



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**



# NC Pre-K Remote Learning Survey Results COVID - 19 Response

By North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services,  
Division of Child Development and Early Education  
and Robert C. Carr, *Duke University*

May 2020



## Introduction

Children's earliest experiences shape their brain's architecture and create the foundation for healthy development and future learning. High-quality early learning environments support children in meeting critical developmental milestones, and children who attend high-quality early education programs are better prepared for success in school — academically, socially and emotionally.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the early care and education landscape for children and families, and the early childhood professionals who provide critical services in child care sites across the state and the nation. With schools closed across North Carolina, the pandemic has further exacerbated many inequities and challenges faced by families and educators — from the computers required for distance education to the environments needed to focus on learning. For children who are homeless, food-insecure, without health care or in need of mental health care, child care or school is often the most reliable place where they feel safe. The lack of access to reliable broadband internet and digital devices may limit many children's ability to take advantage of the remote learning opportunities and may limit early childhood educators from being able to provide them.

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) sought to learn what NC Pre-K program staff were doing to provide remote learning services during the COVID-19 emergency and where they needed more support. DCDEE administered separate surveys to representatives of NC Pre-K sites and to NC Pre-K contractors during the week of April 20, 2020, to collect relevant information that is summarized in this report. The surveys gathered information about local communication and remote learning strategies, technology capabilities and challenges.

This report summarizes the information captured in the surveys and highlights the voices of staff sharing their perspectives through open-ended responses. Survey results will also be used to identify ways that DCDEE can provide timely and ongoing support.

DCDEE was supported in producing this report by Robert C. Carr, Ph.D., at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University.

## Background

North Carolina is recognized as an early learning pioneer, creating the nation's first early childhood system, Smart Start, and launching its high-quality, publicly funded pre-kindergarten program, NC Pre-K, in 2001. The program is designed to provide high-quality educational experiences for eligible four year olds to enhance school readiness. The NC Pre-K program has consistently maintained high standards and a strong record of quality, with evidence of the program's effectiveness documented in numerous studies. Rigorous research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University has demonstrated that the NC Pre-K program has produced both short- and long-term benefits for children.

## Eligibility

A child is eligible for the NC Pre-K program if he or she turns four years of age by August 31 of that program year and is from a family whose gross income is at or below 75% of the State Median Income (SMI). Children of certain military families are also eligible without regard to income. In addition, up to 20% of age-eligible children enrolled may have family incomes in excess of 75% SMI if they have documented risk factors in specific categories including developmental disability, limited English proficiency, educational need or a chronic health condition.<sup>1</sup>

## Program Administration

At the state level, DCDEE administers the NC Pre-K program, coordinating service delivery of NC Pre-K through 91 contract agencies (a mix of local Smart Start partnerships and Local Education Agencies), representing all 100 NC counties, who are in turn responsible for recruiting and placing eligible children, subcontracting with local child care programs or schools with a classroom or classrooms that meet the NC Pre-K program requirements, monitoring classroom compliance with NC Pre-K standards and fiscal oversight.

NC Pre-K classrooms are located in three types of settings: public elementary schools, federally funded and administered Head Start programs and private child care centers, both for-profit and non-profit. Under typical operating circumstances, about 48% percent of NC Pre-K children are served through public schools, 14% through NC Pre-K classrooms located in Head Start programs and 38% percent through private child care centers.<sup>2</sup> However, some counties serve children almost exclusively using public schools,

---

<sup>1</sup> Study Costs and Effectiveness Associated with NC Pre-K Slots, Session Law 2016-94, Section 12B.4, amended by Measurability Assessments/Budget Technical Corrections, Session Law 2016-123, Section 5.4; Report to the House Appropriations Committee on Health and Human Services and Senate Appropriations Committee on Health and Human Services and Fiscal Research Division, February 1, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Data provided by NCDHHS, DCDEE. Most readily accessible data available from December 2019.

## NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

while others primarily use private centers. A site administrator for programs in public school settings is a school principal, while a site administrator for a child care program in a private site would be the site director.

### **Requirements**

Eligible children receive the same high-quality educational experiences in a NC Pre-K classroom, whether the program is located within public schools, Head Start programs or private for-profit or non-profit child care centers.

