



## A SYSTEM IN JEOPARDY

### California's Early Learning System and its Dual Language Learners During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Early learning and care programs** play an important role for California's linguistically diverse young children by supporting their early language and literacy development prior to kindergarten entry. Across California, dual language learners (DLLs; i.e., children who are learning another language in addition to English) comprise nearly 60% of children ages 0–5.<sup>1</sup> The families of these children rely on early learning programs both for child care and to help establish a foundation for their children's learning and development. But the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially disrupted this support system.

To understand the status of early learning programs—80% of which serve DLLs<sup>2</sup>—as well as the ways they have adapted during the pandemic and the challenges they face, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Early Edge California conducted a survey of a representative sample of early learning and care programs in California

1 Holtby, S., Lordi, N., Park, R., & Ponce, N. (2017). *Families with young children in California: Findings from the California Health Interview Survey, 2011–2014, by geography and home language*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. Retrieved from [https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8a6f/c914e3c1bdf1cbbeea81ccbe143e434d4e18.pdf?\\_ga=2.219390618](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8a6f/c914e3c1bdf1cbbeea81ccbe143e434d4e18.pdf?_ga=2.219390618)

2 American Institutes for Research. (in press). *Quick facts: The landscape of early learning programs serving dual language learners in California*. San Mateo, CA: Author.

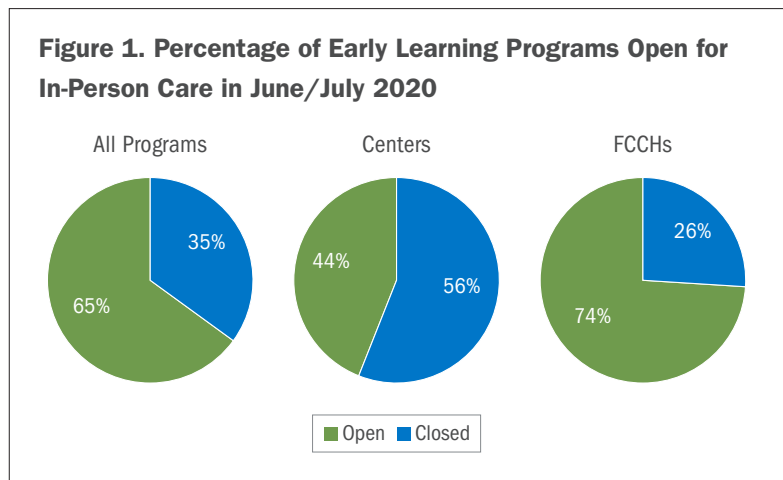
(including school-based programs, community-based programs, Head Start programs, State Preschool programs, and family child care homes [FCCHs]). We first drew a stratified random sample of 822 programs, sampled to be representative of all providers in California. We asked all program administrators in this sample to complete a survey (in English or Spanish) and received responses from 278 programs (34%) between June 11 and July 16, 2020. To ensure that the responses were still representative of the state provider population, we made statistical adjustments where necessary.<sup>3</sup>



Findings from the survey indicate that more than a third of early learning and care programs were closed for in-person care as of June or July of this year, and those that were open were operating with reduced enrollment. During this time, 78% of children served in early learning programs lost care. And DLLs, particularly those in centers, were hardest hit—89% of DLLs in center-based programs lost care. Although many programs that closed expect to reopen, they face significant barriers to doing so. All providers identified critical needs for their programs, including funding for basic operating expenses like staff salaries and supplies, protections for their health and the health of their staff and families, and guidance on how to follow new regulations and protocols. Providing adequate guidance and funding for California's early learning system to recover and rebuild is critical to ensure that California's linguistically diverse young learners and their families have opportunities for quality care and early learning experiences.

### The majority of early learning programs—especially family child care homes—were open for in-person care in June, but operating with reduced enrollment

At the time of the survey, 65% of early learning programs reported that they were open and providing in-person care (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> A greater percentage of FCCHs (74%) were open, compared with only 44% of centers. However, programs that have remained open reported significant reductions in enrollment. They reported serving fewer children in the June/July period than before the pandemic; on average, programs were serving only 27% of their pre-COVID-19 enrollment numbers. These reductions are likely due to multiple



<sup>3</sup> Despite these adjustments, it is possible that the responses of survey participants do not fully capture what nonrespondents would have said had they responded.

