A review of high-quality practices at nine sites for the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program

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CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We provide high-quality research, technical assistance, professional development, and evaluation services that address the most pressing education needs in our region and across the country. Through an equity-centered approach, we collaborate to support learners of every age on their path to and through education and training after high school.

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Overview

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) administers and operates a state-funded preschool program called the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). To inform systemwide improvements in the program, the department contracted with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative study of nine sites across the state. The goal of the study was to identify unique or innovative practices and provide recommendations for scaling these practices across the state in alignment with five domains in the ECEAP Performance Standards: family engagement and partnerships, use of an evidence-based and culturally relevant curriculum, fostering supportive adult-child interactions, measuring and supporting child outcomes, and professional development and training.

Methodology

Education Northwest conducted interviews and focus groups at each of the nine sites with administrators, teachers, family support specialists, and families. In addition, analysis included a review of documents collected from each site and administrative data provided by DCYF. The analysis focused on the qualitative data (i.e., interviews and focus groups). Other data sources provided background information to support interpretation and triangulation during analysis.

Findings

Family engagement and partnerships

Most sites have well-established structures for building relationships and trust with families. This process begins when families first interact with staff members during enrollment and continues through regular family conferences; home visits; daily check-ins at pick-up and drop-off times; and communication through apps, texting, and newsletters.

> *"I think one of the most important things in how this site in particular is breaking down those barriers is going slow at first and inviting families in, taking that time before school starts to have one-on-one family meetings. And they have a group meeting to try to start building that community. And then within that community, it just starts to spread where [families] are feeling welcome."*
>
> — Administrator

Family support is a strength of ECEAP. Staff members go to extraordinary lengths to identify and address the needs of enrolled families. Sites partner with local organizations to provide essential resources to families, and family support specialists offer personal assistance and advocacy for families to access other necessary services and supports.

Evidence-based and culturally relevant curricula

All nine sites in the study use The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool as their primary curriculum, which staff members and families find engaging and relevant to children's lives. Sites enrich and broaden their programming by using a variety of supplemental curricula.

> *"Now we're looking more at the relevance of the curriculum and the classroom... Am I reading books with children who may come from a home with two moms or just one dad or living with grandma and grandpa? How am I incorporating that to make sure the things I have in my centers and the things I do reflect the dynamics of the families I'm teaching?"*
>
> — Administrator

Fostering supportive adult-child interactions

All sites foster supportive adult-child interactions and prioritize building relationships with children. These relationships are established at the beginning of each school year and reinforced daily and are essential for supporting play, learning, and navigating challenges children face. At some sites, social-emotional curricula (e.g., Conscious Discipline) or districtwide programs like Positive Behavior Supports create a common language and structure around behavior management.

> *"I've seen that they tried to get to his level, find out what he needs, and it's nice that they actually try to understand him as a person, not just get lost in the midst, and do what he needs so we feel comfortable, and can find his interests, which helps him."*
>
> — Family member

Measuring and supporting child outcomes

ECEAP sites use a variety of strategies to measure and support children's learning and development. Information from these assessments is used to guide referrals, individualized supports, and classroom instruction. Families value the opportunity to learn about their child's progress and develop goals. ECEAP staff members noted that there has been an increased need for individualized supports and accommodations in recent years. ECEAP sites also use a range of strategies to measure and support children's readiness for kindergarten, in addition to facilitating registration and enrollment for families and providing information to kindergarten teachers to ensure families experienced a seamless transition.

Professional development and training

ECEAP staff members appreciate the variety and flexibility of professional development and training opportunities they receive. Most ECEAP teachers and staff members prefer in-person trainings (on- or off-site, but preferably local) with practical opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge and strategies. Teachers and staff members with young children at home expressed appreciation for the convenience of virtual trainings. Some of the trainings that ECEAP staff members found most useful included Mobility Mentoring®; trauma-informed practices; self-care; behavioral support; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. Staff members also reported that trainings provided through community learning events, and on-site consultation or coaching had the greatest benefit.

Recommendations for DCYF

Based on the interviews and focus groups, the sites and the research team identified recommendations for DCYF that could benefit educators, children, and families. These recommendations included additional opportunities for professional development, supports for implementing curricula and other classroom practices, assistance with data collection and analysis, collaboration with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and other external entities, and increased funding. These recommendations are described in more detail below.

Professional Development

DCYF could consider providing new and increased opportunities for shared learning around the following topics:

- Communicating with families, including translation, integrated with existing supports (e.g., Mobility Mentoring®, Positive Behavior Supports)

- Building community partnerships and finding resources for families

- Facilitating family events, particularly opportunities for families to highlight their cultures

- Implementing professional learning communities and other site-level professional development practices

- Developing collaborative practices around specific supplemental curricula

In addition, DCYF could consider expanding opportunities for professional development offerings across different formats. For example, local, in-person trainings may be more appropriate for in-depth topics, whereas online trainings may be more appropriate for ensuring educators can meet licensing requirements or for brief refresher trainings. Finally, DCYF could consider providing more guidance and resources around existing trainings, such as recordings of trainings, books and videos, and technical assistance, and expand and promote the repository of opportunities and resources for family support specialists.

Curricula and practices

DCYF could identify opportunities to develop, promote or build systems to ensure curricula and materials are culturally relevant, inclusive, research-based, developmentally appropriate, and play-based. This would include reviewing curricula and materials to ensure they represent and celebrate diverse perspectives and experiences that reflect families in ECEAP. To support successful classroom practices, DCYF could provide examples of successful models and create opportunities for shared learning within sites through professional learning communities and book studies.

Data collection and analysis

DCYF could consider supporting sites with data collection and analysis, including the following:

- Providing training on how to access and understand site-level data

- Providing training on how to use data to inform continuous learning and improvement around curricula implementation

- Developing templates and examples that sites can use for data analysis and review

- Providing guidelines or recommendations on enrollment processes that build in time for teachers to meet the child and conduct initial developmental screenings at intake meetings

DCYF could also consider ways to ease the data entry burden for teachers, which would allow teachers to focus on interpreting the data and developing goals for children and their classrooms. This might include encouraging sites to designate a specific staff member to support data collection or data entry for whole-child observational assessments. Alternatively, consider opportunities to reduce the reporting requirements for classroom teachers.

Collaboration with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and others

The findings from this study highlight the importance of collaboration between DCYF and other entities across the state. To support ECEAP staff members and families, DCYF should continue to work with state and regional partners to:

- Develop a central online repository for professional development opportunities and requirements for teachers

- Reduce redundancy and confusion of professional development opportunities and requirements across systems

- Facilitate shared data systems

- Support family members with the transition to kindergarten

- Identify opportunities to provide families with family liaisons and navigational services

Funding

This study also surfaced some specific funding needs. DCYF could consider providing sites with additional funding for:

- Translation of assessment and referral processes based on need (i.e., site-level linguistic diversity and behavioral needs)

- Guest teachers or staff members who would allow ECEAP staff members to attend trainings or professional development opportunities during the work day

"Doing it on my own, I wouldn't be where I am today. They just gave me such strength … So, I didn't feel like I was alone. I thank everybody for that and all their help. They say it takes a village and this is a good village."

– Family member

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Section 1. Introduction

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) administers and operates a state-funded preschool program called the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP). The program serves 3- and 4-year-old children who qualify based on eligibility criteria that include family income and other specified child and family characteristics that put them at risk (DCYF, 2022a). ECEAP services include comprehensive, strength-based education, health, and family support services to children across the state.

In the 2019–20 academic year, ECEAP served 14,000 children (DCYF, 2022b). This number will increase in the coming years due to passage of the Fair Start for Kids Act (ESSB 5237, Wash. 2021) in the 2021 state legislative session, which expands eligibility and state budget allotments for the program. Figure 1 high-lights the needed slots to reach ECEAP entitlement in 2026–27, followed by a second wave of entitlement at a higher income eligibility in 2030–31.

Figure 1. ECEAP slot expansion and conversion between FY2023 and FY 2031, by model
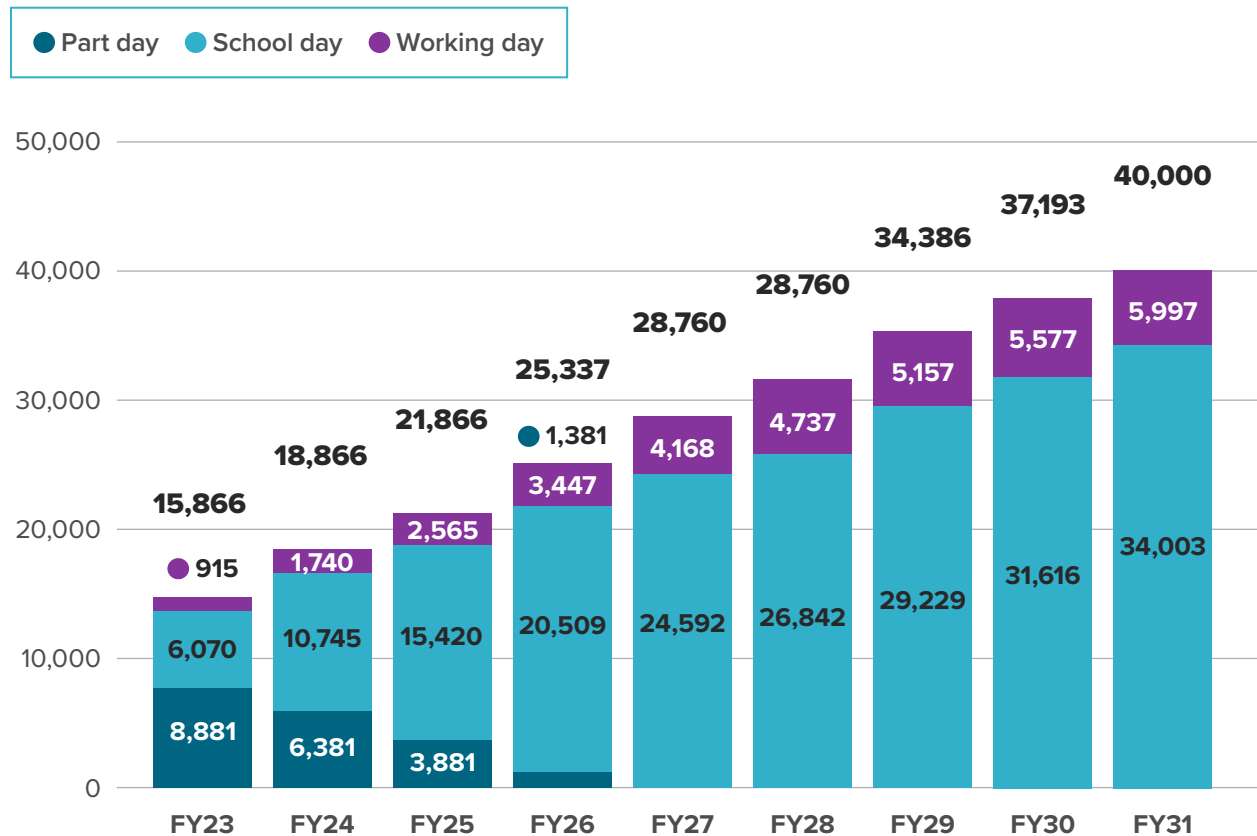
Source: Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

In anticipation of these changes and to inform systemwide improvements, DCYF contracted with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative study of nine sites across the state. The goal of the study was to identify unique or innovative practices and provide recommendations for scaling these practices across the state in alignment with five domains in the ECEAP Performance Standards (DCYF, 2022c): family engagement and partnerships, use of an evidence-based and culturally relevant curriculum, fostering supportive adult-child interactions, measuring and supporting child outcomes, and professional development and training.

The research team developed five research questions to understand unique and innovative practices within each domain:

1. What unique or innovative practices are sites engaging in to build **relationships with families and community partners** (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, family support visits, health coordination services, family engagement, and collaboration with other programs)?

2. What unique or innovative practices are sites engaging in to ensure the use of developmentally appropriate, research-based, and **culturally relevant curricula?**

3. What unique or innovative practices are sites engaging in to foster **supportive adult-child interactions?**

4. What unique or innovative practices are sites engaging in to support **child outcomes** (e.g., developmental screening and referrals, transition supports, child observations, use of child assessment data to inform continuous improvement planning, individualization)?

5. What unique or innovative practices are sites engaging in around **professional development and training** for ECEAP staff members?

Methodology

The research team collaborated with DCYF on site selection, data collection, and a data analysis strategy. Each of these steps is described below.

Site selection

DCYF conducted an initial analysis of ECEAP sites, using data collected in fall 2019 to identify a sample of 30 sites that would include variation across key site-level characteristics including:

- Number of ECEAP slots
- Community- and site-level poverty
- Average or above average child assessment outcomes on Teaching Strategies Gold and WaKIDS

- Early Achievers ratings
- Site-level racial/ethnic and language composition
- Other site characteristics (e.g., region and population density)

The research team and DCYF reviewed data for the 30 sites and narrowed the list to 12 sites, including one Tribal ECEAP site. After obtaining Washington State Institutional Review Board approval, DCYF and the research team began outreach to the selected sites. Of these sites, two declined to participate and one did not respond, leaving a total of nine participating sites that varied across key characteristics (table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participating sites (N = 9)

Characteristic	Participating sites
County	Clallam, Grays Harbor, King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, Yakima
Population density	Sub-Urban, Urban Core, Small Rural Town, Large Rural Town
ECEAP slots	Range: 20–147, Average: 71
English language learners	Range: 0–88% of children at the site, Average: 29%
Number of ECEAP staff members	Range: 3–36, Average: 16
Staff years of experience	Range: 0–26.8, Average: 3.7

Source: Authors' analysis of Department of Children, Youth, and Families data.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study came from interviews and focus groups conducted at each site, a review of documents collected from each site, and administrative data provided by DCYF. The analysis focused on the qualitative data (i.e., interviews and focus groups), with the other data sources providing background information to support interpretation and triangulation during analysis.

Qualitative data

The research team worked with a contact person at each site (a staff member or administrator) to schedule a one- or two-day site visit. The activities requested at each site visit included:

- One administrator interview or focus group
- One focus group with teachers (including paraeducators and aides)
- One focus group with family support specialists[1]
- One focus group with families

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[1] Family support specialists (also referred to as family support coordinators, family advocates, and family support staff) work at each ECEAP site and have a designated caseload of families. Their primary role is to build relationships with families; engage families in the program; and support them with goal setting, resources, and community referrals.

Site visitors worked with a contact person at each site to identify and provide supports for participation. These included $50 gift cards for every participant, as well as child care, translation and interpretation services, and food for the family sessions (as needed). The research team also developed flyers (in English and other languages as needed) for each site to distribute to families. See appendix A for a detailed summary of site visit procedures.

Some site visits included additional interviews or focus groups to accommodate family/staff member availability or interest. The research team also conducted three cross-site Zoom sessions for families at all nine sites. The Zoom sessions were held in English and translated in the top three languages for families in ECEAP: Spanish, Somali, and Amharic. The research team also conducted a focus group with DCYF continuous quality improvement specialists who work with ECEAP sites across Washington state. In total, the research team conducted 46 interviews and focus group sessions with 167 participants (table 2).