All NC Pre-K classrooms must meet the following requirements of the NC Pre-K program:

- Instruction is provided for 10 months (36 weeks) a year for a minimum of 6.5 hours per day, not including transportation time.
- Class size does not exceed 18 children per class, with one lead teacher and one assistant teacher, or a 1 to 9 staff-to-child ratio.
- Lead teachers in NC Pre-K classrooms must hold or be working toward a North Carolina Birth-through-Kindergarten Continuing License or Preschool Add-on Continuing License issued by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.
- Teacher assistants must hold a minimum of a GED and must be working toward or hold an Associate Degree in early childhood education/child development or a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.
- Children receive health assessments and developmental screenings.
- Staff complete formative assessments of children's growth and development.
- Programs engage in family engagement activities and a documented transition to kindergarten plan.

Classrooms serving children with disabilities may have a lower than 1 to 9 staff-to-child ratio. NC Pre-K must provide breakfast or a snack along with lunch that meets USDA requirements. Parents or guardians cannot be charged for the cost of a NC Pre-K slot but can be charged for child care services before or after the instructional day has begun or ended and during the holidays and summer months. Classroom activities must align with state-established early learning standards and an approved curriculum.

### **Changes due to COVID-19**

Since the second week of March 2020, DCDEE has provided ongoing guidance to all licensed child care programs across North Carolina, including to NC Pre-K site administrators and contractors. Guidance has included expectations for the physical environment on site to preserve the health and safety of children, families and staff, flexibility in policy and regulatory requirements, payment information and high-level expectations for remote learning.

In March 2020, Governor Roy Cooper announced via Executive Order No. 120 that all public schools would close across the state, which therefore closed NC Pre-K programs located in public schools. Many private child care sites outside of public schools also followed suit to close their doors. On April 24, Governor Cooper announced that public schools would be ordered to stay closed for the remainder of the traditional school year.

However, while NC Pre-K programs inside and outside public school settings may be physically closed, there have remained opportunities to transition to digital, distance learning. Through surveys to NC Pre-K contract administrators and site administrators, DCDEE sought to learn more about the efforts that were already underway and where more state support was needed to provide remote learning supports to some of North Carolina's youngest learners and their families.

### **Survey**

An email was sent by DCDEE Interim Director Dr. Kristi Snuggs on April 17, 2020, to all 91 NC Pre-K contract administrators informing them of and linking them directly to the two separate Qualtrics surveys: one survey to be completed by the contract administrator and a separate survey to be completed by the site administrators within their region. Survey items included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. A reminder email was sent on April 22, and a final follow-up email was sent to non-responding contractors and where

## NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

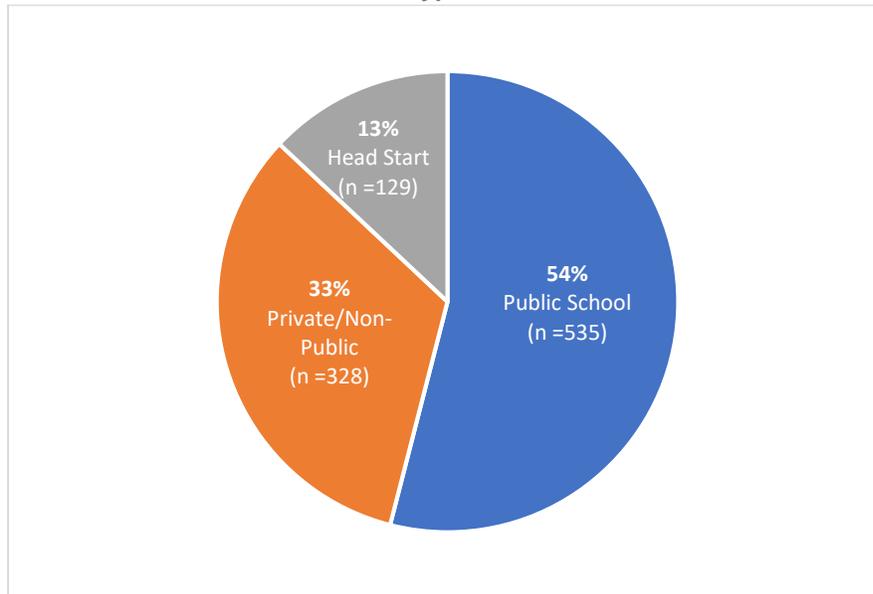
response rates were low among site administrators on April 23, the day the survey was stated to close. The survey window closed at 10 a.m. on April 24.

