Reimagining School-Age Care to Best Serve Children and Parents in the COVID-19 Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person schooling during the 2020-2021 academic year, children participated in school from the classroom, from home, and from out-of-school time (OST) programs on remote learning days.

The creativity and resourcefulness of school-age care providers helped to ensure that children remained connected to caring adults and had safe, nurturing environments in which to engage with online classes and schoolwork. Federal and state agencies, OST program providers, and other community partners mobilized to orchestrate these solutions to the crisis, adapting policies and allocating funds to ensure access to care and learning even when physical school buildings were closed. This care was most urgently needed at those times when children would normally be at school and parents at work.

Facilitating remote learning represented a new and ongoing burden for parents to bear during their workday. This challenge was most acute for those whose jobs do not allow for work-from-home arrangements—a situation faced disproportionately by low-income working parents. To preserve low-income parents’ participation in the workforce, it was vital to ensure access to care for children whose schools were operating on hybrid or remote schedules and whose parents were unable to work from home. With child care programs that serve the youngest children open, even if not at full capacity, the greatest need centered around school-age children. In these circumstances, it was essential to reimagine school-age child care.
Federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)\(^1\) subsidies, authorized under the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (CCDBG), are designed to help support low-income parents’ workforce participation. These subsidies were leveraged to meet the critical challenges families faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief explores how states and programs revamped policies and expanded access to school-age child care, highlighting examples of ways they adapted to best serve families. While many resources and articles have discussed remote learning spaces or “hubs,” this brief focuses on how such spaces have been made accessible to school-age children from low-income families who may use child care subsidies to offset the cost of care.

School-Age Child Care Needs

Compared to a typical school year, school-age child care needs were both vast and vastly different during the 2020–2021 school year. It is estimated that approximately 60 percent of K–12 students started the year fully remote and another 20 percent were in hybrid mode (out of 13,000 public school districts in the United States).\(^2\) This had broad implications for children and families, forcing hard choices about child care coverage during work hours and risking children’s educational progress and social-emotional well-being. Parents and caregivers faced extraordinary demands as they were required to provide supervision and academic and technical support for their children whose classes had moved online or, in other cases, onto printed materials from school with limited live instruction.

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted non-white and low-income communities. These groups suffered higher infection and mortality rates.\(^3\) The disproportionate effects extended to schooling as well. Black and Hispanic students were more likely than other students to be learning remotely, and urban and large districts were more likely to be remote.\(^4\) One reason that Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be learning remotely was due to parental choice. Officials found that, in spite of their challenges with remote learning, “many nonwhite families are not ready to send their children back to classrooms,” given their concerns about health and safety in physical buildings and fears of children bringing the virus home.\(^5\)

Much of the public attention to remote learning came from the perspectives of families who were trying to juggle online school facilitation while working at home. But many low-income workers do not have the opportunity to work from home (e.g., those employed in food services, health care, and retail). As researchers note, “Parental supervision and support may be more difficult in families in which both parents need to work outside the home, or in which the parents are English language learners and cannot directly support their child’s learning.” For those low-income working parents with school-age children, having access to remote learning spaces or full-day child care was essential for them to remain in the workforce.

The data show that some families were unable to bridge these demands. It was found that “parents who used child care before the pandemic but did not have child care in place during late July [2020] were far more likely to be unemployed than

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1 The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Program, authorized by the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) of 2014, is the primary federal funding source devoted to providing low-income families that are working or participating in education and training with help paying for child care and improving the quality of child care for all children.
4 Dorn et al, COVID-19 and learning loss.
6 Dorn et al, COVID-19 and learning loss.
before the pandemic started.” There was a great deal of attrition from the workforce among women in general. Data suggests that mothers of school-age children were particularly affected by employment disruptions, which may be related to school closures. One study found that, “mothers of school age children in early closure states were much more likely to take leave from work than women in general. There was no significant difference in leave time between fathers from early closure and late closure states.” Economist Misty L. Heggeness concludes, “The impact on short-term work productivity and engagement appeared to be borne uniquely on the backs of mothers of school age children.”

Considering many low-income households are headed by women, the need for child care to enable workforce participation is acute. This factor is an underappreciated dynamic in the discussion of remote learning hubs. One of the key facilitators of low-income parents’ workforce participation is the subsidy program known as CCDF. These subsidies, which help offset the cost of child care for low-income working parents, can make all the difference to parents who otherwise would not be able to afford school-age child care and might be forced to drop out of the workforce entirely.

