

A PROFILE OF LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING: LAFAYETTE PARISH EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY NETWORK

Lafayette is one of seven Louisiana communities selected as a Ready Start Network in recognition of their progress towards building a high-quality early childhood education (ECE) system. This profile highlights key drivers of Lafayette’s efforts to unify its ECE system since [Act 3](#), drawing from [interviews with network leaders](#), Ready Start application documents, and network performance profiles published by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE).

ECE BEFORE ACT 3

A few years before Act 3 was passed, the school superintendent in Lafayette felt concerned about kindergarten readiness in the parish and established a coalition called the Partners in Early Childhood Education (PECE). The vision of this group was to bring together everyone who played a role in ECE – including both publicly and privately funded sites as well as other community partners. These stakeholders

viewed ECE as a “community effort.”

Lafayette faced major challenges implementing the goals of the PECE Coalition. Network leaders noted that the different site types (child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k) “were in silos” and that there was little interaction between the Lafayette Parish School System and the regional Childcare Resource and Referral agency (CCR&R) – a community resource that aided families with finding child care options and provided centers with resources and support. Moreover, many sites resisted the idea that improvement was needed. One network leader explained that child care directors’ mentality was that they “must be providing great service because [they] have a waitlist.”


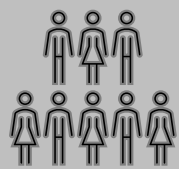
Parish leaders realized that in order to make any improvements they first needed to take a step back and focus on “meeting [sites] where they’re at, validating where they are, and telling them that [the network is] here for them moving forward.” After Act 3 was passed in 2012, Lafayette realized that the state and their PECE Coalition were pursuing similar goals, so they dismantled their original partnership and joined the Act 3 pilot instead.

BUILDING A COORDINATED LOCAL ECE SYSTEM

COORDINATION

Despite their previous efforts to unify ECE in the community, Lafayette network leaders struggled to get

LAFAYETTE AT A GLANCE

<p>Publicly Funded ECE Sites (2018-19): 68</p> 	<p>Parish Population: 244,390</p> 
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Lafayette		Louisiana
69%	White	63%
27%	Black	33%
5%	Hispanic/Latino	5%
825	Population per sq mile	105
\$56,999	Median Household Income	\$49,469
23%	Children below poverty line	27%
33%	Adults with BA+	24%

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LAFAYETTE PROFILE

all publicly funded ECE sites to work together as they transitioned to the work of Act 3; lack of trust was high and communication and willingness to collaborate were low. As one network leader noted, there was “already this animosity about school system versus other site types who were competing for the same children.” At first, this meant network leaders were “chasing teachers and trying to get everyone on the same page willing to work together...[or] even just willing to sit at the same table with someone of a different program type or have a conversation with someone in a different position.”

Lafayette focused on building trust and ensuring that all sites understood the expectations of Act 3. They created a 12-member network leadership team that included leaders from all site types and tasked them with “build[ing] the relationships among their peers” and representing their interests. Network leaders also began surveying all sites each year to determine how best to increase engagement and collaboration. From those surveys, they learned that educators wanted to spend more time interacting at the meetings, participating in action-oriented brainstorming activities, and receiving more frequent updates from the network. To increase communication, network leaders created a newsletter, sent out frequent text message reminders, set up an email group, and rebuilt their website. A network leader noted that establishing communication and building these relationships was “not something that develops on its own...[you] kind of had to force it.”

The Lafayette Parish School System, which serves as the network’s lead agency, applied for and was awarded a local CCR&R grant. This made them the first network in the state to have their own CCR&R agency that was attached to the school system. Having “everything under one roof,” including the funding attached to the CCR&R, helped the network streamline its resources and efforts in increasing access and quality.

QUALITY

Lafayette invested heavily in coaching and training opportunities. Network leaders explained that “every dollar that we’ve gotten...has gone specifically to quality.” They invested in a variety of training opportunities – including CLASS resources and videos – and built up the capacity of trainers so they could provide these workshops frequently. Network leaders specifically focused these efforts on the sites that required the highest levels of support and targeted funding towards child care centers because “they were the most disadvantaged group.”

