

BUILDING EARLY LINKS FOR LEARNING:

BELL ACTIVITIES AND METRICS 2020-2022

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**Building Early Links for Learning:
BELL activities and metrics
2020-2022**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLOSURES

People's Emergency Center (PEC) and Youth Service, Inc. (YSI) merged in January 2023 and is now known as HopePHL™. Learn more at www.HopePHL.org.

Dr. Cutuli is a paid consultant for People's Emergency Center / HopePHL™ to advise on the implementation of the BELL project and analyze data testing for program impact.

We would like to thank the many families, housing providers, early childhood program staff, and many others who support young children who experience homelessness. We would also like to thank the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, especially Fred Gigliotti, Beth Gonzales, Kitchener Jones, and Roberta Cancellier for their partnership and for making data available to be included in this report.

The BELL program at HopePHL™ is supported by the Vanguard Strong Start for Kids™ program and the United Way of Greater Philadelphia. HopePHL's™ president is Kathy Desmond.

All statements in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any funder, agency, or anyone else.

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Suggested citation:

Cutuli, J. J., & Baye, O. (2023). Building early links for learning: BELL activities and metrics 2020-2022. Nemours Children's Health: Wilmington, DE.

Early childhood program participation for children staying in Philadelphia's family shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic.



SHELTER AND EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS (ECE)

CHILDREN IN SHELTER	DISCUSSED ECE		ENROLLED IN ECE		ENROLLED IN QUALITY ECE	
	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
ALL	71%	66%	58%	36%	29%	14%
Birth to 3 Years Old	77%	76%	51%	29%	21%	11%
3 to 5 Years Old	61%	50%	72%	54%	43%	23%

8 KEY ACTIVITIES



SUMMARY

Shelter staff had fewer discussions with parents about early childhood programs during the pandemic, especially for preschool-aged children.



Enrollment rates for all children in shelter showed large declines during the pandemic. Enrollment was especially low among infants and toddlers.



Fewer children were enrolled in high-quality early childhood programs. This was true regardless of child age.



New BELL programs are improving shelter play spaces to support early development and serving families in permanent supportive housing.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

The BELL program should continue to support shelter staff in being a source of reliable information for families despite the ongoing pandemic.

2

Early education and shelter systems need systemic reforms to increase access to high quality early childhood programs for children in homeless contexts.

3

Early education and shelter systems should take proactive steps to increase communication and coordination to assist families.

4

Early education and shelter systems should prioritize the developmental needs of young children experiencing homelessness using trauma-informed approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

The Building Early Links for Learning (BELL) initiative aims to support early development and promote resilience for families with young children who stay in Philadelphia homeless shelters. This document reports on BELL's activities with family emergency and transitional housing programs.

The BELL model focuses child- and family-service systems on meeting the developmental needs of young children who experience homelessness and their families. Resilience occurs when systems are successful in helping families meet the universal developmental needs of early childhood and the specific needs of young children in shelter.

The BELL model supports systems in encouraging early development through three pillars of action:

1. **Improve Shelter Settings:** BELL works to make family emergency and transitional shelters more aware and responsive to the specific needs of the young children who stay there.
2. **Connect Contexts:** BELL increases the degree of collaboration between shelter, early education, and other service systems, allowing them to share expertise and better coordinate.
3. **Open Doors:** BELL promotes high quality early childhood education opportunities and assists families interested in identifying, enrolling, and participating in these programs.

The BELL model was formulated and implemented in Philadelphia since 2016.^{1,2,3} From March 2020, BELL was forced to adapt—along with the rest of society—to the challenges and demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. This report contains data from the 12-month period from April 2021 through March 2022, covering the second year of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. During this time, family shelters and early childhood programs were operating, though with significant limitations related both to staff shortages as well as precautions and restrictions to contain the spread of illness. Parents and other caregivers were also working hard to protect their families from harm and doing what is best for their children despite the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. Broad interventions were occurring at the local and national levels. Some were aimed at mitigating risks to health and safety for those in shelter—such as the establishment of a quarantine shelter site for those at highest risk. Others were aimed at preventing the need to move to shelter, including increased efforts at prevention and diversion from the Philadelphia Office of Homeless services and the federal eviction moratorium.

Our goal is to illuminate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how emergency housing and early childhood education systems serve young children staying in shelter. This report compares key BELL metrics during the 12 months from April 2021 through March 2022 to the same 12 months from 2019 to 2020, immediately before widespread pandemic restrictions were imposed. We

¹ Cutuli, J. J., & Willard, J. (2019). Building Early Links for Learning: Connections to Promote Resilience for Young Children in Family Homeless Shelters. *Zero to Three*, 39(4), 43-50. Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jj_cutuli/36/

² Cutuli, J. J. (2020). Building Early Links for Learning: The BELL Report to Stakeholders. Nemours Children's Health System: Wilmington, DE. Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jj_cutuli/43/

³ Additional publications available at: <https://www.pec-cares.org/policy-publications.html>

highlight how we adapted key BELL activities—and developed new ones—to help systems support young children in shelter during the pandemic. Our hope is that these lessons can help guide needed work to support early development as the pandemic continues and changes.

KEY ACTIVITIES

BELL works closely with families, emergency and transitional housing providers, early childhood programs, and decision makers in child- and family-serving systems across Philadelphia. The BELL model helps draw attention to the developmental needs of young children experiencing homelessness. Key activities include education, sharing information, and supporting relationships between early education and housing providers. BELL also reaches beyond these systems to engage philanthropic partners, researchers, and other relevant stakeholders in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and across the United States.

