



CREATING COORDINATED EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

LESSONS FROM LOUISIANA'S READY START COMMUNITIES

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Creating coordinated early childhood systems

Lessons from Louisiana's Ready Start Communities

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AIM 1 SUMMARY REPORT

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. Louisiana’s first cohort of Ready Start Networks provide seven case studies in how communities can build more coordinated, higher quality ECE systems.

This report and the [accompanying profiles](#) are the first in a set that aim to learn from these seven exemplary networks: Iberville, Jefferson, Lafayette, Orleans, Rapides, St. Mary, and Washington. Based on interviews with network leaders,¹ they describe these networks’ experiences in the years *prior* to Ready Start, highlighting the common challenges network leaders faced and the successful strategies they used when responding to Act 3 and working to increase quality, access, and coordination. The report and profiles summarize key lessons and perspectives from the network leaders that may aid other communities—in Louisiana and across the country—in their efforts to build stronger local ECE systems.

Cohort 1 Ready Start Networks



¹ To identify and explore these key lessons, our team reviewed Ready Start application documents and conducted hour-long, semi-structured qualitative interviews over Zoom videoconferencing software with 15 current network leaders across all seven networks. In each network, we interviewed between one and four network leaders, either separately or together. We analyzed interview transcripts by identifying common ideas, keeping track of the number of similar opinions, and flagging representative quotes. Quotes cited in this report and associated profiles have been lightly edited for clarity. This study is qualitative, and our findings cannot be interpreted as representative of network leaders outside of our sample.

We present findings organized by Act 3’s main goals: improving local ECE quality, increasing access, and building coordination across site types. For each, we describe the challenges network leaders faced, the strategies they used to drive change, and the progress they have made. We also discuss remaining challenges and lessons for other communities.

QUALITY

COMMON CHALLENGES

Act 3 introduced a new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) and mandatory participation in the system for all publicly funded ECE programs. As part of the QRIS, every classroom in every child care, Head Start, and school-based pre-k program is observed twice a year using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). CLASS is a widely used tool that measures the quality of teacher-child interactions in three broad domains—emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. As part of Act 3, local networks were tasked with implementing the CLASS observations.

For each site type, implementing CLASS observations presented a significant change from business as usual. Prior to Act 3, there was no uniform measure of quality across ECE sites. Each site type (i.e., child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k) defined quality differently, faced varying quality regulations, and had vastly different experiences with both classroom observations and accountability. For example, licensed child care centers had been required to meet a set of safety requirements determined by the state but faced little additional oversight. Most child care teachers had little experience with classroom observations or with focusing explicitly on teacher-child interactions. Head Start sites followed detailed regulations set by the federal government, including the recent addition of CLASS observations in some, but not all, classrooms. School-based pre-k programs had the most experience with state-level accountability. Principals and school-based ECE teachers were accustomed to observation-based evaluations, but before Act 3 they typically used tools developed for K-12 classrooms.

Network leaders noted significant challenges implementing the observations. They needed to build buy-in in their communities for both the heightened oversight brought by the QRIS and CLASS’s definition of quality. They also needed to tackle the logistical challenge of coordinating CLASS observations. Heeding LDOE’s recommendation to build local familiarity and capacity with CLASS, network leaders encouraged site leaders to get formal training with the CLASS tool and conduct observations at their own sites. This was a challenge given leaders’ already busy schedules. Difficulties were particularly pronounced for child care centers, which had considerably fewer resources available to support quality improvement.

ADJUSTING TO NEW REGULATIONS & DEFINITION OF QUALITY

Network leaders reported that initially, educators across site types were wary about the introduction of the CLASS tool as the state’s sole measure of quality. One network leader

explained, “because it was tied to some of these higher-stakes items...it automatically appeared to be a ‘gotcha.’” According to network leaders, the introduction of this “high-stakes” approach to accountability was particularly disconcerting for educators at child care centers, who were less accustomed to classroom observations, particularly observations with impacts for funding. According to a network leader, “you’re dealing with privately owned businesses, and suddenly you’re throwing this at them that...if you want to continue to operate your business and retain your license, then you have to comply with regulations from the state. And the feeling [was]...why do we need to do this?”

Several network leaders noted that this question was particularly salient for educators whose conceptions of quality did not align with Act 3’s focus on teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS. For example, one network leader described how center directors would tell her, “‘I’m providing quality because my center is full.’ So that was their mentality... ‘I must be providing great service because...I have a waiting list.’”

