

A PROFILE OF LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING: NEW ORLEANS EARLY CHILDHOOD NETWORK

Orleans 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 Orleans’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

Prior to Act 3, ECE in Orleans was fragmented across site types (child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k) – especially because the public schools had been decentralized following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As a result, schools operated independently of each other and had their own individual, state-funded pre-k programs. To help families navigate school choice in the K-12 enrollment process, the city invested in

systems, building a centralized, lottery-based enrollment system called OneApp.



The OneApp K-12 enrollment system allowed families to fill out a single application for any pre-k program in the system, but child care centers and Head Start sites outside of schools were not included. One network leader noted, “Before Act 3, if you were a family looking for child care – particularly looking for a public seat – you were basically on your own.” Families had to conduct their own research for programs that met their needs and independently navigate the complex process of applying for the child care subsidy program (CCAP) or Head Start.

Perhaps in part because of these distinct enrollment paths, families viewed the role of each ECE program type differently. One network leader explained that by the time Act 3 was passed in 2012, families were “more and more inclined to send their 4-year-olds to pre-k” because they “felt that 4 is old enough that you should be in big kid school,” but many families still thought of care for younger children, or any care outside of the schools, as “babysitting.”

Orleans, led by the advocacy organization Agenda for Children, volunteered to participate in the pilot years of Act 3 and began efforts to unify its ECE system and implement the quality improvement initiatives before they became mandatory statewide. Agenda for Children also ran a Child Care Resource and Referral

NEW ORLEANS AT A GLANCE

Publicly Funded ECE Sites (2018-19): 154	Parish Population: 390,144
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Orleans	Louisiana
35%	63%
60%	33%
6%	5%
2029	105
\$41,604	\$49,469
33%	27%
38%	24%

[Click for Network Website](#)

(CCR&R) agency – a community resource that provides centers with resources and assists families in finding child care. Many child care site leaders had a longstanding, supportive relationship with Agenda for

Children, which helped ground their Act 3 work in trust.

BUILDING A COORDINATED LOCAL ECE SYSTEM

COORDINATION

Network leaders noted that adjusting to Act 3’s new standards of accountability and facilitating coordination across over 150 ECE sites “just took a lot of work. It took a lot of building of relationships, building of trust...building of standards and...accountability practices.” To do this, network leaders focused on transparency and communication, mainly by holding routine meetings. These meetings provided a space for site leaders to raise their concerns, resolve issues, and have their input valued. To ensure that they were listening to and understanding the interests of all types of sites, network leaders also created an advisory board that included representatives from child care centers, Head Start, and pre-k programs. This collaborative structure and consistent communication, coupled with Agenda for Children’s longstanding relationships in the community, helped build trust between sites and the network.

QUALITY

Network leaders faced resistance from many sites in response to Act 3’s singular focus on CLASS as a way to measure quality. Network leaders recalled that adjusting to CLASS as a “universal standard of performance” was stressful, especially because to many site leaders and teachers it “automatically appeared to be a ‘gotcha.’” Child care directors, who were new to opening their classroom doors for any observation and evaluation, were particularly wary of the new requirements. Meanwhile, Head Start leaders were more accustomed to observational metrics, including CLASS, but struggled with the need to now be responsive not only to their usual federal regulation but to this new state- and network-level accountability as well.

Large differences in resources across site types created major challenges for quality improvement, particularly in child care settings. Only some child care centers had received critical grants to help them rebuild after Hurricane Katrina, and many lacked access to stable public funding streams. In turn, these child care centers experienced high rates of teacher turnover, and it was also common for the child care sites to close altogether. This instability created significant barriers for quality improvement. As one network leader described, “there’s just a lot of resources being given and thrown at particular classrooms or centers that may or may not be there in...the next year after – which means there’s also a sustainability concern.”