Table 2. Interview and focus group participants by role

Interview/focus group type	Sessions	Participants
Administrators	10	18
Teachers	11	37
Family support specialists	8	26
Families	16	73
ECEAP staff members	1	7
Total	**46**	**167**

Note: Nine of the family sessions provided interpretation in one of the following languages: Spanish, Burmese, Somali, or Amharic.

Source: Authors' analysis of site visit data.

Document review and administrative data

In addition to collecting qualitative data, site visitors requested key documents from each site, as available. The list of documents was compiled from requirements for Early Achievers and ECEAP Performance Standards. The research team also reviewed administrative data provided by DCYF. These data included characteristics of the sites, children enrolled at each site, and staff members employed at each site (aggregated at the site level).

Analysis strategy

The research team conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative data using a codebook with codes based on the five research questions. Each topic was broken down into a set of sub-codes to capture specific practices or themes that emerged within the larger topics. The team also used a set of codes that cut

across the primary topics to capture culturally or linguistically affirming practices, practices that support inclusion and accessibility, unique or innovative practices, and recommendations. Two coders then used Atlas.ti to code all transcripts. The research team used the documents to create site profiles that summarized key features of each site and findings related to each research question. The site profiles were also used to interpret and contextualize qualitative findings. The administrative data were also used to gain a better understanding of the context at each site and support interpretation of the qualitative findings.

Current context and key challenges

The goal of this study was to identify unique and innovative practices at nine ECEAP sites across Washington state, grounding the analysis of these practices in the unique context and characteristics of each site to inform scalable recommendations.[2] However, ECEAP staff members consistently shared significant challenges they faced in their efforts to provide high-quality services to children and families, many of which had worsened in recent years. Across sites, these challenges centered on three key themes: Staffing shortages, children experiencing increased need for support, and financial challenges. Given these barriers, some participants had difficulty reflecting on or identifying unique and innovative practices they were using to support children, families, and educators. A more detailed summary of findings around these challenges is provided in appendix B.

Report outline

In sections 2–6 of the report, we present findings for each of the research questions: Family engagement and partnerships (section 2), use of an evidence-based curriculum (section 3), fostering supportive adult-child interactions (section 4), measuring child outcomes (section 5), and professional development (section 6). Each section begins with bright spots, which include the innovations and unique practices seen at individual sites, followed by an overview of common themes seen across sites, including successful strategies, culturally affirming and inclusive practices, and challenges. Each section closes with recommendations for sites and DCYF.

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[2] Disclaimer: The findings in this report represent themes, bright spots, and challenges shared by nine ECEAP sites during site visits conducted in fall 2022. The goal of this study was to conduct a detailed qualitative study focused on a small number of sites. Therefore, while these findings may be common across other ECEAP sites, they should not be generalized across the system.

Section 2. Family engagement and partnerships

Engaging families and building partnerships is a cornerstone of ECEAP. This includes engagement around children's education, health, and behavioral needs; resources and referrals for families; and goal development and support for family members through Mobility Mentoring®. This section describes innovations and common practices that the nine sites in this study are implementing to engage families in their child's education and how ECEAP staff members work to identify and address the needs of all enrolled families. The section closes with recommendations for sites and DCYF.

Bright spots and innovations

Building relationships with families

- One site asked families to submit their favorite recipes, then compiled the recipes into a cookbook that was distributed to all families.

- One site offered a drive-through cultural night during COVID-19, which gave families the opportunity to share about their culture. Families brought clothing, made posters, and one staff member reported hearing from a family member, "It was the first time I've ever felt respected for myself."

- According to staff members at one site, more than 90 percent of families participated in Mobility Mentoring®. The site incentivizes goal setting and attainment through rewards that are funded by a yearly auction. This site has regular training on Mobility Mentoring® and access to technical assistance when needed.

- Sites invited families to elect representatives to sit on a parent policy council. These elected family representatives provided input on the preschool and communicated concerns. Family representatives at one site also helped to determine what events might be fun and useful for families, including a cooking class, a parenting class, and disaster preparedness. These events were popular and helped to build a sense of community.

- ECEAP staff members at multiple sites worked after hours to ensure families could participate in conferences and meetings, and they met with families at community locations where they would be most comfortable.

- ECEAP sites used a variety of communication methods to reach families including email newsletters, apps, text messages, and phone calls. These venues allowed sites to engage in frequent, informal dialogue with families about their children and share pictures of what they were doing throughout the day. Some communication apps supported translation, which made it easier for

sites to communicate with linguistically diverse families. One teacher conducted a short survey of families during mid-year conferences to ask for feedback about communication methods and connection to the preschool.

- Family support specialists at some sites facilitated pick-up and drop-off by serving as greeters, taking children to their family members' cars, and using the opportunity to engage in informal contact and relationship-building with families and children.

Connecting families with resources and community referrals

- Led by a family support specialist, staff members at one site established relationships with several businesses in the community that had expressed an interest in providing family resources. The family support specialist approached these businesses with a list of needs and ways to support the site. This resulted in a huge and diverse network of community support.

- One site worked with a regional Early Learning Coalition to address "coordinated access so our families can have access to medical and dental care … [so] they're not calling and being told to go [somewhere else] when we have the resource here."

- One site discussed how they helped families navigate the transition to a new ECEAP site by providing a "warm transfer," in which ECEAP staff members went to the new site with the family to "make sure that everyone feels good about this kind of situation."

Findings

Enrollment and onboarding was a structured process designed to build relationships between families and staff members

At all sites, enrolling a child in ECEAP was a multi-step process that began with an application and could include multiple meetings, forms, and orientation events. The intake process was designed to assess eligibility and provide information to families so they understood the program and the role of the family support specialist. Sites tried to provide translation for families that spoke languages other than English, although it could be challenging to do when they were not yet aware of a family's specific language needs. Subsequent family meetings included more questions for families using the Mobility Mentoring® tool and opportunities for families to share about their background, including any family traditions or practices that might make their child feel more comfortable. Many staff members shared how the primary goal of these meetings was to build a positive relationship between family support specialists and families.

> *"This was the only school of 16 that got back to me and worked very closely with me to try to get my daughter in. From the start, they really drew us in with just that coopera-tion, and they wanted us to be here. That was really nice."*
>
> — Family member

One family support specialist noted that prior to enrollment, families had at least three conversations with her, and this number was relatively common across ECEAP sites. After enrollment was complete, sites conducted tours and individual or group orientations. Families had the opportunity to meet the teachers, tour the site (if they had not already), and bring their children in to see the classroom. When possible, interpreters were available for orientations, although it could be difficult to find translators for some languages. Optional home visits were frequently scheduled between enrollment and the first day of attendance. At some sites, family members or staff members also completed developmental screeners for children during this time.

> *"I think one of the most important things in how this site in particular is breaking down those barriers is going slow at first and inviting families in, taking that time before school starts to have one-on-one family meetings. And they have a group meeting to try to start building that community. And then within that community, it just starts to spread where [families] are feeling welcome."*
>
> — Administrator

Mobility Mentoring® provided a useful structure for identifying and addressing family needs

Mobility Mentoring®[3] is a family engagement approach used by ECEAP to "help people set and achieve future-oriented goals despite the immediate challenges and weight of poverty." Mobility Mentoring® gives family support specialists a framework for asking about family living situations and finances, physical and mental health, and educational attainment while also helping families develop SMART goals. ECEAP staff members found Mobility Mentoring® to be a useful tool for building relationships with families and for helping staff members understand the economic and living conditions of the children they serve. While staff members found some Mobility Mentoring® questions to be awkward or probing, particularly before a relationship of trust had been built, they also said the approach helped them address family needs without judgement.

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[3] For more information about Mobility Mentoring® see: https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/EL_0013.pdf

> *"[Mobility Mentoring®] is teaching us family support—how to take our perspective out of the equation and really try our best to gain the perspective of whoever we're working with. So if someone comes in and says, 'I really want a new sweater.' And we're like, 'But you don't have a job.' We don't say that. We say, 'Oh, I can tell getting a new sweater is really important to you. Let's figure out how to make that happen. We have donations, we have the teen closet.'"*
>
> — Family support specialist

Staff members followed up on information they learned during Mobility Mentoring® conversations with personal support for families, referrals, and resources. For example, staff members sent links to help families apply for rental assistance or apply to colleges, and they regularly checked in with families about other supports they might need to achieve their goals. Not all family members who participated in focus groups were familiar with Mobility Mentoring®. Among those who were, almost all expressed appreciation for the process. They mentioned that it made them feel as though someone cared about them and was willing to listen and that they had an advocate to help them achieve their goals.

> *"To be able to have somebody in your corner asking you what your goals are and what you aspire to do is a relief ... It's not an immediate family member asking you this. It's somebody that truly cares not only for your well-being, but also for your child's well-being and your overall family. That's a good thing to have."*
>
> — Family member

> *"I just had my conference with [the family support specialist] two weeks ago, and she read me back my goals that I had for myself. And it's crazy to see the drastic change in myself from a year ago to now, because I've not only surpassed those goals, but I'm doing so much better than where I was a year ago."*
>
> — Family member

Staff members appreciated that the program was strengths-based and nonjudgmental, and they enjoyed seeing families achieve their goals. Some shared how they adapted the scripts and guidance based on their knowledge of families' priorities and concerns and used language that was familiar to families.

> *"And I usually know what's already happening in their lives, so I can bring it up. I can be like, 'How's school?' Or, 'Did you move into that house?' Or, 'Did you buy that car?' Or, 'Did you take care of that credit?' Or, 'What about your restraining order?' I can have those conversations because I already know them."*
>
> — Family support specialist

ECEAP sites provided formal opportunities to build relationships through home visits, conferences, and family events

In-person home visits were limited during the COVID-19 pandemic, but most sites resumed the practice this school year. Some sites required home visits while others made them optional. Family support specialists tried to balance relationship building, which benefited from visits to families' homes, with accessibility and respect for families' privacy. Sites also varied in how they structured home visits. At least one site preferred a team approach that included family support specialists, teachers, and translators (if needed). Another site brought resources and incentives for families when conducting home visits. Most, although not all, staff members reported that home visits were useful for building relationships with families and gaining insights about the children they served. Families and staff members who participated in home visits noted that the children were almost always excited to have their teachers visit their home.

Some sites also conducted conferences during the home visits, although most took place in person at school. Staff members provided flexibility for families with busy schedules that made it difficult to meet in person. Staff members at several sites noted the difficulty of engaging families remotely during the pandemic and said they now strongly encourage in-person conferences when possible. Staff members and families reported that there were three or four conferences per year, on average, and that they were used to build relationships and set family and child goals. As discussed in section 5, the conferences were primarily focused on child assessment, screening, referral, and goal development, but they also gave staff members another opportunity to learn about families so they could incorporate their culture into the classroom and make the child feel more comfortable.

> *"During conferences, teachers ask for parent input. And that can be a [child's favorite] book, it can be ... I think this past conference time, we asked all the families what their mealtimes looked like so that we could try to incorporate something from their mealtime ... And one family sings a thank you song. And so now we don't sing a thank you song, but we have a, I guess you could say, a chant before everybody eats so that we all just connect together."*
>
> — Teacher

Staff members also reported offering a variety of events to encourage family engagement with the site, with children, and with each other, as required by ECEAP performance standards. Many sites organized evening events around a theme, such as family-led cooking activities. Some sites held cultural nights, such as having Native American family members share their regalia, culture, and traditional foods with other families. One site even held a drive-through cultural night during the pandemic. Other family night themes included STEM, literacy, math, parenting, and disaster preparedness, although not all events had themes. Sometimes, events at the site included an activity that families could practice with their children at the event and then take home. Sites tried to provide translators and/or visual aids to support engagement of families that spoke a language other than English.

"We also have events in the cafe. We just had our literacy night, which was awesome. We had teachers who volunteered to read stories in classrooms. We had hot cocoa and popcorn here. We were all here hands-on and greeting them. And throughout the year we have many more events set up."

— Family support specialist

Family events were also offered occasionally during the day. According to one family member, ECEAP offered coffee and donuts in the morning to encourage families to drop in and engage in casual conversation with staff members and each other while children played in the classroom. One site had an annual field trip to a pumpkin patch, which was so popular among families that they pulled their school-age children out of school to attend.

"A week ago, we did donuts and coffee with the kids. They had milk and donuts, and we got to have coffee or milk or whatever it was. It was really cool. They do stuff like that a lot, which is nice."

— Family member

Family events, field trips, and group orientations provided opportunities to build community among families. Some preschool orientations were organized by family language, which helped families who spoke Spanish, Marshallese, Burmese, or other languages to identify each other and build bonds. Most of these evening events and field trips were well attended and helped build community. In family focus groups, participants said they were excited about these opportunities and welcomed more chances to socialize and get to know the families of their children's classmates.

Several sites also highlighted the role of the parent policy council in providing families with an opportunity to network and take on a leadership role. One site shared how families elect representatives, and these representatives help choose family night themes and gather feedback from other families so that they have an opportunity to communicate concerns about the preschool.

The most common challenge in building and maintaining relationships with families was the lack of available translators. ECEAP staff members sometimes struggled to communicate with families who spoke languages other than English, and particularly with those who spoke less common languages. While some sites had language resources available, such as a language line or translators on site, these resources were not always available in the moment they were needed.

"Some of those harder to find languages that we couldn't find interpreters for ... the language line [telephone interpretation service] was a bit challenging. We would ask for Nepali, they would give us Hindi. Hindi and Nepali are different ... We went through one conference, and it wasn't until after [the conference], we realized only one of the four parents could understand the Hindi."

— Teacher

Another common challenge was working around busy family schedules, especially for family members who had multiple jobs or served as primary caregivers to other family members. While teachers, staff members, and families reported that in-person meetings were preferable, these were not always possible. Transportation to and from the preschool was an issue for many families who did not have a car or could not afford gas. Staff members were generally flexible and worked outside their normal hours to accommodate families' schedules, but they also reported this as a frequent challenge.

ECEAP staff members used questionnaires, family conferences, and informal conversations to learn about families' cultures

A key part of the family-teacher conferences was learning about families' unique backgrounds and traditions. Several sites administered questionnaires during or outside of conferences to gather information about family or cultural holidays, traditions, habits, and interests. These questionnaires asked if families would be willing to share their unique traditions in the classroom or at family events. Although ECEAP preschools did not specifically celebrate holidays, they tried to be inclusive and to incorporate family backgrounds into the classroom.

> *"We don't do holiday celebrations. But we had a family who, I think they were Pentecostal and didn't celebrate any holidays, so they wanted to talk about that. So, we were able to bring them in so they could talk about their experience of not celebrating Halloween, basically. And so we just try really hard to make every family comfortable."*
>
> — Administrator

Many classroom and family events were organized around food as a way to highlight and celebrate the cultural diversity of families at each site. Families with different cultural backgrounds were invited to cook their traditional foods in the classroom or to lead a family cooking class outside of school hours. Traditional dancing was another way sites incorporated families' cultural heritages.