According to network leaders, Head Start educators faced a similar disparity between longstanding approaches to evaluating their sites’ quality and the ratings from the new evaluation system. As one network leader noted, “so many of our Head Start providers have been doing this for thirty-plus years...To have on one side, your federal partner...[saying] that you’re doing an excellent job, and then to hear from your state partner that what you’re doing is insufficient, that’s problematic.” This network leader explained that working through these inconsistencies and building buy-in, particularly given that Head Start’s funding comes only from the federal government, was “one of our biggest challenges” in implementing the CLASS evaluation system.

WARINESS OF BURDEN

Network leaders noted that across site types, leaders’ many existing, time-consuming responsibilities made them less receptive to the new approach.

School-based pre-k programs were most accustomed to state oversight and classroom quality measurement, but network leaders indicated that some principals found the addition of the new evaluation system burdensome because it was not aligned with existing K-12 evaluation methods and timelines. One network leader described how principals in her network initially declined to perform CLASS observations in their schools: “I gave them the option, the first or second year, ‘Look, I can come out and do all the observations or we can get you trained [to do them yourselves].’ And they immediately were like, ‘...Nope, you can come, and you can do all the observations. We can’t take on anything else right now.’”

Network leaders reported that center directors, too, felt overwhelmed by the new demands the CLASS observations placed on them. These leaders were often spread thinner than those at other site types. As one network leader explained, “They might be the cook, the janitor, and the teacher for the day...on top of all their...bookkeeping...some days they’re just overwhelmed with...the many different hats that they wear.” Many publicly funded child care centers receive child care subsidies for a subset of their enrolled children but do

not receive enough predictable public funding to maintain stable finances. For directors at these centers, the scope of these state requirements may have seemed out of proportion to the funds they receive from the government.

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS FOR CHILD CARE CENTERS' QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Several network leaders pointed out that the stark differences in resources between child care centers and other site types impacted both their buy-in and their early capacity for improvement. As one network leader explained, “A primary concern was that there were similar standards and expectations across the sectors, even though there weren’t equitable resources...the big question was, ‘How do you expect child care to do what the school system does?’”

“When people are getting paid \$10 an hour to do this work, with no health insurance, no paid leave, and none of the other things that we would typically see high quality workers demand to, first of all, go into the field at all, and second of all, stay and actually be interested in continuing to improve...how much professional development can you actually expect someone...to do, realistically?”

These disparities were particularly pronounced with respect to teacher pay. [Recent surveys](#) of ECE teachers in two of these networks indicate that child care teachers earn about half as much as school-based pre-k teachers, and network leaders suggested that school-based teachers are also more likely to receive benefits. Almost all network leaders noted that the low compensation levels for child care teachers impacted centers’ ability to improve their CLASS scores. One challenge was some teachers’ lack of time, capacity, or motivation to engage in training. A network leader posed the question: “When people are getting paid \$10 an hour to do this work, with no health insurance, no paid leave, and none of the other things that we would typically see high quality workers demand to, first of all, go into the field at all, and second of all, stay and actually be interested in continuing to improve...how much professional development can you actually expect someone...to do, realistically?”

One crucial consequence of these low wages is the high rate at which child care teachers leave their jobs, or turnover. One network leader stated that as a result, some center directors may have relatively low expectations for the level of quality their sites can achieve: “I think they’re just happy if every day, they have...a warm body in every room...because it’s hard for them to find coverage.” Moreover, network leaders indicated that investing in training child care teachers can feel like a waste of time and money if those teachers don’t stay in their classrooms. One explained: “we realized we were spinning our wheels...it became that the teachers were prepared, and then were leaving.”

COMMON SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

Network leaders described investing significant resources in familiarizing educators across site types with the CLASS tool as a foundation for improvement. They provided intensive training and supportive follow-up coaching to prepare teachers for observations. Network leaders often targeted these resources towards child care centers and their teachers, who may not have been able to afford training otherwise. And, to mitigate the detrimental effects of high teacher turnover, network leaders focused on training site leaders to be consistent sources of instructional expertise for their sites.

PROVIDING COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING

Network leaders noted that providing comprehensive training for educators across site types helped offset the initial wariness that educators felt about evaluations using CLASS. As one network leader explained, “We could come into the community....and say, yes, we’re going to assess you, but also, we have the skills and expertise to guide you along the way...we turned out a ton of trainings...[and] we got our staff bought in.”

