

Advancing Equity in Early Childhood: Learning Opportunity



This spring, thirty early childhood specialists from the Office for Children participated in a series of professional learning opportunities on the topic of Advancing Equity. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, a professional membership organization working to promote high-quality education for children birth to age eight, defines equity as “The state that would be achieved if individuals fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. In practice, equity means all children and families receive necessary supports in a timely fashion so they can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential.” The

series was developed to support OFC staff in their work coaching and mentoring community early childhood programs and promoting equity.

The virtual series was conducted with the goals of:

- Advancing equity.
- Promoting social and emotional skills of children using culturally responsive practices.
- Preventing suspension, expulsion and disciplinary disparities in early childhood programs.

Participants met weekly for three months in cohorts of 12 for facilitated sessions that included reflection, discussion about equity and strategies that support children’s

success. The sessions were led by OFC facilitators and consultants September Gerety and Lisa Gordon. September, an instructor with the Pyramid Model Consortium, led participants through sessions on equity coaching and action planning webinars while Lisa, a diversity and inclusion expert with the Education Center at Bank Street College, provided guidance on implementing impactful weekly small group discussion sessions.

Participants in the series developed a stronger understanding of how the alignment of the Pyramid Model for promoting young children’s healthy social and emotional development with the CLASS tool supports positive adult child interactions.



Left to right: Karle Finley and Olga Alvarado (family child care partner).



Left to right: Saeeda Minhas, Georgina Dadzie and Daniela Sensini.

Head Start Helps Address Food Insecurity

While Gum Springs Children’s Center and Gum Springs Glen were closed due to the pandemic, Head Start staff have continued to work to meet the basic needs of families, specifically food security. Head Start identified a need for food for families on the weekends, and Early Head Start family child care staff and GSCC and GSG staff worked together to address this.

Head Start Nutritionist Daniela Sensini worked with Jeffrey’s Catering to provide a Friday night meal and weekend snacks for any interested HS/EHS family. On average, 110 families picked up meals and snacks every Friday evening between April 24 and July 10 at the Gum Springs Children’s Center or the Pennino Building. Every week parents expressed their appreciation for this much-needed resource. Special thanks to HS staff Daniela Sensini, Georgina Dadzie, Saeeda Minhas, Greta Chacon, Nageen Chaudhry and Karle Finley for their work on this program.



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ITC Offers First Virtual Pathways Program to Facilitate Children's Transition to Preschool

One of the key responsibilities for early intervention programs is facilitating a smooth transition once the child is no longer age-eligible for services. That's why the Office for Children and the Infant & Toddler Connection developed Pathways, a summer program offering ITC children and families the opportunity to have a preschool experience in combination with a parent education program.

Though Pathways is typically held in school classrooms, this summer ITC held the first-ever virtual program in response to COVID-19 and the advent of virtual learning. Held August 3-7, the program was open to any ITC family that made a referral to Fairfax County Public Schools early childhood special education services for the 2020-21 school year.

Children and caregivers participated in approximately 3.75 hours of virtual classroom programming over five consecutive days. Each class was taught by ITC Service Coordinators and Direct Service Providers and structured to resemble a typical preschool classroom experience during FCPS distance learning, with parents helping their children participate in guided activities.

"I think this year's Pathways to Preschool experience was both challenging and a great success," said ITC Regional Family Support Liaison Mia Batson. "Creating virtual content is new to everyone. Being a virtual teacher, and for some staff being a first-time Pathways teacher, translated to a lot of time pre-planning and practicing, and working together in small teams to come up with a

concise, intentional 30- to 45-minute lesson. Families really enjoyed the teachers' creativity, the way they engaged each child by name, the way they demonstrated modifications, and ways to practice these activities at home."

In addition to the virtual classroom time, parents participated in virtual workshops during the evenings to learn more about FCPS Early Childhood Special Education services with guest presenters from FCPS. ITC Family Counseling and Support Providers and ITC Family Support Liaisons helped answer questions regarding the transition from early intervention services to FCPS services.

According to ITC Infant Educator Katherine Heiser, "Overall, I would describe this year's Pathways experience as a great learning experience for all involved. It provided families with practice for virtual preschool, and the information sessions were helpful for families to ask questions regarding the upcoming school year and to see that they were not alone in their concerns."

ITC Service Coordinator Scott Evans added, "I felt that this year's Virtual Pathways was surprisingly

successful, as we brought together ITC personnel with a variety of strengths and ran four classrooms each morning. We had nice attendance and

could open this up to expanded numbers this year as everything was on screen."

