

Executive Summary

Building Resilience Capacities in Early Learning

March 2020 was a pivotal month, as COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization and its effects began to manifest across the United States. Like other social service systems, the **nation's early learning systems** and their complex web of stakeholders—formal and informal providers and caregivers, learners, families, and public officials—were immediately and severely affected.

Yet amidst unprecedented challenges that spotlighted the inequity and insufficiency of our public safety net, the pandemic also offered a unique inflection point where early learning system stakeholders could reimagine and advocate for an alternate vision of early learning: where all families have access to high-quality care through which their children can thrive.

In this exploratory brief, we examine the concept of **system resilience** in early learning systems against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. During spring and summer 2021, we drew findings from more than 75 sources (including national and local newspapers, education think tanks and journals, philanthropic organizations and journals, and other national associations and research organizations), as well as 17 interviews with national, state, and local early learning stakeholders (including educators, public officials, organizers, and advocates).

This brief is designed to inform public system leaders and private funders who are working to create resilient, equitable early learning systems. It highlights vulnerabilities in early learning systems; elevates lessons from the pandemic about the resilience capabilities, or assets and resources, that stakeholders used to stabilize systems; and shares recommendations for enabling equity-oriented transformation of our early learning systems.



1

Early Childhood Learning System Vulnerabilities

To what extent were early learning systems ready to withstand the shock of COVID-19, and what unfolded as a result?

Early learning systems neither anticipated nor planned for a global pandemic. During temporary mandatory shutdowns, early care and education centers were unable to provide reliable, essential services to most families. The disruption in the system was especially felt by marginalized communities, where affordable childcare deserts prevailed before the pandemic, increasing the likelihood that these families would not find care within their communities during widespread closures. Our research elevates three conditions that caused early learning systems to be especially vulnerable to service disruption.

Condition #1: Financial Volatility and Instability

Early learning revenue structures have critical limitations, including high costs and short supply, making it difficult for providers to maintain financial stability. Many providers utilize a business model with attendance-based rather than enrollment-based reimbursement. In this case, when children cannot attend, the centers lose revenue. Reliance on family and caregiver contributions to supplement reimbursements means that families' job and income losses become childcare providers' financial losses.

Condition #2: Public Devaluing of Early Learning

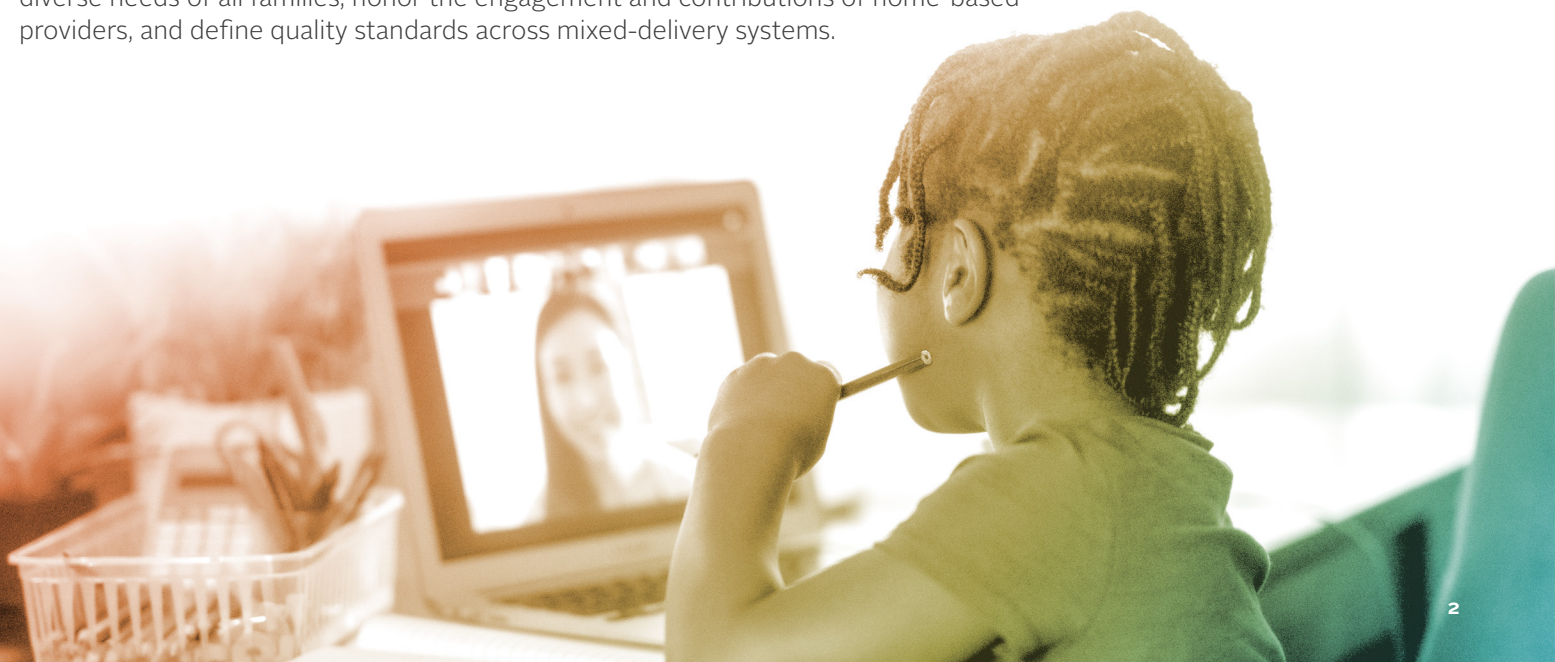
Challenging public narratives continue to influence early learning systems and can manifest in inadequate and inequitable funding formulas. The following myths have taken root in public mindsets.

