Community Conversation: Virtual Learning and Childcare
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Research Brief on Nationwide Community Response to Schools Reopening

Introduction

As schools across the nation prepare to reopen with virtual and hybrid learning plans, working families face difficult time-pressured decisions on childcare arrangements. Enabling parents to work will be crucial for economic recovery and family financial security amid already challenging times. Alignment between school leadership, regional stakeholders, local community organizations, and family-input will be vital for success.

National Profile

Approximately 20% of childcare centers are closed, and those remaining open report a 67% reduction in enrollment. Nationwide, 82% of child care programs predict they will not survive longer than a year without supplemental funds to cover decreased attendance and substantial costs incurred for PPE and janitorial services. Care.com, an online service connecting families with childcare providers, experienced a 92% increase in families seeking shared-childcare arrangements.

Differential Effects of School Closure & Childcare

The absence of in-person K-12 education opportunities will disproportionately affect low-income families, and increase the achievement gap between high- and low-income students and white and minority students. In addition, families with special-needs students who rely on school services and programs will suffer. Working class and low-income families comprise a large percentage of **essential workers**. Nearly one-third of the U.S. work force is comprised by parents with minors, and of those, 70% do not have a designated at-home caregiver. If parents are forced to quit jobs, this crucial sector will risk a decreased workforce. Furthermore, without consistent social interaction, students will have fewer opportunities to engage social-emotional learning, develop social skills, and form meaningful relationships with educators and other students. Rural areas with limited technology access are at a higher risk for this deficit. Considerations of equality would be bereft without highlighting that crisis tends to exacerbate a reversion to inequitable patterns. For example, childcare services are crucial for working parents; when such services are inaccessible or unaffordable for dual-working families, the burden of reducing hours or quitting is borne disproportionately by women.

Responses

Communities are responding to the challenges of childcare and remote learning using a range of approaches. Some counties are implementing a minor sales tax to support subsidized childcare programs for needy families. There is an uptick in learning pods a.k.a. "pandemic pods"— small groups of families agreeing to do remote learning together, either by hiring an external provider or taking turns teaching/providing childcare for the group of children, which rotates between homes. Another take on micro-schooling is the Texas Learning Pod, started by a UT Austin student to match families with undergrads who can provide tutoring. The city of San Francisco partnered with state departments and community organizations to transform local facilities (many of which are currently closed due to COVID-19) into Community Learning Hubs that supplement distance learning. The Hubs provide full-day programming for small groups— prioritizing high-need students including low-income, those with limited

digital resources, and English Language Learners. In April, the NM-PBS television station began broadcasting Albuquerque Public School lessons from 8am-noon M-F. Schools are finding success by increasing teacher collaboration and varying the instructional approach for young children such as segmenting classrooms into small groups, and alternating customized live sessions with pre-recorded content. Churches and community organizations are also stepping up to provide free childcare and virtual learning centers, and some businesses are rearranging office spaces to accommodate employees bringing young children to work. Many childcare startups, including apps, home-based networks, and share-care arrangements are adapting to meet the needs of essential workers. Social media also continues to be a method for connection, and local Facebook groups designed to connect families who want to remote learn together rapidly grow across the nation.

Discussion
Based on the NM-CYFD, only one-third of childcare centers in the state are currently operating. Poverty is also severe among school- and childcare-dependent (SCD) workers, and NM has the second-highest national percentage of SCD workers who fall below the 200% federal poverty line. These SCD workers comprise nearly 20% of the workforce in NM. The many rurally-located families in NM adds additional challenge for receiving childcare support and participating in learning pod arrangements. Even if childcare centers grow in capacity, many working parents may opt to avoid the health risks and keep children home. And even if schools reopen, recent national reports showed 6 in 10 parents are likely to continue remote learning.

Learning pods are an attractive concept, but can often exclude low-income and minority families who cannot afford to share the cost of a tutor or give up working hours during their pod rotation. Schools could consider organizing small cohorts of students based on meaningful variables, and arrange practical ways to group these students and families together for weekly in-person meetups with a teacher or para-educator to supplement their remote education. NM may also be able to integrate aspects of Community Learning Hubs, and collaborate with churches and religious nonprofits to provide childcare resources.

The Superintendent of the second-largest school system nationwide, the Los Angeles Unified School District, recently conveyed how collaboration and alignment are crucial for success: "School officials can handle instructional logistics... [But] states, county and local agencies need to take responsibility for the complex network of supports that schools would need to stay open in the midst of a pandemic." These networks also need to involve families and parents more in decision and planning processes, to elicit cooperation, collaboration, and feedback.

In NM, increasing this alignment and collaboration may include:
- A system-wide communication strategy to align stakeholders and supports
- Consistent updates and briefings from school leadership delivered on accessible platforms
- Increased data on the percentage of single- and dual-working families and SCD workers in NM
- Unified process to connect families' needs to the relevant organizations providing services
- System/online hub to connect childcare providers and tutors with families that optimizes crowd-sourcing