Discussions about Early Care and Education and Help Enrolling

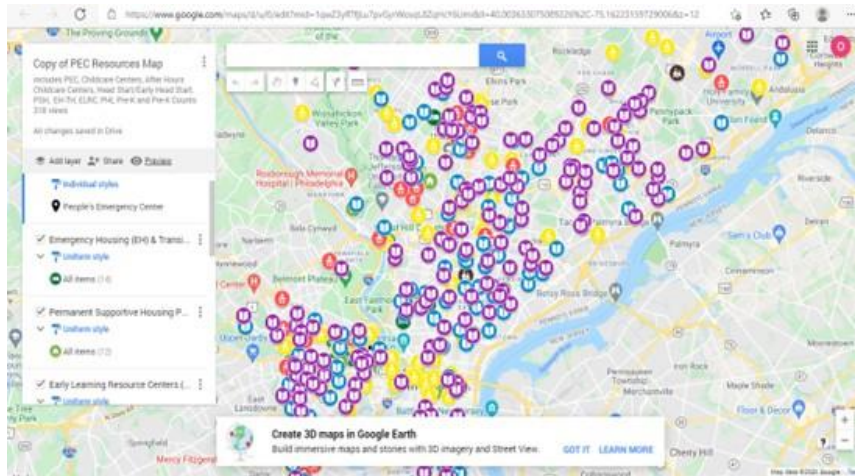
BELL supports housing program staff to engage parents about the potential benefits of different early childhood programs. Staff then assist parents in carrying out their preferences. BELL helps staff work with families to first identify programs that are a good match, then pursue tuition subsidies when needed, and enroll in a program.

Making an Early Childhood Focus Routine

BELL has helped housing providers establish a routine system for asking families about early childhood program involvement at intake and during monthly meetings. Staff ask about each family's current involvement with early childhood programs, what involvement the family would like in the future, and how the housing provider can help provide information or overcome any barriers to help fulfill the family's preferences. Housing providers communicate this information to the BELL team and collaborate on ways to support each family.



Early Care and Education Resource Map.



In September 2021, HopePHL™ launched its online Early Care and Education Resource Mapping Tool. This map supports the BELL Project's Shelter Liaisons and families experiencing homelessness in locating high quality childcare near each housing site, or future addresses for when they are preparing to move. Families use the map to view the distance between

high quality childcare centers and their place of employment, plan travel to a childcare center, view center contact information, hours of operation, and locate an early care and education (ECE) provider's Keystone Stars rating.

Collaborating on Follow-up and Follow-through

Many families qualify for early childhood supports, but struggle when it comes to applying and receiving them. BELL Specialists work with housing provider staff to set up routine ways to certify families' housing status. This helps families affirm their eligibility and priority access to many early childhood programs like Head Start. The BELL team also works closely with the Philadelphia Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) to help process families' applications for tuition subsidies through the Child Care Works program. BELL receives regular updates regarding the status of applications submitted to the ELRC, and intervenes to mitigate barriers to enrollment.



Enrollment Fairs



hands-on interactive games and “teachable” moments about developmental milestones and how to choose a high-quality early childhood program.

BELL collaborates with housing providers and early childhood programs on regular enrollment fairs. When in-person, these events bring early childhood program staff onsite to streamline enrollment for families and shorten admission wait times. Representatives from high-quality early learning programs within walking distance of the shelter attend to speak with parents and enroll children. These fairs also feature free book giveaways and games for parents with prizes to help them understand features of high-quality early childhood programs. Families engage in friendly,

We adapted these enrollment fairs to a virtual format to accommodate pandemic restrictions. Families can login to Zoom meetings from their rooms and receive information needed to register their children in quality early childhood programs. Key early childhood program partners directly engage families, including the Early Learning Resource Center, Early Intervention, the School District of Philadelphia, and other early childhood providers.

Responding to New Realities: Supporting Early Development during COVID

Restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented suddenly in March 2020, and continue to change as the pandemic evolves. The BELL team took action to support early development by helping to equip housing programs with needed resources and up-to-date information.

Teaming-up for young children in family shelter

BELL representatives participated in a number of city-wide and state-wide task forces to ensure that the needs of children experiencing homelessness are represented in pandemic response efforts. For example, BELL participated in the Philadelphia Child Care Reopening Task Force along with city agencies and child care providers. This allowed BELL to receive up-to-the-moment information about resources for families and housing programs, and also helped ensure that there were feasible plans granting priority access to families experiencing homelessness to key resources, such as internet access through Philadelphia’s PHL ConnectED program.

Precautions Updates

The BELL team has worked throughout the pandemic to communicate accurate information about precautions to families, staff, and other partners. The COVID-19 pandemic required parents and providers to adhere to precautions that were at-times complex and confusing. Often precautions required sudden changes, like when childhood centers were forced to close in response to new infection or unexpected staffing shortages. Other precautions seemed foreign or confusing, such as

when not to send a child to care because of symptoms or what ages were required to wear masks. Throughout the pandemic, the BELL team has communicated up-to-date information about required and recommended precautions relevant to early childhood programs. This information has been a resource to housing staff and to parents to understand what to expect throughout the changing reality of the pandemic.

