



COVID-19 AND 4-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN (4K): Executive Summary on Dane County School District Impacts and Responses

Report by the University of Wisconsin–Madison Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (CRECE)

Authors: Jonathan Marino, Jiyeon Lee, Xiaopei Yang, Amy Claessens, and Beth Graue

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruptions across all levels of American education. In Wisconsin's mixed-delivery 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) system, the disruptions exacerbated existing inequities and challenged the system's ability to provide high-quality opportunities to all children. In June 2020, our team of researchers at the Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (CRECE) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW–Madison) launched a study on how COVID-19 impacted 4K programming in Wisconsin. This report synthesizes findings from this research in three key areas. First, we describe how districts in Dane County made decisions about the format of 4K instruction during the pandemic (e.g., virtual, in-person, hybrid), and how teachers and parents experienced these policy decisions. Second, we describe the resources districts provided to teachers and parents and the ways teachers and parents experienced this support. Finally, we explore potential silver linings in an otherwise challenging time. Below we summarize our research methods and key findings.

This research draws on four data sources collected from December 2020 to June 2021. First, CRECE surveyed 422 Wisconsin districts that operate a 4K program. 183 completed surveys were received, a 43% response rate. In this report, we focus on responses from Dane County districts to describe how they adapted policies and programs during the Spring and Fall 2020 semesters. 14 responses from administrators in Dane County districts were received. Second, CRECE surveyed all 123 4K teachers in eight Dane County districts: Cambridge, DeForest, Madison, Middleton-Cross Plains, Monona Grove, Mount Horeb, Stoughton, and Sun Prairie. 59 teachers completed the survey, a 48% response rate. The survey asked teachers about their curriculum and instruction, their support, and their well-being during the pandemic. Teachers in the same eight districts were also invited to participate in Zoom-based interviews with the CRECE research team. In total, 25 teachers in Dane County completed interviews. Finally, 61 parents of 4K children in the same eight districts were interviewed about their experience in 4K during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Programming Shifts During COVID-19

4K programs in Dane County offered instruction remotely in Spring 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Dane County districts were quicker than districts across the state to offer synchronous lessons using technologies such as Zoom. Yet, Dane County programs faced radical shifts that created a challenging teaching environment. Further, a majority of Dane County districts made decisions about the format of instruction for the 2020–21 school year quite late in summer 2020 and continued to change the model throughout the school year. This made it difficult for teachers to establish classroom routines. Also, it presented parents with difficult choices about their child’s 4K experience, with a key challenge being balancing parental work with supervision of remote instruction at home.



Supporting Teachers and Families During COVID-19

Dane County districts provided resources to help 4K teachers and parents. Teachers received support around how to talk to families about COVID-19 and how to mitigate its spread. They received less support with curriculum, and they were responsible for adapting the curriculum. This increased job stress for the teachers, with those teaching in-person experiencing additional stress. Support for 4K families focused on basic needs, such as food. Families reported less support with learning materials, such as books and tablets or laptops, leaving concerns about how equitable access to remote instruction was for all families. Some families with a special needs student or an English language learner (ELL) did not receive added services during COVID-19.



Silver Linings and Future Considerations for 4K in Dane County

As Dane County 4K teachers and families adapted to the COVID-19 crisis, they experienced some positive outcomes. First, many teachers and parents felt more closely connected to each other. The use of new communication technologies such as Seesaw (mobile app used to share student work and communicate with parents about student progress) and Zoom increased the responsibilities parents had for their child’s education and gave parents a deeper appreciation for the work 4K teachers do. How to sustain these strengthened parent-teacher relationships after the pandemic subsides is an important question raised by this research. Second, for some students, virtual 4K seemed to work well, either as a fulltime option or for short periods when a student might need to be away from school. How 4K sites choose to maintain the virtual learning options they created during COVID-19, while balancing the time and money this requires, is another important policy question to consider. Finally, teachers found new opportunities, including more planning time and collaboration with colleagues, that they hope will continue once the pandemic crisis wanes.

This project was made possible with generous funding from The American Family Insurance Dream Foundation.