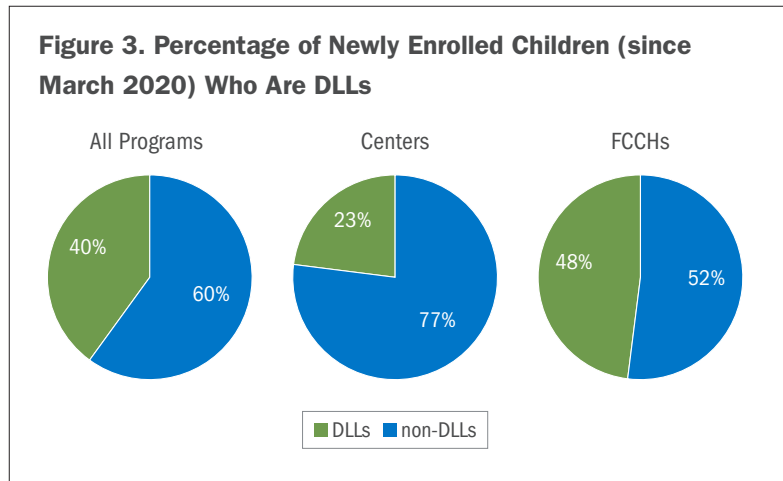
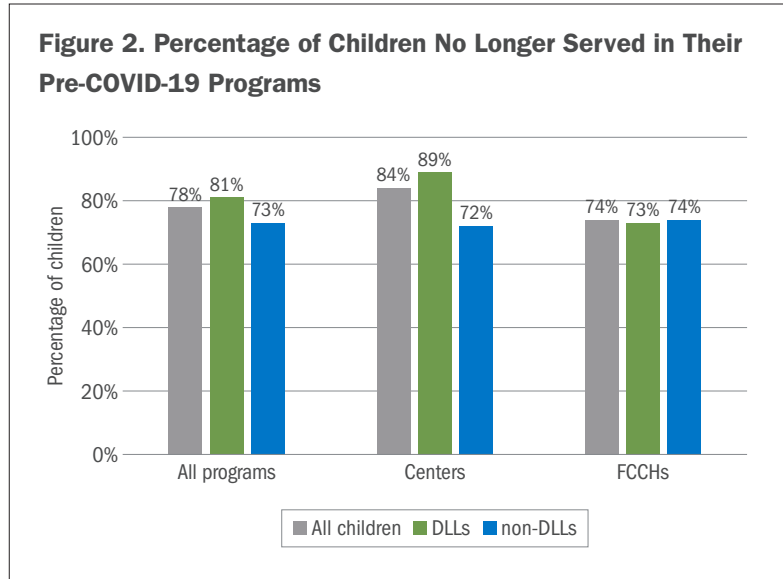
<sup>4</sup> A study conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) during the same time period reported greater percentages of open sites overall than our study. Both studies, however, found that FCCHs were more likely to have been open during this period. A main difference between the two studies was the sampling scheme. The CSCCE study included a large number of sites distributed across the state (but not a representative sample), whereas our survey used a stratified random sample, combined with statistical adjustments for nonresponse, which enables us to generalize results to the entire state.

factors, including program constraints (e.g., limitations on group sizes) and family circumstances (e.g., health and safety concerns, job loss, or other financial constraints).

### Most young children have lost care—and DLLs have been disproportionately left out

Prior to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, more than 1.2 million children in California were enrolled in early learning and care programs across the state.<sup>5</sup> Program closures and restrictions on group sizes due to the pandemic have displaced large numbers of children, including many DLLs. Based on the survey data, nearly eight of 10 children (78%) enrolled in licensed early learning programs prior to COVID-19 were no longer receiving care in those programs, as of June or July 2020 (Figure 2).

The impact on DLLs has been even greater. At the time of the survey, 81% of DLLs (compared with 73% of non-DLLs) were no longer being served in the programs in which they were enrolled prior to COVID-19. This disparity is greater in center-based programs, where 89% of DLLs were no longer receiving in-person care at their program, compared with 72% of non-DLLs. Again, these shifts in enrollment are likely due to multiple factors, including the fact that communities of color and immigrant communities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic disruptions associated with it.