Early Childhood Enrichment Activities

BELL helps equip housing providers with activities for families to do in their rooms. Pandemic restrictions at times cut families off from important community resources and programming in shelter common areas. In response, BELL developed and distributed a portfolio of activities for families to support their child's early development. BELL staff also produced a series of freely available videos of developmentally appropriate activities for families in shelter called *Sit Calm*.

With funding from Vanguard Strong Start for Kids and The Reinvestment Fund, BELL experts in early childhood worked with partners to design, buy and distribute 385 kits of developmentally appropriate toys, games, and other materials. Each family with a young child in emergency or transitional housing received a kit to help families support early development.

Internet access.

BELL has been working with multiple partners throughout the pandemic to help ensure that every family has internet access. Many aspects of the pandemic response relied on being connected to the internet. Wi-fi systems at many emergency and transitional housing sites were quickly overwhelmed. In response, BELL and its partners worked with the PA Head Start State Collaboration Office to award COVID Mini Grants to emergency and transitional housing providers in the initial months of the pandemic. Family shelters used the funds to make wi-fi infrastructure improvements and purchase equipment to aid children and families forced to attend school virtually because of COVID-19 related closures. In addition, BELL worked with the PHL ConnectED program to ensure that families experiencing homelessness were categorically eligible for free wireless hotspots and data service, and to establish procedures that circumvented barriers for families in shelter.

Connecting Provider Systems: Staff Meet and Greet Events

BELL routinely coordinates multiple "Meet and Greet" events each year for staff from both housing providers and early childhood programs. The goal is to help form and deepen relationships between staff in both systems. Participants network and share their perspectives and expertise on serving young children in Philadelphia. These events have primarily been virtual gatherings on remote-meeting platforms during the pandemic.

Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Family Shelters

Typically housing program staff share expertise with local early childhood program staff while completing an annual self-assessment tool. This process assesses each shelter for policies, practices, and physical spaces that are developmentally appropriate for young children. Staff share perspectives and learnings, ultimately constructing an action list of steps for the shelter to better support early development.

During COVID the self-assessments were conducted virtually and allowed BELL to reassess infrastructure needs of our emergency housing provider, such as adequate wi-fi for remote learning and social emotional learning tools/activities for children and families, now isolated in their rooms.

The Children's Work Group Early Childhood Conference: Convening stakeholders

BELL convenes the Children's Work Group to gather diverse stakeholders in the wellbeing of young children experiencing homelessness. This includes shelter and other housing providers, early childhood programs and agencies, municipal agencies, and others. Attendance averaged 40 participants over the 8 Conferences held during the reporting year. During COVID the stakeholder convenings served as opportunities to bring providers together across systems to network, educate, and advocate for needs of families experiencing homelessness. These occurred using remote-meeting platforms to maintain social distancing. Participants shared needs, solutions, and sources of support with each other. Meanwhile, special presentations covered a range of topics, such as updates on pandemic precautions, new procedures and practices for the Early Learning Resource Center, and collaborations for Early Intervention services, to name a few.



Remote Staff Trainings

BELL offers routine training workshops in topics related to early childhood development and homelessness. These were delivered using remote-meeting platforms to maintain social distancing during the pandemic. Families, housing providers, early childhood program staff, and others participated in trainings across a range of topics, including early development in general and how to support healthy early development in the particular contexts of homelessness.

BELL Summit 2021: Children Cannot Wait

In September 2021, BELL hosted its annual summit as a virtual event, drawing an audience of 270 stakeholders. Local, state, and national leadership announced efforts to improve supports for how young children experiencing homelessness through high quality early learning programs.

Keynote speaker Mr. John McLaughlin, Education Program Specialist with the United States Department of Education, gave a comprehensive explanation to the McKinney-Vento homeless

education system. Presentations by Tracey Campanini, Deputy Secretary, Office of Child Development and Early, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Tracy Duarte, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Head Start Collaboration Office, and Donna Cooper, Executive Director of Children First, shared new policies, procedures, and data on supporting young children experiencing homelessness in the state. Finally, local and national advocates helped the audience set effective agendas for change.⁴

Advocating for Systems-Change

BELL engages a variety of stakeholders who influence the systems that support providers and families experiencing homelessness. These include policymakers, researchers, and others at city, state, and national levels. For example, HopePHL™ launched the “Children Cannot Wait” campaign to educate candidates for Pennsylvania’s U.S. Senate and Gubernatorial candidates, sharing policy positions that were identified at the 2021 BELL Summit. The Campaign held meetings with US Senate candidates Malcolm Kenyatta and Conor Lamb, and representatives from Gubernatorial candidates Doug Mastriano’s and Josh Shapiro’s policy teams. 105 statewide leaders signed onto a letter to the candidates supporting the positions. Members of the BELL team co-authored two reports on the prevalence of participation by young children experiencing homelessness in Head Start (see *A State-Level Brief: Participation of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Early Childhood Programs in Pennsylvania*⁵ and *Continuums of Care and Head Start Working Together to Address Housing Vulnerability of Pennsylvania’s Families*).⁶

Other advocacy highlights included co-chairing the Pennsylvania ECE Homeless Stake Holder Meeting, speaking directly with 24 state legislators about greater support for high-quality early learning programs, and organizing a roundtable discussion event with PA State Senator Hughes to inform the Appropriations Committee on support for early learning programs. Also, the BELL team serves on several committees across systems to ensure that early childhood education initiatives and policies include children and parents experiencing homelessness, including the Children’s Health Collaborative, Children’s First Racial Equity Provider Council, and others.

