WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

LISTENING TO AND LEARNING FROM FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS DURING A PANDEMIC

THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED BY
INTERMEDIATE, LLC RESEARCH,
EVALUATION AND SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT SPECIALISTS

ABOUT

EDUCATE, EMPOWER, AND ELEVATE (E3)
E3 Educate, Empower, and Elevate is a Charleston, SC community-based organization that aims to co-create a vision for K-12 education in the tri-county community for students of color through mobilizing the community and supporting the voice, energy, and ideas of families, students, and educators (grassroots stakeholders).

For more information about E3, visit TheE3Group.com or contact Executive Director Audrey KS Lane TheE3ConsultingGroup@gmail.com

TRI-COUNTY CRADLE TO CAREER COLLABORATIVE
Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative (TCCC), based in North Charleston, South Carolina and is a non-profit organization committed to closing the academic achievement gap for all children in the region, from cradle to career, with an emphasis on those who are impacted the most - Black and Brown children, and those living in poverty.

For more information about TCCC visit tricountycradletocareer.org or contact CEO Phyllis Martin Phyllis@tricountycradletocareer.org

InterMediate, LLC
InterMediate, LLC (IM) is a leader in advancing ethical community engagement practices in African-American communities. IM conducts implementation for long-term change. IM is based in North Charleston, South Carolina.

For more information about InterMediate, LLC visit intermediateplanning.com or contact the author/researcher Ashley Krejci-Shaw at ashley@intermediateplanning.com

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Immediately as the global pandemic became apparent, our leadership was innately aware that those that would be most impacted by COVID-19 would be individuals of color. And in the education community, although doing whatever was necessary to adapt to virtual school settings, there continues to be a knot in the pit of our stomachs about the ongoing impact of the global pandemic on students and families of color.

E3's guiding principle says that those most impacted by educational inequity in Charleston—people of color—must be at the center of all decision-making. We must shift who leads and establishes the education agenda to the people in the community who are connected, or as we say, have established "skin in the game". Therefore, we believe that the work of improving educational options begins by creating a "community vision" for education in our region or a community-centered table. And therefore we had to act to elevate the voices of the often unheard!

The initial phase of creating the community-centered table required listening and learning from the community about their desires for their children and a plan for ongoing engagement to ensure a sustained commitment to the work and not just a moment of isolated, non-strategic action. Given the history of the Charleston region, we also knew that it was imperative that trust be rebuilt and agency activated as part of this work. Rebuilding trust involves having the right leaders and messengers to own the community work and ongoing engagement. Therefore it was imperative that we engaged and continuously collaborated with grassroots organizers, community leaders, and stakeholders who are closely connected to the community to convene the intended beneficiaries of this work around their vision for education and equity-focused solutions. And it is our vision that this process is not a one-time gathering, but instead a cyclical process in which there is ongoing feedback about the progression of strategies and how these strategies are or are not improving the lives of those we seek to serve.

Thank you to the parents, families, students and childcare professionals who allowed our team to hear and explore how you maneuvered during the pandemic. A special thank you to our partners Phyllis Martin, LaTisha Vaughn and the Tri-County Cradle to Career team and sub committees for your commitment and support of this very necessary work. To the Tri-County First Steps Team (Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester), we appreciate your vision and partnership to remain focused on the needs and desires of our childcare providers and the families they serve. Thank you to Ashley Krejci-Shaw for taking our ideas and putting them to work in what we believe will be a guiding work in changing the trajectory of our students in the Tri-County community. And to you the readers, thank you in advance for listening to the voices throughout this report and in turn, using your voice for the voiceless in the rooms where they are discussed but are often not present.

Sincerely,

Audrey KS Lane
Executive Director
E3 Educate, Empower, Elevate

Phyllis Martin
Chief Executive Director
Tri-County Cradle to Career

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY FOCUS GROUPS

In late September 2020, E3 and TCCC approved a project plan for a series of stakeholder focus groups to learn more from *community members* in the tri-county having experienced unexpected triumph, hardship and, possibly, loss during the 2020 COVID pandemic.

InterMediate, LLC became the second strategic partner and was entrusted to formulate a project plan and develop a methodology. Unlike other data projects commonly produced in the region, this is a qualitative data report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2020, E3 and TCCC began a series of focus group engagements with the assistance of sustainable development research and evaluation company IM. Together with four strategic grassroots partners, eight community focus groups were conducted producing over 100 pages of narrative analysis, findings, and recommendations. In total, 52 individuals across three counties participated safely and virtually in community focus groups, and in two instances, participated in one-to-one follow-up virtual interviews with the moderator. The work was conducted in three phases.

During this time frame, October 2020 to February 2021, the effects of COVID-19 and systemic racism were inescapable. Focus group participants shared stories of distress, discrimination, faith, perseverance, illness, recovery, and having to lead in household decision making while overwhelmed by unknowns.

The decision to produce a qualitative report was a timely one. Experiential data from focus group participants was collected, coded, and synthesized with the highest degree of skill. The chief objective for qualitative researchers is to analyze experiential data accurately. Readers are encouraged to review all three project phases, especially their separate findings and recommendations, all in their deserving detail. Overall, it is experiential data provided by those surviving in real-time that is impactful.

