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HISTORIC CRISIS, HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY:

USING EVIDENCE TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF
THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON YOUNG CHILDREN AND
EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The COVID-19 crisis upended life for young children, their families, and the early care and education (ECE) programs that serve them. Researchers around the country have written over 300 reports to capture these challenges and inform decision making. But the sheer volume of reports and findings has been oftentimes overwhelming, especially for leaders inundated with urgent, day-to-day demands.

This brief synthesizes the evidence on the pandemic's impact on **young children's learning** and on the **ECE programs and teachers** that play a critical role in the lives of young children, families, and the U.S. economy. Leaders need a

clear understanding of the pandemic's impact, particularly as the Biden administration makes historic investments in ECE. To meet this need, our team of early childhood experts synthesized findings from **76 high-quality studies**, spanning 16 national studies, 45 studies from 31 states, and 15 local studies. We then collaborated with ECE policy and practice leaders from multiple states to identify **actionable, evidence-backed, and equity-centered solutions** for addressing young children's immediate needs, stabilizing hard-hit ECE programs, supporting early educators, and mitigating longer-term ramifications of the crisis. We also offer suggestions to guide future research on the ongoing effects of the crisis and recovery efforts.



REGARDING THE IMPACTS OF THE CRISIS ON YOUNG CHILDREN, WE FIND:

- Some of the necessary changes that were made to young children's in-person learning environments to enhance safety were not conducive to learning and social skill development.
- Remote/hybrid learning was challenging for children, families, and teachers and resulted in significantly less learning time and lower-quality instruction.
- Young children's learning and development suffered setbacks during the crisis.
- Effects of the crisis have not been born equally. Children of color, dual language learners, and children from families with low incomes appear to have been more negatively affected. Young children with special needs may not have been identified and may not have gotten the services they needed to thrive.

The equity-centered, evidence-backed solutions for mitigating the effects that we detail in this brief include actionable recommendations aimed at **accelerating children's learning, supporting the whole child, partnering with families, increasing support to the workforce, and accelerating the creation of a coherent ECE system.**

ON THE IMPACTS OF THE CRISIS ON ECE PROGRAMS AND EARLY EDUCATORS, WE FIND:

- The public health emergency highlighted pre-existing inequalities across early childhood program types. Child care centers and family child care homes experienced serious financial challenges that made it difficult to operate. In contrast, public schools and Head Start programs experienced more stable funding and were not as affected.
- Early stabilization efforts left substantial unmet needs, particularly in child care centers and in family child care homes. Pandemic recovery continues to be uneven, with tremendous need for new funding and professional supports.
- The pandemic increased the complexity of early educators' jobs across all program types, in ways that negatively impacted teachers' mental health. Teachers reported high levels of stress and depressive symptoms, as well as concerns that these challenges would affect their ability to provide high-quality experiences for young children.
- More challenging working conditions, financial concerns, and mental health struggles may have contributed to programs' challenges recruiting and retaining teachers. Data from fall 2020 and spring 2021 suggest that teachers' commitment to both their jobs and ECE in general has decreased, and providers are struggling to hire qualified teachers.

In the short term, this brief aims to help policymakers make evidence-informed choices about how to leverage new resources. Ultimately, it aims to support efforts to build a stronger ECE system that meets the needs of all children and families and that supports all ECE programs and teachers to provide the high-quality learning opportunities young children need to thrive.