

Interviewee: Jitinder Walia
Interviewer: Ellen Balleisen
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Abstract: Jitinder Walia, Executive Director of Bronx Community College's Early Childhood Center, describes how she and her staff managed to continue educating the children of BCC's students after the campus had closed. When she first realized the pandemic would cause the Center to end in-person classes, she felt devastated. But she quickly realized that the children and their parents needed the Center's services during this extremely stressful time. So she and her staff figured out how to provide online lessons for young children and social services for parents without in-person contact.

Jitinder misses hugs from children and face-to-face chats with parents. She's looking forward to the day when she can hear the sounds of 100+ energetic children in her building. Yet she's immensely proud of the way her staff has continued the Center's mission during the pandemic, and she plans to continue some of the online activities created because of Covid.

Ellen Balleisen 00:01

Hi. So, I am Ellen Balleisen, and I'm here with Jitinder Walia, and she's going to talk about how the childcare center of the CDC responded when the pandemic hit and they weren't able to have classes with very small children in person. So could you start by just telling me your name and your position at Bronx Community College?

Jitinder Walia 00:26

Good afternoon, Ellen. My name is Jitinder Walia, and I'm the Executive Director of Bronx Community College Early Childhood Center.

Ellen Balleisen 00:35

And what services did the Early Childhood Center provide before the pandemic started?

Jitinder Walia 00:41

So the Early Childhood Center provides childcare for children from ages two to five, from Monday through Saturday, from 7:30 to 10 o'clock at night, pre-pandemic, and we also provided after school Monday through Thursday, from four o'clock to 10pm at night for parents who had older children and needed help. Along with that, we provided social work services, family services to all the families who attended childcare at the center.

Ellen Balleisen 01:16

And all of this was in person, of course?

Jitinder Walia 01:18

All in person. Yes.

Ellen Balleisen 01:20

So when you first found out that most of BCC was going to be shutting down because of the pandemic, what thoughts went through your mind?

Jitinder Walia 01:28

Um, I think like everybody else, my staff, and, you know, we were nervous about like, wait, what's going on? You know, the word pandemic itself was like, wait, what's happening? So when we found out, we actually had a DOH inspector in the building, and we were reviewing our files, and all of a sudden, we were like, wait, we might not be coming back for a little while, let's get our stuff together. It was, wow, it's been over a year, but when I go back, it just, it was tough; it was tough. The best part of what we do is being in the building with the children, with the parents, one-on-one. I mean, if you know anything about early childhood, we're a hug and kiss type of a profession, you know, so the idea of not having children in the building was devastating, was devastating. And for a lot of my students, and a lot of my staff, the Early Childhood Center was safe space. You know, parents didn't just drop their children in the building; they spend time over there in our family resource room, and they hung out over there, they made connections, they made friendships, they would eat breakfast in the building, they would eat lunch because we offered breakfast, lunch, and snack for the children, and we would keep the leftovers in the front for the parents to enjoy, so that was like taking so much away from them, so it was devastating.

Ellen Balleisen 03:07

So how did you and your staff figure out how to transition into an online environment when it was so devastating not to be there in person?

Jitinder Walia 03:17

Well, we knew that our parents needed us, and we knew that our children needed us. And we also knew that if there was anybody who was able and capable to pull this off, it was going to be the staff of the Early Childhood Center because we from the get-go were the kind of family that was intrusive into our student parents' lives, so we knew everything about them, and it was not going to be an issue picking up the phone, texting them, calling them, emailing them, because we have the relationships. You know, in early childhood, especially for us, our relationships really were the key to making the difference of being able to do what we did. And the fact that we were fiscally, we're a very strong place. We had the support of all the campus administrators, so things like having laptops and iPads was just a regular kind of thing for us. Now, granted, staff didn't do anything on Zoom, but yeah, we did have Learning Genie on our iPads, where we used to communicate with our families, pre-pandemic in sending them information, so that was not a big deal. So the first thing we did was make sure that every teacher had a laptop to take home. We improvise and use the iPad, so getting prepped to go home with those materials, and then we tried to figure out the steps that we were going to take to keep engaging with our families. So the most important person that came in this picture was our social worker and our family worker. You know, we developed our list, you know, started making the phone calls, tried to figure out how we were going to contact them and what we were going to do, so the children don't miss out on whatever learning we had to do, but it was beyond that, at that time, it was just making sure that they were okay. You know, because in the first few weeks, it was not about, "oh, are we going to have a lesson plan?" In the first few weeks, it was like, "are you okay? Are you safe? Are the children okay?"

