CREATING COORDINATED EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS: LOUISIANA'S ACT 3

BACKGROUND SUMMARY

In 2012, Louisiana's legislature passed the Early Childhood Education Act, known as Act 3, which aimed to unify the state's fragmented ECE system and improve school readiness statewide. Prior to this legislation, subsidized child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k programs all provided publicly funded ECE to children, but they did so in isolation, regulated by separate departments and facing very different requirements. The goal of Act 3 was to work towards a more cohesive ECE system, with the hope that greater alignment would ultimately lead to improved quality and access for children.

A primary way Act 3 improved cohesion was by moving control of child care licensure and the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) from the Department of Family and Child Services to the Department of Education (LDOE). This shift meant that all ECE programs would be housed under a single, unified department. In turn, LDOE was responsible for creating a cohesive set of performance standards and requirements for all publicly funded ECE programs in the state.

At the heart of Louisiana's approach was the development of a new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). QRIS are early childhood accountability systems built to measure and publicize quality and target supports for improvement. While these accountability systems are now common throughout the country, Louisiana's QRIS is unique in two ways. First, participation in the QRIS is mandatory for all publicly funded ECE programs. This meant that after Act 3, irrespective of site type, all ECE programs would be evaluated based on the same quality measures.

A second way Louisiana's QRIS is unique is that programs' ratings are based on a single measure of quality. In most states' QRIS, ECE programs are evaluated on a long list of indicators (e.g., teacher-child ratios, teacher credentials, family engagement supports, etc.). Though policymakers intend for each indicator to capture an element of quality, and in turn contribute to children's learning, most studies suggest that QRIS scores are poor predictors of children's learning. In Louisiana, QRIS scores are based solely on the quality of teacher-child interactions in the classroom, as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). CLASS is a widely used observation tool that evaluates teacher-child interactions in three broad domains – emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. A large body of research demonstrates that interaction quality, as measured by CLASS, is linked, albeit modestly, to children's learning gains.

As part of the QRIS, all classrooms in publicly funded ECE programs in the state are observed at least twice each year. Trained observers, including both local leaders and third-party observers coordinated by the state, conduct the observations, and each classroom receives a CLASS score that ranges between 1 and 7. Classroom scores are then aggregated up to the program level and correspond to specific ratings. For instance, a program that receives an average score of at least 4.5 is rated as "proficient." Programs with scores below 3 are considered "unsatisfactory."

Louisiana's focus on teacher-child interactions is motivated by the assumption that stronger interactions lead to better learning outcomes for children. To help ensure that children's

learning is prioritized and that teachers understand children's learning needs, Louisiana requires all publicly funded ECE programs to use a child assessment tool – Teaching Strategies GOLD (TS GOLD). TS GOLD is a performance-based assessment that measures children's knowledge and skills across all key school readiness domains.

This broad focus on teacher-child interactions is central to Louisiana's quality improvement efforts. State-funded professional development, coaching, TS GOLD, and a new teacher credential program all focus on improving teacher-child interactions, as measured by CLASS. They incentivize growth on CLASS, target supports to programs based on CLASS scores, and also eliminate public funding for the small number of programs repeatedly rated unsatisfactory. Each year, CLASS scores are published in performance profiles that are designed to help families make informed decisions about their ECE options.

In addition to increasing the quality of all ECE programs, Louisiana also sought to improve children's access to high-quality ECE programs. Child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k programs each have different eligibility requirements, enrollment schedules, and enrollment processes. This fragmentation made it difficult for families to find a program, navigate the complex eligibility verification process, and enroll their children. Through unification of the ECE system, Louisiana hoped to simplify families' experiences with this search and selection process by creating a single enrollment system for all publicly funded sites in each locality. These local systems, in conjunction with the performance profiles, would also provide families with information about all ECE programs in their community.

While LDOE established these new, state-wide guidelines and goals, they empowered local communities to implement them in ways that best align with their unique contexts. To do this, they established a system of early childhood community networks throughout the state. Each network includes school districts, child care providers, Head Start programs, and other stakeholders within the community who work together to provide children with access to high-quality ECE programs. Each network is directed by a lead agency – most often the school system – that is tasked with three main goals:
- Building coordination across all publicly funded ECE programs in the community – including child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k
- Improving quality, mainly by implementing the state's QRIS and overseeing CLASS observations
- Increasing access by creating a coordinated enrollment system that includes a unified application for all publicly funded ECE programs and provides families with information about their options

The requirements of Act 3 were fully implemented statewide during the 2015-16 school year, but starting as early as 2013, several communities opted to participate in a pilot program, which was effectively a "soft launch" of Act 3. These communities partnered with LDOE to test out the new systems and provide feedback on how to best roll out the requirements statewide.

In the years since Act 3, there has been substantial progress.[1] Statewide, CLASS scores have improved, and the number of programs that are rated as proficient has risen from 62% of programs in the first full year of Act 3 implementation (2015-16) to 85% of programs in 2018-19, with notable improvements across all site types. While CLASS scores were generally high among school-based pre-k programs already (88% of classrooms were rated as proficient in the initial year), the gaps in quality that initially existed between Head Start programs and child care centers relative to school-based pre-k have narrowed drastically.

Despite this progress, quality improvement has varied across the state. Some networks have experienced more growth than others, and the percentage of child care centers rated proficient still lags behind, with just 73% rated as proficient in 2018-19, in comparison to 93% of Head Start programs and 95% of school-based pre-k programs. Teacher turnover also remains high, posing a barrier to increasing and maintaining quality. Moreover, while the vast majority of at-risk 4-year-olds have access to publicly funded ECE programs, access for younger at-risk children (birth-3 years old) is still quite low, and waitlists for the child care subsidy program (CCAP) are long.

Moving forward, LDOE is building on the work of Act 3 with initiatives that aim to address these remaining challenges and learn from the communities that have been most successful thus far. As with Act 3, these initiatives, such as the establishment of Ready Start Networks, center on investing in local system-building as a strategy to improve quality and access. Across the country, the fragmented nature of publicly funded ECE has long been a major challenge, compromising both quality and access to ECE. Louisiana has made meaningful strides in unifying its ECE system around shared goals by empowering local communities – and its efforts to tackle this fragmentation provide important lessons for other states and communities.

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[1] Bassok, D., Magouirk, P., & Markowitz, A. (2019, December). *Systemwide changes in the quality of early childhood education: Trends in Louisiana from 2015-16 to 2018-19*. Study of Early Education – Louisiana Report, No. 1. Retrieved from https://files.elfsight.com/storage/022b8cb9-839c-4bc2-992e-cefccb8e877e/a3995094-d565-41c4-9aa8-ed0ddaad58b0.pdf