



The Seattle Preschool Program Process Evaluation Community Brief

School Readiness Consulting

For the Seattle Department of Education
and Early Learning

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A blue-tinted photograph of the Seattle skyline, featuring the Space Needle prominently in the center. The city's skyscrapers and buildings are visible in the background, and trees are in the foreground. The text is overlaid on the image.

AN OPPORTUNITY *in* SEATTLE

The City of Seattle is committed to providing high-quality preschool education experiences to young children and their families. In 2015, the Department of Education and Early Learning (DEEL) launched the Seattle Preschool Program (SPP) to deepen the city's commitment to early learning by increasing access to full-time, high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds in Seattle.



Seattle Preschool Program In Action

SPP is offered in a number of settings, including Seattle Public Schools (SPS), family child care (FCC) homes, and community-based organizations (CBOs). Over the past 6 years, SPP has made significant progress toward meeting its goal of providing accessible, affordable, high-quality, and equitable preschool to children across Seattle by taking these steps:

- Rapidly increasing the number of available spots in preschool programs
- Continuously working to improve program quality to boost children's growth and learning—in fact, SPP children show strong gains in language, literacy, math, socioemotional, and physical skills
- Serving children of all racial/ethnic groups—for example, approximately 75% of currently enrolled children are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and 40% speak a language other than English at home

IMPACT OF THE DUAL PANDEMICS: COVID-19 AND RACISM

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all spheres of human life, including preschool. Programs around the country faced an unprecedented shift in how they delivered services, and many pivoted entirely to virtual instruction. This incredible shift was also experienced in SPP and was guided by swift support and decision-making from DEEL. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, it became apparent that the country was actually facing dual pandemics: the present COVID-19 pandemic and an ongoing pandemic of systemic racism and racialized violence. Although systemic racism and the fight for racial equity have existed in the United States for centuries, awareness and discussion about this struggle have increased over the past few years as a result of numerous events of police brutality against communities of color and the development of the Black Lives Matter movement.

All of these historic and racialized events (which we call the racial justice movement, or RJM) had profound effects on preschool programs. As a result, a large question remains unanswered: How do we ensure that all children (especially in communities of color) have access to high-quality and culturally responsive preschool experiences, especially during two ongoing pandemics?

In spring 2021, DEEL partnered with School Readiness Consulting (SRC), a social-justice-focused early childhood consulting organization, to help the SPP community better understand the impact of the dual pandemics, guided by the following research questions:

- What were the highlights and some lessons learned from DEEL's response to the pandemics?
- How did teachers, program directors, and coaches experience the switch from in-person to virtual coaching?
- What issues of equity surfaced, and what can be done to improve racial equity going forward?

LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

The SRC team explored the effects of the dual pandemics by conducting focus groups, interviews, and surveys. Specifically, the SRC team interviewed DEEL staff, including Early Learning Division leadership and members of the Policy, Operations, and Quality Practice and Professional Development (QPPD) teams. Focus groups were conducted with SPP program directors and teachers. We also used data from surveys given to program directors, teachers, and families in the spring and summer of 2021.

WHOSE VOICES ARE INCLUDED?

While the SRC team could not include all SPP programs and staff in the study, the team selected participants using a process to help ensure different experiences would be represented. The two illustrations that follow show how different groups were represented in more detail, specifically showing the diversity in program types and in race/ethnicity of participants.¹



**10 interviews
with DEEL staff**



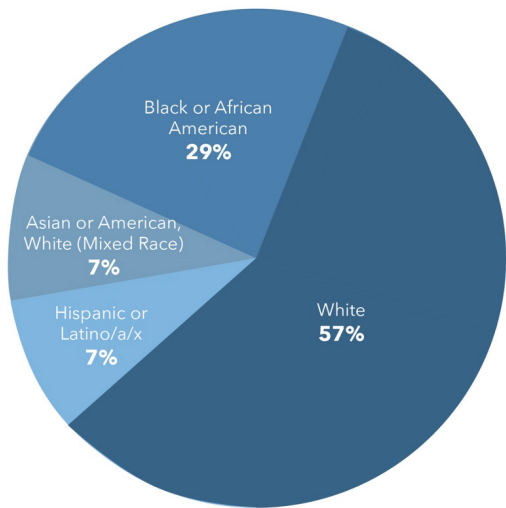
**38 focus group participants including
SPP program directors and teachers in
centers, FCCs, and SPS sites**



