

Guidance on Phasing in Early Learning Center Operations

Overview

Child care providers are facing a number of challenges as they consider reopening in the aftermath of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. If you are a child care provider thinking about reopening your early learning center, you may be thinking about how you can overcome staffing and enrollment challenges and successfully reopen your center in phases.

This guidance document provides information for early learning centers considering reopening in the following areas:

- **Changes in staffing and enrollment** as a result of COVID-19 and how to plan for future success
- **Planning for phased reopening** as a strategy to respond to changes in staffing and enrollment

Changes in Staffing and Enrollment

If you are a child care provider considering reopening your early learning center following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely your center will face changes in staffing and enrollment in the coming weeks. In order to prepare for those changes, you may want to ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do I have staff who are available to return to work?

- **Understanding Staff Needs:** In order to begin to understand the availability of your staff, individual calls to each teacher or staff member may be beneficial.
 - In what ways can you learn from your staff about their current needs and concerns?
 - Teachers and staff may have been sick, have lost family members, or have been managing higher-than-usual levels of stress at home. Therefore, your staff may find resources on trauma helpful.
 - It may be helpful to keep notes on their concerns and questions, so that you can follow up with them or keep their concerns in mind as you make decisions.
 - Your staff may also be in a population that is considered [vulnerable to COVID-19](#) and unable to return to work. If so, you may need to consider how you will respond in these situations.
- **Communication of Plans:** How can you communicate your plans for phased reopening and what your staff should expect?
- **Establishing Routines:** As you begin to phase in reopening, it may be helpful to establish routines and schedules for communication with your staff. Providing your staff with a clear structure for when they can expect to hear back from you with updates and next steps may be helpful.

2. Are families ready and able to return?

- **Understanding Family Needs:** In order to begin to understand the needs and concerns of the families at your center, it may be helpful to speak directly with families.
 - In what ways can you learn from your families about their current needs and concerns?
 - Families may have been sick, have lost family members, or have been managing higher-than-usual levels of stress at home. Your families may find [resources on trauma](#) helpful.
 - Children or adults in your families' homes may be in a population that is considered [vulnerable to COVID-19](#), which may impact their decision to send their children to group care. If so, you may want to think about how you will respond in these situations.

- Families may also be experiencing financial hardship and/or may be newly eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Be prepared to share any resources regarding the application process for [CCAP](#).
- To meet child care needs during COVID-19, families may have started sending their child to a new child care provider. They may find it helpful to discuss how best to transition their child back to your center.
- **Communication of Plans:** How will you communicate your plans for phased reopening and what your families should expect?
- **Establishing Routines:** As you begin to phase in reopening, it may be helpful to establish routines and schedules for communication with families.

Planning for Phased Reopening

As early learning centers reopen, it may be helpful for providers to make decisions to phase in operations to balance staffing with enrollment. These two factors— staffing and enrollment— are the two biggest drivers of an early learning center budget. This section of the guidance will discuss potential scenarios centers may experience related to staffing and enrollment.

Note: It is important to remember centers reopening will be required to follow the [Office of Public Health Guidelines for Child Care](#) regarding adult-child ratios and group sizes, as well as Louisiana [licensing standards](#), and should use whichever is stricter for the age group.

Scenario 1: Few teachers are available, and few families are ready to return.

In this scenario, recruitment and support strategies to encourage teachers and families to return to your center may be beneficial.

- **Finance:** The [Early Childhood Center Revenue Calculator](#) may help your planning. You can plug in different staffing and enrollment numbers to think about how you can protect yourself from operating at an unmanageable loss.
- **Enrollment:** Families may appreciate a [video tour](#) shared through email or social media. It may be helpful to reach out weekly to previous families who may be ready to re-enroll.
- **Staffing** It may be helpful to reach out to past teachers on a regular basis and update them on your plans. You may look into the workforce supports offered by lead agencies and Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to recruit new staff when they are needed.
- **Vulnerable populations:** Families and/or staff may be unable to return because they or their families may be vulnerable to COVID-19. There may be resources you can offer to families and/or staff.

Scenario 2: Few teachers are available, but many families are ready to return.

In this scenario, strategies that help meet families' needs may be most helpful. Having too few staff for the number of children enrolled may make it difficult or impossible to meet the required [Office of Public Health Guidelines for Child Care](#).