Parent feedback about the virtual Pathways program was mostly positive, with several participants noting the program eased their anxiety about virtual learning.

One parent said, "It gave me a good understanding of what to expect at FCPS. I think my fears about my son attending a virtual class lessen after this program." Another parent reported, "I was able to try different approaches at home with my child to find how she would feel more comfortable and get acclimated to the virtual environment before school actually starts."

Still another described the experience as "excellent," saying, "We are so thankful for this experience. My son enjoyed all the teachers that he met. They were so genuine in getting him to feel comfortable and opening up."



Head Start Summer Program a Resounding Success



After being closed since March due to the pandemic, Gum Springs Children's Center Head Start and Gum Springs Glen Early Head Start programs opened for a four-week summer program from July 20 to August 14. To prepare for the program, staff collaborated with the Health Department and NCS to develop health and safety procedures. Each morning, parents and children were greeted outside the buildings for their child's temperature check and a health screening questionnaire. Staff then escorted children to their classrooms where teachers were prepared to ensure social distancing in the classrooms and provided individual learning materials to each child. Teachers were able to follow typical HS or EHS daily schedules with minor changes to follow CDC recommendations.

The planning and effort were well worth it when staff saw the smiling faces of the children and parents arriving each day for the program. The children enjoyed being outside riding bikes, playing on the playground, painting and interacting with friends they hadn't seen for a long time. The summer program was a resounding success for the children and families who participated!

STEM Ready Goes Virtual!



In August, Fairfax Futures completed its highly successful STEM Ready Certificate Program. Combining research and real-world classroom experience, the program was taught to 25 early childhood educators. Led by instructors Cecie Boggs and Bronwyn Dean from the Fairfax County Office for Children's Institute for Early Learning, the course launched in March as a series of in-person classes.

However, after two weeks COVID-19 required switching to an all-virtual format, challenging the instructors to rethink how to present the information and activities in this new environment. "Our STEM course was developed to emphasize the importance of hands-on learning through experimentation. Making the switch to virtual required us to provide STEM kits to participants so that we could continue to work through each experiment together but remotely. We also examined how we presented the information to ensure that our participants really understood the how's and why's of each activity," said Boggs.



The instructors successfully engaged the group of early childhood educators in learning how to apply developmentally appropriate science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) activities in their early childhood classrooms. The teachings and materials were targeted for children ages 3-5. Dean shared, "Even after

we switched to the virtual classroom format, our participants were so enthusiastic about all the activities we presented and couldn't wait to introduce them to the children in their care!"

Fairfax Futures thanks the Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation for its generous grant to support the purchase of STEM materials that educators can fully integrate in their early childhood programs. Sallyann Bergh, Fairfax Futures' Executive Director, shared "Philanthropy from our local business community demonstrates the commitment of leaders to help cultivate the next generation of scientific thinkers."



Early Head Start Family Child Care Conducts Health Screenings

On Saturday, August 29, the Early Head Start Family Child Care option held a Health Screening event at the Pennino Building. Parents learned about the event from EHS staff and screenings were done by appointment. At the event, all CDC and Fairfax County Health Department COVID-19 protocols were followed.

Head Start Public Health Nurse Yukta Regmi coordinated the event and was joined by former Head Start Public Health Nurse, Amy Joyner, to conduct the screenings. Children were screened for health requirements mandated by the federal Office of Head Start including vision and hearing. Hemoglobin and lead tests were also conducted if age appropriate. Results showing concerns

in any of these areas are followed up on with the parent and appropriate referrals are made.

Additional opportunities for parents in the FCC program to bring their children for screenings will continue through the month of September with events also being held at Gum Springs Children's Center for the Head Start and Early Head Start center-based children. Supporting children's health and wellness is a priority of Early Head Start and Head Start and helps to support children's school readiness.



Camp Fairfax opened on July 13 and ran through August 14. Offered at 18 locations across the county, including seven NCS Community Centers and eleven Fairfax County Public Schools, Camp Fairfax provided a fun summer camp experience for 350 children each week.



While implementing CDC health and safety guidelines, the full-day program featured exciting opportunities for children to participate in outdoor adventures, performing arts, sports and recreation, visual arts, science exploration and creative writing. Although within each center children and staff were grouped in "bubbles," the SRS staff came up with creative opportunities for children to develop friendships and connect virtually with other bubbles - both in the center and at other SRS locations. These virtual activities included games such as bingo and charades, dance and paint parties, art gallery showings, talent shows, fitness events, a "Masked Singer Showcase" and so much more!



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