Network leaders reported applying for additional funds from the state—for example, Preschool Expansion Grant funds—and other sources to support their training efforts. “We’re always looking for different pots of funding for training,” said one network leader. Oftentimes, they reported spending those funds on workshops and materials directly linked to CLASS. One network leader described investing heavily in Making the Most of Classroom Interactions (MMCI), a course that aims to help teachers identify, understand, and build stronger teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS: “We really went hard in on MMCI...we got a grant from the state... [and] we trained over 400 [educators]...not only was it popular, but people loved it and we had really fantastic instructors...people really just bought in.”

Along with devoting funds to trainings, almost all network leaders emphasized the crucial role of one-on-one coaching in helping teachers implement new practices in their classrooms. Network leaders noted that finding funds to pay for continual coaching was key for improving the quality of teacher-child interactions. One explained: “I think the thing that impacted [quality] the most was us believing that you can have all the professional development you want, but if you don’t have that embedded follow-up in their actual job, then you’re not going to see the effects...[you have to] follow up with the instructional coaching.” With limited funds, one network leader noted that her network decided to prioritize sending coaches to sites with the lowest CLASS scores.

Many network leaders also highlighted the importance of investing network funds in high-quality curricula and materials, particularly for child care centers that could not afford these resources on their own.

SUPPORTING CHILD CARE CENTERS

Many network leaders reported spending most of their network funds on the needs of under-resourced child care centers. For example, in reaction to concerns about pay disparities,

network leaders reported paying child care teachers stipends for attending trainings to motivate attendance and compensate them for time spent outside of their usual working hours.

EMPOWERING LEADERS

Several network leaders reported that a site’s CLASS scores tended to be higher when the site leader was actively engaged with network activities. Site leaders who were empowered to train their own teachers could offer continual guidance—and keep a consistent focus on providing high-quality teacher-child interactions even if trained teachers left their jobs. After recognizing this dynamic, network leaders worked to more fully engage and include site leaders in trainings. One network leader emphasized, “I think our biggest shift for quality...is our directors becoming reliable in the CLASS tool, becoming observers themselves...that intense knowledge of the tool we attribute to their continued success. I find that when the director or owner or any administrator is an observer, they are able to be 24/7 CLASS, rather than [a teacher] just getting a CLASS observation, receiving the feedback, and that person leaving.”

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PROGRESS

Network leaders reported that their focused investments in trainings, coaching, and curricula led to meaningful improvements in quality, particularly for child care centers. One network leader gave an example of the impact of CLASS training on teachers’ skills: “We were always promoting oral language development, but the self-talk, the parallel talk, and the repetition and extension—those things are so valuable...it’s taken everything to a higher level, for sure.”² Indeed, in each of the seven Ready Start Cohort 1 communities, CLASS scores increased in the years after Act 3 was introduced.³ Notably, the substantial gap in quality between child care centers and school-based pre-k seen in the first years of evaluations also narrowed over time.

² The CLASS tool encourages teachers to promote oral language development through self-talk (narrating their own actions), parallel talk (narrating the child’s actions), repetition (rephrasing something the child has said to form a more complete statement), and extension (expanding on a child’s statement to extend the conversation further). Each of these techniques are child-centered and model language to help children learn new vocabulary and sentence structure.

³ See each network’s profile for further explanation and visual representation of CLASS scores over time.

Many network leaders indicated that their promotion of a universal measure of quality created a shared goal for all educators and that celebrating successes both increased respect across site types and helped professionalize the ECE field. One network leader explained that inviting child care center directors to be recognized for their high CLASS scores at school district meetings was an important way to show their respect for them as educators. Another described, “I think they feel so much more valued now...it’s not like, ‘Oh yeah, there’s the babysitters.’ We’re trying to make everyone so aware of [the fact that] these ladies are receiving observations. They are held to higher standards...they’re well-trained, they’re earning higher-level certificates, and everything. I think all of that has been a success.”

ACCESS

COMMON CHALLENGES

To simplify families’ experiences finding and enrolling in ECE programs, local networks were required to create a single, coordinated enrollment system across all publicly funded sites. Much like the effort to move towards a single approach to defining and measuring quality, moving towards a more coordinated approach to enrollment proved challenging—both because of the individualized enrollment needs of each site type and because of a pre-existing sense of competition across site types.

