

Public Health Success Stories:

Bringing Public Health and Well-Being to Delaware's Early Care and Education (ECE) System

Laura Lessard, PhD, MPH;¹ Kristy Sheffler, PhD, MA;² & Heidi Beck, MS³

1. Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood, Department of Health Behavior & Nutrition Sciences, University of Delaware
2. Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood, University of Delaware
3. Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood, University of Delaware; New Directions Early Head Start

Abstract

The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) has embraced a multi-dimensional definition of health and well-being and integrated several health and well-being offerings into regular practice. In this commentary, we describe our successful efforts to bring public health to early care and education settings statewide and some key facilitators that have enabled those successes.

Introduction

Early care and education (ECE) settings are an important environment for young children and their families. These types of settings not only provide an opportunity for children to build healthy habits for life, but are also a workplace for ECE professionals and a trusted partner for families and communities. In recognition of the importance of ECE settings for health, many systems, programs, and other resources have focused on integrating public health concepts and programs in ECE settings.¹ For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released their Spectrum of Opportunities for Obesity Prevention in ECE settings (CDC Spectrum) in 2013, which identified nine areas for ECE systems to embed nutrition, physical activity, and screen time components. Among the opportunities identified were Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, Pre-service and Professional Development Systems, and Statewide Technical Assistance Networks.²

The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) is the statewide home of professional development and quality improvement for ECE programs and professionals. With support from the Delaware Department of Education and other partners, DIEEC offers a wide range of support, resources and training designed to improve the quality of ECE programs statewide. Due to this broad reach, DIEEC is an ideal place to develop, pilot, build, and expand public health efforts in collaboration with ECE programs and professionals.

DIEEC efforts in this space have included 1) cultivating a culture of wellbeing for EC system staff; and 2) offering free, high-quality professional learning experiences focused on health and wellbeing.

Cultivating a Culture of Wellbeing for DIEEC Staff

DIEEC employs a wide range of professionals, whose goal is to support ECE programs and their staff. Roles include Quality Improvement Specialists, who work with individual programs to develop and implement quality improvement planning processes, and Professional Development Coordinators, who design and lead professional learning experiences. According to the CDC's Spectrum,² expanding the expertise of technical assistance providers, like DIEEC staff, is a key lever for systems change in ECE. In recognition of this opportunity, DIEEC has partnered with the Delaware Division of Public Health to expand the capacity of DIEEC in the areas of nutrition, physical activity, and obesity prevention. With this support, DIEEC hosts Lunch and Learn sessions focused on public health topics, brings community members and other experts to develop connections with DIEEC staff and initiatives, and offers funding for DIEEC staff to attend workshops and conferences on related topics. In 2025, for example, staff attended conferences focused on nature-based outdoor education and farm to ECE. Lifting the expertise of all DIEEC staff in these topical areas and empowering them to integrate what they've learned across the organization is essential to building and sustaining momentum in these areas.

Professional Learning Experiences (PLEs)

As part of its core work, DIEEC offers a wide range of professional learning experiences (PLEs) for ECE educators. Several of these offerings include well-being topics, including mindfulness and stress reduction. Three signature initiatives of DIEEC related to well-being include Shining the Light on You, an award-winning well-being program offered to home-based ECE professionals, Let's GROW outside, focused on outdoor education and gardening with children, and Physical Activity Learning Sessions (PALS).

Shining the Light on You³ started in 2020 with the goal of supporting the wellbeing of family child care (FCC) professionals. FCC settings are unique; educators work in their own homes, often alone, educating a small group of mixed-aged children. Shining the Light offers these educators the chance to focus on their own health and well-being in a supportive, small group environment. Participants meet weekly over Zoom, engaging with a DIEEC Quality Improvement Specialist and a board-certified Health and Wellness Coach. They receive both group and individual health coaching sessions and are supported by cohort members. The program is offered annually, alternating between English and Spanish language each year. To date, nearly 100 educators have participated across 9 cohorts and counting. More details about the program and its impacts have been published elsewhere, but briefly, participants report improvements in physical health (e.g. physical activity and nutrition) as well as social support.³ One participant in an early cohort explained, "I would recommend [the program] to every last one of our child care providers... because it really, it's just, you're just so different when you come outta there. You're a different person."