What is it that we can do immediately to help you?" That was the most important thing. While we were doing that in the front, with the families behind the scenes, my job was to make sure that we got comfortable in using Zoom. So we tried to do our own learning through workshops, there were several workshops, I mean, I think there was a point where all of my staff was attending at least three to four workshops, trying to engage themselves in the learning so that they can then share it with the families. So that was a very key component of us being prepared. I mean, of course, we had a smiley front, and we were, you know, yes, we got this, you know, we can do this, but behind the scenes, it was nerve wracking, but we learned together as a team.

Ellen Balleisen 06:28

Who gave the workshops?

Jitinder Walia 06:30

We did workshops through the Department of Health. I did some private workshops with our... because we had our... and that's why I think pre-pandemic, we were such a strong solid program. I had my own staff developer, so she did a lot of staff development for my families; we reached out to DOE, Department of Health, and then we paid for some other workshops with our agency that used to do workshops for our center already, so all those pieces were already there. We just had to go and try to do it then on Zoom. I mean, it's hundreds of workshops that we did, because we wanted to make sure that what we offer to our families was nothing but quality. You know, and one of the first things we did was to develop a video, at some point, if you want I can even send you the links of some amazing, amazing videos that we developed. The first one was talking about the Coronavirus to children; how do you talk to them and tell them: Why can't I go to school? So we had, you know, and this is pre-pandemic, we had a music teacher, we had a puppetry artist, and we had a yoga instructor; we chose not to get rid of them, we kept them. And then we, with their help, with our puppetry artist developed a video which we sent to all our families so they can talk to the children about what was happening. It was one of the first things that the children were like, "but I'm not sick, I want to go to school." Why can't you go to school? The importance of when you go out with mommy and daddy, it's okay to wear a mask because it's not safe right now. Their importance of saying, you know, "hey, we're going to see you soon, just right now we want you to be safe." Then we decided, each of the teachers started reading books that children like, you know, they knew which books the children liked in the classroom, and then we developed a YouTube channel. We never had a YouTube channel before; we decided we wanted to upload them so that the parents can watch at their leisure. So we started having zoom classes, but at the same time, not everybody was able to attend, so it was important that everybody was able to take advantage of what we were doing. So then teachers started reading we would upload them and what happened: the children started making the connection, "oh, that's Miss...that's my teacher." So that gave them some sense of relief, like, okay, you know, we're still there. That was one, and then being on Zoom classes with their friends was good, because the initial first two times, they would just keep on waving to their friends, like, you know, and it's, it's hard to have three year olds and four year olds on Zoom and be able to talk over them because they have so much to say. So we learned, they learned with us, their parents learned with us, and we did it one step at a time. It was a challenge, but it was also a learning experience that I mean, I wish we didn't have to go through it, but I really, really strongly believe that because I had such a great team of people who were eager to learn, who were creative, and who were passionate. You know, I think early childhood is a work of passion.

It's you know, you know that teachers don't make the kind of money that, you know any other profession does, so it's an act of love, you know, they want it to be there for their families, they want it to be there for their children. As months went on, we got more creative and added so many more things. So every week, our puppetry artists would do a Zoom lesson, and then we would tape it, and we would upload it. Our yoga instructor started doing yoga on Zoom, and then we would also tape it and upload it. Our music teacher started developing music videos, so that we would put it on the YouTube channel and the children can make sure they said hi to Mr. Chris, and Mr. Andy, and Mr. Dan, that was not missing. We added workshops from our social worker and family worker, about mental health. You know, the stresses of being home and working at home and still having your children around there. And then we started having Zoom open session workshops as to almost like, the name is not coming in my head, I'm having a senior moment, they would have group sessions, where they would talk about things that we can do to help you, right, and one of the things that the student parents shared that they were having a hard time with their older kids in terms of their homework, and in terms of how to provide them help. So then we said, "okay, no problem," we started doing one-on-one tutoring; we opened it to all our families and said, "whether your child was part of our after school program or not, if you have an older child, and they're struggling, contact us, and we will allocate a one-on-one tutor" because during that time, I don't know if you remember, in Manhattan, parents who could afford were developing pods, you know, 15,000, 20,000, and you know, they had private tutors. And my thing was, well, I'm in the South Bronx, my parents don't have the money to be doing pods, so their children are going to be left behind, and we had a meeting and all of my staff agreed that they were willing to pick up whichever age group they were comfortable with, to do one-on-one tutoring. So each, each teacher would have students during the course of the day that they would do one-on-one tutoring with, which was another added connection that the children were able to make. I mean, along the way, we added so many more things. I would move a little bit further down in June, last year, we had to do our graduation; we did a remote graduation; we taped the stuff, and then we actually had the president, VP, a lot of people attended the graduation. And all the families gathered around in their house, and they participated in it. So that yes, it was not the regular in person, but we made sure that we made it special for them. More time passed on, and we realized that the parents were struggling in terms of having gadgets, so we saw that some of our children were doing their Zoom on little phones. So we decided that we were gonna surprise them for Christmas, and give them head headphones, so that you know, they're living in one room with five people, six people, and it's a distraction. And for each four year old kid, we sent them a Samsung Galaxy Tablet, so they would have their own technology to work with when the teachers were doing Zoom. So that was like really, really a big hit because parents were very happy, and the children were happy. Then we're talking food insecurity. I mean, there was so much food insecurity, and we knew our parents needed that. So between November and December, we did four food drives. Where I mean, I think I got about almost over \$60,000 worth of food. And I mean we're talking meat, we're talking groceries, bags and bags full of stuff from blankets to diapers to tampons to razors, things of need. You know, of course, I had a connection with an organization that, you know, I had a relationship from before, and again, one of the things that helped us through this time was that we used to do a lot of things previously, so a lot of these relationships existed already. So the donations I got for my food drive was not from a random person, it was from Vidya, who was the commissioner of ACS years ago and had visited my site, but now was vice president of another organization called Trinity, and she picked up the phone and said, "Hey, Judy, I'm doing this donation drive, would you be interested?" And I was like, "Yes, I am." And that's how, you know, we went on with that. And that's really what really