⁴ Summit presentations and recommendations are available at: <https://www.pec-cares.org/bellsummit.html>

⁵ Available at: https://www.pec-cares.org/uploads/2/9/3/9/29391481/pa_-_state_level_brief_1.14.22.gw_final-2022-01-27_1.pdf

⁶ Available at: https://www.pec-cares.org/uploads/2/9/3/9/29391481/pa_hs-coc-2022-01-24_final.pdf

INFORMATION FOR ACTION

BELL uses information to help guide its activities and to evaluate whether and how it is having an impact. We report three key metrics: (1) the percentage of parents who had a conversation with housing program staff about early childhood programs, (2) the percentage of children who were enrolled in any early childhood program, and (3) the percentage who were enrolled specifically in a high-quality program. We further report rates separately for infants and toddlers (Birth to 3 years old) and for preschool-aged children (3 to 5 years old). We include only children whose shelter stay lasted at least 30 days, and allow children to contribute more than once to the rate if they have more than one distinct shelter stay in either or both time period. Information comes directly from parents and is linked to administrative and other records to produce the figures reported here. We provide additional details in the appendix.

How many parents spoke with staff about early childhood programs?

About two-thirds (66%) of parents of young children in shelter had at least one documented conversation about early childhood programs during the COVID-19 pandemic year (April 2021 through March 2022; hereafter referred to as ‘2021’). This is lower than before the pandemic when about 71% of parents had a discussion (April 2019 through March 2020; referred to as ‘2019’). See Figure 1. Notably, there were fewer (582) young children with shelter stays lasting 30 days or more during 2021 compared to during 2019 (915). Families likely attempted to avoid shelter while increased diversion and prevention efforts from the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services also reduced the need for some families to use emergency or transitional housing.

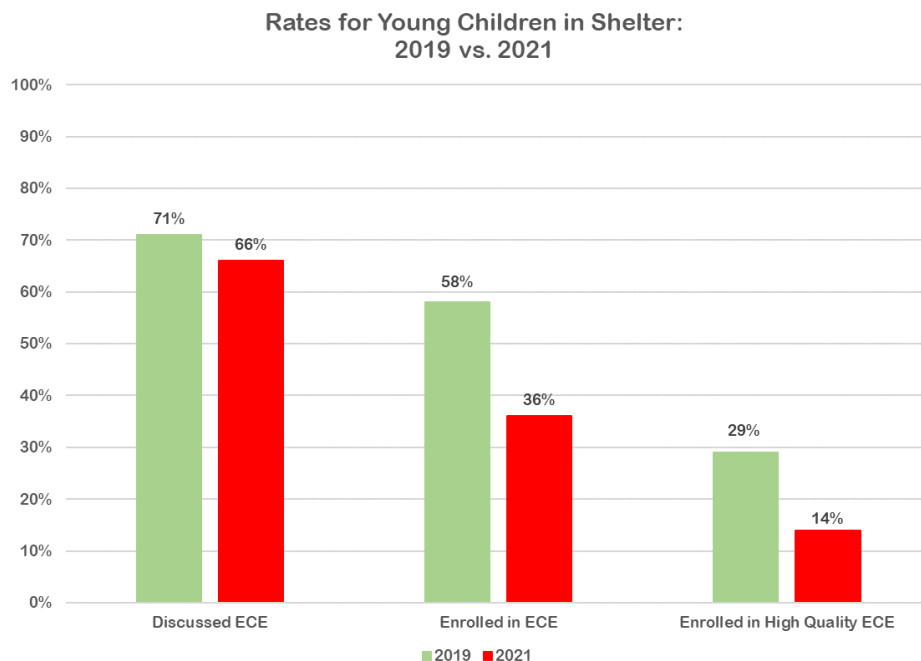


Figure 1. Rates of key metrics for young children staying in family shelters.

Note: ‘ECE’ refers to early care and education programs for young children. Percentages of young enrolled in ECE are based on the subset whose parent discussed ECE with staff at least once.

How many children were enrolled in an early childhood program?

Very few young children (36%) in shelter were attending any early childhood program in 2021, much lower than in 2019 when a majority (58%) were enrolled. See Figure 1. This is a 38% reduction in the percentage of young children in shelter who attended an early childhood program in 2021. The rates in this and following sections consider just those children for whom we have information (66% in 2021; 71% in 2019).

How many children were enrolled in a high-quality early childhood program?