> *"We've had parents who are from the Filipino culture and speak Tagalog ... come in and show us some of their dances that are very important in their culture. We've had other families come and cook or share other things that are really important to them."*
>
> — Administrator

ECEAP sites used multiple methods to communicate with families and build relationships

Family support specialists and teachers tried to engage in both daily and weekly communication with families to build relationships and keep them informed about their child's progress and what was happening in the classroom. The most common methods of communicating with families were text and communication apps, both of which allowed staff members to share pictures and information quickly and easily from a cell phone. At least seven sites mentioned using the Class Dojo[4] app. ECEAP staff members also used other apps in combination with or instead of Class Dojo. These apps included Brightwheel,[5] ClassTag,[6] Remind,[7] and TalkingPoints.[8] Several of the communication apps helped with translation. Class Dojo automatically translates between staff members and families in up to 36 different languages, and Talking Points is designed as a translation app. In addition, most preschools had access to a translator or language line assistance when needed. However, several sites shared the need for more translation assistance.

> *"Language has sometimes been challenging. We did just get a new company that we're using for translation. But previously, we had used language line and some of those harder-to-find languages that we couldn't find interpreters for. Language line was a bit challenging."*
>
> — Teacher

During the intake and enrollment process, staff members asked families about the best methods for communicating with them. Teachers and staff members then tried to accommodate individual prefer-ences, but also used all means at their disposal. In addition to communication apps and text, ECEAP staff members used phone, email, printed information sent home in child backpacks, and even notes stuck to a child's shirt. Staff members also posted flyers in drop-off and pick-up areas to remind families about events. Families appreciated frequent communication, and some expressed a desire for more regular and frequent updates.

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[4] https://raisinglanguagelearners.com/classdojo-for-parents/

[5] https://mybrightwheel.com/

[6] https://home.classtag.com/

[7] https://www.remind.com/

[8] https://talkingpts.org/

Families at most sites appreciated regular communication and would like more contact with teachers

Several sites used pick-up and drop-off times to build relationships with families and pass along information about the child. At some sites, family support specialists served as the greeters since they had primary responsibility for maintaining the relationship with families. At other sites, teachers were also involved. Many families said they appreciated these efforts to engage during drop-off. However, families at some sites wanted more direct contact with teachers and more information about what was going on in the classroom.

> *"The last school preschool that [my daughter] was at before we came here, I got to interact with the teacher before we dropped her off and after. So I guess I just kind of miss that one-on-one ... I want to be able to ask all the questions, like, 'How did she do today? How is she improving? What can we do at home to keep the wheel going?' Stuff like that. I would just [like] a little bit more interaction with our actual teachers and not just the [family support specialist]."*
>
> — Family member

Teachers and family support specialists at most sites communicated with families during the school day by sharing pictures of their children participating in classroom activities. One site shared how they made a particular effort to send these pictures in the first week to reassure families that their child was happy and safe. Families appreciated this and shared that photos and updates made them feel involved in their child's education and gave them something to ask their child about at home.

> *"I've only been here for a week, so I guess maybe because I was very, very adamant that I know what happens in class and what went well. I've been getting tons of pictures a day ... Because I was an educator, I can distinguish what they're doing. I saw them painting, so I knew it was fine motor. I saw them working on the letter D and the letter E. I saw them outside for gross motor."*
>
> — Family member

Families appreciated getting learning activities and information from staff members that facilitated learning at home

ECEAP sites also shared how they support family engagement in their children's education by sending home learning activities, supplies, and information to bridge home and school activities, a practice that is required of all ECEAP sites. Staff members sent home supplies that helped facilitate learning, such as a laminated version of the alphabet and magnets for putting it up on the fridge. Other activities required more direction, and staff members sometimes modeled these during family conferences or included

directions via app, text, or newsletter. Writing implements and art supplies often accompanied these activities. Families could also request supplies from the sites, some of which provided lists of what was available.

Staff members at some sites customized take-home activities based on each child's learning and needs. Several families across ECEAP sites articulated the need for help in managing their child's behavior at home and said they looked to the teachers for guidance. Sites often helped families understand how to apply social emotional learning practices, and a few encouraged families to set up a safe space at home where the child could go to calm down.

> *"When my son acts out, which he does a lot ... I have to remember to calm myself down and take a step back. The deep breath is something that we do a lot. And he's taught me that himself. And so we do it together a lot, which has been a huge thing. And then the quiet corner thing, too. That's been really helpful for him in just really focusing on not getting upset myself, so he doesn't feed off of that."*
>
> — Family member

Sites varied in the frequency with which they sent home learning activities, and what they sent home. Activities might be sent home regularly, for school year breaks, or to work on the summer before kindergarten. Not all families reported receiving information or activities to help them facilitate learning. It is also not clear whether activities or directions were always translated or illustrated for families in their home language.

> *"Personally, I'd like a little bit more communication with the in-class teaching because my baby, she comes home and wants me to engage with her at home, and there hasn't been a lot of activities sent home. So, it's kind of discouraging on my part to be interacting with that. Other than that, [the teacher] does tell me what [my child] does, but I would like to have more at-home projects that she could engage with me in."*
>
> — Family member

Sites strive to meet families' basic needs and some more complex needs

One of the strengths of the ECEAP program is the ability of the sites to address family needs directly or by facilitating family access to services and resources. Through family conferences, informal check-ins as well as close collaboration between teachers and family support specialists, staff members worked to identify and address the needs of participating families and children. Key resource needs for ECEAP families included food, clothing, and home-related resources. In particular, diapers, baby supplies, toys, toiletries, and cleaning supplies were in high demand. A lack of transportation was a problem for many families and to mitigate this situation, sites often picked up resources from community partners and distributed them directly from the building.

A few sites mentioned that they maintained lists of resources by community location in order to identify the closest location to families' housing. Several sites shared lists of available resources with families and asked them to share these lists with their networks to ensure that the families with the greatest needs received information about resources. For example, one site offered a rack with outdoor boots and rain jackets that any child could use and take home. Gift cards donated by local organizations were often distributed around the winter holidays and provided another valuable support for families. Additionally, ECEAP sites occasionally helped families obtain larger resources such as mattresses or furnishings that helped to address housing needs.

> *"It was really nice to be able to go to the store and buy my son clothing and shoes, just to know that it was with the gift card that we received through the program."*
>
> — Family member

Not all resources were for basic needs. Families also received free zoo passes and movie theater tickets, which provided opportunities for family time. Staff members also encouraged families to ask for what they needed, regardless of whether those items were on the list of resources.

> *"We haven't run into a thing that we can't solve for a parent. And I feel like they're more comfortable telling us also like, 'Hey, I need this.'"*
>
> — Teacher

"[Staff are] like, 'Hey, do you need [this] assistance? If not, no offense.' It's never a thing where I feel like I'm being talked to like I have problems, like I need the help. It's more so, 'This is here. I know that in the past you've mentioned it. If not, it's not going to hurt my feelings' kind of a thing. Nothing's ever felt pressurized or discriminatory whatsoever about it. Everything always feels like a very kind gesture, as if my mother were to call me or an aunt."

— Family member

ECEAP staff members helped families navigate complex systems to access valuable assistance and services

In addition to resources provided to families directly through the sites, ECEAP staff members facilitated access to off-site services and resources, including rental assistance, utility assistance, and medical and dental services. Some staff members noted that there were not enough mental health resources available for families who needed them. Family support specialists reported huge backlogs in these services and noted that many mental health providers did not accept state funding for services, making it inaccessible for most ECEAP families.

ECEAP staff members offered different types of assistance to connect families with services depending on need. Sometimes, families needed help filling out forms to apply for services or help understanding where to go to find information (such as links to the information online). Family support specialists helped families locate and navigate these systems and overcome obstacles to obtaining services. **While some of this assistance was as simple as helping families figure out the closest grocery store to their home, family support specialists also accompanied family members to appointments and showed families how to ride the bus.**

ECEAP staff members also supported families with more complex matters. **For example, one family support specialist helped draft a letter and went to city hall on behalf of a family living in rental housing with a cockroach and bedbug infestation.** Previous families had been evicted from the housing complex for asking the landlord to address the situation. With help from the family support specialist, the family was able to get the bug infestation resolved without the threat of eviction.

Obtaining access to dental and medical services is a challenge for some ECEAP families. ECEAP staff members improved access by holding on-site dental screenings, sometimes for the whole family, and working with local providers to offer free or low-cost services to ECEAP families. At one site, they took children to a mobile dental clinic and at another they had a dentist visit the preschool. ECEAP staff members then followed up with families to make sure they were using these services.

Person 1. *"My favorite thing would be that health is a big, important thing and they want to make sure that they're vaccinated and [go to the] dentist and all that."*

Person 2. *"I do like how they are about the health, like the hearing and the vision and the dental checks with the Smile Mobile. Stuff like that is very helpful because then when they come home, they give us the report of what has been said by either their vision test or their hearing. They're just as concerned as if it was their own child."*

— Family members

In another example, a family support specialist successfully advocated for an older child in a family to receive needed therapies at elementary school.

"[My child's] social worker was a nightmare of a social worker and was putting us through the ringer and all this stuff. The [family support specialist] had a conference with the social worker ... and be like, 'Yes, [this child] really could use these services. What can we do to support helping him get these services put in place and stuff like that?' So, they were a huge help to me ... advocating for my children, not for me, but for my children with the social workers and stuff."

— Family member

Family support specialists built relationships with local partners

To facilitate access to food or other resources to meet the basic needs of enrolled families, ECEAP sites partnered with food banks, community resource organizations, local municipal organizations, charities, and for-profit businesses to collect donations for families. Family support specialists took the lead in developing relationships with these community organizations and continued to expand outreach to new organizations over time. Most sites maintained a list of existing and potential partners along with contacts at those organizations. After establishing these partnerships, community organizations sometimes reached out proactively when they had resources to share with the site.

"We had a lot of families that had a lot of basic needs, so we did a basic needs drive ... I went out to different places, and I introduced myself. I had made a flyer stating what we were doing, what we needed ... And I was able to leave boxes [at] all the places that said yes. And people were just putting stuff in there: toilet paper, soaps, all kinds of different things. And then I went around and picked them up. And then we had a huge family event where the families got to come and get those things that they needed."

— Family support specialist

Not all sites were equally successful at obtaining resources. Establishing partnerships was time consuming and was more challenging in some communities than in others. For example, at some sites families and staff members shared that they would like their children to have more opportunities to participate in youth sports, but few scholarships are available. Family support specialists expressed a need for more training on how to identify and obtain resources for their program.

> *"The only training we really want … because we don't have extra time right now … But we want to learn about how to help our families. And how we help our families is [about] providing the best resources we can. That's what we want to know."*
>
> — Family support specialist

Recommendations

Sites

- Assign families to a family support specialist from the first intake meeting to provide consistency and support with early relationship building.

- Implement frequent and diverse methods of communication in a variety of languages with a focus on pictures and positive notes. Ensure language supports through apps that provide translation, on-site translators, or language lines.

- Consider offering additional opportunities to attend open houses or on-site orientations and give families the option of attending more than once.

- Increase opportunities for families to meet and engage with each other, as many families feel isolated after the pandemic social restrictions. This may include casual events such as family coffee hour or other events. Communicate with families about child friendships and then allow families to provide their contact information to the families of their child's friends. Consider organizing family peer support groups for families of children with particular needs.

- Provide time for family support specialists to be in the classrooms for part of each week. This enables them to provide information about individual children and to answer families' questions.

- Create opportunities for teachers to meet family members face-to-face outside of conferences. These might be family events or pick-up and drop-off.

- Encourage staff members to send home ideas and supplies for learning activities that are aligned with the curriculum. This could be done on a weekly basis. This will also increase families' knowledge of the curriculum and understanding of what teachers are working on in the classroom.

- Partner with other sites in the community or region to share family engagement strategies and community resources and partnerships.

DCYF

- Continue to identify communication strategies and apps that have been effective for communicating with families, providing translation services, and integrating with other supports (e.g., Mobility Mentoring®, Positive Behavior Supports) and provide more opportunities for sites to engage in shared learning around these resources.

- Provide family support specialists across the system with increased shared learning opportunities focused on building community partnerships and finding additional resources. Ensure administrators are aware of these opportunities and encourage them to remove any barriers to attendance.

- Facilitate opportunities for sites to engage in shared learning around family events, particularly those that create opportunities for families to highlight their culture.

Section 3. Implementing evidence-based curricula

ECEAP sites are required to implement The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool, High Scope, or an alternative DCYF-approved curriculum. All sites in this study used The Creative Curriculum® as their primary curriculum with a variety of supplemental curricula to support specific skills or gaps.

This section describes innovations and common practices that the nine sites in this study are using to implement The Creative Curriculum® and various supplemental curricula. The section closes with recommendations for sites and DCYF (see table C1 in appendix C for a full list of supplemental curricula).

Commonly used supplemental curricula included:

- Conscious Discipline® and Second Step® (to support social emotional learning; SEL)
- Second Step® Child Protection Unit (safety)
- Handwriting Without Tears (literacy)
- Foundations for Literacy (literacy)

Sites also used: Imagine It! (reading), Eureka Math®, CharacterStrong (SEL), Growing Up WILD (STEM), Building Blocks (math), Zoo-phonics (literacy), Early Childhood Hands-On Science (STEM), Bridges Math, and Math Expressions.

Bright spots and innovations

- An administrator at one site shared how they used a "coaching to fidelity" tool with The Creative Curriculum® to support teachers. This administrator described using checklists and coming together to learn more about the purpose of each component of the curriculum. This process helped teachers "implement the curriculum in the way it was intended to be used."

- One administrator described how they review WaKIDS data to see how children from their program perform in kindergarten. In recent years they had noticed a gap in math skills and had begun piloting new math curricula to address this gap. They had also implemented a new math assessment tool (the Basic Skills Math Assessment) to gather more specific data and create more targeted strategies to address areas of weakness. This site also had data teams who used a tool to examine site-level data. They also incorporated an equity lens with a focus on supporting children furthest from opportunity. The administrator described their approach at weekly staff meetings, saying:

> *"I'm also layering in, 'OK, so we're going to look at our data today, and it's on math.' So,*
> *our teachers have done an assessment with the students, like a baseline assessment.*
> *We take the data and start pulling pieces out of what we're noticing. What is the area*
> *of concern? Where are children really having struggles?"*

- One site focused on implementing Conscious Discipline (a supplemental SEL curriculum) with fidelity by studying the teacher implementation guide as a group. Another site used a coaching to fidelity tool to "help [teachers] implement the curriculum in the way it was intended to be used." This administrator mentioned a checklist that includes the tools, delivery, family engagement, events, and environment.