made a difference. When we had the food drive, Dr. Thomas, you know, came and he participated. Kay, Irene. I asked, and they were always there. So those were the kinds of things that really made a difference for us.

Ellen Balleisen 15:42

Wow, that seems really, really impressive. I'm curious how you explain the pandemic to children at different ages. You mentioned the YouTube videos, were there different ones for kids of different ages? I mean, you've got very small children in Early Childhood Center, and then you've got much older children in the after school program, so how do you explain this to children of different ages?

Jitinder Walia 16:08

I mean, I wish I could, you know, show you the video, but I will make sure that I send you the link, the video was made by a puppetry artist who the children knew, you know, the little ones knew. And the older ones knew Mr. Andy, too, because he did a lot of activities with them. So it's very simple, you know, for the four year olds, and five year olds, and the six and the seven, and if you're talking about the eleven, and twelve year olds, we started sending them more information to the parents, you know, so they can talk to them, and you know, like in terms of articles and stuff, so they can read to them. But the video was so sweet and simple that in itself, it really didn't matter if you were ten, or eleven, it just gave you the understanding of what was happening, you know, and then, as I said, we were doing one-on-one with these families, so our teachers were able to talk to them. If a student a ten year old after school student was struggling, like oh, you know, "Miss Judy, I miss school," you know, so we would talk to them why it was so important for them to be safe, you know, and this too shall pass. So that was a more of a one-on-one, and with little children, they were happy, and were able to comprehend what the video was trying to show to them in the words of Mr. Andy who they love, you know, so, with little kids, it's always important that you make a connection. So the connection was that this was a familiar face, you know, and we made it, I don't want to say fun, but we made it so simple that they understood. They understood.

Ellen Balleisen 17:48

So in two sentences, could you summarize the sense of Mr. Andy's video?

Jitinder Walia 17:54

Um... two sentences...

Ellen Balleisen 17:59

Maybe three if you need them.

Jitinder Walia 18:02

Now, basically, you would see a little ball, you know, it was like a Coronavirus, and something, you know, Mr. Andy's voice in the back, and it's talking about what's happening and how it's spreading, wash your hands, why it's important. So the kids would go back to their parents and be like, "Mommy, Mr. Andy said we have to wash our hands." And one, two, and so they were picking it up, and parents were calling and sending us videos of children talking about the video how, what they were picking up. So like, I wouldn't be doing justice to the video if I didn't have you see it, so I will make sure I make it a

point that you have that video, so you can share it. It was actually shared throughout CUNY, all the other campus. And I think they even posted at one point, they put it on the CUNY website because it was so popular, and then it was sent to the State Department of Ed, too.

Ellen Balleisen 18:59

Oh, that's terrific. So that actually answers partially one of my next questions, which is did any of your initiatives work out better than you had expected? And were any of them more difficult than you had expected?