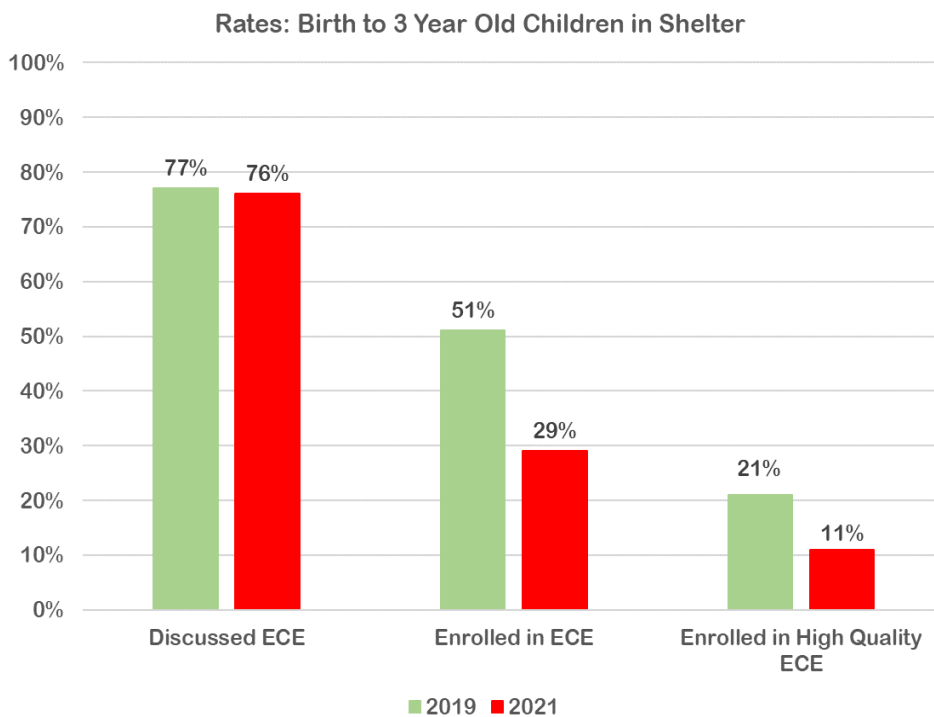
Only 14% of young children staying in shelter were attending a high-quality early childhood program in 2021, down from 29% in 2019. This is a 52% decline in the percentage of children attending a high-quality program while staying in shelter. See Figure 1.

Rates for infants/toddlers and preschool-aged children.

Infants and toddlers. The first three years of life are especially important for later development. Parents of infants and toddlers were likely (76%) to have a discussion about early childhood programs with staff during their shelter stay in 2021. This rate is similar to pre-pandemic levels (77% in 2019). However, they were much less likely to enroll in any early childhood program, with less than a third (29%) doing so in 2021 compared to 51% in 2019, a decline of 43%. Only 11% were enrolled in a high-quality program in 2021, compared to 21% in 2019, a decline of 48%. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Rates of key metrics for infants and toddlers staying in family shelter.

Note: Percentages of students enrolled in ECE are based on the subset that discussed ECE with staff.



Preschool-aged children. Development continues rapidly during the years that children are eligible for preschool programs (3 to 5 years old). Only half (50%) of caregivers of children this age had a discussion with staff about early childhood programs in 2021, down from 61% in 2019. While a majority (54%) were enrolled in an early childhood program in 2021, this rate is markedly lower than in 2019 when more than 7 out of every 10 (72%) preschool-aged children were enrolled. This corresponds to a reduction of 25% in the percentage attending any early childhood program. Strikingly, only 23% of children were enrolled in a high-quality program in 2021, down from 43% in 2019, a 47% reduction. See Figure 3.

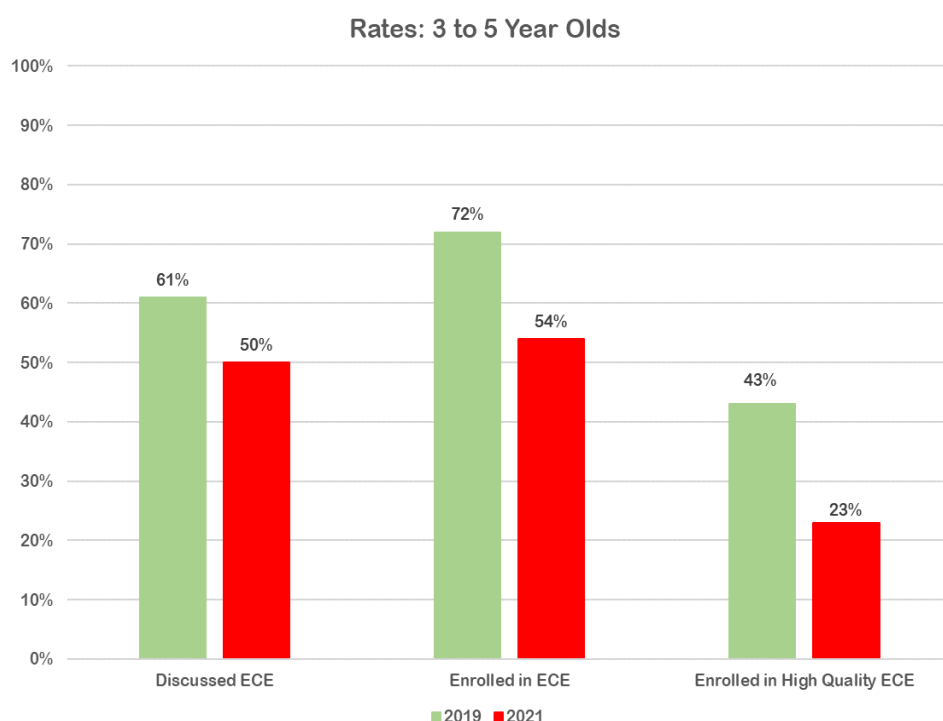


Figure 3. Rates of key metrics for preschool-aged children staying in family shelter.

Note: Percentages of students enrolled in ECE are based on the subset that discussed ECE with staff.