- **Scheduling:** Different scheduling options could help to manage the available staffing.
- **Recruiting:** The Department's [Recruiting and Hiring Toolkit](#) offers helpful guidance on hiring new teachers that may be helpful. Past staff may be able to support as well. You may reach out to past teachers on a regular basis and determine if they will be ready to rejoin the staff.

- **Workforce Incentives:** Consider offering bonuses or incentives to your staff to return to work. Contact your [early childhood community network](#) to learn about potential funding opportunities related to workforce incentives.
- **Vulnerable populations:** Staff may be unable to return because they may be vulnerable to COVID-19. In such cases, there may be other roles vulnerable employees can take without threatening their health.

Scenario 3: Many teachers are available, but few families are ready to return.

In this scenario, it may be helpful to balance the number of teachers with the number of families ready to attend, until more families are ready to return. Having too many staff for too few families may become financially unsustainable.

- **Health and safety:** Following the [Office of Public Health Guidelines for Child Care](#) and utilizing the Department's [Health & Safety Guidance](#) can help your staff to prepare the physical space for families' return.
- **Professional Development and Training:** Time of low enrollment may be used to provide valuable trainings and professional development to staff. The Department has an [Instructional Leadership Guidebook](#) and [Guidance on Ongoing Professional Development](#) available to continue building your team's skills.
- **Connection:** You may be able to provide support to families through a virtual format to provide [continuous learning opportunities](#) and sustain relationships until families are ready to return.
- **Recruit:** Families may appreciate a [video tour](#) shared through email or social media. It may be helpful to reach out weekly to previous families who may be ready to re-enroll.

Scenario 4: Both teachers and families are ready to return, but the guidelines for group sizes require temporary downsizing of operations.

For the health and safety of staff and families, early learning centers are required to abide by the group sizes included in the [Office of Public Health Guidelines for Child Care](#).

- **Finance:** The [Early Childhood Center Revenue Calculator](#) may help your planning. You can plug in different staffing and enrollment numbers to think about how you can protect yourself from operating at an unmanageable loss.
- **Information:** It may be helpful to closely monitor COVID-related announcements and make adjustments to operations accordingly.
- **Planning:** You may want to develop a long-term plan for scaling phased-in operations as they relate to health-related announcements.
- **Consider physical modifications:** Group size changes may require that large classrooms need to be made smaller to accommodate your previous enrollment. Refer to [Bulletin 137](#) for guidelines on physical spaces, and contact your early childhood community network to learn about potential funding opportunities related to workforce incentives.

Guidance from First Children's Finance

[First Children's Finance](#), a business, training, and technical assistance entity, has a number of resources to support early learning centers in making informed business decisions. It can assist centers in:

- [Analyzing financial statements](#);
- [Preparing to reopen a child care center](#) from a financial perspective; and
- [Operating with reduced enrollment](#) with considerations to guide thoughtful planning.

Planning for New Children and Staff

With the dynamic changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely you may need to plan for supporting new children and staff to ensure smooth operations.

- **How will you develop a plan for onboarding new staff members and/or enrolling new children?**
 - With social distancing in place, how will you introduce families to their child’s new teacher? Examples might include a welcome letter or video from the teacher.
 - How will you learn how to best work with and support new children? If you don’t already have one, an “All About Me” form may help you and your staff to learn about new children in your program.
- **What staff policies may be important to develop related to COVID-19?** With the many changes related to COVID-19, there may be new policies and procedures that you want to develop and communicate to your staff.
 - **What is your plan for managing work absences due to COVID-19**
 - **Communication:** Who should an ill staff member reach out to if they are sick? What are your expectations for communication from staff related to illness?
 - **Staffing Shortages:** How will you operate your center if you or your staff are sick? What are available staffing resources in your community?
 - **Pay:** Employees may be eligible for [Paid Sick Leave](#) as required by the U.S. Department of Labor. How will you communicate these rights to staff to reduce sick staff members reporting to work.
 - **Teacher and child absences:** How will you monitor health and safety in your center?
 - **How will you manage ongoing communications with staff?**
 - **Regular check-ins:** Strong relationships with staff will alert you to when additional support, like mental health days or breaks, may be needed.
 - **Staff meetings:** When new routines are created, regular communication can alert you to understand what is working and what is not.