Prior to Act 3, the way families enrolled their children in ECE programs varied widely across site types. Most Head Start and school-based pre-k programs operated on academic-year calendars, and they solicited applications for a fall start during defined enrollment periods in the preceding late winter or early spring. In contrast, most child care centers operated year-round and enrolled children continuously, dependent on available slots and families’ needs. In addition, site types have varied eligibility requirements, so each site type required different paperwork and eligibility verification.

“...it is just hard to gather so many different parties with different ideals and different expectations and different processes and try to get them to agree upon a standardized process.”

Many network leaders reported that they struggled to create a coordinated enrollment system that satisfied each site type’s existing enrollment schedules and eligibility requirements. One network leader explained, “it is just hard to gather so many different parties with different ideals and different expectations and different processes and try to get them to agree upon a standardized process.” She described the coordinated enrollment creation process as, “let’s take what you’re doing over

here and fit you into a mold that applies to everybody else.”

One network leader noted that in her network, Head Start directors, in particular, expressed a lot of resistance to this process because “they have...a manual of how you do these things,

how you figure out who you should enroll...it's highly regulated about how those federal dollars are meant to serve families. And so coming in and asking them to...see where they could bend those things" was an enormous request.

Network leaders described that some child care center directors also struggled with being asked to change their independent enrollment processes: they didn't understand the need for a coordinated system, what would be required of them, or how they would benefit. In some networks, this hesitance was exacerbated by a sense of competition for children to fill their slots, coupled with a lingering distrust of the school system for "stealing" 4-year-olds when pre-k programs were created.

COMMON SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

According to network leaders, sharing information with site leaders, families, and community members helped address these challenges. Transparency helped ease tensions between site leaders and build community trust and knowledge. Increasing public awareness helped ease families' access to ECE programs.

PRIORITIZING TRANSPARENCY AND DATA

Network leaders indicated that both site leaders and families had concerns about the fairness of the enrollment system. Several shared that site leaders' lingering sense of competition made them wary of the centralized system and that fostering transparency and discussion were essential for combating this. For example, one network leader emphasized that reminding all site types that "we can't serve all children in one program" eventually helped alleviate tension and reduce the "animosity" bred from perceived competition.

Another detailed how her network enlisted a group of well-respected and experienced child care center directors to form a committee on coordinated enrollment to address the centers' resistance to the new system. This group presented to other center directors in the network about "how we're going to do it and what we're asking them to do." This peer collaboration and transparency helped more site leaders understand and engage with coordinated enrollment.

A few network leaders noted that in order to maximize enrollment across all sites, their enrollment systems limited families' control over the specific site to which their child was assigned, and this worried some families. Collecting data on enrollment and sharing these data with the community helped increase trust in the process. One network leader emphasized that, in her large parish with many school-based options, "a big part of being able to be transparent about the enrollment system was data...how many people applied, what was the match rate, what were the number of siblings who were accepted into a program with their sibling...that information was publicly available, which helps dispel myths and rumors."

Data also helped some network leaders better understand which types of families they may need to proactively seek out to ensure they have access to ECE programs. One explained that her network team “looked at our data and I think less than 3% of the families who even come to us to apply are of Hispanic background, or Spanish speaking. And wow, that’s absurd. We have to figure out how to reach out to those families [to make sure] that they know that they qualify for many of these programs, and that our job is to assist them in applying and accessing” them.

PROMOTING FAMILY AWARENESS

Network leaders reported focusing on raising public awareness about ECE options. They funded publicity campaigns and held community events, strategies that had previously been used largely by school-based pre-k. Several network leaders described holding yearly enrollment

events, often in conjunction with other community organizations, where families could learn about all the different ECE opportunities available in the community and fill out program applications. Although child care centers continued to enroll children year-round, most network leaders felt that these events helped families engage with the network and understand existing opportunities.

Network leaders also described other approaches they used to raise families’ awareness of ECE options. “From the beginning, we have tried as a network to push out as much publicity [as we can]...for [all sites]...offering free broadcasting and marketing and billboards and things like that, to boost parents’ awareness of those programs,” said one network leader. Another explained that in her network, they had found personal connections with families and partnering with other community organizations to be fruitful: “It’s less about the formal, expensive advertising campaigns, and more about the more informal kinds of approaches and networking that we see works best.”