Let's GROW Outside! is a professional learning (PLE) focused on outdoor gardening with young children. Over the course of 8-10 months, participants learn about the benefits of connecting children and gardening, gain knowledge and skills needed to develop and sustain a garden, understand how to use a supplemental gardening curriculum, and plan for garden activities with children. Participants also receive materials and tools needed for gardening free of cost. This program offers children the opportunity to learn about how food grows in an experiential way. One participant in the last cohort described how one child was excited about eggplants, "If you notice the little boy...that was exciting to him. 'cause they haven't seen the

eggplant growing, grow grown. So that was exciting.” She explained how she’s incorporated gardening into the program and curriculum, “I’m bringing them outside. Seeing the harvest grow, watering. I let them color, touch everything. So it’s a very good experience.” This program was developed by DIEEC and offered in 2025-2026 with support from the Delaware Department of Education, via a federal Farm to School grant.

Physical Activity Learning Sessions (PALS) is an evidence-based practice developed by Nemours which seeks to expand the capacity of ECE professionals in the area of physical activity. Using a cohort model, ECE professionals learn tips and tricks for expanding physical activity opportunities throughout the day, identify and overcome barriers to increasing physical activity, and receive support from a coach and their peers. Participants in recent PALS cohorts reported learning “how much daily activities the various ages [of] students need” and several identified ways they were already using what they learned in PALS to improve transitions and add more active play to their classrooms just a few weeks after the program concluded. This program has been offered by DIEEC for several years, with support from both the Delaware Department of Education and the Delaware Division of Public Health.

Facilitators of Success

Two key factors have facilitated this approach, the first is the integration of health and well-being across practice areas. Across the country, many public health organizations offer some type of programming for ECE programs and/or professionals.¹ What is unique about the DIEEC approach is that these efforts span the organization and are integrated within a system that ECE professionals already know and engage with in their daily work. Lifting the capacity of staff is the most sustainable way to ensure that public health topics are embedded across the organization.

The second key facilitator is partnerships with public health organizations and entities. While DIEEC staff are experts in ECE systems, coaching, and professional development, they are not experts in health and wellbeing. To make the biggest impact on these topics, DIEEC has intentionally sought out partnerships with organizations and other entities that can bring their expertise. The University of Delaware’s Cooperative Extension is a key partner for Let’s GROW Outside. Their garden experts and nutrition education professionals deliver training content both to DIEEC staff and to the participants in the program. They offer visits to their existing garden so that participants can see ways to garden in small spaces, with plants and foods that grow well in our climate. The Food Bank of Delaware is a key partner in the nutrition related efforts. Their nutrition educators have visited with DIEEC staff, modeling how they deliver nutrition education in ECE classrooms. They have offered their resources both for food insecurity and nutrition education to DIEEC staff and to other program and professional partners. Finally, the partnership with the Delaware Division of Public Health not only provides the financial resources to offer programs, but also facilitates connections to existing public health planning efforts. DIEEC was invited to participate in DPH strategic planning efforts so that this work can be aligned with that of the state.

Conclusions

ECE programs and professionals in Delaware have multiple opportunities to engage with DIEEC on public health topics spanning mental health, nutrition, physical activity, and mindfulness. These system-level changes are consistent with best practices (e.g. CDC Spectrum) and put

Delaware's children in a position to develop healthy habits for life. Partnerships are a major key to this success because of the interconnectedness of Delaware's public health, non-profit, and educational sectors.

Dr. Lessard may be contacted at llessard@udel.edu.

Acknowledgements

The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood is supported by grants and contracts from the Delaware Department of Education and the Delaware Division of Public Health.

References

1. Kenney, E. L., Mozaffarian, R. S., Ji, W., Tucker, K., Poole, M. K., DeAngelo, J., . . . Frost, N. (2022, August 18). Moving from policy to practice for early childhood obesity prevention: A nationwide evaluation of state implementation strategies in childcare. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(16), 10304. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610304> PubMed
2. Reynolds, M. A., Jackson Cotwright, C., Polhamus, B., Gertel-Rosenberg, A., & Chang, D. (2013, Winter). Obesity prevention in the early care and education setting: Successful initiatives across a spectrum of opportunities. *J Law Med Ethics*, 41(Suppl 2), 8–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlme.12104> PubMed
3. Lessard, L., Hallam, R., Albrecht, S., Plautz, E., & Fulgence-Belardo, K. (2022, August 31). Shining the light on you: An evidence-based program designed to improve the health and wellbeing of family child care professionals. *Delaware Journal of Public Health*, 8(3), 42–46. <https://doi.org/10.32481/djph.2022.08.010> PubMed

Copyright © 2026 Delaware Academy of Medicine and Public Health

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.