The uniqueness of each focus group, including their characteristics and dynamics between respondents, provided just a few reasons why an early attempt to standardize moderating across all phases did not work. Although there are similarities in their design, different approaches were used to best capture the data provided by each group. The report offers readers direct insight and captures a range of emotions from the start of the pandemic until the spring, which marked the first full year of living with Coronavirus.

There was much learned, but the most significant—and not articulated explicitly until now—is leadership. **Leadership is by far the most coveted attribute desired among citizens during times of crisis.** The two contagions requiring immediate leadership in 2020 were COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. Additionally, a sharp increase in anti-Asian violence reminded us that Black, Indigenous, & People of Color (BIPOC) are among our most vulnerable citizens. It was also a reminder that critical research like this must also be intentional in its demographic focus, regardless of representation.

Adults we spoke with dug deep to lead for themselves and their families despite contradictory political messaging and unsteady government leaders. Youth relied on the adults in their lives more than ever, trusting parental leadership to guide them through the mass restrictions that tested their mental toughness, friendships, and commitment to their academic success.

Leadership in both thought and action has the power of decreasing uncertainty when reassurance is needed most. This report and its findings are an act of leadership; taking steps to ethically collect experiential data—vast and easily accessible— and commit to action plans for program improvement or reform. There is a need for a collective effort to answer the concerns raised by participants and bring forth protocols that, across a broad range of service providers, lead by example and expand the support available for vulnerable communities both in times of crisis as well as each and every day.

AT THE FOREFRONT

AUDREY LANE
E3 Executive Director

A native of Columbia, SC, Audrey utilizes her talents, professional experience, and passion for community empowerment to influence the landscape of Charleston, SC's public education system. Currently, she is the co-founder and Executive Director of E3 - Educate, Empower, and Elevate, an organization with an intentional focus on creating high-quality educational options for Black and Brown students with the desires and needs of parents and families at the center of this work.

Prior to launching Lane Equity Enterprises and E3, Audrey was the Chief of Access & Equity for the SC Public Charter School District (SCPCSD), the Executive Director of the Royal Foundation, and the Deputy for Human Capital Development for the Charleston County School District.

PHYLLIS MARTIN
TCCC Chief Executive Officer

Originally, from the Catskill Mountains of New York, Phyllis has served as a non-profit leader in communities throughout the South for over 25 years. Passionate about systems change and helping communities solve their toughest challenges, she joined Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative in 2019.

Prior to making the low country her home, Phyllis served as the Executive Director for the YWCA of Greenville and as Vice President of Community Impact for the United Ways of Greenville, SC and Northeast Florida in Jacksonville.

LATISHA VAUGHN
TCCC Chief Operating Officer
E3 Co-Founder

A native of Kansas City, Missouri, LaTisha utilizes her talents, professional experience and passion for education and community activation to eliminate systemic barriers that stand in the way of quality education for children of color. Currently, she is the Chief Operating Officer of Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative, overseeing daily operations and administrative functions, creating a results-driven culture that is rooted in continuous quality improvement and collective impact.

Reporting to the CEO, Vaughn works with staff and volunteers ensuring effective communication, policies, procedures, and strategies align with TCCC's mission and vision. In addition to this work, LaTisha is co-founder of E3 – Educate, Empower, Elevate. Prior to these experiences, LaTisha was an Assistant Associate Superintendent for the Charleston County School District, principal, and teacher.

FOCUS GROUP NON-PROFIT COMMUNITY PARTNERS

TRI - COUNTY FOCUS GROUP FAMILIES

TRI - COUNTY CRADLE TO CAREER COLLABORATIVE

SOUTH CAROLINA FIRST STEPS TO SCHOOL READINESS
Adrienne Troy-Frazier | Sherry Gilliam | Crystal Campbell | Ivory P. Mitchell

CAROLINA TEEN CENTER
Lisa Hart | Javon Rodgers

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
Tyeka Grant

OUR LADY OF MERCY COMMUNITY OUTREACH SERVICES, INC.
Ericka Plater | Kelly Criscitiello

PHASES AND TIME BREAKDOWN

In October 2020, E3 and TCCC began a series of focus group engagements with the assistance of sustainable development research and evaluation company IM. Together with four strategic grassroots partners, eight community focus groups were conducted producing over 100 pages of narrative analysis, findings, and recommendations. In total, 52 individuals across three counties participated safely and virtually in community focus groups, and in two instances, participated in one-to-one follow-up virtual interviews with the moderator. The work was conducted in three phases.