Myth #1: Access to early learning options and quality childcare is not a right. Early learning has been widely treated as a commodity that families can choose to pay for, rather than a public good that every family and child deserves.

Myth #2: Early educators are not as important as other educators. Unlike many K-12 workers, who could rely on continued pay and benefits in the aftermath of the pandemic, many early learning workers could not count on these benefits being extended despite the essential nature of their work and their exposure to infection.

Condition #3: Lack of Provider and Family Voice in Policymaking

When policies and decisions pertaining to early learning systems are not designed or informed by those most proximate to children (i.e., families and practitioners), they often miss the mark, affecting quality of care and diminishing outcomes for learners. When families and providers have a voice in policy making, discussions of "quality" are informed by their experiences with and contributions to the system. By listening to these constituents, policymakers can better meet the diverse needs of all families, honor the engagement and contributions of home-based providers, and define quality standards across mixed-delivery systems.



2

Early Childhood Learning System Resilience Capacities

What enabled response and recovery in early learning systems?

While response and recovery efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic varied from community to community, four critical “**resilience capacities**” emerged from our research as essential to quickly getting providers and families back on their feet. Our analysis suggests that system actors can cultivate these capacities to stabilize and strengthen early learning systems ahead of future system shocks.

1 Well-Networked Community-Based Organizations

In early learning systems nationally, membership organizations and local coalitions have long played a vital role. They connect residents, families, and organizations to broader networks; leverage established relationships and institutional knowledge of provider needs and community resources and assets; serve as liaisons between state agencies and providers; and advocate for policies and funding to support and advance early learning efforts. These local networks and community-based organizations (CBOs) expedited pandemic response and recovery efforts within their communities by facilitating resource and information distribution from state agencies to families and providers.

2 Community-Centered Leadership

State education and organizational leaders had to navigate unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis. Effective, empathetic leaders sought to limit the harm to learners, families, and providers, while stabilizing early learning systems so that services could be safely provided. One critical leadership attribute that facilitated system response and recovery was knowledge about the needs of providers and families to inform equitable policy change, strategies, and decisions.

3 Flexible Resource Policies

The pandemic elevated the role that consistent and reliable funding plays in ensuring system stability. In a crisis, steady funding helps the workforce stay intact and ensures providers can purchase supplies or resources necessary for any pivot. Following initial destabilization due to the pandemic, local systems modified existing resource and funding distribution policies and practices to expedite providers’ access to resources.

4 Useful Data

Public officials and local organizations leveraged valid, reliable data to inform their decisions and strategies, improve programs and services for residents, advocate for policy changes and funding, and communicate to internal and external stakeholders. Existing investments in data systems and infrastructure supported response and recovery by documenting the impact of the pandemic and informing decisions on how to intervene.



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Looking Ahead

What can public leaders and private funders do to support resilient early learning systems moving forward?

The four resilience capacities helped limit the immediate impacts of the pandemic from causing deeper harm in communities. While those capacities supported response and recovery efforts, they stopped short of transforming early learning systems to withstand future crises and to support equitable access, delivery, and outcomes for learners and families. Below, we highlight several ways that state leaders and funders can enable transformation in early learning systems. These shifts in mindset, policy, and practice directly address the system vulnerabilities named above by creating a more inclusive decision-making process, expanding affordable care options, and improving working conditions for early learning practitioners.

Recommendations for State-Level Leaders:

- 1 Provider and family voices:** Center provider and family voices in decision-making processes focused on early learning policies—for example, by liaising with intermediary organizations that serve as a bridge between state agencies and communities.
- 2 Accessibility and affordability:** Make high-quality childcare and Pre-K widely accessible and affordable for all families by increasing public funding streams to minimize, or remove, the financial burden of daycare and expanding free and affordable childcare and Pre-K options.
- 3 Workforce improvements:** Improve working conditions for early learning practitioners by standardizing family-sustaining salaries and benefits.

Recommendations for Philanthropy:

- 1 Advocacy:** Support long-term, flexible funding and technical assistance for advocacy and community organizing that serves organizations representing provider and family needs.
- 2 Research:** Consider supporting a robust research agenda that provides trustworthy and reliable information to support system actors in decision-making. For example, research the short- and long-term impacts that the pandemic has had and continues to have on children's academic and social emotional development.
- 3 Narrative change:** Support efforts to shift existing narratives of early learning that diminish the value of the sector's contributions to society. For example, support public awareness campaigns about early learning that explain its role as a "public good" that benefits not only families but also the economic well-being of broader communities.
- 4 Collaboration:** Use convening power, relationships, and access to bring together the many disparate stakeholders in early learning to jointly consider challenges, opportunities, and solutions within local early learning systems.