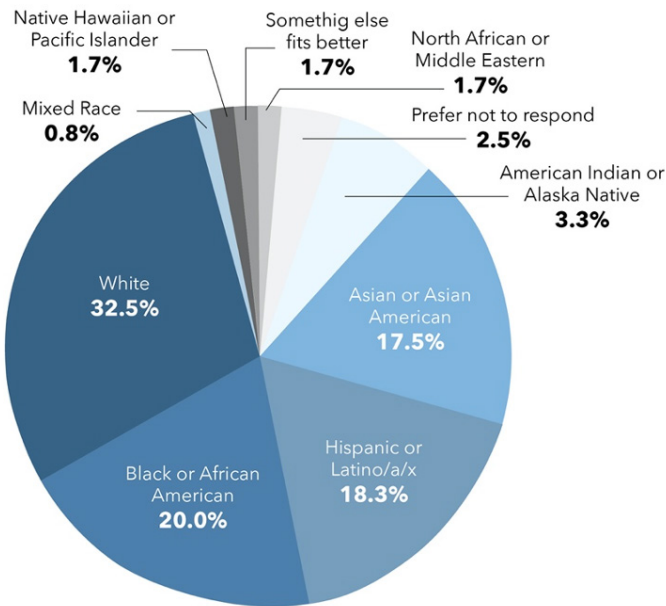
**113 survey responses from SPP
program directors and teachers in
centers, FCCs, and SPS sites**



**610 survey responses
from SPP families**



Race/ethnicity of interview and focus group participants



Race/ethnicity of SPP staff survey participants

¹ Participation in the study by program type and race/ethnicity was generally representative of the SPP program overall, based on available data.

A blue-tinted photograph of the Seattle skyline, featuring the Space Needle prominently on the left. The city is densely packed with various skyscrapers and buildings. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of evergreen trees. The overall tone is a solid blue overlay.

WHAT DID
we LEARN?

The study team carefully reviewed and analyzed all of the data shared with us through the focus groups, interviews, and surveys. The big takeaways from this analysis are shared in this section.

DEEL’S RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMICS

What Did DEEL Do in Response to COVID-19?

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, DEEL took swift action to help programs continue delivering services safely to families. The following table summarizes the main goals of DEEL’s pandemic response and examples of action steps.

Main Goals	Action Steps
Adjust to providers’ and families’ needs and preferred instructional modalities	DEEL allowed hybrid, online, and in-person instruction
Facilitate enrollment	DEEL extended enrollment timelines
Maintain SPP sites’ funding	DEEL continued providing funding to programs, regardless of how instruction was being done, and provided additional emergency funding
Reduce tuition costs for families	DEEL cut back tuition for families enrolled in hybrid and in-person programs
Provide supplies and address basic needs	DEEL provided programs with personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies and provided at-home learning kits for families
Increase communication with families and programs	DEEL held frequent meetings, administered feedback surveys, and gave families a more direct line of communication



Highlights of DEEL's Response

DEEL's policies and pandemic responses were most helpful when they alleviated administrative and financial burdens, allowing some flexibility in program operations.

- Program directors and teachers expressed appreciation for DEEL's consideration of the specific needs of their programs and were particularly pleased with flexibility regarding attendance requirements and contracts.
- According to program directors and teachers, families also appreciated the flexibility, especially with enrollment timelines.

Lessons Learned from DEEL's Response

The SPP community was still negatively impacted by the pandemics, especially in terms of their mental health and access to resources.

- SPP families felt wary about the risks of getting sick and had to navigate sudden shifts to virtual learning.
- SPP program directors and teachers were worried about their jobs.
- SPP program directors had to take on increased responsibilities to support families and teachers.
- The mental health and well-being of SPP community members (especially in communities of color) were affected by increased incidents of racism.
- The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that SPP programs in public schools had access to more resources than family child care homes and small centers.



Strategy Spotlight

Overall, program directors and teachers appreciated DEEL's response to the pandemics. A few strategies stood out as being particularly effective:

- Leading with compassion and emotional support during uncertain times
- Making it possible to choose between different modes of instruction
- Easing attendance requirements
- Extending enrollment timelines
- Providing additional financial support
- Providing learning materials to support virtual environments



"I would say that [DEEL] has been very supportive of us during COVID and doing whatever they can to accommodate our site. We needed a little more flexibility. We said hybrid, but our families didn't really want to come back and neither did our teachers. So we came back a little later and that was perfectly fine. And when families were ready, we started two days a week and now we're up to three days a week and they're able to help us make the most of what we can do as opposed to coming down on what we can't do."