Although many children lost their care arrangement due to COVID-19, the survey data indicate that some programs actually began enrolling new children after the initial stay-at-home order, including children of essential workers or from vulnerable populations. About half (56%) of open centers and a third (33%) of open FCCHs reported enrolling new children since March. But only 40% of the new children being served in these programs are DLLs (Figure 3). Not only did more DLLs who were enrolled in March lose their spots due to COVID-19, but also fewer DLLs secured new spots as programs began enrolling new children during the pandemic. DLLs are particularly underserved in centers—DLLs comprise only 23% of the children newly enrolled in centers. In contrast, 48% of the newly enrolled children in FCCHs are DLLs.

5 Stipek, D., Pizzo, P., Hunt, N., Austin, L. J. E., Whitebook, M., Chávez, R., ... Anantharajan, M. (2019). *Getting down to facts II: Early childhood education in California*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University and PACE. Retrieved from [https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/GDTFII\\_Report\\_Stipek\\_v2.pdf](https://gettingdowntofacts.com/sites/default/files/GDTFII_Report_Stipek_v2.pdf)

## Early learning programs have attempted to remain connected to families not receiving in-person care, although reaching linguistically diverse families is a challenge for some

Early learning providers are committed to the families they serve and are taking measures to support them during the crisis even when they cannot provide in-person care.<sup>6</sup> Among the many programs that are not serving all of their pre-COVID-19 families—whether they are closed or have reduced enrollment—about half (51%) reported communicating (by phone, e-mail, or other means) at least once a week with the families they could not serve in person. An additional 35% reported reaching out to these families but on a less frequent basis.

To communicate with families of DLLs, programs often leverage their bilingual staff. But not all programs have bilingual staff, or staff who speak the variety of languages represented by all children and families in their program. Forty-three percent of the DLL-serving programs that have families they cannot serve in person reported having staff that can communicate with *all* families in their home language (Figure 4). The remaining 57% of programs do not have staff who speak some (or any) of the languages spoken by families in

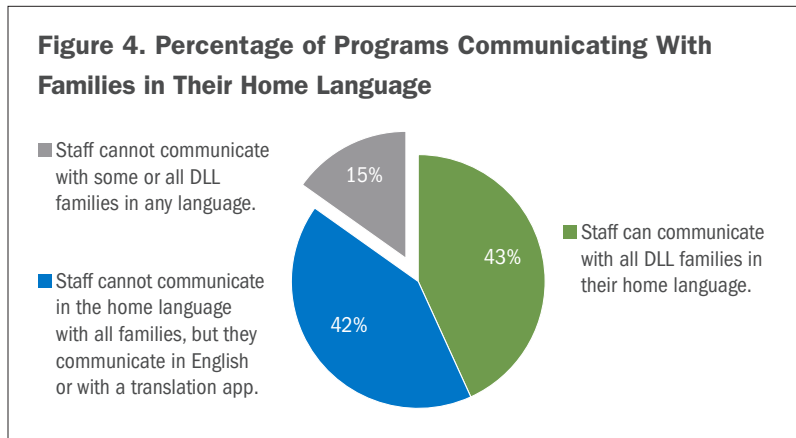
the program. Some of these programs use translation apps such as ClassDojo or Learning Genie to translate communications to families, or their families can speak enough English for staff to communicate with them in English; 42% of programs use one of these communication strategies. However, 15% of programs have parents who do not speak English and have neither an app nor staff who can speak the home language. Thus, these programs are unable to communicate with these families during the COVID-19 disruptions.

Communicating with families generally was not highlighted as a significant challenge for most programs—only 15% of all sites said it was a major or moderate challenge. But 23% of programs serving DLLs indicated communicating with families of DLLs was a moderate or major challenge, and centers were more likely (29%) to report a challenge in this area than were FCCHs (18%).