Against the backdrop of this churn, network leaders focused on providing thorough and frequent trainings for all educators. Network leaders noted that they were able to keep continuity in coaching staff, which ensured consistency in training. The network also used CLASS data to offer targeted professional development supports for educators. One network leader explained, “The fact that we could come into the

APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES

- Involve stakeholders in collaborative decision-making and regular, transparent communication by creating an advisory board
- Combat hesitation about assessment by providing consistent, targeted coaching based on CLASS
- Build trust in the coordinated enrollment system by collecting and sharing data

community...and say...yes, we're going to assess you, but also we have the skills and expertise to guide you along the way" was key for shifting educators' attitudes. To further overcome hesitations about accountability, network leaders relied on a group of influential site leaders to "guide and shepherd" their peer leaders and teachers as "they were also becoming more versed in the tool and therefore could help assuage any potential concern."

ACCESS

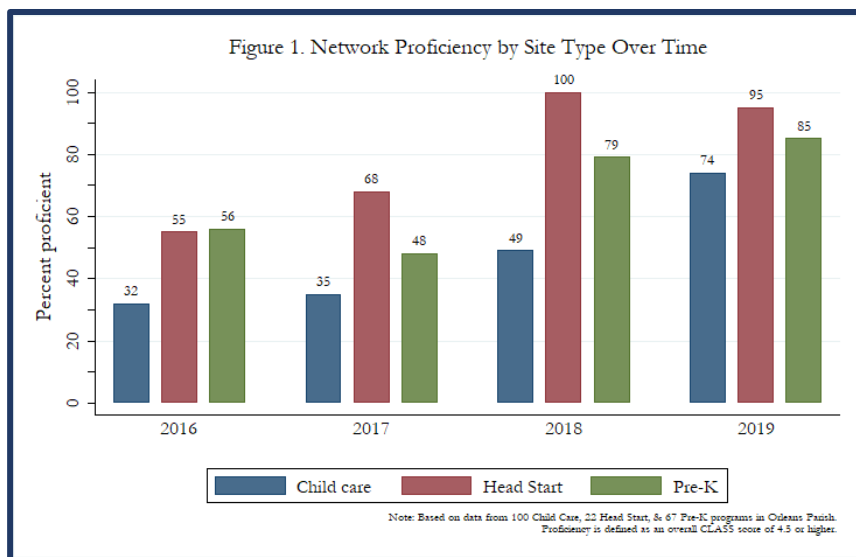
Network leaders noted that the large size of Orleans made "getting everybody at the table" to create a centralized enrollment system difficult. While tackling this logistical challenge, network leaders were able to capitalize on the existing OneApp enrollment system for K-12 schools to create a centralized system that included other ECE options in addition to the school-based pre-k programs. According to a network leader, the coordinated enrollment system then allowed families to "check which programs they are eligible for. They can verify eligibility for all the programs through one platform. And then they can get enrolled into [some programs] through a unified lottery system."

Network leaders also created a coordinated information campaign to help families become more aware of their ECE options and the enrollment system. Initially, many families were wary of the system, as they had limited control over the particular site to which their child might be assigned. Network leaders noted that transparency and honesty – including collecting and sharing data around exactly how well the system was working to place families in the programs that they desired – built trust. One network leader noted that, for example, it is "incredibly hard for a family if a sibling doesn't get into school with a brother or sister," but because of the data, they were able to explain to parents that "95% of siblings get into school with their brother or their sister." Being able to share these details helped families believe that "the system did what it was supposed to do. And that's just huge because...that person will tell other people that they trust the system and it's working."

PROGRESS SINCE ACT 3

COORDINATION

Network leaders reported that they have made great progress in building relationships with sites over time,



largely driven by frequent communication and setting policies that make compromises to meet the needs and interests of the different site types. One leader noted, "When there's a problem, we try to jointly solve it and jointly address it...now it's much more transparent."