Phase	Duration
Phase I Childcare Providers (Focus Group 1)	*3 Weeks October 2020
Phase II Parents/Guardians/Adolescents (Focus Group 2)	8 Weeks December - February 2021
Phase III Parents/Guardians/Children (Focus Group 3)	4 Weeks February - March 2021
Summative Activities	3 Weeks

EARLY DISCUSSIONS AND INQUIRY

Prospective stakeholders identified as potential focus group volunteers included parents, related guardians, working-class adults, historically marginalized groups, politically marginalized groups, industry professionals at greater risk of transmission, and potentially, youth volunteers. The topics of concern considered necessary were racism, politics, economic hardship, childcare, education, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are examples of draft questions regarded as essential to ask potential respondents:

1. What effect is COVID-19 having in your personal and professional life?
2. What challenges are faced now by working-class adults with school-age children?
3. What have been African Americans' experiences in the tri-county who face COVID-19 and racial injustice locally and nationally?
4. How are African American and Hispanic communities coping with the disproportionate loss of life in their communities?
5. How has anti-immigrant election rhetoric impacted Spanish-speaking communities during COVID-19?
6. How are children and adolescents feeling at this time? Are they better or worse than when the pandemic officially began?
7. What kind of support do families need in the tri-county at this time?

QUESTIONS

All question guides prepared were highly structured. Question types ranged from open-ended to dichotomous scale questions (e.g., yes/no/unsure). Also included were psychometric response scales such as the Likert scale to specify respondents' level of agreement with particular statements. Highly structured questions were also one way of providing less talkative volunteers a chance to participate without feeling pressure to divulge new, or unfolding experiences in 2020. The rationale proved effective in two out of three phases.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

TCCC's Data Committee, Recovery Steering Committee, Family Engagement Subcommittee, Broadband Subcommittee, and Parent Engagement Subcommittee were updated periodically during virtual meetings.

Nearly all nonprofit partners engaged in at least one discussion with the researcher about their organization's constituency. The pre-focus group talks helped prepare the moderator, especially for potential follow-up questions. Some nonprofit leaders shared personal stories, independent research, and in other cases, recommended questions or topics to explore with volunteers they were instrumental in gathering.

During Phase II, there was time available for TCCC committee members to provide feedback and suggestions for a new question guide created for parents and guardians. It was unclear whether it would be possible to conduct the child and adolescent focus groups by the end of the year. There were three emails sent to the team, mainly consisting of questions and a few comments, which integrated into the final question guide.

FOCUS GROUP TERMS, CONSENT, AND PARTICIPATION

The following are terms agreed to by every volunteer participating in discourse:

- Signed consent was explained, collected, and verified by grassroots liaisons before focus groups commenced
- Verbal communication of consent before the discussion
- A completed, signed parent/guardian questionnaire ensures participating children/adolescents remain safe and capable of answering age-appropriate questions about their lives pre-pandemic and during without upset
- A right to share gender pronoun preferences any time
- Agreement to listen respectfully to others even if opinion or perspective differ
- Right to leave focus group any time
- Agreement to adhere to an in/out policy in which volunteers can enter and leave the focus group without explanation for a reasonable period should a personal matter arise
- Agreement to complete the focus group to receive a VISA gift card either through the mail or provided in-hand by their grassroots community liaison

AGGREGATE REPORTING

Aggregating three separate focus group reports allows readers to understand decision-making about research methodology, unexpected moderator adjustments, and different narrative styles, as a few examples. The compilation of each phase may also allow readers to understand the scale of experience and complexity of bringing together narratives that are both powerful (internally) yet marginalized (externally).

THEMES FROM FINDINGS

PHASE I (FOCUS GROUP 1)

"TEACHER" VERSUS TEACHER

EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

INDUSTRY EXCLUSION

INDUSTRY NEGLECT

OUTSIDE ASSUMPTIONS

INCREASED EXPENDITURES

PHASE II (FOCUS GROUP 2)

IMPERFECT SUPPORTS

ELDER RISKS

CONNECTIVITY

ADAPTED LEARNING

STUDENT SUPPORTS

PHASE III

PANDEMIC AESTHETIC

CHILDREN, CORONA & COMMUNICATION

SCHOOLS & HEALTH EQUITY

PANDEMIC & RACISM

MASKS OVER VIRTUAL

ADAPTING VERSUS RESILIENCY

UNITED AFFRONT

YOUTH, TRUST, AND PROTOCOLS

OVERVIEW
19 MAJOR FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

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1. "Teacher" Versus Teacher

Child care professionals explain how the value of their work with preschool children is often disregarded or diminished by people outside their industry.

Credentials, wages, and varying ideas about professional value are likely reasons why some childcare providers describe feeling diminished by public school teachers indirectly. Focus group participants describe moments in which they overhear admiration for school teachers, yet receive little fanfare when they tell people about their work as a childcare center employee. It also seems that even employees who own their centers or have high credentials do not feel or perceive themselves as being distinguished, having furthered themselves in the industry. They understand there is a stigma that may define them as a glorified babysitter. Mind you, certified school teachers have spoken openly about feeling the same, a feeling captured in many news articles as recently as this past February.[1]

Each group of (mostly) women must play dual roles in young children's lives, yet the hierarchy of reverence, seemingly in favor of "real" teachers, creates tension between the groups. It should be noted that there is no anecdotal data from Phase I focus groups indicating that classroom or certified teachers are aware of the public judgments that childcare providers describe, or even if they demonstrate bias themselves.

The participants' belief that few people outside of their industry refer to them as "teachers'' is most likely true. Even the terms "daycare" and "a childcare facility" can spark sensitivity. Yet, these terms are likely out-of-date and worth modernizing in the industry lexicon.