Jitinder Walia 19:14

I guess I'm a very positive person. I think most of the initiatives that we started went on very well, and you would say "well, who do I compare it with?" You know, I compare it with eighteen other campuses. I mean, we have been open since August of last year, full time, Monday through Friday, and we're the only campus that has been open five days eight to four since August 26. You know, before, you know, we came in person, I'm talking in person. Most of the campuses did remote and are still doing remote, and we have been in person, so it is all because we had all our pieces in place, and we wanted to do it, and we had the support. So this is not to say that so-and-so campus did not open, because they didn't want to, this is to say that our campus was willing to allow the childcare center to be open and have the children come in. Now, having said that, in the fall semester, we had maybe twelve children that would come in, and at one point, I said to VP Irene, "You know, all of this work, and only ten... I feel sad, I wish more would come." But I had to accept the fact that the parents were afraid. Right? And my VP said to me, and I, you know, I will always remember that. She said, "Judy, but to those twelve parents, it really matters." Now I know that, but I'm used to seeing a hundred children in my building, so seeing twelve was like, "oh, man," like I want more to come back, so staying open, even though we had very few, we did the best we could to make a difference for those families. And even now, all of my staff, we are all vaccinated. Okay, and we are using that as a tagline to encourage student parents to say, "Hey, listen, it's time to come back. You know, we are here we are all vaccinated, bring your children back." So I think all the initiatives that we've tried worked; some of them, we will probably keep on going with them, like, we're going to keep our YouTube channel, we're going to keep our Instagram page that we have, we will continue the modality where if we need to do one-on-one tutoring over Zoom, and the parents can't come, we will continue some of those initiatives, because they're working out really nicely for our families.

Ellen Balleisen 21:52

And you've been serving the eighty-eight or ninety or so other children remotely while you have these twelve in person, right?

Jitinder Walia 21:52

Yes, yes. Yes.

Ellen Balleisen 22:04

Do the children on Zoom have any opportunity to interact with each other?

Jitinder Walia 22:10

Well, you can't, you can't avoid that because they see each other so they will be waving at each other. So of course, yes, they do have the opportunity, but the teachers have it very, now the children are very trained, but they haven't balanced where they have that opportunity to do back and forth. Plus, a lot of these students are from the Bronx, so they already had relationships from before, so sometimes they also see each other off campus, depending on the friendships that their parents have.

Ellen Balleisen 22:41

Great. What are you most looking forward to about going back to having all of your kids in person?

Jitinder Walia 22:48

I am looking forward for the norm to come back to just hug my student-parents and hug them, like I'm just starving for my hugs. I'm starving for student-parents coming inside my building and coming in my office and us chatting and us laughing and just having people inside. I mean, yes, we are open. Yes, we have about eighteen children now, but you know, we don't allow student-parents to come in. You know, it's just the children, so I'm just looking forward to a lot of people in the building so we can hug each other. I miss my hugs, I really do.

Ellen Balleisen 23:30

And is the center doing any outreach to convince parents to get vaccinated?

Jitinder Walia 23:36

I haven't started that yet because CUNY, itself, you know, is doing this whole campaign. My biggest initiative was two weeks ago when we sent out our big post of the staff being vaccinated, which the chancellor is our follower on Instagram now, and he reposted our picture and talked about how he had visited us during the pandemic and how what a great program we were. So our next, in the next two weeks, we are working on having a campaign where we're going to have pictures of our staff, but we're going to have a tagline where the children are in that picture and they're saying "we want our friends to come back, us teachers are vaccinated." So we're working on it, and once we have that, we're going to lay that out to our student-parents so they can get a little bit more comfortable, you know, coming back in the building. Yes. That's another, next project that we... it's work in progress.

Ellen Balleisen 24:41

And what's the most important to keeping you personally sane during this very difficult time?

Jitinder Walia 24:49

I don't think you're looking at a sane person. I'm sorry, but you're not. I have my good days, and I have my bad days, but I have all my good days when I am around my staff, and I am able to see the children, and I keep myself together. I think my downtime is usually when I'm, in the evening sitting down, and I stick my head, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I want this to be over. I want this to be over." And I think that's the norm for anybody and everybody, but it keeps me going, because I know that this is going to be over and everything is going to be fine. And it just so happens two years ago, I had graduated with my fourth master's in social work, so some of those social work skills that I learned, I tried to apply that mindfulness stuff and kind of sometimes try to meditate and say, "it's going to be okay." But it has been quite a journey. It has been quite a journey, but our desire to make sure that we are there for our

children, and our student parents, for my staff, is the most important thing that keeps me going. Really, because, you know, like, I can't give up because they're student-parents who, whose life depends on, because if I gave up, then where are they supposed to go? I can't give up on those children because that's not an option, and I can't give up on my staff, because for them it's also the safe space of the Early Childhood Center. So no, it's giving up was not an option, is not an option, will not be an option, and I know this, too, shall pass. I know that.

Ellen Balleisen 26:40

Great. Well, is there anything else you would like to add?

Jitinder Walia 26:44

Um, no. All I can say is I am very blessed that I have an amazing, amazing staff that works for me. I have an amazing supervisor in VP Irene, who's amazing, and the President has been nothing but supportive. I mean, there's not one single person on that campus, who during the pandemic or pre-pandemic, has not been supportive of us, so you know, we are very blessed to be on the campus of Bronx Community College. We are.

Ellen Balleisen 27:15

Oh, that's wonderful to hear, and thank you so much.

Jitinder Walia 27:18

You're very welcome.