Some networks also used more hands-on methods. One network leader described a community enrollment event at which “families come to the school and meet with the secretaries, and then there are people there that assist them with the application process. Nurses come and do vision and hearing screening, and weigh the children, all those things.”

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PROGRESS

Network leaders reported that they felt their efforts towards coordinating enrollment have led to an overall increase in families' knowledge of ECE options as well as greater ease navigating the enrollment process. One described coordinated enrollment as offering a "one-stop shop where they're educated on: here's the options, here's how much it costs, here's what you're required to do to qualify." Another highlighted the importance of coordinated enrollment's unified eligibility determination process: "families can now, through one application, determine which public funding sources they qualify for, of a whole plethora, instead of applying for them individually, or going center by center."

COORDINATION

COMMON CHALLENGES

Act 3 aimed to improve quality and access in large part through increased coordination between child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k. This coordination across site types was a completely new concept in most parishes. Network leaders shared that prior to Act 3, each site type operated in their own silo and often did not communicate with other site types at all. As one network leader put it, "We all started off basically strangers... We really didn't know anything about each other. We knew what we did, separately, at... each one of our entities."

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In addition to these siloes, in many networks site leaders felt distrustful and competitive towards other site types, particularly around schools' enrollment of 4-year-olds. One network leader, based in the parish's school district, explained that this meant "we had to build that trust, that we weren't there to take their children, we were there to make it better for

everyone, and that there were plenty of children to go around for all of us."

COMMON SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

All network leaders indicated that building trust was essential for improving coordination. Network leaders did so both through structured approaches (by providing resources, creating welcoming and engaging network activities, and prioritizing transparency and collaboration in decision-making) and more informally, by forging personal connections.

PROVIDING RESOURCES

Almost every network leader highlighted that providing resources (e.g., coaching, curricula, materials, professional development stipends) helped foster goodwill between sites and the network. They described how dedicating resources specifically towards child care was intended to both bring them closer to parity with school-based pre-k and Head Start and

show the network’s commitment to all site types: “We do that to let them know that we’re all-inclusive, we’re all in this together.”

Many network leaders reported that they targeted *all* available network funds towards child care centers because Head Start and school-based pre-k could rely on their state and federal funds. These resources, and the respect they signaled, gradually won over many centers, according to network leaders. One explained, “Anytime there was another opportunity or pilot grant...any kind of investment that we could get...we put it into child care because we knew that they were the most disadvantaged group of the program partners. We really just tailor all of our funding, all of the opportunities toward them...I think through those offerings and continuing to just give and give and give, that eventually it became this, ‘Okay, we’re willing to trust you and participate, but also, we’re going to do our part to commit.’”

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Another, who also reported that her network was constantly looking for new sources of money and applying to new grant opportunities, noted that offering these additional funds and “really trying to get folks to see this as something bigger than a state mandate was another thing that brought forth, I think, a little bit of collegiality at the table.”

CREATING WELCOMING AND ENGAGING NETWORK ACTIVITIES

Network leaders worked to create many formal opportunities (e.g., meetings, advisory groups) to build relationships while engaging in the work of Act 3. LDOE required networks to convene site leaders four times a year, and network leaders reported using these meetings to build community. They described intentionally organizing meetings (sometimes more frequent than quarterly) to be welcoming and to encourage participation: “We created monthly meetings that were open meetings for discussion; we created a forum where people could give input.”

One network leader highlighted the care her network took to cultivate an atmosphere of respect: “We just try to make everyone feel very comfortable coming to the table with us... we’d meet in our boardroom; they’d sit up in the chairs where our school board conducts their meetings. Everybody was always listened to...anybody who came [to watch] said they thought that we were successful in what we were doing because of the way that we treated the directors and everyone with so much respect and lifted them up.”

Another way that network leaders reported increasing trust is by celebrating success. One network leader noted that recognizing sites' successes during meetings—for anything from improving teacher-child interactions to efficiently navigating the federal meal program—often “opens the door for others to want to communicate.”

Flexibility was also key for fully engaging site leaders. One network leader explained that to boost center directors' attendance at meetings, they shifted schedules around to meet at lunchtime—and provided food. She noted that this wasn't the most convenient time for network leaders, “but we were trying to build that trust.”