> *Childcare providers know they do not earn living wages, and they work without adequate health protections and have near-zero private healthcare options.*

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1 Politico. '[They want their babysitters back': California school tensions boil over](https://www.politico.com/)". Mackenzi Mayes. February 18, 2021. Retrieved at https://www.politico.com/

2. Empowerment And Disempowerment

Child care professionals convey their work as rewarding and essential yet share realizations that their industry and society fail to recognize them as such.

Since the pandemic began, childcare professionals share their desire to be there for families, now more than ever, without disruption. Yet, they recognize that their profession makes them vulnerable in both economic and physical ways. Fears they may fall ill from COVID-19 prompt the wage-earning participants to remember that most of them have no health care coverage and have no idea when they will be able to afford a plan. Those who do have coverage wonder how falling ill with COVID-19 will affect their coverage and premiums. More so, they are certain that COVID-19 would have devastating financial consequences, as working-class persons in what is so often a low-wage earning industry.

In all, the moral obligation that professionals in childcare feel toward the families they serve is tremendous. Nearly every single participant claimed to love what they do. For instance: "it's not about the money"; "I do it because I love it"; "this is my calling." On the surface, the sentiments sound like positive dispositions, but they are often stated in relation to an unfair realization about their industry overall. In some ways, the sentiments they use may be a device to soften realities that frustrate them more than they want to admit: limited earnings, no opportunities for input, little appreciation for the sacrifices they make, and so on.

In the meantime, dodging transmission affects them psychologically. Childcare providers are an example; two out of three childcare provider groups were the most concerned out of any volunteers about contracting COVID-19. Engaging with children in the simplest ways causes anxiety and discomfort with what were once simple, commonplace childcare center tasks. According to them, there are very few safety protections for them, including assistance with healthcare costs should they fall ill with COVID-19.

Looking ahead, they want to change, but lack certainty on how to achieve it. Detected is an underlying belief among them that they cannot disrupt or "strike" the way school teachers can. As stated, leaving their client-families without childcare coverage gnaws at their commitment or perhaps the pride they articulate when it comes to their work. As poignantly stated by different respondents, more than once: it's not about the money.

3. Industry Exclusion

Child care professionals see no evidence that their industry knowledge and experience are valuable to regulators and other decision-makers.

The childcare providers that cited the most dissatisfaction with changes in their industry were industry veterans. Many feel that more realistic and sensible guidelines could be made to bridge a gap between *caretaking in theory* and *caretaking in practice*. To paraphrase one respondent, *why would any person or entity create new rules without speaking to people in the industry? Our opinions matter. We know what we're talking about.* Center directors particularly have a lot to share about tough decision-making and what influences their daily leadership strategies. Their experience has a place in shaping the industry for important improvements and standardizing.

> *Why would any person or entity create new rules without speaking to people in the industry? Our opinions matter. We know what we're talking about.*

4. Industry Neglect

The pandemic revealed disregard of women's ownership, business management, and labor struggles in the child care industry.

The respondents express some certainty that they, collectively, are neglected by their local and state representatives. The consequences of governmental neglect to advance, modify and fix structural problems were shown as significant liabilities for industries like healthcare and law enforcement in 2020. The childcare industry appears to have been shaded by higher-profile macroeconomic concerns or, in a city like Charleston, less represented comparatively to local narratives from food and beverage business owners. Without comprehensive health care options, industry protections, or standard living wages, professionals in childcare have several grievances to legitimize a walkout that could have economic consequences for the state.

5. Outside Assumptions

Child care professionals discuss outside assumptions about their capability to care for client families at the same capacity (e.g., employee bandwidth, confidence, workplace safety) as they did before the shutdown.

When COVID-19 caused the initial national shutdown in March 2020, news stories documenting Americans' economic hardship were rampant. How long can the USA survive a shutdown? Federal government safety has alleviated some burden in the lives of everyday Americans. Included were small business relief loans to help carry small businesses through the shutdown. Center directors benefitted from these loans, which allowed them to keep their lights on even if their centers were empty.

At the time, unexpected job losses along with decreased and zero revenue brought forth sad industry stories, like those of restaurant owners. Educators were also regularly featured too, as teachers deliberated the risk to them and students should they re-open fully. Comparatively, there may have been far less news coverage of childcare providers like those who volunteered in the focus groups. Their accounts suggest they were sidelined in discussions about re-openings and financial hardship due to the pandemic. Collectively, they share statements suggesting they are presumed as willing, comfortable, and ready to open their doors and care for America's children at a moment's notice.

6. Increased Expenditures

Child care center owners and managers reported declines in their enrollment numbers. In tandem, additional precautionary measures increased costs.

There are higher expenses that make running a childcare facility more challenging these days. While expenditures have increased, enrollment in October was still reported by directors as being down. Despite having fewer children, center directors say they purchase more supplies such as gloves, masks, and sanitizer which have all increased in price since COVID-19 due to high demand. Price hikes plus more frequent ordering was a burden in 2020, although increases may have leveled off by now.

Their accounts suggest they were sidelined in discussions about re-openings and financial hardship due to the pandemic.