### Early learning programs that are closed anticipate reopening but face significant barriers

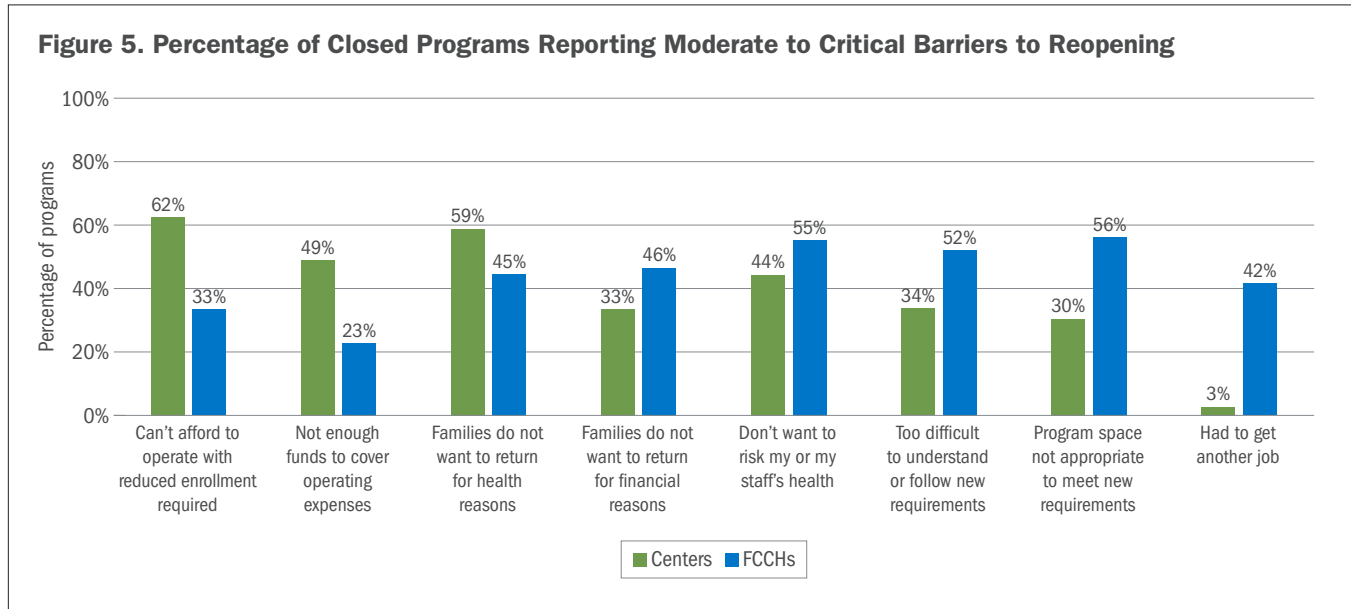
Of the 35% of programs that were closed for in-person care, most were optimistic about reopening, although 16% reported that they were *not at all* or only *slightly likely* to reopen again. This was true among programs serving DLLs as well as programs that did not serve DLLs. Centers more frequently reported that they were *very likely* to reopen (71%) compared with FCCHs (55%).

However, programs reported significant barriers to reopening, including health and safety concerns. In addition to health risks, our survey found that financial concerns, enrollment challenges, and difficulties meeting new



6 Bergey, R., Quick, H., Anthony, J., Crolotte, C., & Lozano, P. (2020). *California's early learning and care providers: Essential workers who need support*. San Mateo, CA: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <https://www.air.org/system/files/downloads/report/California-early-learning-COVID-brief-June-2020.pdf>

requirements were also significant barriers to reopening (Figure 5). Three of five centers reported the financial impact of operating with reduced enrollment (62%) and fewer families re-enrolling due to health concerns (59%) were moderate or critical barriers. For FCCHs, the most common moderate or critical barriers reported were related to their program space being too small or otherwise not appropriate to meet new public health requirements (56%), concerns about risking their health or their staff's health (55%), or difficulty understanding or following the new requirements (52%). Almost half (42%) of FCCHs (compared with only 3% of center directors) indicated that they had to find another job to make ends meet, which poses a critical barrier to reopening their child care program.

