



The Future of Children

Princeton - Brookings

Research-Practice Partnership Brief

Balancing Rigor and Timeliness in the Time of COVID-19

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Our research-practice partnership team—which consists of researchers at the University of Michigan, MDRC, and Harvard, partnered with the Boston Public Schools' Department of Early Childhood—has a simple goal: improving educational experiences and outcomes for young children through research. As highlighted in our Future of Children article, the biggest challenge to achieving this goal is balancing rigor and timeliness. [1].

Rigorous research tends to move slowly, and policy decisions typically have short deadlines.

The COVID-19 crisis amplified this tension. Boston Public Schools (BPS) had to pivot almost daily to meet shifting public health guidelines, which upended the data collection plans of our research-practice partnership (RPP). Through the disruptions, we have continued to use timely data and rigorous analysis to help BPS make important decisions. Here are two examples of how the RPP structure made it easier for us to do so.

Universal Prekindergarten (UPK). To expand high-quality prekindergarten beyond the public schools, the City of Boston is partnering with community-based preschools and providing supports for quality, including coaching, professional development, curricula, and salary parity for teachers. When the crisis struck, our RPP was launching an implementation study of the UPK expansion effort. Importantly, the community-based preschools centers were almost all fully in person for

most of the 2020/2021 school year, while Boston's public school prekindergarten programs were fully remote for most of the year.

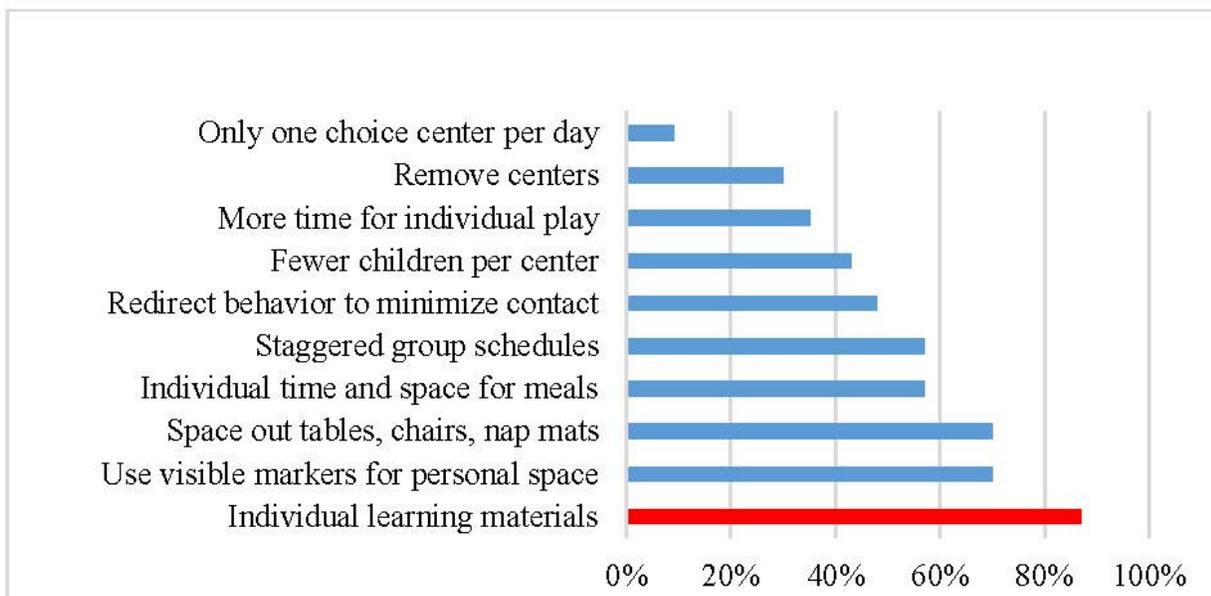
We expanded our UPK research to cover new crisis-relevant topics—especially enrollment drops, increased teacher turnover, and safety-enhancing changes to center and teacher practices. For timeliness, we released these findings in fall 2020 in a policy brief (see Figure 1 for one of our key findings).[2] We also wrote internal memos and presented key findings from surveys, interviews, UPK centers' reopening plans, observations of coaching sessions, and analysis of administrative data, all with the purpose of informing leadership on how to support quality and basic operations in UPK going forward.

Seesaw. During the crisis, the BPS Department of Early Childhood led a professional learning community for BPS principals on how to support home learning. At BPS's request, we analyzed the quality of asynchronous learning happening on Seesaw, the district's remote learning platform. Our work aimed to capture the cognitive demand of online assignments, the extent to which they involved writing, and the quality of feedback from teachers. We cocreated a coding tool with the district and rated about 500 activities assigned in kindergarten and second-grade classrooms, selected from 15 schools. We summarized our findings across activities for the district and

individualized reports for each school. We also worked with BPS to create a coding manual for principals, and trained the principals on how to understand their own data moving forward. The district used our findings to create new best practices for the future use of Seesaw, including for quarantined students in the 2021/2022 school year.

The challenges of the pandemic have highlighted just how critical and useful RPPs are to data-informed decision-making. The RPP structure allowed us to continue to improve practice, maintain some rigorous research, and pivot quickly to answer newly relevant questions. Our long-standing relationships allowed us to hit the ground perhaps not running, but at least walking together during this historic crisis.

Figure 1: UPK Center Adaptations to Instructions and Routines to Increase Health and Safety in 2020/2021



Note: Data were coded from centers' reopening plans for the 2020/2021 school year.

[1] Christina Weiland, Jason Sachs, Meghan McCormick, JoAnn Hsueh, and Catherine Snow. "Fast-Response Research to Answer Practice and Policy Questions." *The Future of Children* 31, no. 1 (2021): 75–96.

[2] Paola Guerrero Rosada, Christina Weiland, Annie Taylor, Louisa Penfold, Catherine Snow, Jason Sachs, and Meghan McCormick. (2021.) *Effects of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Education Centers: Descriptive Evidence from Boston's Universal Prekindergarten Initiative*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ford Education Policy Initiative Policy Brief. https://edpolicy.umich.edu/files/BPS_ECE_COVID_Policy_Brief.pdf.