### Results

#### Information on Respondents and Children Served

- An estimated 82% of all NC Pre-K sites responded to the site administrators survey.
- 994 NC Pre-K sites responded, representing 99 of North Carolina's 100 counties.
- The majority of respondents worked in public school sites (54%;  $n = 535/994$ ), followed by private/non-public sites (33%;  $n = 328/994$ ) and Head Start sites (13%;  $n = 129/994$ ). (See Graphic A.)

GRAPHIC A: Types of NC Pre-K Sites



- 37% of responding sites were located in North Carolina's *most distressed* counties (Tier 1;  $n = 364/994$ ), 37% in *distressed* counties (Tier 2;  $n = 365/994$ ), and 27% in the *least distressed* counties (Tier 3;  $n = 266/994$ ).<sup>3</sup>
- 100% of NC Pre-K contract administrators responded to the survey.
- Across the NC Pre-K sites that responded to the survey, a total of 25,238 children were enrolled at the beginning of March, prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, with an average of 25 NC Pre-K children enrolled per site.<sup>4</sup>
- 72% of sites indicated that they were serving NC Pre-K children from families for whom English was not their primary, home language ( $n = 713/994$ ). Among these sites, an average of 24% of the NC Pre-K children enrolled were from families for whom English was not their primary, home language.<sup>5</sup> (See Graphic B.)

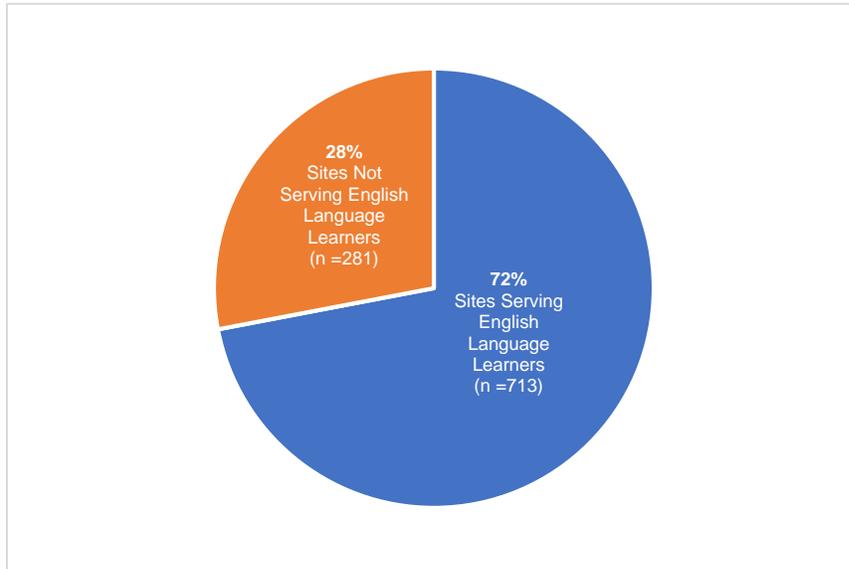
GRAPHIC B: Sites Serving English Language Learners

<sup>3</sup> The North Carolina Department of Commerce annually ranks each of the state's 100 counties based on economic well-being and assigns each county a tier designation. For more information see: <https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/county-distress-rankings-tiers>.

<sup>4</sup> Q9. How many total NC Pre-K children are enrolled in your facility (based on enrollment at the beginning of March)?

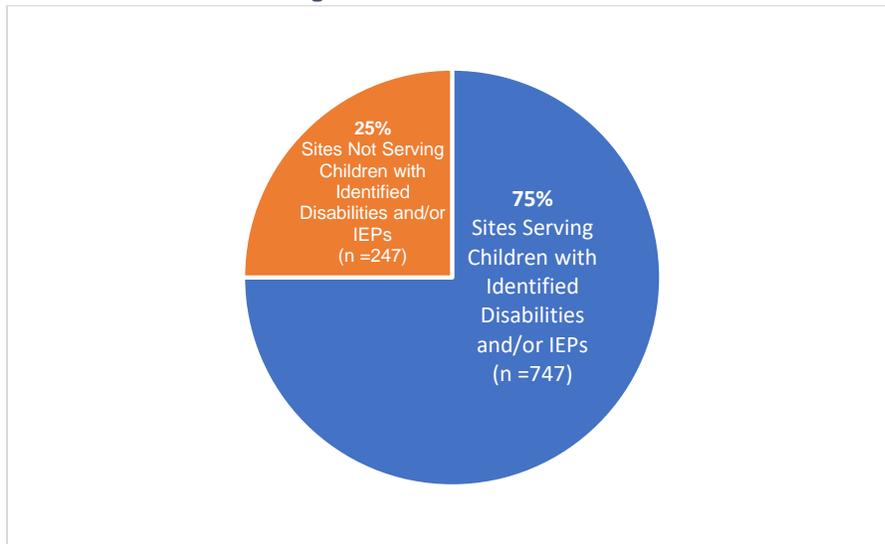
<sup>5</sup> Q10. Do you have any NC Pre-K children from families for whom English is not their primary, home language? | Yes - Please indicate how many

NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



- 75% of sites indicated they were serving NC Pre-K children with identified disabilities and/or Individualized Education Programs (IEPs;  $n=747/994$ ). Among these sites, an average of 18% of the NC Pre-K children enrolled were children with identified disabilities and/or IEPs.<sup>6</sup>

**GRAPHIC C: Sites Serving Children with Identified Disabilities and/or IEPs**



**Operating During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

<sup>6</sup> Q11. Do you have any NC Pre-K children with identified disabilities and/or IEPs enrolled in your program?  
Yes - Please indicate how many

---

*Our teachers have adapted well to providing effective remote learning, but this is not to say all is good. The missed intervention therapies and social developmental aspects have weighed heavily on our teachers and their perceived abilities to help here. Some of this is just out of their control. Increased hunger, overall stress and families already living in poverty exacerbates the teachers' lacking confidence that their efforts are working. Some training in this area would be useful.\**

---

- 94% of NC Pre-K sites reported their NC Pre-K classrooms were physically closed as of April 24 ( $n = 933/994$ ).<sup>7</sup>
- Among non-public school NC Pre-K sites, 76% of respondents from private/non-public sites reported that their NC Pre-K classrooms had physically closed ( $n = 276/328$ ) and 98% of Head Start sites reported that their NC Pre-K classrooms had physically closed ( $n = 127/129$ ). No significant differences were found between counties. All NC Pre-K Sites in public schools were mandated to be closed by Governor Cooper's executive order.
- 61 sites remained open and serving NC Pre-K children in-person as of April 24, with a total of 995 NC Pre-K children being served and an average of 16 NC Pre-K children attending per site.<sup>8</sup>
- Of the sites that were physically closed, 98% of sites reported they were providing remote learning services ( $n = 913/933$ ).<sup>9</sup>
- Of the responding sites that were physically closed, 2% of sites reported they were not providing remote learning services ( $n = 20/933$ ).
- Less than 1% of sites reported that teachers have been laid off during the COVID-19 emergency ( $n = 5/994$ ).

### **Access to Technology and Internet**

---

*Our county is rural and there are areas where there is limited or no internet access for students and staff. Students are limited in the extra support they would have if online resources were available. They might have a school iPad, but they may not be able to use it in their home setting. They would have to drive to a school parking lot or mobile access spot to use those resources. They are having to use their personal data.*

---

- 91% of NC Pre-K sites reported the *majority* of their NC Pre-K families had access to smart phone, tablet or computer technology ( $n = 894/984$ ). This rate was lower in the *Tier 1* counties (86%;  $n = 313/363$ ) compared to the *Tier 2* (94%;  $n = 341/362$ ) and *Tier 3* counties (93%;  $n = 240/259$ ).<sup>1011</sup> (See Graphic D.)

---

<sup>7</sup> Q14. Please indicate the statement that currently best describes your NC Pre-K classroom(s) (select all that apply)

<sup>8</sup> Q14. Please indicate the statement that currently best describes your NC Pre-K classroom(s) (select all that apply) Open and serving children - Please indicate the average number of children attending

<sup>9</sup> Q14. Please indicate the statement that currently best describes your NC Pre-K classroom(s) (select all that apply)

<sup>10</sup> Q25. Which statement best describes the level of access the MAJORITY of your NC Pre-K families have to internet and technology devices?

<sup>11</sup> Chi-square test of independence were used to test for statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between (a) county tier designations and (b) program sites for all relevant survey items.

\*Some survey responses were lightly edited for clarity and/or length to include in this report.