- One site's approach to collaborating around the curriculum was to take turns lesson planning and then share those plans across the classrooms. As one teacher shared,

> *"Our planning is spectacular [because] we take turns doing each thing ... So, really the*
> *only thing you're planning is very individualized classroom work because we're all*
> *doing the same thing anyway ... I've never been in a place that has done that before.*
> *And then I can focus on the other things that need more of my attention."*

- One site supplemented their curricula with an anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019) and obtained grant funding to support music education. Through this grant the sites implemented Kindermusik and collaborated with local Tribal organizations to learn about and create Native drums.

Findings

ECEAP staff members found The Creative Curriculum® to be relevant and engaging

Across sites, the majority of teachers, administrators, and staff members liked the topics in The Creative Curriculum® and used their knowledge of children's interests to ensure that the lessons were relevant and engaging. As one family support specialist said, "It really touches on things that kiddos and families are experiencing."

> *"[The] Creative Curriculum®, is a child-led curriculum. And it's play-based. And as the*
> *teachers in the classroom, we try and choose studies based on what the kiddos are*
> *interested in. It's not teacher-led. And so in this case, we're studying wheels in this*
> *classroom. Teachers wanted to study trees, but our kids really love cars and anything*
> *that goes. So we are studying wheels."*
>
> — Teacher

Many teachers shared that The Creative Curriculum® worked well for both new and veteran teachers because it provided a lot of information and structure but was also very adaptable. Some teachers used resources and practices in the online lesson planning tools. They also appreciated the alignment between the curriculum and the TS Gold assessment, skills, and data collection and entry procedures. However, many of the more experienced teachers also shared that they do not rely on the provided implementation supports and instead supplement the curriculum with their own ideas and plans. For example, experienced teachers at one site shared that they started teaching before The Creative Curriculum® was required and had already developed a variety of lessons they liked to use. They chose to continue using those lessons and activities in conjunction with The Creative Curriculum®.

Some teachers found The Creative Curriculum® to be challenging to implement if there were a lot of materials or the activities were too complex. To address this challenge, they reviewed the required materials and timeframe first to narrow down which lessons or activities to use. Some teachers felt pressured about teaching The Creative Curriculum® to fidelity and found that the lessons could be too long for younger children and those with shorter attention spans. Teachers addressed this challenge by adapting the lessons to make them shorter, building in activities to allow children to move around or stand up, or shortening other activities during the day (e.g., circle time) to accommodate the longer lessons.

Sites used supplemental curricula to address children's social and emotional learning needs

DCYF and ECEAP staff members noted that children had been showing an increased need for SEL support in recent years. DCYF recognized this need and provided sites with funding for supplemental SEL curricula. Some staff members and administrators addressed these needs by spending more time on SEL-focused lessons in existing curricula or looking for additional supplemental curricula to address the gap. Other sites were already using supplemental curricula and felt more prepared to address the needs they were seeing in their classrooms.

> *"The pandemic amplified the importance [and] it really highlighted why social-emotional skills and self-regulation are really needed. We don't teach behavior; we teach everything else. How many times do you work with your 4-year-old to tie their shoe before they master it?"*
>
> — Administrator

Four of the nine sites were using Conscious Discipline to support SEL. Conscious Discipline is a comprehensive, trauma-responsive curriculum that also includes a parent training component. Across all four sites, families, staff members, and administrators used the practices in Conscious Discipline to create safe and supportive classrooms and build strong relationships with children and their families. In fact, many participants at these sites referenced the curriculum when asked what practices at their site were unique or innovative.

"I would say Conscious Discipline [makes us unique] because ... I just feel like the kids feeling safe and connected is their first foundation of learning. It's hard to learn when you don't know what to expect. Having that routine, being able to express your feelings, knowing what your feelings look like and knowing that we're going to figure it out together. You're not bad, you're just learning. I know a lot of kids may have those behavioral issues but we're working through those challenges together. We're not calling [parents], 'Pick your kid up.' No, we're going to work through this as a team, figure out what works best for this kid and how we can best support them ... I think we do a really good job at making everybody feel important, listened to, heard, and safe."

— Family support specialist

Some of the Conscious Discipline practices that ECEAP staff members highlighted were the intentional focus on building relationships with children and approaching the school as a community. Educators also referenced Conscious Discipline practices that supported their efforts to avoid expulsion and exclusionary disciplinary practices, a requirement of all ECEAP sites, and support children who are experiencing higher levels of stress and trauma due to the pandemic. As one teacher said about the "safe space" in her classroom:

"It's a hot spot, and I'm very happy for it because some of my friends definitely need it ... We grew up in a world that tells us that 'Feelings are not OK' and 'Stop crying' ... and if you're crying, 'That's bad,' or if you're angry, 'That's bad.' And it's not bad. It's bad when we can't do it in a safe way, or we can't voice what we're feeling. And so, I think the safe place teaches kids how to do that in a safe way. So that's why they're like, 'Hey, I'm allowed to cry right now.'"

— Teacher

Multiple staff members who used Conscious Discipline said they sought opportunities to build on their skills, even on their own time. Some said they returned to the book regularly, while others said they watched the training videos on weekends. The "adult first" approach to emotion regulation and self-awareness was so impactful because the practices benefited the adults as well as the children, with one staff member saying, "It's so healing, and it feels like therapy every time I read a chapter in the book." One administrator shared that the Conscious Discipline approach provided their staff with tools that could support their own social-emotional skills as well as those of the children in the program.

Educators also valued the parent training component of Conscious Discipline and used these trainings to strengthen the bridge between family and school settings. One teacher shared that Conscious Discipline opened a dialogue with parents about strategies for managing challenging behaviors at home—a topic that was otherwise hard to broach. In addition, because of the family engagement component, family support specialists received more training and resources to support their understanding of the Conscious Discipline curriculum, compared to other curricula, and they used the practices in their interactions with children and families. Many family members appreciated the parent trainings approach and reflected

positively on the skills they learned to support their children. Even family members who did not partici-
pate in the trainings saw value in the practices that were being implemented in the classroom and shared
these practices when asked about their favorite thing at the site.

> *"I think my favorite thing about the ECEAP is ... the Conscious Discipline, how they put
> [children] in a nice calming corner, in a safe space, instead of putting them in a corner
> as discipline for normal child behaviors."*
>
> — Family member

Programs implementing Conscious Discipline found that this approach provided programs with valuable
tools for creating a supportive classroom environment, building relationships with children and families,
and supporting SEL. However, they noted that it could only be implemented after program-wide plan-
ning for implementation. Even experienced teachers who strongly advocated for the program did not
recommend using it at other sites unless the entire staff was completely on board with it.

Other sites used the Second Step SEL curriculum, which was often selected to align with the K–12 system.
Staff at these sites found it beneficial for children to begin gaining familiarity with the curriculum and
lessons in preschool since they would continue on with it when they entered elementary school.

Other supplemental curricula addressed gaps and site-specific needs, but selection and implementation were challenging

In addition to supporting SEL, ECEAP sites used supplemental curricula to address a variety of other
needs that they identified in their programs. Four sites mentioned using Handwriting Without Tears, and
teachers spoke highly of it, finding that it worked well for teaching children the mechanics of writing and
included engaging activities and fun songs. Some teachers noted that they collaborated with service pro-
viders (e.g., occupational therapists) to modify the curriculum and ensure that it was supporting children
with special needs.

Some programs implemented supplemental curricula that incorporated elements like music and outdoor
play. Another supplemental curriculum that contractor staff implemented was the Growing up WILD
science curriculum, which includes music, movement, art, healthy snacks, and science, as well as a parents'
guide to expanding the learning at home and a Spanish translation. The curriculum includes a strong
outdoor component that works well for children who may not otherwise get those opportunities.

"A lot of our kids live in small apartments or multi-generational homes where they don't have a lot of opportunities to get outside and if they do, they are playing a little bit, but not necessarily exploring all of the different things they can do. And, especially, it rains a lot here, so parents are like, 'No, we're just going to stay inside.' So we're like, 'It's OK. That's just part of where we live, and we still want to get outside and explore and do things.'"

— Administrator

Site administrators supported the implementation of a variety of curricula by creating opportunities for shared lesson planning and by bringing in specialists to help teachers tailor or modify lessons for children with specific learning needs. Teachers also shared that they searched online for ideas and one teacher mentioned finding ideas in teacher TikTok groups. This encouraged hands-on and play-based learning, supported developmentally appropriate practices, and reflected the diverse children and families in the program.

Administrators also considered the time constraints of their teachers and programs when selecting curricula. **Teachers in half-day programs preferred shorter, easier-to-implement curricula; whereas, teachers in full-day programs appreciated longer and more detailed plans.** In addition to these constraints, some administrators selected particular curricula based on district or educational service district guidelines, either to align with the K–12 system or due to financial considerations. Other considerations when selecting new supplemental curricula included funding new materials for the classroom and to send home, ensuring staff members received professional development, supporting implementation of a new curriculum with fidelity, and gathering feedback. See Appendix B for a more detailed description of funding challenges faced by the ECEAP sites in this study. One site shared how they were embarking on this process by piloting a new math curriculum with a small group of teachers, gathering feedback about whether it supported hands-on and play-based learning, and reviewing child assessment data to see if it was improving math scores. However, the cost and time required to successfully screen and implement a new curriculum could be prohibitive.

With a variety of curricula at their fingertips, teachers shared various strategies for integrating them during the day. One teacher shared that they carefully watched the clock to ensure they only spent 15 minutes on each one, while others said they looked for shorter lessons so that they could include more activities throughout the day. One administrator found that the process of creating weekly lessons plans was helpful for ensuring that children were spending sufficient time in required activities (i.e., choice time, outdoor time, large groups, small groups) and the lessons selected for the week. Another approach was to select lessons in various curricula that aligned. For example, they would select a literacy activity from a supplemental curriculum on the same topic as The Creative Curriculum®. Others described how they focused on "the essential question" of each lesson and that helped them identify the components that could be dropped if there was not enough time.

"We have the kids for three hours, and if we did everything for every piece of curriculum we had, we'd be here 24 hours a day to really do it right. You pick and choose the best of those pieces and fit them in with your day."

– Teacher

Sites used a variety of approaches to incorporate families' cultural backgrounds into the curricula

When asked how The Creative Curriculum® was culturally responsive, teachers shared that it was flexible, and they were able to apply it to the diverse lives and environments of the children in their programs. Many described how they used their own knowledge of their students' cultural and family backgrounds to tailor the curriculum to be culturally affirming and relevant. Some educators referred to The Creative Curriculum® as "neutral" in that they could make it culturally relevant for the children in their classroom.

"It's all stuff that they're really familiar with, and so you can build upon their background knowledge. It's fun to teach them when they're like, 'Oh, I have one of those at my house.' Wherever their house is. So I think it is culturally relevant. … We all know our kids and their situations, and so we know the kids who maybe don't have a house, or the kids who live in hotels, and so we're sensitive to that and wouldn't bring that up if that was the case."

– Teacher

An administrator reinforced this approach, saying,

"Now we're looking more at the relevance of the curriculum and the classroom... Am I reading books with children who may come from a home with two moms or just one dad or living with grandma and grandpa? How am I incorporating that to make sure the things I have in my centers and the things I do reflect the dynamics of the families I'm teaching?"

– Administrator

When asked about cultural relevance, some teachers highlighted the "wow" experience in each lesson, where families were invited to come in, share knowledge or cultural practices with the class, and engage with their children in the classroom setting.

> *"After you have completed your study, you can have a celebration. So that's where you get to invite parents and do the experience and see if a parent wants to come in for a visit or to share ... I can have a parent bring in her clothing from Guatemala. I can have a parent from Mexico bring hers."*
>
> – Teacher

Other teachers shared how they try to create opportunities for families to come in and share their culture on an ongoing basis.

> *"On Fridays, we make sure to read Native American books... The parents are very involved. They'll bring food, fry bread, elk jerky, things like that and introduce it to the kids, have them eat it. It's pretty fun."*
>
> – Teacher

Many teachers shared their strategies for asking families about their cultural backgrounds and bringing those backgrounds into the curricula used at the site. These practices included "about me" forms, informal conversations, and activities designed to bridge home and school settings for children. Some teachers encouraged children and families to bring things in from home to share during a particular lesson, such as clothes or other traditional items used for special occasions or daily use. One administrator described their approach to incorporating families' backgrounds:

> *"It's also incorporating that family's experience, needs, desires, interests, culture into the classroom ... So when you say tradition, they think holidays. And then how do we elaborate that? Other things can be traditions, too. Eating a meal together every night, or what's a ritual that you do when you're putting your kid to bed? And so we want to make sure we bring that into the classroom."*
>
> – Administrator

Most curricula were available in English and Spanish, and some classrooms had bilingual teachers who taught in both those languages. However, it was challenging to implement curricula in classrooms with languages other than English and Spanish because materials, resources for family members, and other components were not translated into the languages needed. Supporting linguistically diverse children and families was particularly difficult at the beginning of the year when staff members were still learning about their language needs. They sometimes received assistance from other families, but it took time to establish consistent linguistic supports.

In addition to using their knowledge of families' cultural backgrounds to modify or adapt curricula, some sites created opportunities for bilingual instructional assistants, staff members, and families to provide feedback. One site shared how they asked for feedback from bilingual instructional assistants to increase the cultural relevance of the curriculum and provide materials that reflected the cultural backgrounds of children in the classroom. Another teacher shared about a conversation with a parent who provided feedback about a component of the curricula that did not feel culturally responsive and inclusive.

Families' knowledge of the curricula focused on topics and skills

Families learned about curricula through conferences with the teachers and from their children by way of the materials they brought home, the songs they sang at home, and from asking about their day. Many family members expressed surprise and happiness at the level of detail children could use when describing what they were learning at school, and they found that their children were especially tired after a day at ECEAP. Singing, in particular, was carried across to the home setting, and families loved learning the songs from preschool and singing them with their children at home.

> *"He always comes home talking about all the different things he's done, all the fun things he got to make, how many new friends he's made, and how long he got to play on the playground. He's always really tired when he comes home, so I know he is definitely busy playing and playing."*
>
> — Family member

Other than Conscious Discipline, family members typically did not know what curriculum their site was implementing or what it featured. However, they often had a sense of the topics their children were learning and the new skills they had developed. Family members also noticed how "hands-on" the activities were and liked that children engaged in role play and thought about various careers. Some family members shared that the topics were based on children's interests and that the activities were interactive and engaging, both of which are key features of The Creative Curriculum®.

> *"[My child] absolutely loves it. There're different sections. There's a kitchen area, there's a light board area. So, she loves that there're different things to do. And she loves the little projects that they have at the school and how every week there's something different for them to learn."*
>
> — Family member

> **Person 1.** *"[My child will] come home and it's school all day, all night about all her friends and what they did, and she changed a diaper on one of the baby dolls and singing songs."*
>
> **Person 2.** *"They're very hands-on with the kids, and I love that."*
>
> **Person 1.** *"The teachers are really good."*
>
> — Family members

"I've seen that they tried to get to his level, find out what he needs, and it's nice that they actually try to understand him as a person, not just get lost in the midst, and do what he needs so we feel comfortable, and can find his interests, which helps him."