QUALITY

In the years since Act 3, all site types in Orleans have made significant improvements in quality. Overall, while 42% of sites were rated proficient in 2016, this rose to 80% of sites by 2019. The

increases were particularly striking in child care settings, where the percent of proficient centers more than

doubled, from 32% in 2016 to 74% in 2019, as shown in Figure 1. The average CLASS scores for all site types have also increased since 2016, as evident in Figure 2. Most notably, the average scores in child care centers rose almost one full point, nearly eliminating the “quality gap” that initially existed between centers and other site types.

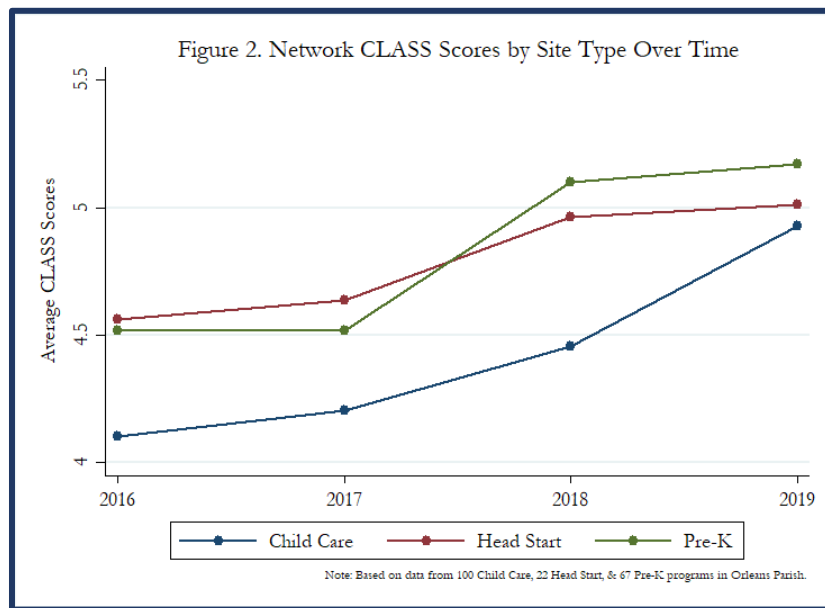
According to network leaders, there is growing understanding among early educators both about the importance of quality in general and about the utility of focusing on CLASS in particular. One network leader explained, “there’s nobody

out there saying right now, ‘CLASS is awful,’ which is definitely what people were saying early on.” This network leader also noted that now, educators generally embrace CLASS and accept its usefulness, though some wish that it was not the only measure of performance given that resource gaps and teacher turnover continue to pose significant barriers to improving CLASS scores.

ACCESS

While the coordinated enrollment system has improved the process for families to find and apply for ECE, particularly for school-based pre-k and Head Start, network leaders noted that “there are miles and miles to go” in improving families’ access. They explained that putting the different eligibility requirements in one system has “revealed important cracks” and “shown how complicated it is” for parents to verify their eligibility for various programs, fill out applications, and enroll their children. Network leaders noted that eligibility verification for the different site types has become more transparent for families but “has not become more rational,” and they indicated that further simplification is needed moving forward.

The vast majority of at-risk 4-year-olds in the network are being served – 95-100% are enrolled in an ECE program – and network leaders believe that once families have navigated the application process, the seats are “distributed equitably.” Access to seats for younger children, ages 0-3, has remained much lower, with only 11-29% of at-risk children in this age group enrolled in a program, and network leaders noted that there are not nearly enough infant and toddler seats in Orleans. Network leaders also emphasized that they do not fully understand what families want from ECE and why some families may choose to not engage with ECE at all. One explained, “Until we really address why families make the choices they make, we’re not going to be able to really deliver a system that works for everybody.”



ADVICE FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES



Ensure transparency in your processes: Orleans network leaders highlighted transparency as essential, particularly in a large community like theirs. Network leaders described the importance of clear and honest communication, especially about how funds are spent and why decisions are made. They also encouraged communities to embrace systems of public accountability that can create this transparency, noting that “rules are not your enemy” but rather can help foster clear expectations and trusting relationships.