– **Program Director**



"When we were in lockdown, I was worried I'd get furloughed or lose my job, or we would not be able to reopen . . . And then after we reopened, I really felt the feeling that it was too soon, and I was scared of getting sick from coming to work for a while. Now that we're later, maybe I've just gotten complacent, but I more think of just the physical discomforts of COVID-19, we're not able to offer group or freely open sensory experiences for the kids, and I think a lot of my individualized support has suffered from that, as well as just being physically uncomfortable in a mask."

– **Teacher**



"For us here [at the FCC], kids were not coming in. Enrollment was less. We were unable to pay for rent, even unable to pay employees. We were hearing grants and stuff were there, but grants were not accessible to family child care providers. We apply for it and we don't get it. So, it's like, 'Okay, how am I going to keep the roof over my head? How am I going to pay the employee?' At the time, I had the two employees that were working for us. And besides dealing with the business, a lot of personal things."

– Program Director

THE SHIFT TO VIRTUAL COACHING

How Did DEEL Shift To Virtual Coaching?

Due to COVID-19 lockdowns and other social distancing restrictions, SPP coaches had to quickly pivot to supporting teachers and program directors remotely. Coaches initiated the transition by reaching out to their teachers and program directors to inquire about preferred means and frequency of communication (e.g., email, phone call, text message). Then, coaches tailored their communication approaches to meet the needs and preferences of their teachers and program directors. DEEL supported the transition to virtual coaching by respecting coaches' autonomy, increasing flexibility in the coaching process, and providing technology tools and training.

According to the coaches, teachers, and program directors who participated in the interviews and focus groups, these were the main components of virtual coaching in 2020–21:

- **Remote check-ins:** None face-to-face communication was initiated by a coach in order to identify and address teachers'/administrators' ongoing challenges and needs.
- **Virtual observations:** Coaches observed sites and classrooms remotely. The observations occurred through videoconferencing platforms (such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams), pictures, or video recordings.

What Is Coaching In SPP?

As part of their participation in SPP, program directors and teachers receive individualized coaching and professional learning resources. The ultimate goal of coaching is to create tools, spaces, and approaches for culturally responsive and high-quality teaching practices in all SPP programs. The process of coaching is anchored in a continuous improvement cycle: coaches and teachers work together to build a meaningful coaching relationship, set professional goals, learn and work toward their goals, and evaluate progress. Some of the specific ways coaches help support professional learning include:

- **Curriculum instruction:** Coaches support teachers in using the chosen curriculum of their program.
- **Reflection:** Coaches provide space for teachers to reflect on their instructional practices and identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.
- **Using data:** Coaches support teachers in using data from multiple sources to inform their practice.
- **Training:** Coaches help plan and organize professional development opportunities for directors and teachers.



Highlights of Virtual Coaching

The remote approach and digital technologies created flexibility that could be promising for the future:

- Virtual coaching helped coaches increase their job capacity and communication with teachers and program directors.
- Most program directors and teachers reported that coaches were very helpful in supporting resource access, family engagement, virtual instruction, and relationships with colleagues.
- Coaches' support was especially helpful for FCC providers, all of whom found coaches to be particularly helpful with health and safety protocols, virtual learning strategies, and meeting flexibility.

Lessons Learned from Virtual Coaching

Despite the benefits of virtual coaching, SPP program directors, teachers, and coaches still experienced the following issues:

- The switch to virtual coaching exposed inequities in access to and understanding of technology and heightened the need to develop clear guidelines for virtual coaching.
- Experiences with virtual coaching also revealed that coaches struggled with providing support related to long-term professional goals, likely as a function of needing to meet more immediate needs.
- Coaches often found themselves supporting program directors' and teachers' mental health more than their professional development.



Strategy Spotlight

Overall, program directors, teachers, and coaches shared positive reflections on virtual coaching. A few strategies used during virtual coaching surfaced as particularly helpful and can be considered for use moving forward:

- Not every interaction needs to be in person, to make scheduling and rescheduling easier.
- Quick, informal interactions help meet directors' and teachers' needs in the moment.
- Creative use of technology, like texting pictures of a classroom setup or sending videos of instructional practices, is effective for immediate, ad hoc feedback.