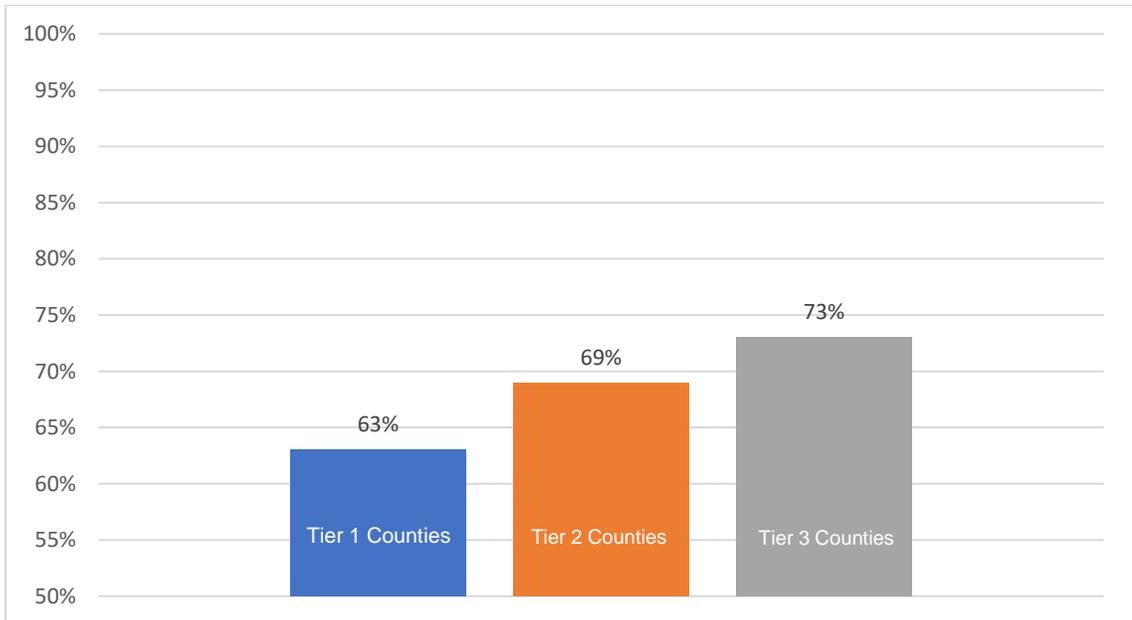
NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

GRAPHIC D: Families' Access to Technology



- 68% of NC Pre-K sites reported the *majority* of their NC Pre-K families had reliable internet access ( $n = 665/984$ ). This rate was lower in the *Tier 1* (63%;  $n = 227/363$ ) compared to the *Tier 2* (69%;  $n = 248/362$ ) and *Tier 3* counties (73%;  $n = 190/259$ ).<sup>12</sup> (See Graphic E.)

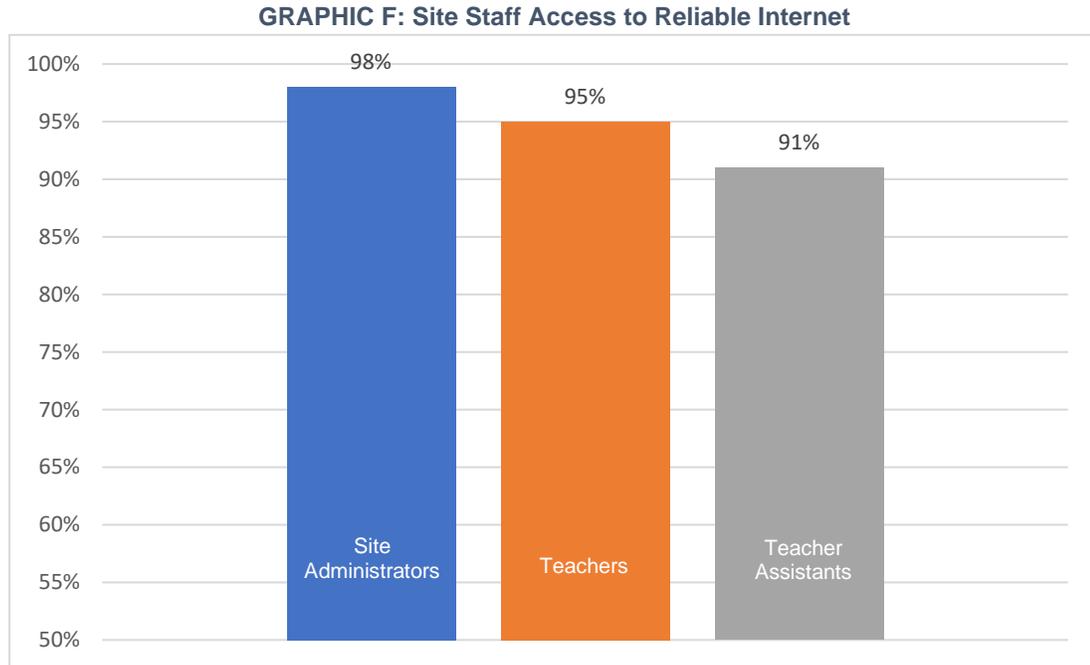
GRAPHIC E: Families' Access to Reliable Internet