Access to a program that allows children to participate in remote learning means more than just child care coverage. It also encompasses academic support and enrichment, social-emotional learning benefits, and basic needs, such as food. While gaps narrowed after the spring of 2020, Black and Hispanic households in late 2020 were still 3–4 percentage points less likely than white households to have reliable access to devices, and 3–6 percentage points less likely to have reliable access to the Internet. Programs set up for remote learning could offer Internet connectivity and access to technology devices that parents might lack at home, and which are vital for school-age children’s full participation in learning activities. Further, children who would otherwise eat at school might have meals and snacks provided during remote learning/full-day care. This provision met a critical need. According to Feeding America, “one in four children is at risk of hunger during the pandemic.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service issued a number of flexibilities and waivers for child nutrition programs in 2020 to help ensure that children could continue to access meals they would typically have received at school. Waivers allowed meals to be served outside of regular meal times, allowed meals to be served outside of standard congregate group settings, and allowed parents/guardians to pick up meals for children without students being present. These flexibilities enabled community-based OST providers, such as Boys & Girls Clubs and local YMCAs, to distribute food to children and families. Through this point of contact, programs had opportunities to connect with families and learn more about other supports they might need. To “support a successful school reopening in school year 2021-2022, and to promote afterschool and child care,” these waivers and flexibilities have been extended through June 2022.

The dramatic changes to the school day owing to the pandemic put undue burdens on schools and their students. The need for child care and additional supports has increased significantly. While some families have been able to continue to work, many have not. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for more flexible and accessible child care options, especially for working parents.

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11 Dorn et al, COVID-19 and learning loss.
on children and families alike. Creative solutions and supports at the federal, state, and program levels helped to address these challenges.

**Flexible State Policies**

Federal subsidies helped support children’s participation in remote learning spaces offered through school-age child care programs. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Child Care issued allowances and waivers to enable the subsidy system to better respond to the needs of parents, and states were able to leverage these changes to serve school-age children.

The $150 billion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, signed into law in March 2020, included $3.5 billion in discretionary funding for the CCDBG. State CCDF Lead Agencies used this funding to help stabilize the child care market and maintain parents’ access to care. In particular, this funding allowed states to support parents of school-age children who needed full-day care during the day due to schools operating remotely.

State Lead Agencies offered greater flexibility around absences, addressed the costs of increased health and safety requirements, and offered full-time reimbursement to providers. A number of states made a switch to automatic full-time authorization (instead of part-time) for school-age children in response to the pandemic and the need for full-day care. This shift allowed providers to be reimbursed for the full-day care they offered school-age children on remote learning days.

Some states used CARES Act funding to expand access to child care subsidies by broadening eligibility requirements for families, such as raising the state’s income eligibility threshold.15

**Spotlight on Georgia**

In Georgia, the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief fund—allocated through the CARES Act—was used to create **Supporting Onsite Learning for Virtual Education (SOLVE) Scholarships** for school-age children’s access to full-day remote learning child care. The SOLVE program was administered through the Childcare and Parent Services program within the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning and targets families eligible for CCDF subsidies.

In order to be eligible, parents had to be involved in an approved activity (e.g., working or attending school), and children must be enrolled in a district that is at least 50 percent remote. Scholarships could be used at providers that were already approved to accept child care subsidies. The three-month scholarships automatically renewed if the child’s school was still at least 50 percent remote.16

States also offered supports directly to providers as well as to families accessing care. Given that school-age child care providers faced increased costs to run their programs, a number of states initiated new policies and supports to keep them afloat. Some states offered grants to child care providers to maintain and expand child care for school-age children during out-of-school time. The funding could be used to address health and safety needs related to COVID-19, tuition, transportation, training, and other expenses to maintain and expand care for school-age children. Another state provided short-term rental assistance for school-age child care programs that had been displaced from their locations due to the pandemic.


15 Income eligibility was still capped at 85 percent of the state median income (SMI), as required by the CCDBG Act, but some states capped income eligibility at less than 85 percent of SMI and therefore had room to raise that threshold and serve more families with CARES Act funding.

Spotlight on New Jersey

Through New Jersey’s Child Care Subsidy Program—Expanded Care initiative, the state paid licensed or registered child care providers for child care during the school day. This policy covered school-age children who were attending school remotely, either part time or full time. The state also provided child care providers with supplemental payments of $300 per month for full-time care or $150 per month for part-time care per eligible child—including school-age children. This benefit was designed to support the reopening and sustainability of the CCDF child care market.