7. Imperfect Supports

Focus groups appreciate social safety nets, but there are fixable changes to consider to improve program delivery post-pandemic.

Parents reflecting on government-funded programs share mixed reviews. On one hand, a program like SC Vouchers, designed for working-class adults in need of financial help for childcare coverage, is regarded as overwhelmingly positive. On the other hand, one parent was disappointed to learn, unexpectedly, that her vouchers received near the beginning of the pandemic had expired. Uncomfortable with sending her children to childcare earlier in the year, her comfort level by the fall had become high enough to allow her to seek out childcare options. However, she was informed that the voucher was unusable and that any vouchers not used previously were lost. Although she is likely eligible to re-enroll, she feels the "use it or lose it" rule lacks empathy and possibly could have been amended given the pandemic.

Parent criticisms are more often directed at specific schools and were noted mostly in terms of health risks and trust or distrust in school administrations. In one instance, a critique of Dorchester School District 2 (DD2) was offered in regard to a food service program that initially launched after school shutdowns to help food insecure families. Like all school districts, DD2 offered a curbside lunch pick-up program at multiple locations to alleviate these burdens for families who rely on school nutrition programs. Whether or not the programs are comprehensive was called into question by parent who asked about families who may want lunch, but be unable to get there for one reason or another.

8. Elder Risks

Indicators show that retirees are more likely to put their health at risk through increasing contact with adult children and grandchildren.

It is common to see stories of grandparents talking about separation anxiety from their grandchildren—many share stories of missing their grandchildren since Coronavirus emerged and visits were advised against by health officials.

Some families fall on the other side of the visitation spectrum; they often rely on frequent visits because of limited or costly childcare options.

Three respondents specified their parents as primary childcare support for their children during the pandemic. Grandmothers were described by their adult children, unassumingly, as unsung heroes ready to help them when needed: *grandparents [help me most], I take her to my grandmother's house, and they were driving me and mom crazy.* The unwavering support of grandparents to provide support during the pandemic puts them at greater risk for developing severe illness if they contract COVID-19. If adult children and grandparents understand the risk of being in such close proximity so frequently, it implies there is a desperation that supersedes recommended safety protocols for senior citizens.

Use it or lose it.

9. Connectivity

Connecting and overcoming barriers to unstable connections consumes citizens desperate to find comfort with new interpersonal communication methods.

Connectivity is most often discussed in three ways: first, in relation to pairing devices to wifi; secondly, when connecting with a teacher virtually; and thirdly, in attempts to connect with in-school support for counseling or a learning difference. As previously mentioned, Dorchester families reported virtually no problems retrieving devices or hotspots supplied by their school. However, unstable connections emerge as a recurring blanket issue stifling productive communication between students, teachers, and parents.

There are students and parents who experience trouble connecting to wifi or staying online; when this happens students can opt to use their family wifi to avoid frustration. PA1's experience suggests that teachers may be put in a position to help adults or their children troubleshoot connection issues. For youth who are virtual or hybrid, some describe problems connecting with their teachers either through written communication or because of unreliable wifi. It seems there are relational disconnects with teachers that also affect teacher/parent relationships when engaged in virtual or hybrid learning.

As some examples describe, a student attempts to log in to their classroom, but they experience trouble. Maybe the wifi connection is out, or spotty. Maybe they need to update their software and haven't found time to do so. Nonetheless, a teacher may not see their login attempt, or see that the student is booted off repeatedly. The teacher may also say they do not believe the student attempted to log on at all. Scenarios like this may seem benign or superficial but do cause contention and animosity. Virtual/hybrid students who endure poor connections may find themselves having to convince teachers (likely with a frustrated parent) that they were present during class, or have to spend time explaining why assignments are not uploaded on time.

Whether or not rural students in the tri-county experience major challenges because of their location remains unclear based on respondent accounts. During a follow-up interview with two Johns Island brothers, one brother said that he believes their internet is slow because of where they live.

One student misses connecting with others, mainly through team sports. They describe situations in which their hybrid or virtual learning is choppy because of unstable wifi.

There is little evidence that respondents live in internet deserts or cannot afford wifi connection. Like any household non-essential such as cable television, wifi is a cost that most families are willing and do pay for.

For students living in households where internet access is unavailable due to affordability, it is likely that mobile internet is coordinated through their school. During a focus group, one mother notified another parent that these kinds of supports are available through DD2. From this interaction comes an important question to explore: how well informed are parents/guardians about resources available to them through their district?

> *How well informed are parents/guardians about resources available to them through their district?*

10. Adapted Learning

Elementary students and parents of children with disabilities more often report improved academic performance regardless of attending virtual or hybrid.

Non-traditional learning is, at best, tolerated by adolescent respondents; every adolescent stated their grades had been in decline since March. With three exceptions, all parents affirm that disruption in a traditional school structure was one reason their children struggled in 2020. Academic achievement declined, with few exceptions. One parent stated "three of my kids have this, it's been better. Their grades have gone up now that they're doing virtual where they're not being distracted with their friends. So that's the only positive to name, I can think of to say about, you know, the three that are ADHD, but it's just the [decreased] distractions. Being home they could eat when they wanted to, and their grades came up, because now they got to focus on doing their schoolwork and their studies and all that. Great. Got more time to do it."