"I think some positive change that's occurred is my schedule is more flexible in terms of meeting with the teachers. I'm meeting with them more frequently than I did in person, just trying to make up for not being there in person. . . . So before, if I meet them once or twice a month, I'm now meeting with them sometimes three or four times a month. So at least once a week with some teachers in some classroom, depending on how much support that they needed from me, I guess, according to our coaching plan."

– Coach

Equity Considerations For Coaching

Experiences using virtual coaching were not necessarily equal for all SPP program directors and teachers. These are some potential inequities that directors and teachers feel may exist in the coaching model:

- More Black directors and teachers found coaching helpful than White directors and teachers did.
- Program staff in some delivery settings reported meeting more frequently with their coaches than staff in other settings did. For example, FCC providers reported the highest number of meetings out of all program staff who participated in the study.
- Not all directors and teachers had the same knowledge of or access to technology.

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“Social and emotional support I think was the biggest thing [during 2020–21 virtual coaching]. Just being there and listening to the teachers. I had a lot of teachers that were crying. . . . I had to do a lot of just listening and also supporting teachers with their personal things from a professional standpoint. I was advocating for them with the directors, a lot of resource sharing online, trying to find what I could do, but it was never enough.”

– **Coach**

”

“I got a lot of support from the SPP coach, she was really awesome, because we just talked and that’s what I needed more than anything was just to talk, just explaining to her that I’m not going to focus on whether these children can know numbers from one to 10 or if they know the ABC’s from A to Z. I said that’s not important, what’s important is that these children understand this next environment from home. . . . And I didn’t want to hear all the other things about, ‘You got to do this, and you got to make sure that this point is hit and these things.’ . . . Social-emotional was more important to me than anything else because all the other stuff would come with it.”

– **Teacher**



THE RJM AND ADDRESSING RACIAL EQUITY

How Did DEEL Respond To The RJM?

The racial justice movement (RJM) sparked conversations and training about racism and inequities within DEEL and SPP. As a result of these conversations, DEEL planned and hosted several professional development events related to race equity where SPP directors and teachers could learn about inclusion, anti-racism, and culturally responsive practices. DEEL also offered resources and opportunities for SPP directors and teachers to discuss racial equity and discrimination. These are a few specific examples of DEEL's efforts:

- Staff from the DEEL team offered their own time to hear about experiences with racism and discrimination in programs.
- DEEL crafted and shared a statement of anti-racism in solidarity with communities facing incidents of racist violence.
- DEEL adjusted enrollment criteria to better serve multilingual and low-income families.
- DEEL developed new strategies for reaching diverse families who may be interested in the SPP program.
- DEEL offered multiple trainings on topics such as racism and culturally responsive practice.



Highlights of DEEL's Response to the RJM

The RJM sparked a deeper examination of equity across DEEL and increased cross-racial solidarity in SPP:

- Program directors and teachers expressed that they felt compelled to increase their own knowledge of anti-racism and pursue efforts for allyship with communities of color.
- Program directors and teachers also felt stronger cross-racial solidarity among staff in their programs.
- Program directors and teachers acknowledged DEEL's efforts to provide training and space for discussion, which they felt helped lay a foundation for learning.

Lessons Learned from DEEL's Response to the RJM

The RJM evidenced that systemic changes are needed to substantially increase racial equity in SPP:

- Many Black and Asian SPP teachers and program directors experienced discrimination and were deeply, personally impacted by the dual pandemics.
- SPP teachers and program directors reported needing in-depth training opportunities on specific skills such as facilitating developmentally appropriate discussions about racism and supporting communities of color.
- SPP teachers and program directors also shared that they feel resources in programs do not always reflect families' cultures and languages.
- The dual pandemics emphasized an existing "digital divide" for SPP teachers, program directors, and families.



Strategy Spotlight

Overall, program directors and teachers appreciated DEEL's intentions to address the RJM. Here are a few actions that they felt were particularly effective:

- Encouragement to pursue allyship activities (e.g., local rallies).
- Discussion of race equity issues during meetings, especially ways to combat rising anti-Asian sentiments.
- Additional guidance and resources from coaches about anti-racism.