— Family member

When asked how they shared information about the curriculum with families, ECEAP staff members and administrators shared many of the strategies reviewed in section 2, such as texting, communication apps, and newsletters. One family support specialist shared how they used pick-up and drop-off times to share with family members what their children would be doing or what they had done. Some sites texted families when children were absent to share information about classroom activities or send home materials so families could do the activities with their children. Family members appreciated the contact, especially when their children were out of school, and they liked learning about activities to do at home that would align with what was happening in the classroom. They also valued opportunities to come into the classroom and experience their child's learning firsthand.

"The best part for me is being able to know what going on, him not talking made it hard for me to know what would happen in the classroom or the activity that he does and having that communication has made it so much better and has been sort of comforting."

— Family member

Recommendations

Sites

- Create opportunities for teachers to collaborate on curriculum and lesson planning and engage in shared learning around increasing family engagement with the curriculum, culturally responsive practices, and modifications to support children with special learning needs.

- Create opportunities for family support specialists to learn about the curriculum and share information with families.

- Review site-level data to identify curricular gaps and pilot new supplemental curricula to address those gaps.

- Develop site-level implementation plans that identify how new supplemental curricula will be used. Components of such plans could include piloting, professional development, coaching to fidelity, and data collection to gather feedback.

DCYF

- Consider vetting potential supplemental curricula and materials for cultural relevance and inclusive practices, research base, developmentally appropriate practices, and play-based approaches and sharing summaries or recommendations with sites to assess fit.

- Develop or build on systemwide or local efforts to bring diverse perspectives and experiences into the most commonly used curricula.

- Facilitate opportunities for sites to collaborate and share practices around specific supplemental curricula.

- Provide examples of successful models for shared learning within sites, specifically around the curriculum (e.g., professional learning communities, book studies).

- Support sites with accessing and understanding site-level data and provide guidance on processes for using the data to inform continuous learning and improvement around curricula implementation.

Section 4. Fostering supportive adult-child interactions

ECEAP requires all contractors to develop strategies to "support children's play and learning" and to "build positive relationships with children" (DCYF, 2022c). Sites are required to use positive guidance techniques and avoid exclusionary discipline practices and expulsion. This section begins with bright spots and innovations used by the nine sites in this study to build relationships, support children's play and learning, and manage challenging behaviors. This is followed by themes and findings across the nine sites in their approach to purposefully fostering supportive adult-child interactions. It closes with recommendations for sites and DCYF.

Bright spots and innovations

Building relationships

- One site mentioned the important role of bilingual assistants in building relationships with linguistically diverse children and families. These assistants were typically contracted through the school district. Teachers shared how these individuals would go above and beyond to support children and provide guidance on common cultural norms and practices to help teachers build relationships with families and children.

- One site supported long-term relationship building between children and teachers by having classrooms "loop" so that children had the same teacher for two years in a row.

- Sites used a variety of strategies to empower children and families. One site focused on establishing clear and consistent routines in order to create a sense of safety. Another teacher shared how she co-created classroom rules with children, getting them to think about what they would like to see in their community.

Supporting play and learning

- Teachers at one site shared how valuable they found literacy teaching strategies from the Guided Language Acquisition Design[9] approach. Although originally designed for English language learner students, teachers found these strategies useful for children with various learning needs (including native English speakers). These strategies included using visuals, breaking routines down into smaller steps or adapting them, providing children with physical objects to represent transitions,

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[9] https://ntcprojectglad.com/

and using key phrases. One teacher wore a lanyard with pictures and translations of key activities that she could use to support communication with children.

- One program partnered with the library to address families' diverse cultural backgrounds. The librarians would tell stories with puppets or a flannel board in languages other than English.

Managing challenging behaviors

- One site had access to a behavior specialist and a mental health coach, funded by the educational service district, who provided training and videos.

- One site received a complex needs grant that funded an educator who could "float" between classrooms, providing one-on-one support to children who were having a challenging day.

- Some sites used SEL curricula that explicitly focused on fostering self-awareness and emotion regulation strategies for teachers and other staff members. Staff members at these sites described how valuable it was to know their own triggers and address those when supporting children who were experiencing "big feelings."

Findings

Staff members prioritized building relationships with children

Across the board, teachers prioritized building relationships with and empowering children as the first step in supporting play and learning and managing challenging behaviors.

> Interviewer. *"What's your approach to helping kids play and learn?"*
>
> Teacher. *"Oh, connection, for sure. That's the biggest thing you could ever have in your life, is that connection. You've got to start, at the minute they see you in the morning, connecting. Especially the children with behavioral issues, or it's never going to be a good day. You cannot be somewhere else. If you cannot be in the moment at that moment, at that door, your day is not going to go as planned."*
>
> — Teacher

Many staff members emphasized the importance of developing purposeful and planned routines around drop-off and pick-up times. Drop-off times provided the opportunity for an initial connection with every family member and child so that "every one of our students has a place and knows … they're welcome here, they belong." Some staff members greeted each child by sharing how happy they were to see them; others greeted children and families with a choice of a hug, high five, or butterfly shake; and others had children put their picture on the wall to show they were present. Similarly, at the end of the day, many programs emphasized the connection at pick-up.

In addition to drop-off routines, teachers liked to start the day by empowering children to use the items in the classroom and pursue their interests, with support and scaffolding provided by the teacher. One teacher discussed the importance of gradually introducing children to the daily routine through visual cues and repetition at the beginning of the school year. They shared how this empowered children and provided a sense of safety and consistency that was particularly important after the pandemic.

One program called pick-up times "reunions," which emphasized and built on children's excitement about seeing their families.

Building relationships could be challenging in linguistically diverse classrooms, and the sites had developed a variety of innovative strategies to prioritize this essential component of ECEAP and to foster communication and belonging with children and families. One bilingual teacher taught English-speaking teachers key Spanish phrases to use throughout the day to support belonging and relationship-building with children. Another teacher said it was a priority to ensure each classroom had at least one person who understood every child. An administrator shared their approach to supporting children who spoke languages other than English, saying they did not put pressure on any child to speak English. They found that children would pick up English on their own, and it created a stronger sense of trust and safety within the classroom if they were not pressured to do so. In classrooms with interpreters, teachers worked to ensure that children were interacting with peers who spoke other languages and learning in both/all languages to avoid segregating the classroom.

Families valued the focus on relationships

Building relationships with children was also a key step in building relationships with families. Many participants shared how they built relationships with family members around the common goal of supporting their child, which helped open up conversations and establish trust. This approach was particularly impactful for families experiencing trauma or stress, as one family member shared:

> *"Doing it on my own, I wouldn't be where I am today. They just gave me such strength. Then, my kids' behavior was going … he was acting out and everything. With their help, they were just always there for him and helping him. So, I didn't feel like I was alone. I thank everybody for that and all their help. They say it takes a village and this is a good village."*
>
> — Family member

Similarly, the family support specialists found it helpful to be in the classroom to build relationships with children and streamline communication with teachers. They balanced their time in the classroom with other responsibilities to ensure they could build relationships with children while also connecting with and supporting families.

Many family members pointed to the people involved and their ability to engage and build relationships with children as the most unique and innovative elements of ECEAP. Families shared how kind, patient, and non-judgmental ECEAP staff members were. Many noted that this level of care and support was consistent across the entire staff, regardless of role, and that staff members also treated each other with respect, and it "felt like a family." As one family member reported, "[My child] says, 'They're all my teachers, Mama. I love them all.'" Family members also noticed how teachers gave equal attention to every child and did not give special treatment or have favorites. Some shared how much trust they placed in ECEAP to protect children and prioritize their safety in contentious custody situations or in a community that had experienced violence and lockdowns.

Staff members incorporated play and learning in all activities throughout the day and provided accommodations to address needs

They did this by building teachable moments into their everyday interactions. They created a routine where "every part of [the] day has a little bit of learning" and every activity throughout the day is structured to support play. As one administrator shared, "learning is best through play." Staff members described using repetition, stories and songs, modeling, and engaging in motor skills and interactive activities. Several mentioned the importance of asking children questions in these interactions to help them reflect, make predictions, explain what they are doing, elaborate on their play, or share their interests. One teacher referred to this strategy as "extending the communication" and shared how they always look for ways to spark longer responses from children.

> When asked how they support children's play and learning, many teachers said they prioritized building strong connections with children over teaching children specific skills.

> **Teacher 1.** *"We follow a child's interests."*
>
> **Teacher 2.** *"… not just during their playtime but in circle times, too. They kind of lead the discussion most of the time. We'll ask a basic question or give them a topic and let them run with it and see where it goes."*
>
> — Teachers

Teachers found that The Creative Curriculum® lessons lent themselves to a child-led approach, as described in section 3. The child-led focus was also apparent in how teachers described engaging in pretend play with children around their interests. Another shared how she gives each child a role or job each day based on their interests and preferences, such as being the leader, holding the rope for everybody, or getting the milk. Many also described their focus on getting down on the children's level and engaging in play and silliness.

"I act like I'm a kid and I join in with them. If they're playing in the dramatic area, I love to interact with them, pretending like it's a beauty salon and they're fixing my hair or they're putting makeup on me, or running after them outside, playing hide and seek, or duck duck goose. The kids love playing duck duck goose."

– Teacher

One family member shared:

"[She] knows she's got a timer. The first week, she kept running over to [teacher name] and had them flip it. Now, she knows how to do it herself, so she just flips it, and goes on to the next thing … It's very hard for her to sit longer than two minutes. But she knows that she has this timer, and she can't move on to anything else until that five minutes is up."

– Family member

Families appreciated the focus on play and also saw their children making a lot of progress on learning new skills. Many family members valued the role of ECEAP in supporting children's socialization with other children and adults and preparing them for norms in kindergarten. Family members also shared concerns about potty training. Many felt well supported with helping their children make progress and appreciated that ECEAP did not pressure them to meet a certain goal or deadline. Overall, families knew that the environment was fun and engaging by their children's excitement about attending and their love for their teachers.

Teachers also implemented specific strategies to create a supportive learning environment that met the needs of individual children, such as using a timer with a child that had a hard time sitting still, offering children various ways to sit or engage in circle time (e.g., "mermaid sitting"), providing weighted blankets, giving a child a sock with rice to hold in their lap, and providing rocking chairs and wobble chairs. They also provided supports to address sensory needs such as puppets; fidgets; a toy where they breathe to blow a pinwheel; tinker toys; play dough; opportunities to swing, spin, or jump; compression vests; and pop-its.

"He's excited about everything he does. He wants to go to school. When [my kids] first started last year, they'd come home on the weekends, and they'd get up in the morning on Saturday to go to school. When we'd tell them they can't go to school, they'd be all disappointed. So, they're excited to go to school. They want to go. It shows me that they're doing well in school, and they're being taught the things they need to know. They're making it fun for them."

— Family member

Staff members used a variety of strategies to support children and manage challenging behaviors

Staff members noted they had observed an increase in challenging behaviors in recent years (see Appendix B for a more detailed discussion). When managing challenging behaviors, many staff members focused on the role of prevention and the need to identify patterns or common triggers.

"We talk amongst ourselves and try to determine where that challenging behavior is coming from. If it's during a certain transition or something's going on, or if it's a certain child that is around them [that is triggering that behavior]. We try to see what is starting this challenging behavior."

— Teacher

Staff members described a variety of strategies they used to manage children's behaviors and support their growth in ECEAP. These strategies included role playing how to ask for turns or express boundaries, reinforcing positive interactions and turn taking, and using visuals and sign languages to reinforce routines and give children communication skills. In some cases, they moved children to new classrooms. Some teachers also mentioned using playfulness or silliness and giving children options to address challenging behaviors.

The key to identifying a successful strategy was having a strong relationship and trust with each child and knowing them well enough to know what strategy would work well and whether the behavior was worth addressing. Administrators discussed the importance of responding in a positive way to challenging behaviors, with one saying:

"They use age-appropriate words. They're kind. They don't use any words that are demeaning. If they need to set boundaries because a behavior is not OK, then they say, 'You're not being safe with your body, and I need you to do this.'"

— Administrator

Some teachers talked about the importance of collaboration and shared problem solving with peers to address certain behaviors or support specific children. In the moment, it was important to be aligned within the classroom and to know that they would be supported in their approach to working with an individual child so that there was a "togetherness that echoes between [teacher 1] and [teacher 2]." Another teacher shared how she and other staff members switched roles seamlessly to work with individual children as needed and how they developed strategies for asking one another for help if they needed to "tap out" or "tag someone else in." Family support specialists also helped out in the classroom, supporting teachers who were providing one-on-one support to a student, filling in for teachers who were out sick, or just providing an extra pair of hands.

Some sites had weekly meetings to discuss challenging behavior issues and found that it resulted in better strategies and reduced isolation for teachers. One school district-affiliated site invited additional support staff to these meetings, such as a school psychologist, special education teacher, and school counselors. Some teachers mentioned close collaboration with and professional development from specialists like occupational therapists or school psychologists. Some sites took this a step further and implemented a team-based approach to problem solving for particular children. This included relevant specialists based on the child's needs.

For students on individualized education programs (IEPs) this would include the special education teacher working with the school psychologist. If children were receiving services from external agencies, then those service providers would also be part of the team. This collaborative approach was particularly valuable for new teachers who faced a steep learning curve as they acquired the necessary strategies and experience to deal with challenges in the moment.

Families were key partners in managing challenging behaviors

Many teachers also shared the importance of collaborating with families to understand the root cause of a behavior or to ask if they have strategies that work at home. This provided consistency across the home and school. Many family members expressed relief and appreciation for the attention and care taken by ECEAP staff members when they worked together to address their children's challenging behaviors.

> *"I love the fact that she heard me. When I told her what we were seeing, she said, 'Ok,' and she went into action. That's huge to me, because sometimes you feel like you're fighting a battle. Like, 'No, really. My kid is a good kid, but this is what we're seeing.' [A common response is] 'Oh, no, [they're] just being a kid.' Yes, but some of these things are extreme and people don't always see that. For her to just say, 'OK,' and take me at my word and instantly work with [child name] on the first day, that's huge."*
>
> — Family member

Families felt like equal partners when teachers asked for or used their suggestions about how to support or engage their child, and they were grateful when staff members could help them address challenging behaviors at home. Many noted that this was the first program that "worked" for their children with higher levels of behavior challenges. Families also appreciated that teachers provided positive feedback about their child even when they were exhibiting challenging behaviors.

> *"Because [child name] at his previous school was just being disciplined constantly. Every day I picked him up, he was in timeout. Every day I picked him up, there was a write-up about something he had done. And I would just be given a list of everything he had done wrong that day versus when I'd pick him up from [ECEAP], even if he had a write-up, it was approached in a positive way that was like, 'Well, we struggled a little bit with this today, but this is how we redid it. And then we redid it like this. And then he did really good with …' It was framed in a way that was what he did right and how he was able to fix the situation versus just he did this, this, this, and this wrong."*
>
> — Family member

This was echoed by a teacher who said,

> *"[We tell families] 'We're not going to [kick kids out]. We're going to find what works and we're going to work together and you're a part of that team.'"*
>
> — Teacher

Some sites used specific curricula or programs to address challenging behaviors

Many participants used strategies or practices from a curriculum, program, or training used by their site to address challenging behaviors. These included Conscious Discipline, Positive Behavior Supports, or Right Response trainings. This site-level approach was helpful in creating a shared language across an entire staff, providing staff members with a script and guidelines for managing behaviors in the moment, and establishing a process for engaging families. However, these approaches looked very different in practice.