11. Known/Unknown Student Supports

Students struggle to identify school school counselors as either their first choice or an appropriate in-school point of contact during stressful times.

Based on answers from parents, connecting their adolescents with school resources for mental health or academic needs is usually challenging, at least initially. Students cannot describe the kind of resources available to them through their school's guidance team, nor can they recall a specific campaign promoting services for youth like them. One might presume that coming of age youth may be inundated by their school counselors, making them aware of all resources available in support of their wellness. But they may rarely hear availability of counseling or other support or other resources that could help them or their families with mental toughness during COVID-19. There should be a survey of school guidance counseling services and the manner of implementation to ensure students know about all the resources available to them and their families.

12. Pandemic Aesthetic

Some youth convey their appreciation of COVID-19 protective equipment in their schools as reassuring, although visually disheartening at times.

Often COVID-19 is spoken about in terms of new rituals like regular use of hand sanitizer and wearing a mask. However, youth responses indicate that new artifacts brought into their school environment because of COVID-19, namely plexiglass, have some impact on them. Plexiglass—a clear, transparent thermoplastic—is a rather monumental reminder of the contagion. While some youth remark on its presence as a reminder of all it takes to keep them safe, they also deliberate about its efficacy. During the follow up interview with a student he said, unprompted by any mention of plexiglass, that he would like to see the material expanded in one area of his school where it appears to be lacking or insufficient. The moderator asked whether or not that was one change that would make him feel safer, and he nodded in agreement.

One year into the pandemic, we may have unknowingly arrived at a place where the aesthetics of keeping safe should match the environment of more impressionable populations. The Johns Island students' perspective indicates that artifacts matter, and further that the clinical-like safety features could be more kid-friendly. Educators should consider the following in regard to COVID-19 in-school practices:

- Creating student educational videos about common safety measures and structures
- Periodic surveying of students and their families to better understand how they may feel safer at school
- Personalizing safety features like plexiglass (e.g., artwork, positive messaging)

13. Children, Coronavirus, and Communication

Some parents speculate that there are adults who may pass along their anxiety or misinformation to their children, causing them worry.

Parents/guardians are confident about the information they provide to their children about Coronavirus. However, they are skeptical about the appropriateness of information communicated by other parents. Several online resources and national broadcast specials are available for viewing if parents/guardians are unsure how to discuss or update their children about COVID-19. However, what and how parents communicate about the contagion is subject to their personal beliefs, which may or may not be factual. In other words, parents articulated awareness that adults are influential in what their children know, and consequently, how they feel about Coronavirus; their children affirm this too.

A step toward standardizing communication about COVID-19 for youth may be through school districts. If adults and children have any confidence about their school practices, it may be the best conduit for circulating accurate information and updates about Coronavirus. Can school districts help children navigate conflicting practices of wearing masks in some places such as their school and not being required to wear them in other places? With mask restrictions easing across many states, including South Carolina, mixed messaging and inconsistent behaviors could complicate young people's understanding of the virus.

What kind of data could school counselors report about COVID-19's impact on school children? Are children from families known to have contracted COVID-19 stigmatized by peers or other families? What policies and supports are in place among tri-county school districts for students of PGs who fall ill with COVID-19 and recover? What about the support services for students with parents who do not recover? Standardizing communication about COVID-19 is just as important as standardizing support for families.

14. Schools and Health Equity

Parents share anecdotes that warrant their skepticism about equitable treatment of their children regarding fair implementation of COVID-19 safety rules and virtual learning.

There was little evidence that racial inequity is often felt or widespread at the Johns Island elementary school the youth participants attend. The one equity-like concern surfaced when a related caregiver described hypocrisy in how safety policies are enforced at her grandchild's school. According to her, her grandson racked up 18 warnings in one day because he improperly wore his mask, repeatedly. Yet, she was bothered when she observed a teacher interacting with small children without having a mask properly positioned on her face: "So they're saying that the kids have to do this. And I've stressed to mine [grandchildren] that it has to stay on." She later suggested to her grandson that tell his principal about the teacher, so that he knows teachers are not following rules as they should.

> If adults and children have any confidence about their school practices, it may be the best conduit for circulating accurate information and updates about Coronavirus.

15. Pandemic and Racism

In the tri-county, African American and Hispanic parents experience anti-BIPOC hostility in the workplace. Racial violence against Asian Americans is at an all-time high in the US since the pandemic began.

The workplace discrimination described by parents in two focus groups over the last year supports sentiments among activists that people of color are targeted and mistreated more often. The experiences of the two women spur questions about employers' responsibility to ensure employees are protected on all fronts, including from racist rhetoric. Their experiences also open up questions about what industries are more inclined to tolerate racist behavior toward employees if they are clients or considered customers; both incidents happened in a medical facility in the tri-county. One parent is an administrative employee working with highly confidential patient records, and another parent is a trained, licensed practical nurse (LPN) providing first-hand care to patients. Can it be true that working in the medical field and pledging an oath not to discriminate or violate patient privacy also means that abusive, racist behavior toward medical professionals is just part of the job? What protections exist for non-white medical professionals vulnerable to racially motivated, anti-migrant acts of discrimination?