<sup>12</sup> Q25. Which statement best describes the level of access the MAJORITY of your NC Pre-K families have to internet and technology devices?

## NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

- A majority of NC Pre-K sites reported their facility's NC Pre-K site administrator, teachers and teaching assistants had reliable internet access (98%, 95%, and 91%, respectively).<sup>13</sup> (See Graphic F.)



### Contact with Families

---

*Our focus is providing options for families, without inducing additional stress. We are requiring weekly connections to touch base with families and children via phone or Zoom, as appropriate. We are also offering weekly packets of activities for children and families that are emailed and/or picked up, which include review and new concepts.*

---

---

---

*All of the language in any communication we make is parent-centered. We are providing support to families to continue their child's learning at home. But, as families begin to stop responding to communication attempts, it is hard when teachers are required to document continued attempts to engage families.*

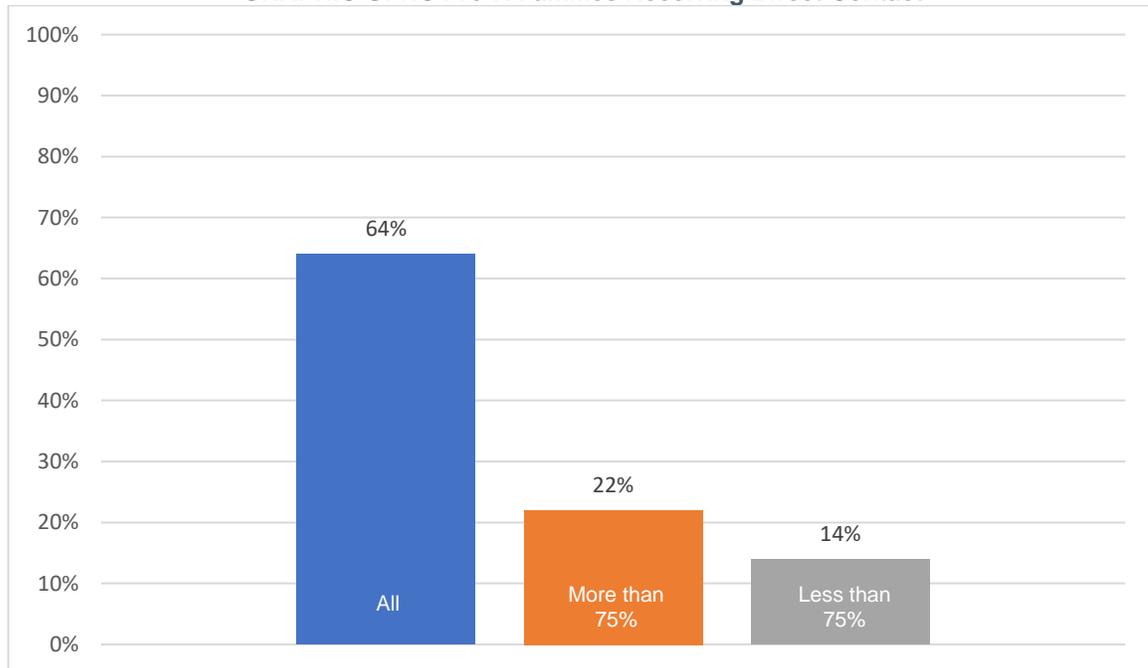
---

<sup>13</sup> Q29. Please indicate the level of access your facility's NC Pre-K site administrator and teachers have to internet and technology devices. If you have several teachers, please indicate all levels that apply

## NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

- A majority of NC Pre-K sites reported *all* (64%) or *more than 75%* (22%) of their NC Pre-K families had received direct contact or communication (voice-to-voice or text-based) to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 emergency. Few sites reported contact with less than 75% of their NC Pre-K families (14%).<sup>14</sup> (See Graphic G.)