Staff members at sites using a SEL curriculum discussed how they approached challenging behaviors by first regulating their own behavior before engaging with a child. The social-emotional strategies also helped them understand how to take a science-based approach to addressing children's behavior.

Staff members talked about the importance of self-awareness and knowing their own triggers.

"Learning that you can't really do anything until you are calm. Knowing that has been really helpful because then [I'm] able to recognize this child is absolutely not going to be able to listen to what I want them to do until they've been able to get to a state where they can process it and then actually respond to what we're trying to give them to do."

— Family support specialist

Social-emotional curricula also provided staff members with strategies to support emotional regulation and awareness with children, including "feeling buddies" that could help children talk about their emotions and the "safe space" where they could go to work through big feelings.

"I have a few that will just go to a corner, calm down, and they just don't want anyone around, just them. And they breathe and they're fine."

— Teacher

Families at sites using Conscious Discipline shared additional strategies that worked well for their children, such as giving children the opportunity for "re-dos" instead of immediately disciplining them for a particular behavior and providing them with options for how to express emotions. Another parent shared how it helped her understand the causes of her child's behavior, such as when her son was emotional because his teacher was gone for a week. Another family member was learning redirection strategies from her child's teacher who avoided the word "no."

Staff members at sites using Positive Behavior Supports shared how it created a clear structure and expectations for children within a supportive environment. They also found that the behavior charts through Positive Behavior Supports helped to facilitate collaboration with service providers and families. Positive Behavior Supports also provided a process for engaging families in co-designing interventions and understanding why a child might be experiencing challenges. One site used the Class Dojo app to align with the Positive Behavior Supports and to share with family members when children were receiving points for positive behaviors. Administrators also saw value in using Positive Behavior Supports to align with the K–12 schools in the district.

At some sites, these strategies were reinforced by behavior reports. For example, in some cases the teacher documented how they responded and whether they regulated their own response (e.g., by taking three calming breaths), and in other cases, the report included information about the time of day, the transition, or anything else that might have sparked the behavior. Some behavior reports included information about restorative practices and teachers' approach to repairing relationships or supporting children that might have been negatively impacted by the behavior.

An increase in challenging behaviors took a toll on staff members

The increase in challenging behaviors could be hard on staff members, and they discussed the importance of not taking it personally, understanding how children's situations might be contributing to the behaviors, and engaging in the emotional regulation strategies to help them cope. Teachers acknowledged that challenging behaviors could "be very exhausting and take a toll on everyone," and they noticed that it was a much bigger issue this year compared to previous years. Some teachers emphasized the importance of patience and having a passion for teaching and engaging with children, saying that this is what keeps them going to work every day.

However, many noted that the behavior challenges were exacerbated by high child-adult ratios and staffing shortages (see Appendix B for a more detailed discussion). One administrator commented that sometimes children just needed a break during the day. In previous years children could come to the office if they needed a break, but due to staffing shortages the administrator was now in the classroom most days and that was no longer an option. All sites had a documented process for managing continued challenging behaviors that included behavior plans, social support teams, and referrals for additional support or evaluation.

Recommendations

Sites

- Create structures for aligning behavior reports with supportive behavior management practices.

- Establish processes for reviewing data to understand and address equity gaps. This would include disaggregated behavior report data across classrooms and sites.

- Create a site-level approach to engaging families in behavior management strategies.

- Establish or reinforce practices that support adults with emotion regulation skills and self-care including norms around "tapping out" or "tagging in" and breathing before responding to challenging behaviors.

DCYF

- Review site-level access to service providers, coaches, specialists, and technical assistance providers and support sites that have limited access. Across the sites in this study, there was wide variation in their access to these individuals. Educators found that access to and collaboration with these individuals supported their own knowledge and skills. They also reported that access to providers that could offer push-in services was beneficial for children.

Section 5. Measuring and supporting child outcomes

ECEAP sites used a variety of strategies to measure and support children's development and learning. In this section we will use the term "screening" to refer to developmental screenings, and "assessment" to refer to whole-child, observational, formative assessments used to guide instruction so that children can make developmentally appropriate progress. Most of the nine sites in this study used either the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) or Developmental Indicators for Assessment of Learning 4 (DIAL-4) to screen for developmental delays, and some sites used additional social-emotional screeners (ASQ SE).

All sites used Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold) for formative assessment. This assessment includes quarterly written observations, checklists, parent questionnaires, and pictures to assess children's skills across nine domains. This section reviews findings around administering both developmental screenings and conducting formative assessment with TS Gold, sharing screening and assessment data with families and developing goals for each child, implementing individualized supports and differentiating instruction, providing referrals for additional services or evaluation, working with service providers, using child screening assessment data to inform site-level improvements, and supporting children with the transition to kindergarten. This section begins with bright spots and innovations, followed by common themes and practices across the nine sites in this study. It closes with recommendations for sites and DCYF.

Bright spots and innovations

Conducting screenings and observational assessments

- Some sites collaborated with community partners for developmental and health screenings. One site partnered with Child Find to assist with observations and screenings to follow up on concerns from a parent or teacher. Another partnered with local universities to do hearing and vision screenings and provide additional screenings and recommendations around speech and language pathology. Another site partnered with a nonprofit serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and another connected parents with resources at the library.

- One site had an Early Achievers[10] coach who supported staff members with conducting the assessment and entering and interpreting Early Achievers data. Staff members at several sites said they would appreciate additional support for collecting and entering screening and assessment data.

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[10] Early Achievers is the rating system used to provide information about the quality of early learning programs in Washington State. See more information here: https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/early-learning-providers/early-achievers

- Staff members at one site described how they used a playful approach when screening children to build trust and create a relaxed environment.

- Staff members at a site with a high proportion of English language learners shared how they work with bilingual instructional assistance to provide key information and context to screenings or assessments with children and families.

Providing accommodations and individualized support

- One site used a student support team approach to focus on a particular student each week. Meetings were attended by the family support specialist, two or three teachers, a family member, and the educational specialist, occupational therapist, and speech-language pathologist. They reviewed a form that began with the student's strengths, and then they reviewed behaviors and learning delays and decided on additional data collection, intervention, or referral.

- One school district site had elementary school case managers and special education teachers who pushed down into preschools and began providing services for students up to two years before kindergarten. An administrator shared that "It's a benefit to the kids and our program."

- One school district site had a school counselor who provided lessons and read books to the children focused on social-emotional skills. This person also provided referrals and group counseling for children who were having trouble with specific skills. An administrator explained how embedding this role in the classroom streamlined the referral process and "the lapse in time is cut in half, or even more so because we have all those supports in place."

Using assessment data for classroom or program improvement

- One site had a professional learning community for teachers to engage in goal setting for their whole class or subgroups of students. They conducted classroom-based assessments monthly and reviewed the data as a team to see what was working well and areas for growth. They also used this time to learn from one another and share successful strategies. Another site had a data day in which the entire teaching staff met to discuss trends, engage in problem solving, and share what was working and what was not.

- One site used a data system that allowed them to track data over time and integrate WaKIDS data to review performance in elementary school. Another site had a shared data system with the district kindergartens, which teachers used to compare TS Gold to WaKIDS. Each fall, teachers sat down with kindergarten teachers and shared the data.

Supporting kindergarten transitions

- One site engaged children in a caterpillar lesson as part of their "getting ready for kindergarten" work. Each child got a caterpillar and saw it turn into a butterfly. The teachers turned this into a metaphor for preschool students transitioning into kindergarten. This site also held an end-of-year celebration and took students on a field trip to their new school.

- At one site, a director compiled a packet for each child that included all three assessments, an information card completed by the teacher, and a writing sample. The director delivered the packets in a meeting with the principal, kindergarten teachers, and special education teachers. At these meetings she described the children, starting with those that had the highest needs. They also took the children on field trips to the elementary school and provided a "kinder academy" for a few days before the start of the school year, which involved ECEAP staff members, their kindergarten teacher, and other support staff. During these days children learned the routines and where things were located and began to gain familiarity with the new environment.

Findings

Staff members tried to minimize the stress associated with screenings while still gathering important information

All of the sites administered the first set of screenings and assessments within the first few months of the school year. However, the timeframe for the first screening was challenging for some staff members to navigate due to competing priorities.

Some sites began this process before enrollment, sending home questionnaires or screeners as early as possible so that staff members could understand families' concerns and make referrals as early as possible. This was especially important in recent years, due to a significant increase in cases. A family support specialist also noticed that sending home these resources earlier provided family members with a common language to share observations or ask questions and helped build trust. Some teachers described how they balance family members' reports of children's abilities with their own observations and assessments of children's abilities and work to ensure that families understand the results and process surrounding the early screenings and assessments.

Teachers or family support specialists conducted additional screenings after children were enrolled, although this varied by site. It was common for family support specialists to conduct screenings, but some teachers preferred to do this because they had stronger relationships with children and needed the information to guide classroom instruction. Screenings in the first weeks of school could be challenging as well. Some teachers also found that children would resist or refuse a screening at the start of the year and would need to be re-screened once they had established trust. One family support specialist shared how she used a playful approach to help children feel comfortable during the screenings, saying:

> *"We tell them, 'OK, I want you to tell me if you can hear some alien noises.' Or, 'I want to see how tall you are, how strong you are.' So instead of, 'I need to test you on this,' we make it playful. They forget they're being tested and are less tense."*
>
> — Family support specialist

Staff members were concerned about their ability to accurately assess children who spoke languages other than English. For example, family support specialists were concerned that they might miss developmental or speech/language delays and wished for additional resources and support in that area.

One site used bilingual instructional assistants to do the screenings, but they were not always available and some of the responsibilities were outside their job description. For example, one teacher shared how the bilingual instructional assistants went above and beyond to take notes about what they were seeing in the classroom because "they're hearing things in the home language that [the teacher] might not understand or interpret correctly based on the situation."

 Another strategy that one teacher used was to try the assessment multiple ways, which made it as easy as possible for children to perform a particular skill. Some sites were also beginning to use social-emotional screeners, such as the ASQ SE, and found them to be helpful in identifying children who would benefit from a referral to a mental health counselor or a school psychologist.

One of the most successful strategies for teachers and families was including children in the intake meetings and conducting developmental screenings at that time. This helped teachers understand each child's ability and facilitated relationship building between parents and teachers. An administrator shared that they prioritized completing screenings before the observational formative assessment to "eliminate if there is a physical reason why a child's not learning [a particular skill]."

This practice was not consistent, however. At some sites, the child's attendance at the intake meeting was optional, and children were screened after being enrolled. Another site had to condense their onboarding process because they had to fill slots on a tight deadline, which meant eliminating some of the early meetings that allowed teachers and family support specialists to meet with and screen children.

Another successful strategy was setting aside dedicated time at the beginning of the year to complete screenings. One site closed for two days, one month into the year, and set up appointments for screenings. This process ensured that children were comfortable with the staff and able to complete the screenings in a safe, one-on-one setting where families were present and staff members could immediately discuss referrals or areas of additional support. Another teacher, who had experience at multiple ECEAP sites, favored testing days or "data days," during which they were provided with a substitute teacher and could focus on individual children. However, other teachers explained that this process was cut due to staffing and budget constraints (see Appendix B for a more detailed discussion).

Teachers integrated TS Gold assessment with classroom activities

Teachers described how they tried to build TS Gold assessment into daily routines, such as ensuring every child had an opportunity to answer a question of the day or observing children while they were in small group activities. As one teacher said, "I never want a kid to feel tested … it's supposed to feel like play, and just seeing what sparks their curiosity and what they like and their own way of exploring the world in this point in time." However, other teachers shared that it was not a natural process and could take away from "the natural flow of the classroom." One site integrated TS Gold assessments by allowing teachers to use pictures on their phone instead of writing up a report. One teacher shared that children were excited to demonstrate skills for the camera and "show off." They also appreciated the alignment between the activities in The Creative Curriculum® and the TS Gold assessment and found that it streamlined data collection.

> *"One of the things that I find hard is uploading the documentation. Not to say we don't have it, because we definitely have it, but it's just putting it in when you have 36 friends [students] and you only have 15 minutes in the day [to do it]. That's something I'm working on personally."*
>
> – Teacher

The increase in challenging behaviors also had an impact on assessment (see Appendix B for a more detailed discussion). One teacher described trying to conduct an assessment with one child, which left her paraeducator with 19 other children to attend to, which was not feasible due to the prevalence of challenging behaviors. When asked to describe the biggest challenge related to assessment, a common response was, "Having the time to do it and then to be present enough to actually observe without having to run across the classroom and help a child having a meltdown."

Challenges with collecting TS Gold assessment data were exacerbated by the revolving door of staff members in any given classroom, due to covering staff absences. Some staff members were not trained or experienced with collecting and noting observations, and teachers felt that it took a lot of experience to be able to integrate them easily into the classroom flow. Across sites, teachers talked about the importance of having experience with assessment and having strong relationships with children to understand whether a child just needed time in the classroom or a referral for additional services.

ECEAP staff members used formal and informal strategies to share data and set goals with families

When asked how they engaged families in their children's learning, staff at most sites discussed the importance of sharing assessment data and engaging in goal setting at parent conferences. Sites typically conducted three or four conferences per year and used a team-based approach that included teachers and family support specialists, at a minimum, with administrators, service providers, and other staff members joining in some situations.

One administrator described a dual approach in which family support specialists were responsible for understanding what was happening in the context of the families and teachers were responsible for understanding what was happening in the classroom. Conferences brought those two together with families and allowed them to discuss each child's strengths, share concerns, and develop goals.

A family support specialist echoed this approach, describing one of their roles as "strengthening the bridge between teachers and families." At conferences, family support specialists also provided families with referrals to community resources including behavioral health supports, contracted mental health specialists, and primary care doctors.

Some sites described using conferences to share activities and educational resources with families. For example, one teacher mentioned a child who needed support with fine motor skills, so they developed goals with the family and sent home scissors, paper, and play dough. Another teacher had a child who was working on their three-point pencil grip, so they encouraged the family to use broken crayons to help develop this skill.

One administrator shared a slightly different approach where they set two goals for each child—a family goal for families to work on with their children at home and a child goal for the classroom—and provided families with the necessary resources to meet both. At this site, they checked in with families each month to learn about their progress and develop additional goals. Teachers found that conferences were enlightening for parents who might have different expectations for what their children should know prior to kindergarten or the kinds of activities that support learning. One teacher noticed that many families had social-emotional goals for their children.