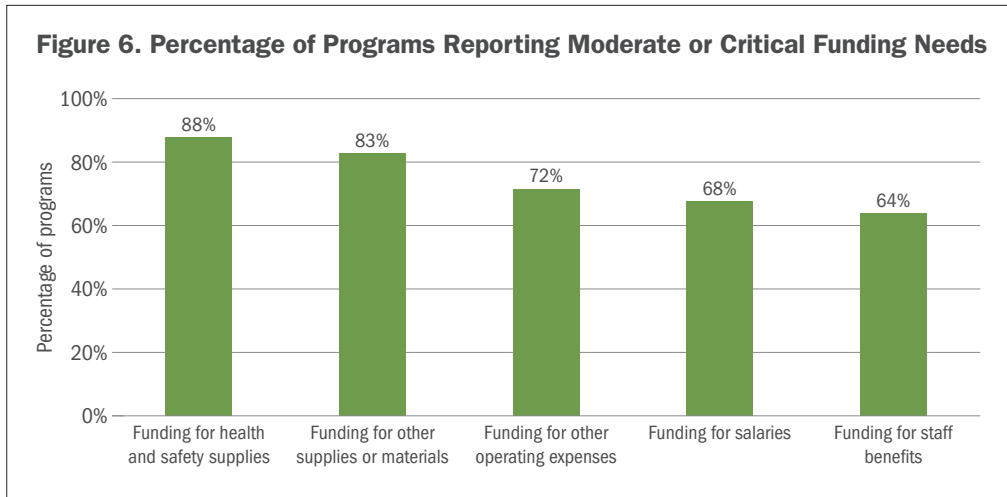


## Early learning programs need additional funding to support operation

Early learning programs, including those that serve DLLs, face significant financial challenges that strain an already challenged system. Indeed, the most frequently cited challenges among survey respondents are financial. More than two thirds of programs (68%) said that the financial stability of their program was a moderate if not a major challenge for them.

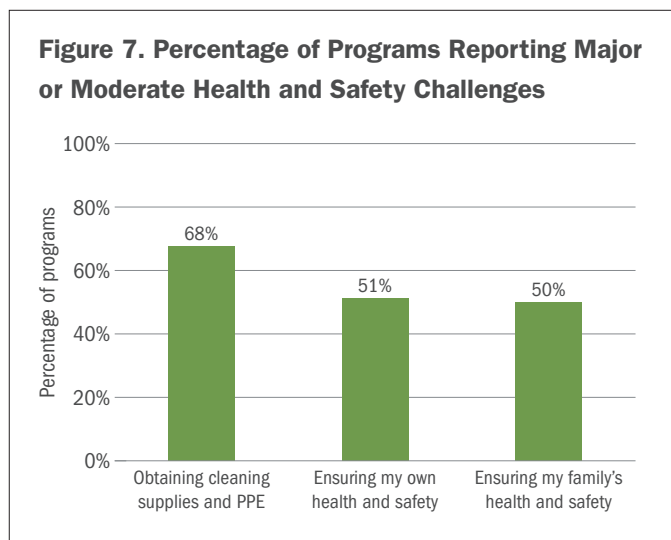
Among programs' top financial challenges are the need for more funds for basic operating expenses. Most programs said they had a moderate or critical need for funding for staff salaries (68%), staff benefits (64%), or other operating expenses (72%) (Figure 6). One participant shared that, "Finding competent, excellent early childhood educators before COVID-19 was a critical issue. Now, the excellent early childhood educators are largely unwilling to return to unworthy wages and benefits." In fact, 58% of sites reported having to lay off or furlough staff as a result of COVID-19 disruptions, and 36% had to reduce staff pay. This challenge was even greater among FCCHs, where 64% reported reducing staff pay, compared with 10% of centers.

Another significant funding challenge reported by programs is obtaining supplies. Nearly all programs reported a moderate or critical need for funding for newly required health and safety supplies (e.g., masks, gloves, cleaning supplies; 88%) or other supplies or materials (83%). Clearly, additional financial support is needed for early learning programs to provide care in a safe environment and comply with state and local requirements.



### Ensuring the health and safety of early learning providers is a significant concern

As frontline workers caring for the well-being of others, early learning providers are understandably concerned about their own health as well. In fact, 51% of providers reported that ensuring their own health and safety was a moderate or major challenge (Figure 7). Ensuring the health and safety of their family was also reported as a significant challenge by 50% of providers. Respondents expressed health concerns as a top priority, as well as the associated challenges in getting young children to follow social distancing and safety guidelines, the burden on their staff for additional cleaning needs, and the need to change daily routines dramatically. Limited access to cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) may add to providers' concerns for their safety. More than two thirds (68%) of programs reported that obtaining cleaning supplies and PPE was a major or moderate challenge for their program. These concerns were universal—expressed by programs with and without DLLs—and should be addressed to protect the health of these essential workers. Access to and additional funding for cleaning supplies and PPE are needed for all programs.