16. Masks Over Virtual Learning

Most young people prefer going to school with a mask, indicating that many view virtual learning as complicating their learning track at times.

On the subject of masks, some student respondents prefer to wear them. It is clear in their collective answers that if they had a choice to wear a mask at school all day or not wear a mask and attend virtual school at home, they would choose to wear masks at school. Three youth respondents acknowledge that the masks get uncomfortable throughout the day, and can be hard to breathe through at times. Mask discomfort may depend on style, low-grade material, and the duration for which a child wears it. Why masks bother one child and not another could also be a question of affordability; are more expensive masks of better quality? Possibly.

School districts should consider a mandate to ensure all school stakeholders - particularly children - have the best quality mask available to them. A closer look at when children experience discomfort during their school day could yield improvements for students who struggle to keep them on properly. Additional research possibilities for districts like CCSD include:

- Construction of highly functional open-air classrooms that can be utilized during South Carolina's most moderate months
- Regularly rotating classrooms in unconventional spaces like the cafeteria or a library so that classes or specific subjects can be instructed in spaces that allow for safe periods of unmasked study
- Providing a list of district-recommended masks and discount codes to ensure they can be purchased by any family seeking more comfortable, safer options for their children

17. Youth Adapting Versus Resiliency

The long-term effect on student learning in the tri-county remains unknown. The 2021/2022 school year is critical for determining students' ability to rebound from a tumultuous 2020.

This is an important finding that very much calls for context. Youth have adapted to current state affairs, one might say. Yet, their resiliency is not easily observed and remains unknown. What about the missing children, identified and otherwise, forgotten about in Charleston County? There are far too many children whose whereabouts are unknown; thus, there are no reports now or in the future that could ever truly make a determination about child resiliency when there is virtually nothing known about what the missing groups are going through (even at this very moment).

As some of the young respondents noted, handwashing, not touching, using sanitizer, are adapted behaviors. Although there are likely to be some behaviors that linger after the pandemic is under control, children and adolescents have adapted. Childcare providers shared nothing to indicate the children they see are suffering beyond frustration for not being able to fully live and move in the physical world as they once did. "There are no children that are scared or apprehensive. Children do not reject safety practices."

18. United Affront

Sweeping improvements for child care professionals, principally all women, are possible with a united front. At this time, no such movement gains momentum.

Professional associations, nonprofits, the public sector, and child care workers are just a few critical stakeholders capable of making a difference to increase wage and workplace protections. Childcare providers know they do not earn living wages, and they work without adequate health protections and have near-zero private healthcare options. Without comprehensive affordable health care, hazard pay, or living wages, professionals in childcare have several grievances that legitimize a collective effort for legislative improvements.

19. Youth, Trust And Protocols

Youth anxiety is relatively low about catching Coronavirus and their concerns relate mostly to rejoining activities they were a part of before the pandemic. They report behaviors and thoughts to indicate they find comfort in the safety protocols.

School children seem more or less unaffected by Coronavirus. With the exception of one elementary student whose mother is an essential medical worker who had fallen seriously ill with Covid-19, it is likely that tri-county children do not feel overly stressed at their prospects for contracting the virus. Nor do they seem intolerant, dismissive or stressed by safety procedures that are in place to limit transmission. On one hand, they seem rather indifferent to protocols, and content to follow the rules as presented to them. Youth respondents attending school, as usual, in Charleston County are also aware of the challenges of virtual learning, which they would have experienced at the end of March 2020 when schools shut down and districts were forced to employ virtual learning to put a bookend to the 2019/2020 school year. For CCSD students, the short experience without the structure of a brick and mortar building made them aware that virtual/hybrid peers face difficulty getting help and completing assignments.

Five child respondents on Johns Island and siblings with ADHD also reported they have made significant increases in their grades.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Qualitative findings articulate likelihoods. Unlike quantitative data, qualitative research analyzes data, offers evidence of the analysis, to validate the data in mostly narrative form.

Summary of High-Level Focus Group Recommendations

The following recommendations are attainable opportunities to initiate change based on needs articulated by focus group participants at every project phase. In some instances, recommendations reflect new information surfacing since the last focus groups convened in February 2021, and some recommendations include system's levers interpreted by internal team members.

1

Childcare providers work in isolation and are excluded from the education system.
Professionals working in private childcare centers were compelling in their belief that their role in preparing children for school is not taken seriously. How do other stakeholder groups feel about the more extensive institutional relationship to childcare centers? What benefits might come from connecting them? Also important to explore is how more cooperative cross-institutional partnerships might strengthen a child's (and parents') transition from a child care facility to a Pre-K or Kindergarten program. Consider data collected from childcare professionals in how they describe their communication with parents. Parents/guardians who were less frequent in their contact with center staff were also less likely to engage in center activities or make time to discuss their child's progress. These are concerns often reported by teachers. With solutions front and center, this could be just one area of common ground that could bring both groups together to forward solutions.

