



The Future of Children

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Research-Practice Partnership Brief

Supporting Pre-K for All in a Pandemic: A Partnership Between New York University and the New York City Department of Education

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In response to COVID-19's profound impacts on early childhood education systems, the New York City Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education (DOE-DECE) has implemented new policies and reallocated resources and supports to ensure that Pre-K for All programs can continue to provide safe, high-quality learning experiences. Decision-making has been uniquely challenging during the pandemic, given the high degree of uncertainty, evolving public health guidance, and limited real-time information about pre-K experiences across the city.

Our multiyear partnership between New York University (NYU) and DOE-DECE, forged with the initial launch of Pre-K for All, was well positioned to support the city during a major public health crisis. Thanks to our strong foundation of trust, open and frequent communication, and commitment to using data to inform decision-making, we were able to adapt and respond to the city's new priorities and need for fast and reliable information. Since March 2020, we have engaged in three key efforts:

1. Strategizing on pre-K supports. When school buildings first closed their doors, our partnership identified topic areas where city leaders needed reliable information to guide planning and decision-making, such as trauma-informed instruction, remote learning platforms, and blended learning models. We developed memos and strategized on how to adapt teachers' professional learning (PL), as well as other supports to respond to pre-K programs' evolving needs.
2. Gathering real-time information. From spring 2020 to spring 2021, NYU shared online resources with pre-K programs (on such topics as supporting social-emotional learning and facilitating family engagement) and had brief phone conversations with more than 400 pre-K directors and principals to learn about their programs' challenges, successes, and specific needs. NYU shared this

information with DOE-DECE through biweekly snapshots that summarized key themes from recent conversations and systematic coding and analysis at select points in the year. Findings showed enormous variations in pre-K experiences, even within a single universal system, and highlighted opportunities for reducing potential racial-ethnic and socioeconomic inequities.

3. Understanding pandemic learning experiences. With support from the NYC Early Childhood Research Network and NYU resources, our partnership launched a mixed-methods study of the experiences of pre-K educators and families during 2020/2021. Our goal was to uncover system- and program-level strategies that support continuous, high-quality, and equitable learning opportunities in the face of stress and trauma, for both children and educators. We specifically wanted to learn how educators have reacted to recent shifts in PL, including virtual synchronous and asynchronous supports. These shifts were necessitated by COVID-19 but are consistent with DOE-DECE's longer-term vision for PL, providing relevance beyond the pandemic.

Our efforts have helped New York City understand the challenges facing pre-K educators, children, and families through the pandemic, and have illuminated approaches that effectively addressed these challenges and also hold promise for supporting young learners during future disasters. COVID-19 compelled us to shift our focus and find new ways of working together, ultimately stretching and strengthening our partnership by giving us the chance to recommit to our joint work and our shared goals of supporting pre-K quality and equity for all.