"I think [the racial justice movement] has definitely impacted everybody, regardless of where you are in the district; where you teach, where you live, what school you go to. . . . I think DEEL and the school district have been really shifting professional development and staff meetings, and any opportunity we have to bring teachers and administrators together to address those issues, and have those hard conversations and professional development and training to grow, so we are bettering ourselves and just meeting those things head-on and opening up a dialogue. So where families and kids are impacted, they feel like they have a trusted teacher, mentor or somebody within the school system that is willing to help them listen and address their needs. So I definitely think we've confronted it head-on, I think, in a really robust way and I know DEEL has done the same. . . . But I feel like the [school] district and DEEL have a lot of opportunities to continue to drive in that direction. And, like I said, I think I'm proud of the work that we've done, but knowing there's still a lot of work to do."

– Program Director



"But not all the teachers at my center are on the same page, and it's definitely the minority of teachers. But when those teachers are around, it's like, now we're walking on eggshells and talking in whispers, and there's that kind of discord within the staff about that. . . . There was definitely a competing narrative in Seattle, because Seattle had a lot of protests going on. And I used it in my classroom as an opportunity to talk about protest and why people protest and why that's part of democracy. But then there were other teachers who were talking about the protest as a nuisance, or in terms of a nuisance only, or as some just awful criminal act or anarchist takeover."

– Teacher



"We have many, many languages across SPP families, the families that speak other languages. Yes, there were applications, or registration forms, or things like that, that are translated, but that's not it. Anything that's done for the families—we should try to accommodate interpretation for events and even curriculum things that are shared with families at our level site, online resources for families, the DEEL newsletter, professional development newsletter for teachers should be in many languages because we have teachers that speak probably more than 50 languages. Some of those things we're just thinking monolingually, but if it will really be meaningful about equity, and reaching out, and being intentional, then we should think about accessibility. . . . What are we expecting families to access? What are they expecting teachers to access if we're only providing training for teachers in English at this point, if that's the only language?"

– DEEL Staff



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HOW COULD SPP *be* STRENGTHENED?

This section presents recommendations based on what was learned that would support DEEL in making changes to SPP so that Seattle’s children and families have equitable access to the program and benefit from high-quality educational services and outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS	WHAT COULD THIS LOOK LIKE?
#1. Strengthen support systems for mental health, virtual learning, and organizational transparency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop mental health support for coaches, teachers, program directors, and families, without placing that responsibility on coaches’ shoulders. • Develop mental health support for other DEEL staff (education specialists, human service coordinators, and program intake representatives) who also navigate difficult and complex issues. • Ensure all coaches and education specialists have access to the technology needed to support directors and teachers. • Ensure families have equal access to the technology needed for full participation in SPP. • Use technology to help engage families. • Increase transparency and flexibility in communication to programs and families.
#2. Develop and implement a hybrid (virtual and in-person) approach for SPP coaching that is based in equity and creates a road map for meeting both immediate needs and long-term professional learning goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize that coaching should focus on cultural responsiveness, racial equity, and long-term professional development. • Make sure that the coaching process and the coaching sessions reflect a balance between meeting the most immediate needs of individual teachers and program directors and working toward accomplishing professional goals. • Identify areas where coaching could meet the needs of teachers and program directors, while still making sure their experiences are consistent and equitable. • Work with coaches, program directors, and teachers to define a hybrid coaching approach for SPP, including setting clear expectations, guidance, and recommendations. • Encourage coaches to start the coaching process in person (if possible) and to clarify the purpose of the virtual components before transitioning into virtual or hybrid coaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS	WHAT COULD THIS LOOK LIKE?
<p>#3. Increase support for stakeholders in communities of color and tailor anti-racist training.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide reliable access to high-quality translation and interpretation services, which may require hiring additional multilingual personnel. • Ensure all aspects of SPP reflect the cultures and languages of communities and families. • Provide additional funding and support to historically underfunded sites, especially FCCs and small centers, which lack the resources that public schools have access to. • Customize the content and type of antibias/anti-racist support and training according to program directors' and teachers' needs, racial/ethnic identities, and understanding of antibias/anti-racist education. • Provide antibias/anti-racism training to staff in leadership positions, especially in the school district, to ensure they are able to support directors and teachers. • Use coaching to ensure that racial equity and anti-ableism are pursued continually in all sites.