In addition to these efforts to help support providers, New Jersey created a School-Age Tuition Assistance Program to assist parents in paying for care for school-age children needed as a result of COVID-19 remote learning school schedules. This assistance program was designed to serve low-income families outside of the existing child care subsidy program who found themselves in need of child care because of their children’s remote learning situation.

These examples illustrate just a few of the state policy responses mounted to ensure that families, especially those with the greatest needs, continued to have access to child care throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resourcefulness of Community-Based Providers

Community-based organizations and school-age child care programs also responded to the unparalleled challenges facing families with creative solutions. Remote learning spaces sprang up around the country to provide safe, supervised places from which school-age children could attend school on remote days. The provisions within the CARES Act allowing relief funds to be used for afterschool programs, combined with additional funding for the CCDBG, enabled programs to expand their typical offerings for school-age children to cover the full day.

Local YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, and other community-based organizations all provided services in this space. These programs offered more than just supervision, as school-age children had access to meals and snacks, enrichment activities, and opportunities for physical activity as well. In early August 2020, YMCAs in 45 states reported that they had begun to receive CCDBG stimulus dollars (allocated through the CARES Act), which they used to provide emergency child care, pay for staff salaries/wages, and purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies. During the 2020-2021 school year, 1,516 local YMCAs offered in-person or virtual learning labs and academic support programs to school-age children. With nearly half of the country’s YMCAs accepting child care subsidies, these remote learning spaces offered a crucial way for families using subsidies to access care for their school-age children. Boys & Girls Clubs were another key player in the remote learning hub space, with over 1,000 clubs serving as “virtual learning hubs” for school-age children.

17 Elena Rocha, YMCA of the USA (correspondent), email to author, February 9, 2021.
18 Elena Rocha, YMCA of the USA (correspondent), email to author, June 10, 2021.
19 Kate Clabaugh, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (correspondent), email to author, February 24, 2021.
Remote Learning Spaces in 2020-2021

1,516 YMCAs
1,000+ Boys & Girls Clubs
Other community-based organizations

Information about remote learning spaces, such as those sponsored by YMCAs and Boys & Girls Clubs, is featured in an online tool from the Afterschool Alliance that offers guidance on the development of community learning hubs. Developed in partnership with the National League of Cities, this resource shares important considerations in setting up these programs. Topics addressed include partnerships, technology access, learning, enrichment, safety, funding, and social-emotional learning.

The Community Learning Hubs tool also highlights examples of community learning hubs from the Afterschool Alliance’s interviews with over 30 afterschool programs, intermediaries, and school districts. Information gathered from this research by the Afterschool Alliance captures lessons learned that will guide the field in shaping the supports needed for children to recover and thrive moving forward.

Reflection

State CCDF agencies leveraged federal funds and flexibility around state policies to help support families in the midst of a landscape dramatically altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Crucially, states found ways to serve families who receive subsidies in the midst of this emergency. Low-income working parents, such as those who qualify for federal child care subsidies, are more often employed in settings where they must work outside the home, and they are among the most vulnerable to employment disruption. With the vast majority of the nation’s largest school systems starting the 2020-2021 school year fully remote, millions of parents were left to piece together supervision and learning supports for their school-age children. School-age child care programs offered a lifeline to these parents, and national organizations also adapted to the heightened demand, offering full-day remote learning spaces to meet the multifaceted needs of children and families.

The pandemic and consequential school disruptions have shown how integral school-age child care is to parents’ full participation in the workforce. Beyond supervision, these programs serve basic needs by providing technology access, learning supports, and food. Program staff also attend to children’s social-emotional learning, which is vital at a time when they are cut off from so much of their usual programming. When federal and state administrators and OST providers respond to an emergency with additional resources and creative, coordinated approaches, children and families have a better chance to weather the crisis and rebound.

For information and resources pertaining to school-age child care, available through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, look up Child Care Stabilization Grants.

The influx of federal funds into the CCDBG, combined with additional child care stabilization dollars and designated set-asides for afterschool and summer programs through the American Rescue Plan Act, will continue to transform families’ access to care for their school-age children.

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This document was developed with funds from Grant #90TA00001 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, by the National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.