Recommendations:
- *Take the lead in coalition building between early childhood communities.*
- *Expand education continuum to include childcare organizations leading coordination of awareness building and advocacy for funding, policy, and infrastructure support.*

2

Trauma and mental health challenges experienced by children and parents has both increased and shifted due to COVID-19 and parallel racialized injustices over the last year.
School administrations might agree to participate in an exploratory inquiry with other schools to understand how COVID-19 has impacted the needs and services provided to youth. Youth were uncertain about school guidance teams being their first go-to for in-school support. COVID-19 is anticipated to taper off as more of the population becomes vaccinated—children included. Yet, what social and emotional challenges might linger for young people? Could no mask wearing in schools stir up anxieties or anger from students and staff who disagree with the mandate's removal?

Recommendations:
- *Broaden definition of trauma in addressing children and families in the education system to include racialized injustices.*
- *Survey and determine the quality of mental health supports offered in tri-county schools.*
- *Determine, and where necessary, assist community and education-based organizations in providing education, advocacy and accessible mental health supports to children and families experiencing trauma. Ensure accountability.*

3
Long term behavioral/psychological effects of increased anxiety, trauma, grief and reduced social interactions due to COVID and social unrest on children, especially children of color, in education, career and social pursuits are unknown.

Recommendation:
- *Research on the long-term impact of 2020 on children and families to anticipate potential new or increased learning gaps and disruptions and preemptive solutions to help them recover.*

4
Basic needs, broadband access and accessible mental health services are innately interwoven challenges and concerns for children and families that create learning disruptions and directly impact children's ability to succeed.

Recommendations:
- *Connect conversations together and elevate strategies that lead to stronger support structures, funding and systems change.*
- *Evaluate where schools can fill gaps and where community-based partnerships can be created to better support children and families.*

5
Uneven application of COVID generated protocols in school districts exists regarding communication (between teachers and administrators and parents and students), access to technology and IT support and the application of mask wearing and penalties.

Online learning is here to stay, as evidenced by a new partnership between tri-county school districts including Colleton County School District to create and offer a K-8 virtual school.[2] As virtual learning becomes more commonplace, school leadership should investigate problems that arose during school shut-downs and find a way to avoid them in the future. A direct approach to avoiding frustration with virtual is to provide technical assistance with both IT issues as well as improving written communication and deescalating conflict.

Recommendation:
- *Design a research project investigating the quality of virtual communications between parents, teachers and students and provide training and technical support.*

6
Lack of sufficient localized data from parents and children on (lack of) access to affordable basic needs and services in communities.

Recommendation:
- *In partnership with other organizations, develop a process for collecting data that drills down to the county and neighborhood levels and utilize this data to determine strategies for moving TCCC mission forward.*
- *Other general recommendation directly from parents: Create a directory of reputable, well-established business owners willing to volunteer time to parents who own, or aspire to own a business. Credible, free (or almost free) sources may be the greatest support to Spanish- speaking business owners who struggle with their English literacy, as one Hispanic mother explained.*

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2 Live 5 News. "CCSD looks to partner with school districts for the 2021-22 virtual academy". Paola Tristan Arruda. April 19, 2021 . Retrieved at https://www.live5news.com/

CLOSING

The release of this report also comes at a time of hope for most and, for others, jubilation. Reopening's around the world are mainly due to, arguably, successful and ongoing vaccination programs. As reported by Our World Data, the United States has fully vaccinated at least 40% of the US population at the end of May; in South Carolina, 33% of the state's population has been vaccinated thus far.

The eagerness to leap into post-pandemic life is understandable yet, one that humble hearts might be best to entertain.

The arrival of COVID-19 in South Carolina exacerbated already stark socioeconomic, institutional, and race divides as it has all over the globe. With few exceptions, the working-class and community members who rely on government assistance for their most basic needs are either in the same socioeconomic position as before the pandemic or worse.

This report was commissioned to evidence the power of grassroots community partnerships and the high value of qualitative research to deliver data that is not merely topical but also insightful. More profoundly, the work endeavors to demonstrate how critical research inquiries are ethically structured, keeping in mind the wellbeing of every stakeholder and volunteer. The project that now stands complete was, as they say, right on time.

It became apparent to everyone involved in this project that any effort on our behalf to engage local community members would have to happen from the standpoint of surviving the COVID-19 pandemic. So, the research here might also be considered testimonial to the hardship and perseverance of tri-county families, as well as an educational resource to spur action.

Hearing a focus group participant quantify their limited or depleted resource(s) is different from hearing them describe the emotional impact to them as a result of not being able to provide help for a loved one. Or, what it did to them emotionally as a result of not being able to provide help for a loved one. Similarly, hearing that so far, nearly 10,000 South Carolinians have lost their lives to COVID-19 may be less impactful than hearing a focus group participant acknowledge having "lost count" of all the people they have known to succumb to the virus. To worry about food, going to work, possibly infecting a loved one, or having to deprive your child of anything they need will change any listener.

We are committed to amplifying the voices of those most impacted by the events of the last 18 months. Through connecting to organizations that are doing community-based work that support children and families in need, sharing the stories of the children and families more broadly for the purposes of advocacy, and building a collective for more direct policy work, jointly, we will continue to ensure the stories of children and families lead the way.

For further information about this report, please email TheE3ConsultingGroup@gmail.com.