When another network's meeting attendance was dwindling, the network leaders conducted a survey to determine how to better engage site leaders. The survey results showed that site leaders craved more discussion and less presentation of information. In reaction, the network “shifted almost 90% of our meeting time from ‘here's the important updates’ to 10% of updates and 90% of sitting down and chatting with someone about a topic or...planning, brainstorming, whatever. And I think that opened the door to more networking and more trusting in my neighbor and, ‘you know, I'm willing to share some ideas.’”

Several larger networks described establishing an “advisory board” or “leadership team” composed of representatives from each site type. These networks were careful to overrepresent child care center directors in these groups and to invite site leaders who had shown the most commitment. As one network leader explained, “it was kind of their task to build the relationships among their peers” and increase buy-in.

A few network leaders also mentioned that involving community partners—stakeholders and businesses outside of the ECE network—helped build momentum within the network. One network leader noted that an initial meeting with site leaders and community partners “was a key milestone of getting everyone on the same page” and that building a collaborative community movement helped everyone feel that “if we do it together, we'll be okay.”

PRIORITIZING TRANSPARENCY AND COLLABORATION

Several network leaders emphasized the importance of honesty and transparency for fostering genuine collaboration in network decision-making. One network leader, for instance, highlighted the need to be direct about real conflicts of interest within the network: “My goal is to be able to advocate on behalf of not just my community as a whole, but on behalf of the interests of all the people who comprise it, and their interests are not always going to be aligned. So, I think a lot of what helps in that relationship building is a willingness to see that, to both stand up for what is right and best for...the long-term health of the system, but also to hear where people are coming from, and to represent and, when appropriate, advocate for their interests. I think that has really helped with relationships over time...[that] honesty among stakeholders.”

Another network leader explained the benefits of this honesty: “As we learned things and we were able to be more transparent and say, ‘Look, this is what we were given, this is the grant, we learned this, this is how it’s being used’—that has opened some trust and built a little bit of overall willingness more to participate or commit.”

“We’re all working to make the lives of children better... We’re creating that collaborative atmosphere in which all of us feel safe to share what we think will work ... and then coming to a conclusion or a solution that’s best for everybody.”

One network noted the need for openness and truly joint decision-making: “It’s not like we said, ‘Okay, you will do this, this, and this.’ Every time it was like, ‘...well, how could we do this? What would it look like?’ ... number one: valuing every person, that every person is important, that every person has a voice in our network ... We’re all working to make the lives of children better... We’re creating that collaborative atmosphere in which all of us feel safe to share what we think will work ... and then coming to a conclusion or a solution that’s best for everybody.”

FORGING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Beyond these formal network activities, almost all network leaders also emphasized creating or maintaining personal connections with educators. In some cases, network leaders or professional development trainers were already well-acquainted with many site leaders, often from their previous work in Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies or school districts. Network leaders reported leveraging these existing relationships to increase sites’ engagement with network activities.

In many other cases, network leaders were developing relationships from scratch, or from a place of distrust. These leaders focused on respecting each person and building friendships with them. One network leader explained, “We were able to get in fairly quickly with most centers just through some quick relationship building and conversations and lots of days of sitting in the director’s office just chatting about what’s happening at their house, and with their backaches and everything else... we value them as people, first, and then... pretty much they’re on board.”

Several network leaders noted that frequent communication was key for creating and sustaining these relationships. One noted: “we created a newsletter, we created a text message group for reminders, we hyper emailed everyone on everything... that was one of the biggest things, I think, that helped.” Another explained that her network has focused on personalized communication: “We email, but we do personal calls and visits and... texts... I still like to pick up the phone, if I don’t drop by... I really do care, I’m not just saying it. I want you to hear it in my voice... I think that because we are willing to do that and we go the extra mile and created the relationship, they trust us and... they want our opinion. They want our advice. And that’s only come through lots and lots of time and practice.”

PROGRESS

Network leaders suggested that relationship building significantly increased cohesion within their networks. One noted that “the relationship that we have all built with the other partners...we call each other, email each other, and we just say, ‘hey’ and be real about what the problem is...it helps get us over the hump into the next chapter. So, I think the relationship is the major thing that has gotten us to the point where we are now.”

Another network leader explained how she saw trust driving a particular child care center’s improvement in CLASS scores: “They went from ‘Unacceptable’ or ‘Unsatisfactory’ to ‘Excellent’...just because we hung in there with her...She trusted us. We trusted her. And we built this collaborative relationship where she realized we weren’t out to get her; we were there to help and support her.”

