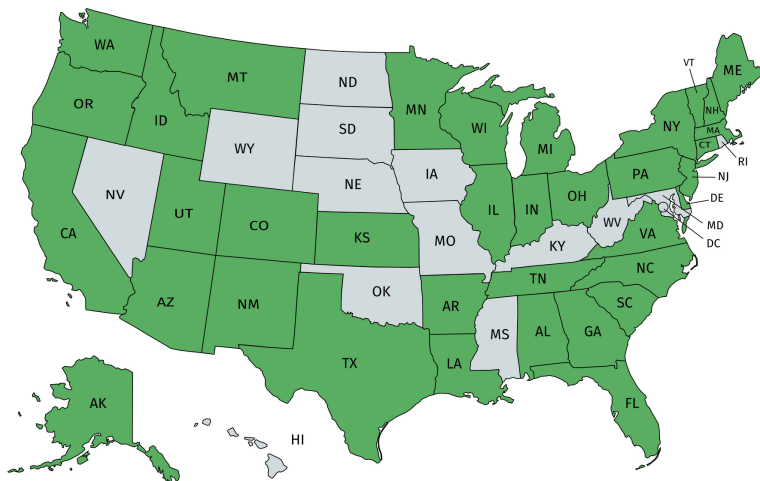


NATURAL START ALLIANCE COVID-19 FORUMS



States across the US were represented in the forums.

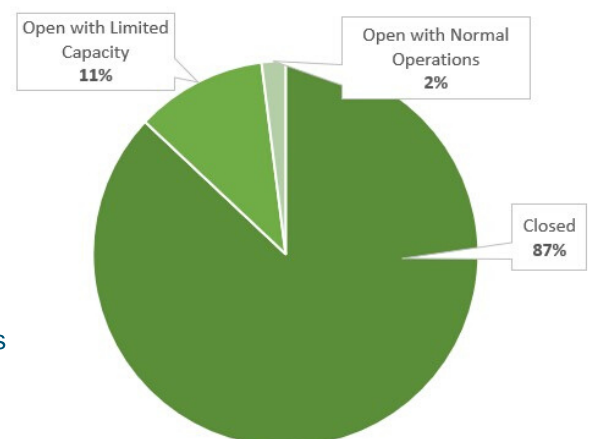
To better gauge the status of nature-based early education in the US during the Covid-19 crisis, the Natural Start Alliance held forums on April 8th for owners and administrators and April 9th for teachers and staff with participants providing input both during the forums and in a pre-forum survey.

In total, over 200 nature-based education professionals shared their input through the survey and during the forums.

The forums reveal a field that, like many others across the US, has undergone a breathtakingly rapid shift, with deep uncertainties about the future. The following provides a summary of what we learned.

NEARLY ALL PROGRAMS ARE SHUTTERED OR OPERATING AT REDUCED CAPACITY

Survey responses from owners and administrators indicate that the vast majority of nature-based education programs today are entirely closed. A smaller number (11%) are operating at a reduced schedule or capacity. Just two programs reported normal operations.



Program status of nature-based programs.

FINANCIAL CONCERNS TOP THE LIST

Not surprisingly, financial concerns loom large for the field, particularly for program owners and administrators facing a sudden loss of revenue and uncertainties about the future. Programs are struggling with concerns related to enrollment, summer programming, accessing stimulus loans and other relief programs (no programs cited specific successes with any of these programs), and questions about whether and how to refund tuition payments for the remainder of the year and whether to collect tuition deposits for the fall. Some programs reported that parents continue to make tuition payments or donations, but most reported that parents are also affected by the crisis and significant percentages have removed children from programs.

Several participants expressed a concern about a loss of momentum, either for the field as a whole or for their specific programs that were previously in a growth phase.

NATURE-BASED EDUCATION MOVES ONLINE

Transitioning to online teaching is especially challenging for nature-based early educators, who typically advise against screen time for young children, embrace an experiential learning model that prioritizes child-led, direct experience, and have little or no training in developmentally appropriate online education for young children, if any such training even exists. Nevertheless, almost all nature-based education programs have quickly pivoted online. The inset on the right provides a snapshot of online tools that educators mentioned they are using.

Platforms Educators are Using

Facebook	See Saw
Zoom	Smug Mug
YouTube/Videos	Podcasts
Marco Polo	iNaturalist
Instagram	Dojo
Google Sites	Remind
Google Classroom	Story Park
Adobe Spark Video	Flip Grid
iMovie Livestream	

As they are experimenting with online teaching, educators raised questions about screen time, safety and security, and how to promote social and emotional learning. Many educators expressed deep sympathy for parents and a real desire to help them. Some offered online check-ins with parents or sent ideas for creating routines, transitions, and setting expectations. **Despite the challenges, many programs report progress, appreciate the opportunity to remain connected to children and families, and some have found ways to raise revenue with digital offerings.** And while most programs have moved online, some also are focusing on offline opportunities, organizing children as pen pals, sending activities such as scavenger hunts that can be completed offline, mailing activity kits, leaving materials for families to use in parks or on trails, and so on. Nature-based educators' creativity and commitment to children and nature is more clear than ever as they jump into distance learning.



It was so valuable just hearing that others had the same concerns, even if we didn't have the answers.

DEEPENING CONCERN ABOUT INEQUITIES

Long a concern for the field of nature-based education, inequalities in American society are now at the top of the minds of many educators and administrators. **Many Americans' reduced access to nature is more apparent—and harmful—than ever, with less affluent Americans missing the physical and mental health benefits that easy access to nature can bring during the crisis.** The nature-based education community noted a variety of concerns about families' different, and inequitable, access to the internet, technology, safe outdoor play environments, and nature; the different kinds of impacts that the crisis appears to be having on families; and a concern about how to help.

TRANSITIONING TO A NEW NORMAL

Nature-based educators are looking ahead with both excitement and trepidation about a return to work. How will education programs look in a COVID world? How will programs keep staff, children, and families safe? Will programs be able to operate at full capacity? Will children have trauma? Will there be entirely new procedures and routines aimed at reducing disease transmission? Few answers are available today, but **many educators noted a hope that because of the benefits to children's physical and mental health, nature-based approaches may play an important role in a new early education landscape.**

LOOKING AHEAD

Thinking ahead about the needs of the field, nature-based educators were most likely to identify needs related to funding, either to support programs and educators through the crisis or to support families when programs reopen. Families, foundations, and state and federal government were all mentioned as possible sources of financial support. Educators also hope for guidance about best practices for operating programs safely upon a return. And many, many mentioned that they appreciate the opportunity to remain connected as a field through the crisis and would welcome future opportunities to meet online.

Although these forums revealed huge challenges and many questions without clear answers yet, they also demonstrated how important a professional network can be in providing support when the way forward is not clear, so Natural Start will follow up shortly with more forums. Many thanks to the educators who participated in these forums, and to all the educators who are working through the challenge of a lifetime.