**GRAPHIC G: NC Pre-K Families Receiving Direct Contact**



- The rate at which NC Pre-K sites reported contact with *all* of their NC Pre-K families was lower for private/non-public sites (55%) compared to Head Start sites (67%) and public school sites (69%). No significant differences were found between counties.
- A majority of NC Pre-K sites reported they had been in voice-to-voice contact (e.g. phone calls, Skype calls) with their NC Pre-K families *more than once per week* (41%) or *about once per week* (47%) to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 emergency, with few sites reporting contact *less than once per week* (10%) or *not at all* (2%).<sup>15</sup>
- The rate at which NC Pre-K sites reported voice-to-voice contact *more than once per week* was lower for private/non-public sites (32%) compared to public school sites (45%) and Head Start sites (48%).
- The rate at which NC Pre-K sites reported voice-to-voice contact *more than once per week* was lower in the *Tier 1* counties of the state (33%) compared to the *Tier 2* counties (44%) and *Tier 3* counties (48%).
- A majority of NC Pre-K sites reported they had been in text-based contact (e.g. emails, mailings, text messages) with their NC Pre-K families *more than once per week* (59%) or *about once per week* (32%) to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 emergency, with few sites reporting contact *less than once per week* (7%) or *not at all* (3%).<sup>16</sup>
- The rate at which NC Pre-K sites reported text-based contact *more than once per week* was lower for private/non-public sites (45%) and Head Start sites (53%) compared to public school sites (69%).
- The rate at which NC Pre-K sites reported text-based contact *more than once per week* was lower in the *Tier 1* counties of the state (50%) compared to the *Tier 2* counties (63%) and *Tier 3* counties (65%).

<sup>14</sup> Q20. On average, how many of the NC Pre-K families in your program have received direct contact or communication (voice-to-voice or text-based) to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 Emergency?

<sup>15</sup> Q21. How frequently has there been voice-to-voice contact with your NC Pre-K families to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 Emergency? (Phone calls, Skype calls, etc.)

<sup>16</sup> Q22. How frequently has there been text-based contact with your NC Pre-K families to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 Emergency? (Emails, mailings, text messages, etc.)

**Contact Between Contractors and their Respective Site Administrators**

- NC Pre-K contractors reported they had been in voice-to-voice contact with their NC Pre-K sites *more than once per week* (31%) or *about once per week* (39%) to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 emergency, with fewer contractors reporting contact *less than once per week* (23%) or *not at all* (7%). The rate at which NC Pre-K Contractors reported voice-to-voice contact *more than once per week* was not reliably different between site types or counties.<sup>17</sup>
- NC Pre-K contractors reported they had been in text-based contact with their NC Pre-K sites *more than once per week* (45%) or *about once per week* (34%) to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 emergency. Fewer contractors reported contact *less than once per week* (14%) or *not at all* (7%). The rate at which NC Pre-K Contractors reported text-based contact *more than once per week* was not reliably different between site types or counties.<sup>18</sup>

**Creating Opportunities for Remote Learning**

---

*Teachers have great computer skills and other resources. They are using them creatively in their weekly lesson plans to develop materials for families to use with their children.*

*The teachers use online learning communities and professional development to work together and share what they have with one another.*

---

---

*Training on how to effectively engage in remote lesson planning and teaching is provided to lead teachers, but not to teaching assistants, and technology savviness varies between teachers and teaching assistants. One struggle has been how to provide effective remote learning, especially for those students who may have a problem with internet and technology access. Most of my teaching assistants are opting to work each day to assist with critical tasks within the building, rather than engage in remote learning efforts because they do not have adequate training.*

---

- NC Pre-K sites reported making phone calls (94%) was the most common method of communication being used to provide remote learning services for NC Pre-K children who are unable to attend in-person due to the COVID-19 Emergency.<sup>19</sup> Respondents could select more than one method.
- The other selected methods of communication were email (85%), texting (79%), Zoom or Skype (52%), social media (48%), Class Dojo (48%), Google Classroom (25%) or some other method of communication (55%). (See Graphic H.)

