. In addition, families participating in distance learning often do not have the materials (e.g., art supplies, paper, scissors) needed to do lessons or activities, whether these activities are introduced virtually or not. Providers also struggle with how to promote and provide distance learning without putting additional stress and burden on families. One provider noted, *“I think you could do too much. You could send too much information and then it just goes out the window.”* Some balance is needed between continuing children’s learning and recognizing families’ limited capacity.

**Providers are uncertain about how to best serve DLLs.** Although providers described their extra efforts to connect with families of DLLs, supporting the learning of DLL children was noted as a particular challenge. With personnel reductions due to closures or changes in program capacity, multilingual staff or interpreters may be less available to support children. The added language barrier with DLL children and their families makes including them in a meaningful way or providing the individualized support they need even more challenging. Providers also expressed uncertainty about best practices for serving DLLs in distance learning or appropriately adapting

in-person practices for DLLs to distance learning. Providers noted that they need *“more technical support, more strategies and also... [support for] helping the educators and the families understand dual language learning.”* The challenge of supporting DLLs is compounded by the distance learning context, where educators lack *“access to the multisensory experiences...the visuals and the prompts and the materials”* that are important for bringing learning experiences to life for DLLs. DLL families may also have more limited technology resources, creating an additional barrier to access.

**In a crisis, providers could benefit from being part of an established infrastructure.** Although all providers we spoke with described facing numerous challenges, subsidized programs and those with established infrastructures, such as school district programs, reported having more resources and support. For example, among programs providing distance learning to children, state- and federally contracted programs or those with dedicated public funding seemed more likely to have sufficient funds to purchase materials and supports for families' use at home, compared to private-pay programs, which were charging partial or no tuition during the program closures and thus had limited funds available. Some school-based and Head Start programs reported that they were even able to set families up with hotspots for internet access so they could take part in the virtual lessons online in real time. In addition, while most providers were feeling in the dark about how to operate in this new context, whether through distance learning or in-person care, some of the Head Start providers reported being overwhelmed by *too much* information. One of these contracted providers explained, *“We're getting so much training now [that] I just want to ask for a break. That's it. I don't want one more thing.”* Other providers that are connected with their county's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) said they were also receiving guidance and resources on various topics.

Home-based providers, which lack a connection to a larger agency and often are not connected to a network of providers, reported having access to fewer resources and less guidance on best practices during the COVID-19 disruptions. As one provider put it, FCC providers are *“kind of last”* when it comes to receiving support. But if licensed centers and school-based programs continue to remain closed or open at a reduced capacity, parents may increasingly turn to FCC or FFN providers, and those providers are going to need more support and guidance.

**The stress of the pandemic is straining Early Learning providers' emotional wellbeing.** Uncertainty about the virus and about their jobs has been stressful for providers. As one focus group participant shared, *“Things just keep changing and it feels really uncertain...and knowing there might be a resurgence”* of the virus is a major concern. In a time when families are being encouraged to shelter in place within their households, home-based providers are faced with the difficult decision of whether to allow others into their homes.

FFN providers that we spoke with shared that the challenging economic conditions were a driving force in their decision to continue caring for children in their homes, even though they feel anxious and concerned about the safety of both their families and the children they serve. One such FFN provider was not planning to take in children during the quarantine, but when a parent told her they could not pay bills unless they themselves went to work in the strawberry fields, she agreed to watch their children.

Providers also reported working extended hours to accommodate the schedules of the families they serve—often while simultaneously tending to their own families' needs, distance learning, and challenges caused by the pandemic. One provider said she is working up to 15 hours a day, adding, *“In order for the federal government to pay out, we have to be able to say we're doing this, that, and the other.”* Providers also reported worrying about their families, their business, and their staff, some of whom they have had to let go. This adds to the emotional toll of the pandemic.

# Early Learning Providers Need Support



Early learning and care is an essential service, and Early Learning systems serve a critical role for families, the economy, and communities. While Early Learning providers—administrators, educators, and caregivers—have shown themselves to be creative and highly dedicated to their families during the pandemic, the Early Learning system in California faces great challenges both now and along the road ahead. Based on our conversations with providers across the state, we recommend the following actions to maintain and strengthen California’s Early Learning system:

1. **Continue to fund state-contracted programs.** Continue to support publicly funded Early Learning programs, which serve as a critical resource for families and communities, both during the crisis and in the transition to a return to the workplace.
2. **Support home-based care through local and statewide networks.** Develop and leverage existing networks, such as Family Child Care Home Education Networks, to provide family child care providers with timely guidance, access to personal protective equipment (PPE), and other relevant resources. Facilitate connections between these networks and other efforts to reach out to family, friend, and neighbor care providers.
3. **Support private programs with guidance and access to resources.** Provide support, guidance, and access to adequate PPE to independent centers that are not part of an existing infrastructure or system—for example, through Child Care Resource and Referral agencies or Quality Counts California hubs.
4. **Provide guidance for all programs on how to operate in the new context.** Disseminate guidance for maintaining quality early learning experiences when reopening programs with reduced group sizes and social distancing. The state’s [Early Learning & Care Playbook](#) provides some of this information and should be updated, maintained, and disseminated widely.
5. **Ensure all programs and families have access to technology and resources to meet basic needs.** Strengthen infrastructure to ensure programs can facilitate access to food and other basic needs for families, especially during times of crisis. Consider ways to expand access to technology for programs and families to support equity in learning opportunities.
6. **Share distance learning resources with all programs.** Curate, consolidate, and widely disseminate resources and guidance at the state level regarding modes and strategies for distance learning that are developmentally appropriate for children under age 5. Current efforts to compile [resources on how to support learning at home](#) and to share [best practices for virtual book reading](#), for example, could be built upon to address this need.
7. **Help programs better support DLLs in distance learning.** Provide guidance, training, and resources to providers on specific strategies for engaging DLLs and their families in distance learning and ways to promote home language development at home. An initial [list of resources specifically for DLLs](#) provides a starting point for this work.

8. **Capitalize on connections with families to strengthen engagement.** Programs should build on the connections and communication between families and providers to encourage families to engage their children in developmentally appropriate learning activities and foster learning through everyday activities.
9. **Share resources with DLL families to promote home language development.** Develop and disseminate guidance and resources to families of DLLs about ways to support home language development and learning at home.
10. **Support Early Learning providers as people.** Provide support for Early Learning staff wellbeing, including physical and mental health services. Consider pay increases or other financial supports for providers who are at increased risk of COVID-19 infection.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted—and deepened—cracks in the Early Learning and Care system. Although the state budget is stretched thin, the system is part of California’s critical infrastructure, and responding to these immediate needs is a first step toward filling the cracks and strengthening the system for all children.

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*[Early Edge California](#) is a nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to improving access to high-quality Early Learning experiences for all California children so they can have a strong foundation for future success.*

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