Network leaders also realized that frequent teacher turnover – especially in the child care centers – undermined their emphasis on teacher training. Oftentimes when teachers left, they were replaced by teachers who lacked training, and the site leaders were not prepared to train and support these newly hired teachers. To address this, the network began including site leaders and other administrators in training opportunities as well. They strove to “make those directors and administrators... accountable and

APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES

- Improve trust by focusing explicitly on relationship building across all site types
- Seek input and feedback from all stakeholders through regular surveys
- Combat the instability caused by teacher turnover by providing site leaders and administrators with training to support and train new teachers
- Streamline the application process and advertise to families

equipped to coach and to train and to become more of an educational leader.” Leaders were then able to train new teachers, observe their own sites, and create an environment that was “24/7 CLASS.”

ACCESS

Lafayette created its coordinated enrollment system with a focus on streamlining the application process and bringing it online. Families can use the website to find detailed information on each ECE site, determine their eligibility for a particular program, complete a single application, and indicate their rank ordered preferences.

To boost parental awareness of ECE options and the new coordinated enrollment system, the network advertised on billboards, offered sites free broadcasting and marketing, and utilized the resources and connections of their newly integrated CCR&R agency. They also coordinated with other family-oriented community organizations, such as the parish’s Early Childhood Department, the foster care liaison, and the ESL department, to refer parents to the services they may need. The offices of all of these community partners are conveniently located in the same building as the network’s lead agency, and one network leader described that they are “uniquely housed in a way that if a parent comes in, [they are] like a one-stop shop.”

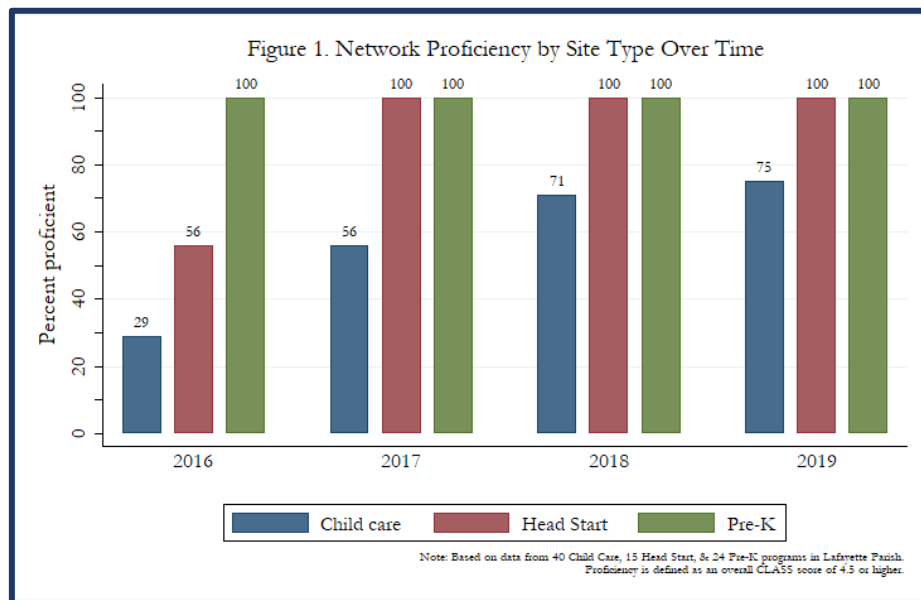
PROGRESS SINCE ACT 3

COORDINATION

Lafayette network leaders believe they have made considerable strides in coordinating the network’s efforts since Act 3. One network leader credited much of their progress to acquiring the CCR&R grant, explaining that it was “the missing link,” and that integrating the CCR&R with the network has been helpful in streamlining coordination and improvements in quality and access.

Still, site leaders’ commitment to the network varies, and some do not consistently attend network meetings or engage in activities. Even though they have made changes to the meeting format to accommodate site leaders’ preferences, attendance has remained lower than network leaders would like,

and they are considering ways to increase engagement and representation from all sites.