For additional context, other sources⁷ report an 18% reduction state-wide from the 2019-20 to 2020-21 school years in 3- and 4-year-old children attending state-funded preschool programs of any quality across Pennsylvania (Pre-K Counts), suggesting that pandemic-related factors may have especially prevented children from attending preschool. Specifically for Philadelphia, city-wide child participation in PA Pre-K Counts declined by about 18% and participation in Head Start⁸ declined by about 46% comparing 2021 to 2019 for the 12-months from April through March. Combining aggregate counts from PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start, enrollment declined by about 25% across both programs. Participation with higher-quality providers (STAR 3 and 4) showed similar declines, city-wide (PA Pre-K Counts: 22% decline; Head Start: 45% decline; Combined: 29% decline). See Figure 4.

⁷ Friedman-Krauss, A. H. et al (2022). The state of preschool 2021: State preschool yearbook. National Institute for Early Education Research and Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

⁸ Via providers participating in the PA Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program

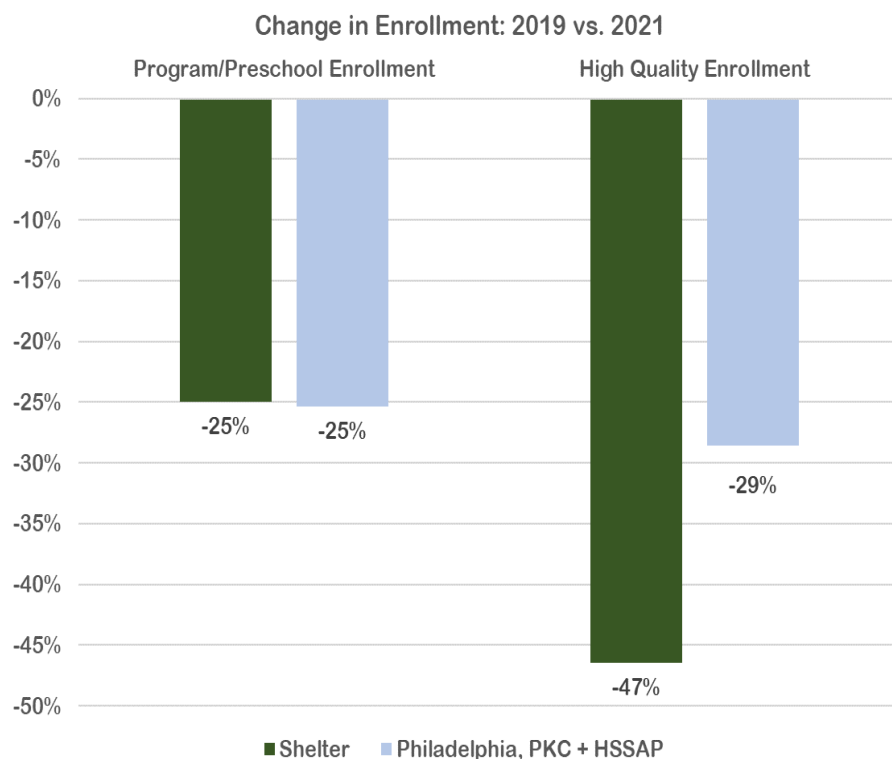


Figure 4. Rates of key metrics for preschool-aged children staying in family shelter.

Note: 'PKC' refers to city-wide enrollment in the Pre-K Counts program. 'HSSAP' refers to city-wide enrollment in programs that participate in the PA Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program. PKC and HSSAP aggregate counts were obtained from PA OCDEL⁹ and combined for the purposes of this graph. Percentages of children in shelter enrolled in ECE are based on the subset that discussed ECE with staff. Additional details are available in the appendix.

SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought severe challenges and limitations when it comes to supporting early development among young children who stay in family shelters. BELL has adapted its key activities in response and continues to work towards improving the developmental appropriateness of shelter settings, supporting shelter and early childhood program staff, connecting shelter and early childhood systems, and facilitating participation in high quality early childhood programs. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, BELL has continued to actively engage systems, staff, and families in supporting early child development and encouraging resilience.

The pandemic has interfered with efforts to support young children in shelter.

Relative to the 12 months preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all metrics of BELL success are lower: Fewer families had documented conversations with shelter staff about early childhood programs; fewer families were participating in early childhood programs; and fewer families were participating in high-quality early childhood programs. Available evidence from other sources gives us some additional context for preschool-aged children: The declines in high quality early childhood program participation for children staying in shelter appears to be greater than declines in preschool enrollment across the city and across the state. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have taken an even greater toll for families living in shelter when it comes to accessing high-quality programs, though enrollment generally declined the same amount for preschoolers in shelter relative to their peers across the city.

⁹ See: <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/about/Pages/Early-Learning-Dashboards.aspx>

There are probably many, complicated reasons why the BELL metrics are lower during the pandemic. Staff and organizations that make up both the shelter and early childhood education systems are essential and have been asked to continue to operate despite the difficulties and dangers of the pandemic. Over time, these challenges have included repeated changes in required precautions, shortages in personal protective equipment and other needed supplies, staffing and other labor shortages within their organizations, unavailability of school and child care for staff's own families, illness, and unpredictable closures, to name a few. This has created strain on individuals and across provider organizations that has likely restricted shelter and early childhood programs, reducing their capacity to fully engage families and collaborate with BELL and with other providers. This also means that there may be less availability of early childhood programs for families in shelter. Some shelters, too, may be less willing to allow outside organizations to spend time on-premises to serve their families, such as home visiting programs or outreach and enrollment drives for center-based programs.

Some families may have avoided early childhood programs during the pandemic.