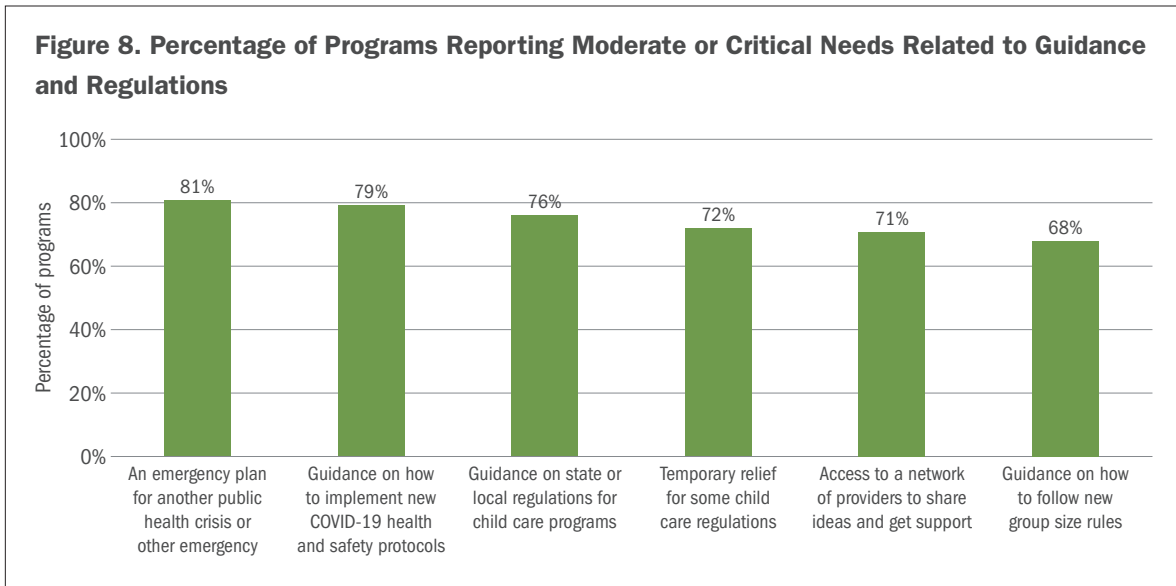


### Early learning programs need guidance around regulations

Programs reported getting information about COVID-19 and what it means for their child care program from a multitude of sources, including mass e-mails, calls, or webinars from state agencies (83%); individualized e-mails from state or local agencies (65%); state or national organization websites or e-mails (61%); or county or local websites or e-mails (60%). However, programs are eager for more clarity and guidance on new requirements for early learning and care providers in the midst of COVID-19. This is true for programs that serve DLLs as well as

those that do not. In the words of one provider, programs need “a one-stop shop for resources” because “we are being bombarded with info from so many avenues and sources.”

Specifically, most programs (79%) reported a significant need for guidance on how to implement new COVID-19 health and safety protocols (e.g., for cleaning or social distancing) (Figure 8). Similarly, more than two thirds of programs (68%) reported that they had a moderate or major need for additional guidance on how to follow the new group size rules. Additionally, 71% of programs indicated that having access to a network of providers with whom to exchange ideas and get support is moderately or critically important as they think about what is needed to help support families and children.



More broadly, three of four programs (76%) reported a significant need for additional guidance on state and local child care regulations, and 72% of programs reported that temporary relief from some child care regulations was a moderate or critical need for their program. In addition to these immediate needs, providers are thinking ahead to the next potential crisis. Eight of 10 programs (81%) said that having an emergency plan that they could follow in case of another public health crisis or other emergency was moderately or critically important for supporting their program. Clear and timely information and guidance from a centralized source is needed to ensure programs can provide care in a safe and effective learning environment.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, early learning and care programs are facing a wide range of challenges—some new, and some an escalation of challenges that have affected the early learning and care system for many years. Due to recent program closures and capacity restrictions as a result of COVID-19, the early learning and care system cannot currently serve all of the children who had been served by early learning programs prior to the pandemic. This change has been even more acute for young DLLs, children who stand to benefit greatly from quality early learning experiences.

Survey findings suggest attention is needed in several areas. As with all critical elements of state infrastructure supporting our children and families, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastating; financial

resources are needed to help early learning programs through the current situation and to strengthen the system for the future. Restoring and sustaining California's early learning system will require supporting programs in the months ahead in four key areas:

1. Funding to support operating expenses, to compensate for programs' reduced enrollment and allow for programs to reopen or remain open
2. Access to and funding for health and safety supplies, which are additional expenses for already tight budgets
3. Outreach to families of DLLs and support for priority enrollment to address the care gap for DLLs and ensure that children who need care receive it
4. Clear and consolidated guidance on the implementation of new requirements and access to emergency planning information to ensure the health and safety of care providers and the children and families they serve



The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound effects for early learning and care in California, and moving forward will require statewide support for this critical infrastructure.

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This work was supported by the Heising-Simons Foundation. The study benefited from the contributions of Patricia Lozano and Carolyne Crolotte at Early Edge California.*

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

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