A third network leader described how building strong relationships and taking care to frame their efforts as a network-wide collaboration with shared goals helped them to maximize available seats and serve the greatest number of children possible. This network leader explained that now, working together, “We have so many network partners across the board that what we can’t access with one, there will be someone else who can take in the children to provide that quality education for them.”

MOVING FORWARD

REMAINING CHALLENGES

While the seven communities featured in this report—and the state of Louisiana more broadly—have made considerable progress on improving the quality, access, and coordination of ECE in the years since Act 3 was passed, major challenges remain.

Low compensation and high turnover among teachers severely hinder quality improvement efforts, especially in child care centers. Networks are doing what they can to help stabilize the workforce. A few network leaders reported using CLASS data to target professional development supports to those teachers and sites that need it the most. Many attempted to mitigate the costs of teacher turnover by empowering leaders to be effective and stable instructional leaders at their sites. The underlying issue remains, however, and it compromises existing investments in professional development and coaching.

Overly complex enrollment processes and insufficient availability of ECE slots for infants and toddlers also remain significant concerns. Despite progress creating coordinated enrollment systems, network leaders saw considerable room for improvement, describing the eligibility determination process as still “Byzantine” and explaining that while it “has become more transparent and clearer, it has not become more rational” than before. In addition, networks are not yet able to fully realize the benefits of coordinated enrollment due to the lack of full participation, particularly among non-school sites. As one network leader explained, “we aren’t able to tell where there are vacant seats, where there’s demand,

where there's truly access gaps, because there's this lack of willingness to share." Another network leader remarked: "We could be serving more 3-year-olds if we were doing a better job as a network of working together."

Beyond building a more coordinated system, there is also a need for additional funds to expand the number of slots available for infants and toddlers. Almost all network leaders highlighted that their current efforts focus on increasing the share of infants and toddlers served by publicly funded ECE. One network leader explained that there is a severe shortage of supply in her network: "All we're doing is putting 90% of the families of infants and toddlers on waiting lists." Some network leaders indicated that obtaining more funding sources for the care of younger children is a current priority.

Ready Start Networks were created to address some of these remaining challenges. Specifically, Ready Start initiatives focus on strengthening network systems, data, and funding; measuring demand for publicly funded ECE; building a community coalition and establishing a formal governance structure for decision-making; and identifying, growing, and allocating shared network resources.

Network leaders' Ready Start applications show that they have embraced the focus on creating formal governance structures, including shared fundraising and financial management, which may help alleviate some remaining tensions with site leaders. Network leaders are also focusing on equitable representation across site types and stakeholders, defining clear roles and responsibilities, and establishing bylaws and procedures. In their plans for addressing access and quality struggles, most networks emphasized creating or improving online data systems. These strategies include investing in building better family-facing websites, expanding the information available online about programs and streamlining applications, and overseeing comprehensive data collection about enrollment and CLASS scores to help target resources for access and quality improvement.

With additional support and funding from the state, increased community involvement, and creative fundraising strategies, Ready Start Networks aim to drive future improvements in quality and access, both in these exemplar networks and across Louisiana. The next report in this series will document how these networks approached the objectives of Ready Start.

LESSONS FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

The achievements of the Ready Start communities in the years since Act 3 was passed—including implementing both a unified quality measurement and a coordinated enrollment system—represent meaningful strides in bringing together a historically disconnected set of ECE providers around shared goals for early education in Louisiana. The best practices identified by these seven networks can serve as an invaluable guide for other communities meeting these same challenges.

In terms of improving classroom quality, network leaders reported that the most effective lever was providing intensive, well-resourced training and coaching—not only for teachers,

but also for site leaders, to strengthen instructional leadership. To improve families' access to ECE, network leaders carried out public awareness campaigns and collaboratively designed processes to lay the groundwork for coordinated enrollment systems.

By emphasizing respect and transparency in both formal network collaborations and personal connections, network leaders forged relationships that were foundational to their successes. Actively winning grants and sharing resources, particularly with child care centers, helped to create trusting bonds and to equip educators with the tools needed to foster more supportive teacher-child interactions.

Creating large-scale quality improvement efforts in ECE is difficult, and network leaders emphasized the ways that structural barriers continue to impede their efforts. Nonetheless, the experiences of Louisiana's Ready Start networks in the years following Act 3 highlight the ways in which local system-building can reshape how communities support young children and families.

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