We say this with caution and based on anecdotal reports. Some families may have wished to avoid potentially exposing their children to contagion in center-based care or other settings. Others may have opted to have family care for their young children, taking advantage of increased availability of caregivers or extended family members who are not working during the pandemic. Still others may feel confused or put off by frequent changes in early childhood program precautions or the need for programs to unexpectedly close in response to disease. We need more research to understand whether or to what degree personal factors and systemic factors (in the form of practice and policy decisions) influence parents' decisions to participate in early childhood programs while staying in shelter.

Fewer families with young children stayed in family shelters during the pandemic.

Conclusively determining why is beyond the scope of this report. There is likely a combination of relevant factors, including families especially wishing to avoid congregate and other types of shelter settings out of fear of contagion, increased funding through the Office of Homeless Services for prevention and diversion of families to prevent their need to enter shelter, and large-scale, federal interventions such as the moratorium on evictions and the expanded child tax credit that may have prevented some forms of homelessness. More research is needed here, as well. Programs like BELL will have to evolve and adapt to serve families with young children who experience other forms of housing instability besides emergency and transitional housing programs. BELL has already begun to implement a version of the program for families in permanent supportive housing. Other approaches will need to be developed, deployed, and tested for efficacy with families living doubled-up, being evicted, and experiencing other forms of residential mobility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a) Shelters and local high-quality early childhood programs should communicate regularly to help families access early childhood programs. This is especially true as long as there is limited capacity of quality early childhood programs due to pandemic-related reasons (e.g., staffing shortages; program closures) or a general inequitable availability of funding. BELL and the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), Office of Early Childhood Education have recently begun piloting a new practice intervention. SDP and BELL have identified the two early childhood preschool programs closest to each shelter and SDP has encouraged these programs to both reserve space for children in shelter and proactively outreach to these families. Results from this pilot will be available in a future report.
- b) Shelter agencies, early childhood programs, and the broader shelter and early education systems should continue to prioritize the varied developmental needs of young children experiencing homelessness despite competing demands. Many shelter programs have established the necessary relationships and supports to meet the needs of young children, and many early care and education providers have increased their capacity to serve children experiencing homelessness through engagement, outreach, and professional development of staff. Meanwhile, homelessness, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other adversities continue to threaten health and wellbeing. *Practice and policy responses that comprehensively address the developmental needs of young children and their families offer the most powerful opportunities to support resilience.* This can be especially challenging when systems are overburdened and risks of one sort (e.g., contagion) are overemphasized relative to other risks (e.g., suboptimal environments for early cognitive and social/emotional development). Agencies confront the challenges of constantly balancing these risks with available resources. This includes continued access to (a) adequate staffing and materials (e.g., personal protective equipment), (b) valid, reliable, and timely information on risk and mitigation strategies, (c) regularly offered professional development training in early childhood development and in working with families with young children, and (d) collaborations that allow for reassurance and the exchange of effective practices between peers.
- c) Shelter staff have the opportunity to reinforce the value of different early childhood programs (e.g., center-based programs, home visiting, family-childcare homes) using a trauma-informed approach and balancing risks to health and safety. Staff should be empowered and well-equipped to fill this important role. Parents and other caregivers may have concerns about participating in early childhood programs, especially during the pandemic. Shelter staff can be a reliable source of information and encouragement so that parents can make their own choices about what is best for their families. The BELL team has resources available for staff to share with families, including information on the benefits of different early childhood programs, assistance on how to obtain subsidies, how to identify the right program, and how to enroll.
- d) Leaders in early education can make systemic reforms to increase outreach, education, and enrollment of children in shelter and other homeless contexts by at least 50%. Based on the findings of this report, children in shelter showed greater pandemic-related declines in high-quality early childhood program participation compared to other low-income children in Philadelphia, at least when it comes to preschool. In addition, fewer young children stayed in shelter during the pandemic, suggesting the need to engage housing insecure families in other contexts, such as through homelessness prevention and diversion programs and other sorts of

housing interventions. Systemic reforms in early education systems can require outreach and collaboration with shelters and other housing programs to help ensure that families experiencing housing instability can enroll. Furthermore, families may be more likely to stay connected to early childhood programs through an episode of housing instability if early education programs routinely ask about housing status and regularly monitor these data, while also requiring staff professional development on how to respond to homelessness.

- e) Practice and research partnerships should continue to elicit and elevate the voices of families experiencing homelessness as well as the providers who serve them. This includes through varied approaches (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method) to community engaged and participatory research¹⁰ focused on family preferences and key barriers and facilitators when families wish to engage high quality early childhood programs. Preliminary suggestions from varied stakeholders in Philadelphia include important topics that go beyond the current BELL data, including whether families utilize more than one early childhood program to meet their needs, families' experiences with different early childhood program models and subsidy programs, and how families' experiences (e.g., of culture, of trauma, with other public agencies) influence their perceptions of early childhood programs, to name a few.

¹⁰ Community engaged, participatory research is a strengths-based approach to research that engages community members at every stage.

APPENDIX – METHOD DETAILS

Data sources.

This report compares information from two 12-month periods: April 1, 2019 through March 31, 2020 (which we refer to as “2019”) and April 1, 2021 through March 31, 2022 (referred to as “2021”). We chose to focus on these 12-month periods for three reasons. First, we have not reported these metrics previously for either of these timespans. Second, we wanted to compare BELL metrics before and during the widespread and dynamic shutdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic that were announced in March, 2020. Please note that we do not view our data to be more-precise than monthly, at best. Third and finally, we did not have reliable data during the 12-months from April 1, 2020 through March 21, 2021. During much of those twelve months many early childhood programs closed, partially or fully, in response to sudden pandemic-related restrictions. Shelter providers also needed to meet sudden new demands and ways of operating, impacting their ability to engage with the BELL mission. Finally, the City of Philadelphia and BELL needed to reestablish their data sharing agreement, preventing real-time data sharing during that time period.

