



The Education Navigator

A Program to Support Child Care Providers' Professional Development

"I work closely with college faculty to make sure that they understand this particular population of students. Some of the students in the cohort are just learning the basics, like how to read a syllabus, how to write a college-level paper, or even how to speak in a respectful way to the college instructor. So, these are important keys to success that can easily be overlooked in a typical college experience."

—Susan Mejia, Education Navigator

What Is the Education Navigator?

The Maricopa County (Arizona) Human Services Department (MCHSD) is an Early Head Start-Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnership grantee funded to serve 160 infants and toddlers. The grantee partners with nine child care centers in high-poverty areas that already have a high number of children receiving subsidies. As it is everywhere, a high-quality workforce is essential to MCHSD to ensure positive outcomes for the infants, toddlers, and families they serve. It was important for their efforts to affect the entire center; to go beyond the improvements for the Early Head Start classroom. Under the initial EHS-CC Partnership start up, 96 caregivers would need to begin the pathway toward obtaining a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Rio Salado College, a local community college, was engaged in significant innovative work around professional development. In addition, the work focused on ways to retain students and to build capacity in child care directors. Together they created a partnership to help build on what the college learned about helping students and prospective child care providers achieve success. The college individualized their approach in their work with Maricopa County Human Services Department's program and child care partners.

One of those innovative strategies for student retention is the **Education Navigator** program. The Education Navigator, who is employed by Rio Salado College, encourages student retention and has relevant experience to bring to the MCHSD Partnership program.

The Education Navigator "meets students where they are." Some students in the cohort are just learning the basics while others already meet the requirements and may just need a little help in applying for a CDA. Some need the full nine credits of coursework, others need fewer, and some are just starting to have their training references evaluated. The Education Navigator individualizes professional development (PD) plans, making them meaningful and achievable for each student.

How Does the Program Work?

The Education Navigator works directly with child care providers (students) to develop individualized PD plans. Rio Salado College also provides designated instructors and offers courses online, allowing for flexibility for child care staff who are working during traditional daytime class hours and allowing them to learn at their own pace. Child care providers who participate in the program receive scholarships and the college waives the application fee.



INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE

Working with prospective child care providers (students), the Education Navigator individually assists students to

- evaluate transcripts to determine if student participants already meet or exceed the Infant/Toddler (I/T) CDA educational requirements as determined by the Council for Professional Recognition;
- develop an individualized PD plan which outlines courses needed to meet the I/T CDA requirements and/or an Associate of Applied Science in Early Childhood.
 - The individual PD plan includes a timeline, strategies to meet their educational goals, and a process for monitoring those milestones;

- enroll in Rio Salado College (for some, this is the first experience with enrolling in college);
- provide coaching as a component of the retention, engagement, and completion strategies to maximize course completion and overall success; and
- apply for Early Childhood Education scholarships, including Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Scholarship applications, and other federal financial aid.

The Education Navigator may directly tutor individuals, or personally deliver textbooks directly to child care providers.

ASSISTANCE TO GROUPS OF STUDENTS

The Education Navigator works with student groups and

- conducts workshops, weekend study sessions, and college-level writing labs;
- develops support systems with center directors to enable them to help their providers, especially those who may have specific learning challenges that may affect their ability to complete their PD plan or CDA; and
- establishes education cohorts based on child care providers' needs (e.g., providers who are taking the same courses or who work together in the same center can collaborate on assignments, studying, and in creating their portfolios).

“Our students are very special people, and in some cases, the challenges are simple. For example, if a student can't afford to pay the CDA application fee, that's an easy one for us to help with. But what has really been the most impactful is the education cohorts we've formed and the ability for students to help each other.”

— Susan Mejia, Education Navigator

LIAISON WITH ADJUNCT FACULTY

The Education Navigator works with adjunct faculty, and

- may directly teach courses in this cohort, especially to support students who are having difficulty; and
- ensures that faculty understand the educational backgrounds of the students in the cohort (e.g., many are just learning the basics of how to read a syllabus, write a college-level paper, and participate in class)

“I can remember doing a performance review for one of our teachers just recently and I was telling her how much I had noticed an increase in her professionalism, just her attitude about herself had really changed and I told her ‘I think it boils down to the fact that a year ago you saw yourself more as a child care worker. Today you see yourself as a teacher,’ and she just about cried.”