Families were eager to know their children's strengths and areas of growth. Many families expressed deep appreciation for the goal setting and celebrated their children's progress. Family members shared numerous stories about the ways in which ECEAP staff members supported their children's goals. One parent shared how their child was already meeting kindergarten goals and ECEAP staff members "didn't hold him back. They put him in a group with all the older kids and they just keep going with him." Another parent shared:

> *"My daughter is very shy. And I would say two weeks after she started the program, they came to me and said, 'How many words is [child name] saying at home?' And that lets me know that they're observing ... Because she's really not speaking at home. And I'm working with the teacher now."*
>
> — Family member

Although many of the conversations with parents were positive, some administrators acknowledged that it could be challenging to broach the subject of an IEP referral or additional screening with family members that had not voiced concerns about their child. Some strategies that staff members used were to approach the conversation with care and intentionality, establish supports for the whole family, and emphasize the importance and value of early intervention. A teacher shared how they used the screening and assessment results to structure conversations, focusing on specific skills. Many administrators shared structured approaches to working with teachers, family support specialists, on-site service providers, and families to develop an intervention, set benchmarks, and assess progress.

ECEAP staff members also shared how they tried to share information with families through text messages and communication at pick-up and drop-off, rather than relying solely on conferences. As one administrator said, "I never want to walk into a meeting and the parent for the first time hears, 'There's a concern about your child.'"

One approach was called "Student Support Teams" and involved weekly group meetings to discuss a specific child. The group included a family support specialist, a teacher, family members, an educational specialist, an occupational therapist, a speech language pathologist and other specialists or teachers as relevant. They used a predetermined process and completed a form as they discussed the child's strengths and needs for additional support before discussing potential interventions. An administrator described this approach as follows,

> *"We try to dissect what the issues are. So, we talk about behaviors, we talk about delays, we talk about maybe just a speech impediment or something that's happening. Sometimes the determination is we're going to collect more data, we're going to implement these ideas or suggestions and interventions, or this looks like we need to refer to the special ed team."*

> **— Administrator**

Other sites used similar strategies through a Response to Intervention approach (part of Positive Behavior Supports), which would result in an intervention or set of strategies that would be implemented for a set amount of time (e.g., six weeks). Then, if none of these steps were successful, the final step was referral. This process was largely successful, as one administrator shared:

> *"It's giving you a chance to meet with the other people and talk about different strategies. And our speech therapist was just saying to me, 'Wow, by the time we get a referral from your teachers, 97 percent of the kids qualify. These are accurate referrals.'"*

> — Administrator

Sites had developed a variety of strategies to support families with understanding and using their children's screening results. Teachers emphasized the importance of meeting with families soon after they were provided with their child's screening results, so they could ask questions and discuss recommendations. They found that pictures, videos, and examples helped build a foundation for a productive conversation.

In addition, staff members emphasized the importance of asking family members what they noticed and what was working at home and then providing them with clear, visual examples of what a particular skill might look like. These strategies worked particularly well for linguistically diverse families and for addressing stigma that may be associated with a particular term or diagnosis from the written screening results.

Teachers faced higher needs for accommodations and individualized support

Teachers discussed how they approached individualized instruction through individual- and group-level accommodations. For example, they shared how they might use visual cues with one child and sign language with another, or how one child might need help with a three-point hand grip to hold a pencil, while another might need more time to walk to the bathroom. However, some teachers noted that they had to be careful with group-based approaches. For example, one teacher explained why they purposefully did not group children by age level or ability, saying "We try to mix it because kids learn from other kids the best."

Families appreciated teachers' responsive and individualized approaches to engaging with children. Especially for children with special learning needs, they shared experiences of how quickly and easily teachers and classrooms adapted to support their children and ensure they could be successful and comfortable. Families were incredibly grateful for the level of individualization they saw for their children, and many referenced diagnoses, communication styles, or behavioral challenges that teachers easily and expertly accommodated.

> *"I moved from a different center that was not understanding my son's specific needs, and he's not even diagnosed with any special needs. [At ECEAP] I've seen that they tried to get to his level, find out what he needs, find his interests. It's nice that they actually try to understand him as a person and do what he needs."*
>
> — Family member

One of the biggest challenges teachers faced with individualization was finding the time to do it effectively. Teachers with more experience were better able to accommodate children and support their learning needs, and this was particularly evident at a site where all teachers held dual certification in special education. Their experience and training also facilitated referrals for IEPs. As one staff member explained, "It's easier for us to say, 'Oh I think that's environmental. Oh, I think that's a disability.' We already have that kind of foundation, that background knowledge."

Another challenge to individualization was the high child-adult ratios. One administrator shared that they had the capacity to develop the plans, but the ratios in the classroom made it difficult to provide the supports outlined in each plan.

At programs with various classrooms and slots (e.g., developmental preschool, ECEAP, Head Start) administrators had to make difficult choices about where to place children with higher needs. One administrator explained that the ECEAP budget did not allow them to add special education paraeducators or even "floaters," so they were forced to move students into the developmental preschool, which might not be the best fit for them or their family. Another administrator said that while ECEAP sites were expected to support students' special education needs, they lacked the necessary resources and support to do this effectively.

ECEAP staff members valued opportunities to work with service providers

ECEAP staff members appreciated the opportunities for collaboration, professional development, and support they received from service providers who worked directly in the classroom. These included school psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, special education inclusion case managers, and school counselors. Having specialists in the classroom also facilitated better referral and evaluation, because they noticed delays or picked up on behaviors that teachers might miss. Moreover, they shared how beneficial this was for children and for themselves in their efforts to support children.

> *"[Service providers] help teachers think outside the box … just because [a child] can't talk doesn't mean they're not able to learn."*
>
> — Teacher

However, there was a lot of variation across sites in the number and types of service providers available. One site had access to all of the specialists described above, whereas another site only had access to a speech therapist. These two sites varied by size, locale (remote versus urban), and contractor type (school district versus nonprofit organization) with the larger, urban, school district-affiliated site benefiting from access to additional resources and supports. Access to service providers can make a big difference for children, as one teacher explained:

> *"I really wish we had services on site, like [occupational therapy], speech, psych, behaviorist, physical. We're working with that age group where kids aren't getting the help they need. Between birth and 3 they may get daycare and other services, but then they go to preschool, and we don't have services or the training. By the time they hit 4 or 5, they're behind on the help they need. And so they struggle in kindergarten and then they're put into services and don't know how to handle them."*
>
> — Teacher

IEP and other referral processes also varied across sites. Referral processes were often smoother for sites that were operating within a school district or educational service district and more challenging for sites that were not part of a school district. At these sites, family support specialists often took on the role of advocate, working with families to complete paperwork online or in person, ensuring that paperwork was submitted, and in some cases walking parents into evaluations so that they knew where to go.

> *"They were with me every single step, guiding me. And they did the screen, and then they did an appointment, and they filled out every single thing that was needed. So, I was just signing papers, and it was a lot. But they made it very easy for me."*
>
> — Family member

ECEAP staff members also prioritized push-in special education services so that students did not need to be pulled out of the classroom. This was well-received by families, as described by an administrator:

> *"It helps when the parents hear, 'Yeah, we're going to provide some extra support for your child. But they don't have to change classrooms. They don't have to change schools. They get to stay where they are with their friends and if they need speech therapy or physical therapy or occupational therapy that's part of their preschool day. We've got the programs here.'"*
>
> — Administrator

Sites also worked to ensure families could continue to attend ECEAP after qualifying for services. **One family, whose child qualified for 40 hours of applied behavior analysis therapy, appreciated that the ECEAP site allowed the therapist to come into the classroom for part of the time, which also helped to ensure consistency between home and school.** This approach resonated with families and helped them support their children, this was echoed by a family member, who said:

> *"My child … went through something really traumatic last year, and so he's actually in behavioral health therapy. And the school has been really supportive in letting me know what kind of behavioral problems come up and how I can interpret that with the therapist who works on those individual needs. So that's been really nice."*
>
> — Family member

ECEAP sites used a range of strategies to support transition to kindergarten

When asked about strategies to support kindergarten transitions, participants mentioned a variety of activities that support children's learning and independence, facilitate registration and enrollment for families, and provide information to kindergarten teachers. In addition to practices required by the ECEAP performance standards, educators at these sites provided the following supports:

- Kindergarten time, during which older kids would spend a little time each day working on kindergarten readiness activities. In some cases this was scheduled while younger children were napping since the older children might be transitioning away from a nap. Teachers also talked about their emphasis on independence and SEL skills in preparing for kindergarten, such as raising hands, standing in line, problem solving, and playing with other children.

- The Creative Curriculum® has a "getting ready for kindergarten" study unit, which helps children gain independent skills such as eating cafeteria-style meals.

One of the biggest challenges with transition, as shared by both ECEAP staff members and families, was the gap in support for families who had come to trust and rely on the family support specialists and teachers. Many family members would continue to call or email the ECEAP staff members to ask for support, either for themselves or their child, because they were not receiving similar supports at the kindergarten level. One ECEAP staff member described the importance of preparing families for this transition by providing them with the tools they would need to advocate for themselves and their child after leaving the program.

Recommendations

Sites

- Identify community partners that could provide professional development or consultation to teachers or support families as they embark on the referral and evaluation processes, particularly families whose children have a specific diagnosis. Some sites noted that community-based support groups for specific diagnosis were beneficial for families.

- When possible, create opportunities for teachers to meet with children and families before they begin the screening process, such as during onboarding.

- Create opportunities for staff members to engage in shared learning around collecting and interpreting classroom and site-level formative assessment data.

- Identify community partners who can support translation for assessments at ECEAP and during screenings or evaluations at community organizations.

- Review kindergarten transition activities and identify additional ways to serve as a bridge between early childhood education and kindergarten. This might include increased opportunities for children and families to gain familiarity with the elementary school and teachers and opportunities for teachers to learn about incoming ECEAP children and families.

DCYF

- Review enrollment deadlines and provide sites with more flexibility to support relationship building and assessment during the enrollment process. It may also be beneficial to provide sites with guidelines or recommendations around enrollment processes that build in time for teachers to meet the child and conduct initial developmental screenings at intake meetings.

- Encourage sites to designate a specific staff member to support data collection or data entry for whole-child observational assessments. This might be a new position or an existing staff member who can take on a lighter caseload. This would allow teachers to focus on interpreting the data and developing goals for children and their classrooms. Alternatively, consider opportunities to reduce the number of assessments and reporting requirements for classroom teachers.

- Collaborate with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, school districts, and educational service districts to support family members with the transition to kindergarten and the shift away from supports provided by family support specialists. Identify opportunities to provide families with basic needs support, connection to community resources, counseling, and goal setting. Since 2019, DCYF and OSPI have worked together to focus on transitions to kindergarten under the Preschool Development Grant.[11]

- Support data review practices at the classroom and site level through templates and examples and collaborate with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and school districts to facilitate shared data systems, especially for sites that are not affiliated with school districts.

- Provide additional funding to support sites with translation supports for assessment and referral processes based on need (i.e., site-level linguistic diversity and behavioral needs).

[11] For more information, see the following: Seeds of Inspiration for Effective Transition Approaches, Successes and Challenges of Early Learning Transitions in Washington State, Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five

Section 6. Professional development and training

ECEAP teachers and staff members at all nine sites in this study participated in regular and ongoing professional development, coaching, and training. These opportunities included a variety of in-person, multi-day trainings; virtual trainings; and in-person, on-site meetings, discussions, and coaching sessions. Professional development on specific curricula and opportunities to apply the strategies were greatly appreciated. Other trainings on behavior management, special needs, safety, equity, and inclusion, and self-care were also widely cited as valuable. ECEAP staff members participated in frequent internal meetings to discuss how to apply what they had learned in professional development sessions. This section begins with bright spots and innovations, followed by common themes seen across sites. It closes with recommendations for sites and DCYF.

Bright spots and innovations

Most professional development practices were common across sites. One of the most innovative practices implemented at several ECEAP sites was the use of community learning events. These events involved internal meetings with teachers and staff members and sometimes included administrators; specialists (e.g., occupational therapists, mental health professionals, speech-language pathologists); and families. Participants reviewed screening and assessment data for individual students, collaboratively worked to identify students in need of referrals, and identified strategies to address student needs. When needed, administrators and specialists would observe classrooms and provide coaching or modeling.

One site had a retreat that received positive feedback from staff members. It provided an opportunity to engage in shared learning, build relationships, and refresh their practices.

> *"By doing that retreat, it got a chance for us to all get somewhere and relax. We had it locally so that people who had young kids and needed to be home in the evenings could just come in for the day. But it really made all the difference. We got a lot accomplished. We had some deep conversations and really those opportunities to make sure that people were ready to learn."*
>
> — Administrator

Teachers and staff members who participated in professional development were particularly excited about several opportunities. One ECEAP site shared that they had monthly trainings on how to implement Mobility Mentoring® as well as technical assistance from the parent company EMPath to help them improve implementation of the program. Other highlights included:

- Conscious Discipline
- Poverty Institute training
- Handwriting Without Tears training
- Training and coaching on autism

- Safety training for responding to active shooters
- Specialized training for interpreters around ECEAP practices and supports

Findings

ECEAP staff members appreciated the opportunity to participate in trainings that will help improve quality and address family needs

ECEAP teachers and staff members reported access to frequent trainings on a variety of topics. While the number of trainings was onerous for some, most participants were grateful for the knowledge they attained and felt the information was useful for supporting children and/or families. Common training topics focused on food, safety, curriculum, social-emotional support, equity, special needs, and child/family needs. Many of these trainings were required, although the ECEAP sites also offered optional trainings. Teachers appreciated the flexibility to choose trainings that met their schedule, learning goals, and the needs of the family and child communities they worked with.

Some staff members shared that while self-care was described as a strategy to address burnout, it could be challenging to take time off or adopt the strategies. Teachers and staff members who work in inclusion classrooms or non-inclusion classrooms were eager for more information on the learning needs of students with special needs, including autism.

Following the pandemic, teachers reported that some of the most valuable trainings focused on staff self-care, behavioral support, and trauma-informed practices to help them understand needs and provide strategies to address those needs.

Family support specialists expressed different professional development needs than teachers, focusing on training to support interactions with families, including Mobility Mentoring® and how to approach sensitive subjects without giving offense. Staff members would still like more training on interactions with families, mentioning that they are not trained therapists but sometimes find themselves filling that role.

"I've had a conversation with the family and the parent opened up … It was during COVID. They're like, 'I'm having suicidal thoughts.' And I'm like, 'Oh crap. Oh crap. Oh crap.' And I'm sending six emails out while on the phone with this family, going, 'I am not a substitute for the suicide helpline. What do I do? Who do I contact?' And I admit, I freaked out mentally and internally and I'm like, all right, just stay calm. But having more resources, more training to be able to help those crazy situations that pop up on us."

— Family support specialist

Family support specialists also articulated a desire for more guidance on how to build partnerships with community organizations and identify additional resources for families. Some shared that eligibility and application processes for state and federal programs (e.g., food and housing assistance programs) could be complicated and they would appreciate support to better understand those programs.

