

CREATING COORDINATED EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS: LESSONS FROM LOUISIANA’S READY START COMMUNITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2012, Louisiana’s legislature passed the Early Childhood Education Act, known as [Act 3](#), which aimed to unify the state’s fragmented early childhood education (ECE) system and improve school readiness. The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) established new, statewide guidelines and goals for all publicly funded ECE programs (including child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k), and they empowered local communities to implement them. They created a system of early childhood community networks throughout the state that were tasked with improving quality by measuring and supporting strong teacher-child interactions, increasing families’ access to ECE by creating a unified enrollment system, and building coordination across ECE programs.

In 2019, LDOE designated seven community networks that had made considerable progress on meeting these goals as the first cohort of “Ready Start Networks” and gave them a set of additional resources and supports to further strengthen their ECE system-building and improvement efforts. Based on interviews with network leaders, this report provides insights on how these seven exemplary community networks responded to Act 3 and worked to increase quality, access, and coordination. It highlights common challenges and successful strategies, and it aims to inform other communities working to build stronger early childhood systems in Louisiana and nationwide.

IMPROVING QUALITY

As part of Act 3, Louisiana introduced a new approach to improving ECE quality, focused on conducting regular classroom observations in *all* publicly funded sites. The goal of these observations—conducted using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a widely used quality-measurement tool—was to systematically measure and in turn improve teacher-child interactions. Community network leaders needed to introduce the tool to educators across site types (child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k) and create a system to conduct observations twice a year in every classroom. Ready Start network leaders reported encountering the following common **challenges**:

- Each site type was accustomed to different existing regulations and conceptions of quality, and adjusting to the state’s unified measure represented a substantial shift in educators’ mindsets and daily work.
- Some site leaders were wary of the burden that the CLASS tool could impose on their time.
- Child care centers receive considerably fewer public dollars than Head Start or school-based pre-k do and were often struggling financially. Compensation for teachers at centers lagged behind those at other site types, and centers experienced high rates of staff turnover, which posed a barrier to improving teacher-child interactions.

Ready Start network leaders noted the following as **successful strategies** in addressing these challenges and improving quality:

- Investing in providing comprehensive training (e.g., workshops and one-on-one coaching) to help educators understand and feel comfortable with the CLASS tool
- Particularly supporting under-resourced child care centers, including by paying teachers stipends to attend trainings
- Empowering site leaders to become instructional experts

INCREASING ACCESS

To simplify families' experiences finding and enrolling in ECE programs, Act 3 required local networks to create a single, coordinated enrollment system across all publicly funded sites. Ready Start network leaders shared that the main **challenges** in accomplishing this and increasing families' access were:

- Each site type had a different existing enrollment system. Most school-based pre-k and Head Start sites operated on academic-year calendars and held defined enrollment periods, while most child care centers operated year-round and enrolled children continuously.
- Because of their distinct funding streams, site types also had differing eligibility and paperwork requirements for enrolling families.
- In some cases, a sense of competition for children to fill their slots made site leaders hesitant to engage in a cooperative enrollment process.

Common **successful strategies** that Ready Start network leaders reported included:

- Emphasizing transparent collaboration in designing the coordinated enrollment system with site leaders and using data to build trust and knowledge
- Creating publicity campaigns, events, and connections with community organizations to promote public awareness of ECE options

BUILDING COORDINATION

Increasing access and improving quality required a cohesive approach, and network leaders needed to facilitate considerable coordination across site types. Ready Start network leaders noted the following **challenges** in doing so:

- Before Act 3, each site type operated in its own silo, and educators were often not accustomed to communicating with educators at other site types at all.
- Many site leaders felt distrustful towards other site types and had a lingering perception of competition for children to fill slots, particularly about the school system "stealing" 4-year-olds during the advent of state-funded pre-k.

To overcome these barriers, Ready Start network leaders shared the following common **successful strategies**:

- Providing resources, especially to under-resourced child care centers, helped show the networks' commitment to all sites and foster site leaders' goodwill
- Creating formal opportunities for convening that cultivated active engagement, including by forming representative leadership teams and ensuring flexibility with meeting structures
- Emphasizing transparency and collaboration
- Building and sustaining strong personal connections by focusing on respect and communication

Ready Start network leaders reported that the combination of these strategies resulted in more trusting relationships across site types, shared goals, and measurable improvements in both teacher-child interactions and families' experiences finding ECE sites for their children.

[This report](#) elaborates on each of these findings, providing more details about how network leaders responded to Act 3 and how this work set them up to be Ready Start communities. It is supplemented by seven [Network Profiles](#), which dive deeper into the experiences of each of the Ready Start networks. Each profile shares context about the ECE landscape in the community before Act 3; describes the main efforts the network undertook to promote coordination, quality, and access; summarizes their progress in each area; and ends with advice from the network leaders to help guide other communities tackling similar work.