—Susan Laurita, Child Care Director

Outcomes of the Education Navigator Program and Partnership Grant

MCHSD has seen remarkable results from both the Education Navigator program and their Partnership grant.

- Toddler CLASS® observations led to improved interactions with children as caregivers learned more about basic child development and developmentally appropriate practices. Specifically, there were significant, positive changes in:
 - Positive Climate,
 - Teacher Sensitivity,
 - Regard for Child Perspective,
 - Behavior Guidance,
 - Facilitation of Learning and Development, and
 - Language Modeling.
- Centers that received funding through the EHS-CC Partnership made important, concrete changes, including: enhanced supplies, new or additional equipment and furniture, and lower teacher to child ratios and classroom group sizes.
- The reduction of classroom group size from 12 to 8 to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) enhanced positive teacher–child interactions.
- Increased support to parents, using a web-based application accessible on tablets and smartphones that enabled child care providers to communicate with parents throughout the school day by sharing photos and notes.
- Turn-over rates for providers who participated in the MCHSD Education Navigator program dropped significantly. Providers who were instructed to take CDA classes without any of the guidance and supports provided by the Education Navigator had a higher turn-over rate.
- Many providers who participated in the Education Navigator program have chosen to further their education, pursuing their associate’s degree and beyond.

- A student cohort of **parents** formed in the second year, with the same supports by the Education Navigator the child care providers received. As an outcome, some earned the CDA and now work for the grantee.

Perhaps most important, MCHSD reported a major turnaround in the child care providers’ sense of professionalism because of the Education Navigator program. The participants now view themselves differently. They report having greater self-esteem based on their work and understand the very important role they play in nurturing young children’s healthy development. They no longer view themselves as just child care workers or babysitters, but as teachers.

Education Navigator: The Next Generation

Recruiting and retaining qualified staff, a challenge commonly shared by programs, poses a hurdle for Maricopa County. Their solution is to “grow your own” through offering this career opportunity to parents. MCHSD is collaborating with Rio Salado College in their second cohort of 10 parent students. The cohort comprises single mothers who are first-time college attendees. Although the college typically offers CDA training online, they adapted their training for the cohort by offering it through a hybrid of online and 3 hours of in-person attendance 2 days a week. Participants in the cohort receive nine units of college credit and their Infant/Toddler CDA credential. Training goes beyond the CDA, to include the HSPPS and day-to-day Head Start best practices. Eve Del Real, Child Care Partnership Coordinator, stated that participants are employable as soon as they finish the program and are in high demand.

PARENT COHORT 2	
Professional development delivery: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online training • 3 hours in-person training/2 days per week 	Upon completion participants receive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nine units of college credit • Infant/Toddler CDA • HSPPS • Head Start best practices



Impact

According to Ms. Del Real, the Education Navigator provides relationship-based support to the students, and the participants have developed a strong internal support system. “They know what it takes to offer quality, and they understand the meaning behind it.” Ms. Del Real recently visited a cohort meeting and said she felt so inspired as participants shared their gratefulness for the program. One young mother stated, “We didn’t see ourselves as college material.” A second mother said that based on studying temperament, she understood her husband and child better. A third mother shared her experience with her child’s parent-teacher conference. She stated that when the teacher talked about Teaching Strategies Gold and her child’s goals, the mom recognized that the teacher was talking about the observation, assessment, and development of her child, and she could clearly understand what the teacher was discussing about her child. Qualitative data from Parent Cohort 2 demonstrates how much the Education Navigator program positively impacts families through providing a viable career opportunity and engaging parents in their children’s learning and development. The Education Navigator program also is an effective tool for recruitment and retention of qualified staff who understand Head Start best practices. In all the cohorts, the Education Navigator program nurtured child care providers’ sense of professionalism and their professional development, improved the quality of infant/toddler classroom environments, and reduced staff turnover.

Links to Financial Aid Resources

[T.E.A.C.H. National Center](#)

[FAFSA Website](#)

[Federal Student Aid Website](#)

Photos courtesy of the Partnership Center.



NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Head Start - Child Care Partnerships