QUALITY

Lafayette’s ECE classrooms have shown significant improvement in CLASS scores in the years since Act 3. As seen in Figure 1, by 2017, all Head Start and pre-k programs were rated as proficient. The average CLASS scores of all site types have increased. Head Start classrooms made a major jump in 2017, and as shown in Figure 2, the

“quality gap” between pre-k classrooms and other site types has narrowed steadily. Network leaders attribute these improvements to their extensive trainings, noting that they “see the transformation,”

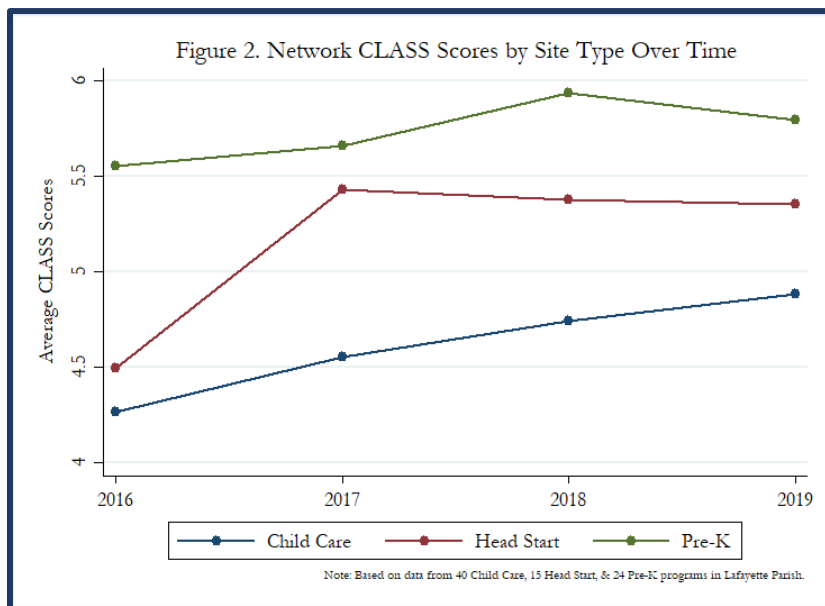
especially at sites that have taken full advantage of the opportunities. Network leaders also noted that they “really see a difference when a director or an assistant director is actually a reliable observer [for CLASS] and can support the teacher better.”

Despite these improvements in the quality of teacher-child interactions, many sites have continued to lack access to curricula and other materials to aid instruction. The network has been working to obtain more funding to help sites secure and properly implement these resources.

ACCESS

Network leaders believe that the coordinated enrollment system has increased families’ awareness of and access to ECE programs, but they noted that “there’s still a lot of parent education that needs to be done.” The vast majority of at-risk 4-year-olds in the network are enrolled in an ECE program (85-95%), but the network is still serving a much smaller proportion of younger at-risk children, ages 0-3 (11-29% are enrolled).

Network leaders also reported that the coordinated enrollment system has provided a helpful but incomplete picture of Lafayette’s ECE supply and demand. They noted that the number of applications they have received through the system has increased each year, indicating improved family awareness – but not all sites’ applications go through the system. The network hopes to increase both sites’ and families’ engagement with the system so that it can track demand and enrollment throughout the network. Network leaders hope that with that information, they could more precisely direct families to sites with openings.



ADVICE FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES



Focus on building and sustaining trust: Lafayette network leaders believe that their focus on building relationships and trust has been vital to their success as a network. As one network leader noted, once there is a “question or doubt of trust...it’s hard to regain it back.”



Establish collective responsibility: Network leaders emphasized the importance of establishing collective responsibility across all sites for the network’s efforts to improve ECE, which they believe can be accomplished by giving educators a voice and letting them “build the plane.”



Provide everyone with the tools they need to support learning: For other communities working to improve their own ECE systems, Lafayette also stressed the importance of equipping everyone involved – including teachers and site leaders and administrators – with the tools and skills they need to provide children with high-quality learning experiences.