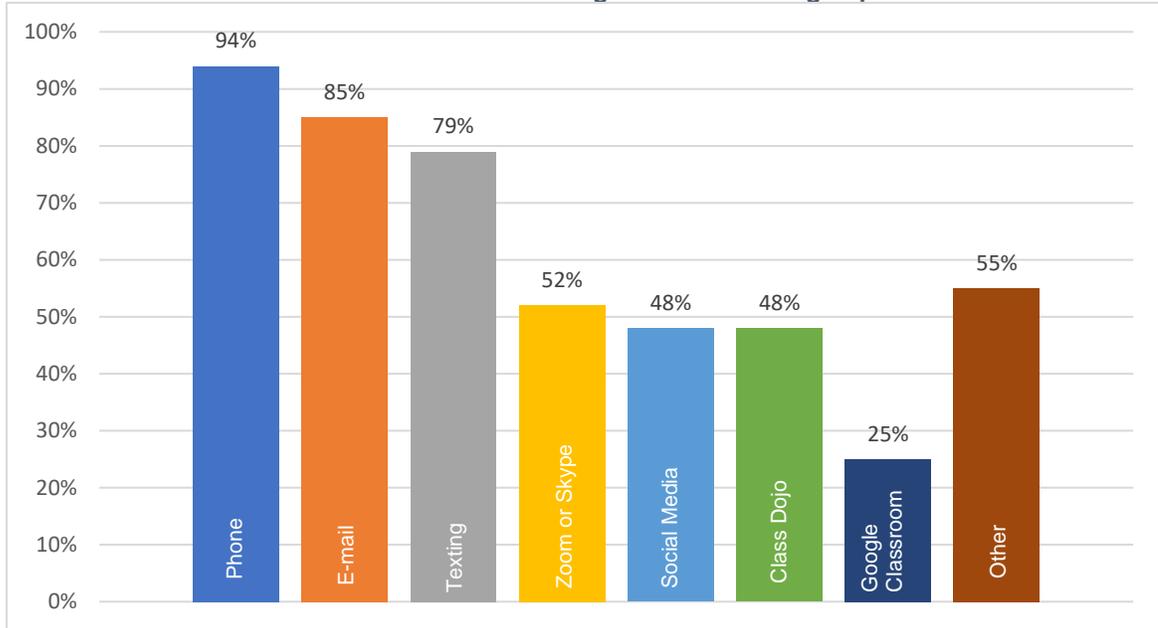
---

<sup>17</sup> Q3. How frequently has there been voice-to-voice contact between the Contracting Agency and NC Pre-K Program Site Administrators to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 Emergency? (Phone calls, Skype calls, etc.)

<sup>18</sup> Q4. How frequently has there been text-based contact between the Contracting Agency and NC Pre-K Program Site Administrators to address needs or concerns related to the COVID-19 Emergency? (Emails, mailings, etc.)

<sup>19</sup> Q24. What methods of communication are currently being used to provide remote learning services for NC Pre-K children who are unable to attend due to the COVID-19 Emergency? (select all that apply)

GRAPHIC H: Methods of Providing Remote Learning Experiences



- 88% of NC Pre-K sites reported *all* of their NC Pre-K lead teachers and teacher assistants had the skills, resources, and materials needed to provide effective remote learning resources.<sup>20</sup>
- Among the 12% of sites that reported not *all* of their NC Pre-K lead teachers and teacher assistants had the skills, resources and materials needed to provide effective remote learning resources, they reported the following barriers (and could select more than one):

Identified Barrier	Percent of Respondents Who Identified Barrier
Staff required additional training	33%
Staff were experiencing challenges accessing technology	21%
Families were experiencing challenges accessing technology	11%
Teachers and families needed greater access to learning materials for remote learning activities at home	16%

- 25% of NC Pre-K sites reported their NC Pre-K lead teachers and/or teacher assistants need additional training on how to use online learning tools, such as Zoom or Google Classroom.<sup>21</sup>

**Potential Survey Limitations**

- It is possible site administrators and/or contractors may not have responded to the survey if they did not have access to reliable internet service or technology. This may have biased our findings toward higher rates of access to technology/internet, higher rates of contact/communication with families and contractors and higher rates of remote learning services provided.

<sup>20</sup> Q30. Do all of your NC Pre-K lead teachers and teacher assistants have the skills, resources, and materials needed to provide effective remote learning resources?

<sup>21</sup> Q31. Do the NC Pre-K lead teacher(s), and/or teacher assistant(s) in your facility need training on how to use online learning tools (zoom, google classroom, etc.)?