Both teachers and family support specialists would like more guidance on how to improve interactions with families. One site offered specialized training for interpreters to help them better understand and translate the context and intent of discussions and instructions from staff members. For sites that used the Conscious Discipline curriculum, ECEAP staff members found the professional development valuable and frequently engaged in ongoing learning through book studies and networking with other individuals who attended the training from other ECEAP sites.

Some sites shared that the focus of much of their professional development was around diversity, equity, and inclusion, with the goal of helping teachers and staff members understand the perspectives and challenges of families. These trainings focused on topics such as poverty, culture, and language and included both external trainings and internal discussions on topics such as race, bias, and collaborations with specialists about how to support students with special needs.

Although ECEAP staff members appreciated opportunities to participate in a variety of trainings, the options could be overwhelming at times. Some staff members discussed the difficulty they faced in keeping track of all the training opportunities and would appreciate having a central online hub where they could filter for training opportunities that are required or are of interest to them. There were also numerous complaints about the number of required trainings and the repetitive requirements across different systems, including school districts, educational service districts, the state education agency, and DCYF. Moreover, some of the required trainings are developed for child care staff members, instead of ECEAP staff members, who have a larger focus on education. Finally, weekend trainings are problematic for some teachers and staff members after a long week.

> *"I think the teachers are so burned out. They're tired. My teachers, they work eight hours and the [paraeducators] work seven. The training was on a Saturday because not only is it for early childhood, but it's also for child care providers. And they're not working on Saturdays, so that's the only time [staff] can do it."*
>
> — Administrator

In-person professional development was the best option for deep learning, while virtual trainings were more convenient

ECEAP sites provide professional development in a variety of formats including in-person, virtual, and on- or off-site. Some of these opportunities are accompanied by resources such as books, videos, and/or technical assistance upon request. Many ECEAP staff members reported using these resources and finding them useful when they struggled to understand or apply a concept or strategy. In-person professional development generally was perceived as the most useful for improving classroom learning and support for children and families. Off-site, in-person professional development during and prior to the school year, including local and non-local trainings provides space for team building as well as time to go in depth around content and to practice strategies. One site required a two-week pre-service training prior to each school year. Others paid for teachers and staff members to attend multi-day professional development training together, and one site held a three-day retreat with just staff members from their site.

> *"And I think training shouldn't just be like on the computer or a presenter. I think you need to be ... I'm the type of person that likes to learn ... I think when I see it and I can do it, that's the way I learn."*
>
> — Teacher

Off-site professional development can be expensive and challenging for staff members with young children. It can also be difficult to schedule around preschool and personal schedules. One common alternative to in-person professional development is virtual training, an option that expanded greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and staff members reported that the virtual online format was more convenient for completing some trainings. However, a few teachers and staff members reported that virtual professional development required a certain level of technical expertise and the ability to resist distractions. While teachers and staff members noted that virtual trainings were useful for meeting requirements or completing refresher trainings, few preferred online professional development as a means for improving program quality.

"I kind of prefer the in-person [trainings]. However, sometimes based off whatever might be going on around [you], it is nice to do some of those the [educational service district] requires online because you can do it and then if something comes up and you're needed, you can pause it and go back later. Whereas you're out of commission if you're at one in person."

— Family support specialist

Coaching provided through schools, districts, and support organizations was responsive and high quality

Another common format for providing professional development was to offer coaching and technical assistance at the ECEAP site. Often organized and funded by the site, district, or educational service district, participating teachers and staff members reported that this professional development provided time to follow up on previous professional development and to discuss and apply learning. Several sites had coaches available who provided on-site help upon request or were available for consultation remotely. Teachers who interacted with coaches found them to be accessible and helpful.

"I would say anytime I have an email question, [the coach] gets back within 10 minutes of my question. And if it's not in 10 minutes, she'll email and say, 'Hey, I don't have the resources to find this right now, but I'll get back to you when I have the answers.'"

— Teacher

"That coach asked me what is my goal to work on. And I said, 'Behavior management.' [The coach] takes it and writes up an action plan. So, we have our goal, and then she sends us a whole bunch of resources that we can look at, like links to videos or articles we could read, and then it'll have like two or three ways that we're going to achieve that goal by next month, and we can save that same goal ... She videotapes us so we can look back and see, 'OK, this is your goal. Did you do it in this video? Did you see yourself doing it in this video?'"

— Teacher

Collaboration provided opportunities to discuss and improve application of strategies learned in professional development

At most sites, administrators built in time for professional collaboration between teachers, family support specialists, and sometimes specialists such as occupational therapists. Sites structured these collabora-tions differently, but activities often included a review of child data or screenings, discussion of recent trainings, discussion of classroom strategies, and resources for both children and families. These meetings generally took place at least monthly and in some cases weekly.

"So we come together as a program and then we do ... a book study. We just finished Managing Emotional Mayhem, which is all about the adult and kind of unpacking your own triggers and history. And then we've done the curriculum book study, we are doing the school family book study."

— Administrator

Recommendations

Sites

- Identify site-specific topics that would benefit from shared learning opportunities such as book studies, community learning events, or other frameworks. Potential topics could include supplemental curricula, culturally affirming practices, and reviewing assessment data.

- Provide family support specialists with opportunities to attend curricula-related trainings and facilitate access to community-specific resources and information.

DCYF

- Continue to expand opportunities to participate in local, in-person professional development that addresses both learning needs and accessibility and cost concerns.

- Continue to offer some trainings online, including brief trainings and those that do not require active application of knowledge and skills during the training.

- Provide funding to allow ECEAP staff members to secure substitutes so they are able to attend trainings during the workday.

- Continue to work with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and other state and regional providers to develop a central online repository for professional development opportunities and requirements for teachers and align professional development opportunities and requirements across these systems to reduce redundancy and confusion.

- Provide more guidance and resources for sites to use to follow up on professional learning, such as books, videos, technical assistance, and recordings of initial trainings.

- Expand and promote the repository of training opportunities and resources for family support specialists who have unique training needs around building relationships with families, Mobility Mentoring®, and connecting families with resources. Regularly review the repository for gaps and expand offerings to address those gaps.

- Support administrators with shared learning about implementing professional learning communities and other site-level professional development practices.

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Appendix A. Site visit procedures

Initial outreach and planning

The procedures at each site varied to accommodate the schedules and translation and support needs of educators and families. Planning began in September when DCYF sent a contact person at each site an email with information about the study and the site visit process and an introduction to an Education Northwest team member. The contact person at each site included a range of roles (e.g., family support specialists, principals, coaches, teachers). The Education Northwest team member then followed up with the contact person at each site to provide more information about the site visit process and identify a coordinator (who was often the original contact person). In some cases, the Education Northwest team member and coordinator held a phone or video meeting to discuss logistics and at other sites planning was completed via email. To plan each site visit, the site visitor and the coordinator discussed the following:

- When to schedule the site visit to support participation for teachers, family support specialists, and families

- Families' language needs and available translation/interpretation services (if any)

- Child care supports

- Compensation and refreshments for participants

- Participant outreach

Scheduling site visits

The coordinators varied in their preference for how and when to schedule the sessions. Some requested the visit on a day their site was closed for professional development or staff training. Other coordinators requested the visit during their typical day, with family and staff member sessions held around pick-up time for children. Some coordinators requested evening sessions for families to maximize participation. Sites also varied in the location of the sessions. At larger sites, sessions could be held in a classroom or cafeteria. At smaller sites, some sessions could be held on site but the family session had to be held off site (e.g., at a coffee shop or nearby school) to accommodate participation.

Families' language needs

The site visitor also secured interpretation services if needed. At some sites, a staff member was able to provide interpretation services, at others the site visitor contracted with a local service provider. When neither of these options was available, the site visitor contracted with a Portland-based service (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization; IRCO) to secure phone or video-based interpretation during the session. At some sites, interpretation needs became apparent before or during the session. In these cases, the site visitor worked with the coordinator to meet these needs. In one case a staff member was

able to translate and at another site, a bilingual family member was able to translate so that the site visitor could hold the session in multiple languages. The translators were compensated for their time.

The site visitor also ensured that consent forms were translated into the languages of the sessions at each site. This was done through IRCO in most cases. In one case, the site needed a new translation, and the on-site interpreter was able to translate the consent form prior to the session. This person was compensated for their time.

Child care supports

The site visitor worked with the contact person at each site to ensure child care was provided during the family session. At every site, teachers or family support specialists were able to care for children and if they provided this service outside of typical working hours, they were compensated for their time. The compensation amount was determined by the coordinator at each site.

Compensation and refreshments for participants

Every participant across all sessions received a $50 gift card via email. The site visitor collected email addresses from every participant at the beginning of the session. This was done through a QR code that allowed participants to enter their email address from their phone or a paper sign-up sheet. After the site visit, Education Northwest sent each participant a link to redeem the gift card at a retailer of their choice through Tango Card.[12] In some cases, the gift card email bounced back, and the site visitor worked with the coordinator to ensure the email addresses were correct.

The site visitor also provided refreshments at the family session and worked with the coordinator to understand participants' dietary preferences and restrictions.

Participant outreach

The site visitor created a flyer for the contact person at each site to share with families. The flyer included information about the session at the site; the three Zoom sessions (which included interpretation in Spanish, Amharic, and Somali); and contact information for the site visitor so that participants could schedule a private interview. This flyer was attached to an email for staff members to print or email and share with families. The site visitor also created a version of the flyer in a Google document so that families could click on the links to the Zoom sessions to register. The site visitor also provided information for the coordinator to share with family support specialists, teachers, and other administrators about their sessions. For sessions that would include interpretation, the site visitor translated the flyer into the appropriate language. The flyer was also translated in Spanish, Amharic, and Somali because those languages were available for the three Zoom sessions.

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[12] https://www.tangocard.com/

Appendix B. Current context and challenges

The innovations and bright spots highlighted throughout this report are particularly striking given the current challenges facing administrators and educators in the field of early childhood education. Below, please find a description of these challenges and the impact they are having on children, families, and staff members in ECEAP.

Sites are facing high rates of staff turnover and absences

Staff members and administrators at nearly all the sites noted the challenges they were currently facing with staffing. In some cases, they had lost staff members due to burnout and were struggling to fill those positions. Others were navigating absences on a day-to-day basis. One administrator shared, "I would say that there are times when I go to bed at night and I'm already dreading what the staffing nightmare will be in the morning." In some cases, administrators would review child absences to see if they could combine classrooms (a practice that was disruptive for families, children, and teachers). Family support specialists were frequently in the classroom to avoid closures, which put them behind in their work with families.

> *"The second anybody calls out, we're like [shakes head]. One person calls out, multiple people's days are completely turned upside down because we have to fill in, move the person here, and then this person's job doesn't get done because they're over here. It's staffing. It's really, really, really hard ... we don't have any buffer. We don't have anybody that we can call, 'Hey, can you come and help today?' It's literally us. Our family support [specialist] is behind in their work because ... they're getting pulled into the classroom to cover ... We've had a few losses of people and it takes weeks and weeks, if not months, to fill that position."*
>
> — Administrator

Children are experiencing increased behavioral needs

Across all sites, ECEAP staff members found that children were showing higher levels of challenging behaviors and needing more accommodations, referrals, and additional services than ever before. Staff members at every site echoed an administrator who said, "especially with COVID, we have a lot of children that have a lot of [challenging] behaviors." Staff members also attributed this increase to higher levels of trauma experienced by families, safety issues in the community, job losses, and other contextual factors.

"It's really hard to do that individualization because we have to focus more on the be-haviors, and then not having enough staff after COVID. It just seems like we're always short staffed."

— Teacher

One teacher shared that more than half the children in the program needed additional services, typically speech and occupational therapy. Some teachers saw increases in toileting needs, which was time inten-sive for the staff. One teacher noticed that they spent more time on things like hand washing since the pandemic, which was also time consuming. Others noticed that children needed more scaffolding and support around play than in previous years.

"I think one of the biggest challenges that we're seeing right now is that kids are com-ing to us, especially after coming out of COVID, with not as many play skills as we're used to them having … We're having to even pre-teach how to play with toys, how to interact with other children. We are working with parents on—how do you play with your children?"

— Teacher

Sites are underfunded, exacerbating staffing shortages and behavioral challenges

Administrators at multiple sites identified challenges with funding. These challenges included funds that went directly to contractors (for sites that were subcontracted), ECEAP or contractor funding restrictions that put limitations on things like food and other supports, and funding reductions to schools or districts as a result of levies that were not passed or grants that were not renewed. The impacts of these funding shortages were wide ranging and included: fewer family support specialists, which led to higher case-loads; fewer teachers or paraeducators, which led to high child-adult ratios in the classroom; reduced printing budgets, which led to limiting the number of papers used for classroom activities or sent home with parents; inability to fund transportation for children to the school or for events and field trips; inability to purchase materials for curricula or implement new curricula; challenges with purchasing materials to support children with special needs; and inability to enroll students with special needs that require one-on-one support.

Teachers and family support specialists were overburdened as a result of staffing shortages, behavior challenges, and budget constraints. The following teacher and administrator experiences were echoed by many.

"Having students with really high needs and behaviors … Having high ratios, 20 kids, two teachers. It's really, really difficult to give quality education with the high numbers and not enough support. And I think that has been the biggest struggle. I feel like with all the requirements that we have and with the needs of our students, that really high ratio and the lack of support—it's making a huge impact on our classes."

– Teacher

"[The staffing shortage] makes it hard. Especially when there are things that could be done to help these kids throughout the day, but we just can't. It's hard. Even if a kid needs a break, well, we can't even call somebody [to hang out with them] because they're subbing. [We're] stretched so thin in every direction."

– Administrator

Appendix C. Supplemental curricula

The sites used a range of supplemental curricula to support specific skills.

Table C1. Supplemental curricula

Curriculum	Topic	Website
Bridges in Mathematics	Math	https://www.mathlearningcenter.org/curriculum/bridges
Building Blocks Pre-K	Math	https://www.mheducation.com/prek-12/program/building-blocks-pre-k-2013/MKTSP-TMB01M0.html
CharacterStrong	SEL	https://characterstrong.com/
Conscious Discipline	SEL	https://consciousdiscipline.com/
Early Childhood Hands-On Science	Sciences	https://www.frostscience.org/stem-professionals/echos/
Eureka Math	Math	https://greatminds.org/math/eurekamath
Foundations for Literacy	Literacy	Matteson, D. (2013). *Prekindergarten: Building the foundation.* (DMA Writing Benchmarks Series).
Growing Up WILD	STEM	https://www.fishwildlife.org/projectwild/growing-wild
Handwriting Without Tears	Literacy	https://www.lwtears.com/solutions/writing/handwriting-without-tears
Math Expressions	Math	https://www.hmhco.com/programs/math-expressions#overview
Second Step SEL	SEL	https://www.secondstep.org/early-learning-curriculum
Second Step CPU	Safety	https://www.secondstep.org/child-protection
Zoo-phonics	Literacy	https://zoo-phonics.com/

Source: Authors' analysis of Department of Children, Youth, and Families data, ECEAP documents, and interview/focus group data.