The information comes from several sources. First, the Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services (OHS) shares information with BELL about every two weeks on where each child under six years old is staying in 15 emergency and transitional shelters. There was no information for children at 3 shelters that exclusively serve families who experienced domestic violence because these shelters are not required to identify participants in their programs for safety reasons. The information was part of the Philadelphia Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and is used under a data license agreement.

Second, BELL encourages each emergency and transitional housing provider to have at least one conversation every month with each parent of a child who is too young to be enrolled in kindergarten (under 5 years old on September 1st of each school year). Housing providers share this information with BELL which includes the (a) date of the conversation with the parent, (b) whether each child is participating in an early childhood program, and (c) which program. Early childhood programs could be center-based or home-based. In cases where children changed early childhood participation status, such as entering, leaving, or changing programs during a shelter stay, we considered only the most-recent status available for each.

Third, this information is linked with publicly available data from the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the School District of Philadelphia, and other sources to gauge early childhood program quality. We collect this publicly available data monthly. BELL defines high quality early childhood programs as those that have a rigorous curriculum combined with reliable and regular oversight. High-quality programs fall into one of three categories: (a) those with a Keystone STARS rating of 3 or 4,¹¹ (b) federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start, (c) NAEYC accreditation, or (d) specialized programs with both rigor and oversight (e.g., licensed therapeutic preschool programs; Early Intervention programs).

Finally, we include data on PA Pre-K Counts (PKC) and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) participation counts for Philadelphia available from the PA Office of Child

¹¹ More information on Keystone STARS is available at <https://www.pakeys.org/keystone-stars/>

Development and Early Learning (OCDEL).¹² Our goal was to compare counts of participation in these subsidized preschool programs for children across Philadelphia to our BELL metrics for children in emergency and transitional housing programs. We aggregated enrollment counts between these programs for each month during April 2019 through March 2020 and during April 2021 through March 2022. We took the median enrollment for each year, separately, and then produced a change-in-enrollment for these 12-month periods. This allows us to compare Philadelphia-wide changes in enrollment for these subsidized preschool programs for three- and four-year-old children to our BELL metrics for children in emergency and transitional housing.

Readers should especially note two caveats. First, our combining of PKC and HSSAP aggregate counts involve the possibility that a child was served by both programs during either timespan. We could not deduplicate these counts with the available data, but we believe this does not greatly interfere with our use of the data to reflect the general trend of preschool participation across the city during 12-month spans before and during the pandemic. Second, PKC and HSSAP counts only refer to data available on the OCDEL website and we compare those data to the entire universe of programs being attended by children in shelter represented by the available BELL data. Children in shelter attended programs beyond those supported by PKC and HSSAP. We do not make any distinction in this report and compare rates for all preschool-aged children in emergency or transitional housing attending any program, regardless of type.

Defined Population

For BELL metrics provided as percentages, we consider only children who had been in emergency or transitional housing for at least 30 days (total) and were in emergency or transitional housing for at least one day during the relevant period (2019 or 2021). We also consider cases to be based on distinct shelter stays. For example, the same child could have more than one distinct emergency or transitional housing stay within the same time period (e.g., 2019 or 2021) that meet the 30-day threshold if they leave and reenter shelter (resulting in multiple 30-day stays) or transfer between two different shelters, staying at least 30 days in each. This was rare. We refer to percentages and counts of “children” for simplicity, but statistics refer to children-in-episodes of homelessness in this way.

For metrics reflecting enrollment in any or in high-quality early childhood programs for children in emergency or transitional housing programs, percentages were based on the subset for which there was available data from conversations with parents. This was 70% of cases in 2019 and 66% in 2021.

Child Age.

We calculated child age so as to gauge eligibility for early childhood programs. Following local age-eligibility criteria for kindergarten, we considered children to be in “early childhood” until they are 5 years old (or older) on September 1st.

Certain programs are available for children age birth to 3 years (e.g., Early Intervention), and others for children who are 3 or 4 years old (e.g., Head Start, PKC, and other preschool programs) on September 1st each year. We calculated age to construct two groups: Birth to 3 years old, and 3 to 5 years old. Because the 12-month reporting periods each cross September 1 during their respective years, we decided to calculate age using the following algorithm. Generally, age was calculated based on age on the September 1st preceding the last documented discussions with shelter staff about early childhood programs (there are no such discussions for children eligible for kindergarten). When

¹² Available at: <https://www.dhs.pa.gov/about/Pages/Early-Learning-Dashboards.aspx>

there were no documented discussions for a child in a particular timespan, we applied a more complex procedure: (a) if the child exited the housing program during the timespan and they were older than 5 on September 1st of the year during the timespan (e.g., September 1, 2019; September 1, 2021, respectively), then age was determined based on their age on the prior September 1st (e.g., child age on September 1, 2018; September 1, 2020, respectively), (b) if the child exited the housing program and were under 5 years old when they exited, then age was determined as the age when they exited, or (c) if the child did not exit the program by the end of the timespan, we determined child age based on September 1st during the timespan (e.g., September 1, 2019; September 1, 2021, respectively).