

A PROFILE OF LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING: RAPIDES EARLY CHILDHOOD NETWORK

Rapides 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 Rapides’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

According to network leaders, prior to Act 3, parents in Rapides often struggled to enroll their young children in publicly funded ECE programs. The different site types (child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k programs) each used a different registration process and timeline. Head Start and school-based pre-k programs had similar but separate registration periods each spring, and child care

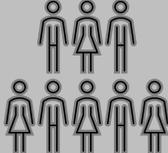
centers did not have any coordinated schedule for registration and enrollment. In addition, applying for the child care subsidy program (CCAP) was especially challenging for families. It was not uncommon for families to start the process but not finish it, not enrolling their children in ECE at all.

There was also significant distrust between site types prior to Act 3. A network leader explained, “We had Head Start in one little silo, we had child care centers, and we had public pre-k. And the three didn’t mix, the three didn’t talk, there just wasn’t any collaboration.” There was also a sense of competition, particularly for the enrollment of 4-year-olds, which created feelings of resentment and additional division between site types.

Use of curricula varied widely across the site types. Head Start used one curriculum, public pre-k used another, and most child care centers did not use any curriculum. Similarly, site types differed in their experiences with classroom observations. Some Head Start teachers had already been observed using CLASS. Teachers in public schools were accustomed to classroom observations but used a different observation tool. Classroom observations were less common in child care settings, which generally did not have a system in place for measuring classroom quality.

RAPIDES AT A GLANCE

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| Publicly Funded ECE Sites (2018-19): 62 | Parish Population: 129,648 |
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| Rapides | | Louisiana |
|----------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| 64% | White | 63% |
| 32% | Black | 33% |
| 3% | Hispanic/Latino | 5% |
| 100 | Population per sq mile | 105 |
| \$47,269 | Median Household Income | \$49,469 |
| 26% | Children below poverty line | 27% |
| 21% | Adults with BA+ | 24% |

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Despite these challenges, Rapides was eager to begin the work of unifying their ECE system and volunteered to participate in the pilot phase of Act 3, starting to implement quality improvement initiatives before participation became mandatory statewide.

BUILDING A COORDINATED LOCAL ECE SYSTEM

COORDINATION

The lack of collaboration and trust between site types was a major barrier to creating a unified ECE network in Rapides. One network leader explained that “nobody trusted anybody” because of the perception that schools “were taking all the 4-year-olds from the early learning centers. So, we had that stigma to overcome.”

Network leaders built trust by forming personal connections. They primarily communicated with teachers and directors through phone calls and in-person visits instead of emails, and one network leader explained that “just chatting about what’s happening at their house and with their back aches” was key to improving relationships. Network leaders also focused on being “very transparent” with all of the site leaders and teachers and “getting their feedback, making them feel like they were part of the decisions that we made.”

QUALITY

Rapides network leaders cited teacher turnover – specifically in child care centers – as a major barrier to improving ECE quality in the network. They explained that for the child care centers, “it was the turnover because they’re paid minimum wage...you’re trying to get them to understand it’s a profession, not just a job.” High rates of teacher turnover meant that new teachers had to be trained constantly, and directors were not always prepared to do so.

Rapides’s quality improvement strategy focused on implementing intensive professional development for teachers. Directors were also included in professional development activities so that they were “empowered...to become instructional leaders” at their sites.

In order to provide these opportunities, network leaders vigorously pursued every “funding project that came along.” One network leader explained, “whether it was curriculum, whether it was those teacher-student interactions, whether it was the Teaching Strategies GOLD with small group work...I mean, we had PD [professional development] on everything.” Importantly, network leaders in Rapides emphasized follow-up support to help teachers and directors apply what they learned in these trainings to their teaching in the classroom. One explained, “you can have all the PD 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.” Towards that goal, network leaders noted that whenever there were any “extra monies that we could put in coaching...we did.” Coaches and teachers “worked side by side. They mentored, they taught...they helped those teachers to feel confident about their skills and what they were doing.”

APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES

- Build trust by forming personal connections and focusing on regular, transparent communication
- Provide intensive professional development for all teachers and leaders and invest money in follow-up coaching and mentoring
- Engage center directors in the coordinated enrollment system and hold community enrollment events

In addition to providing extensive professional development, Rapides invested heavily in ensuring all sites used the same curriculum, which they viewed as a strategy for assuring all sites provided the same “high-quality care to every child.” They also took advantage of any opportunity to apply for grant money and often used the funds they received specifically for child care centers, which were “severely lacking in materials and supplies and technology” compared to the more resourced Head Start and pre-k programs.

ACCESS

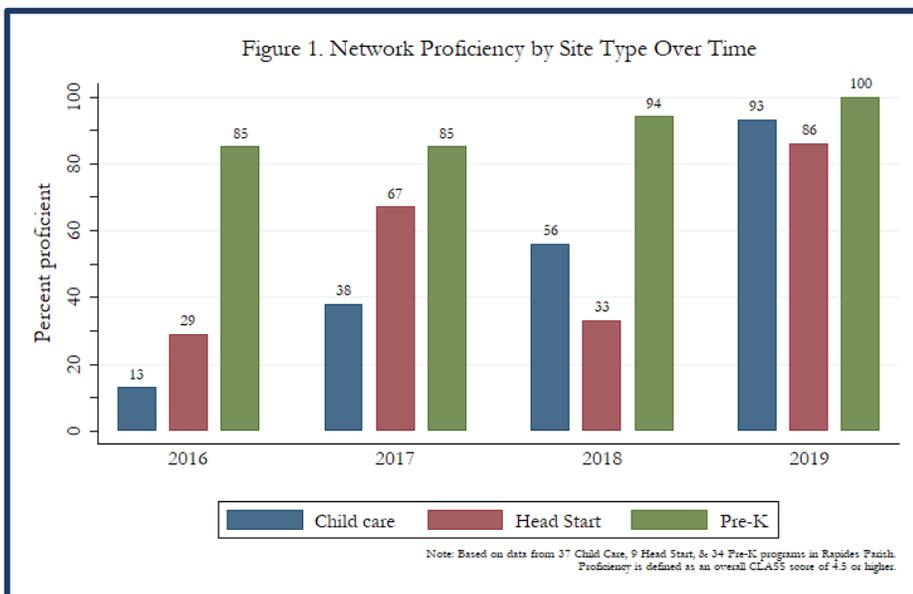
When creating a coordinated enrollment system, network leaders were challenged by the widely varying enrollment schedules across site types. One network leader explained that while Head Start and school-based pre-k programs registered children for the following fall starting in early spring, child care centers enrolled children “24/7, every day of the year.” These differences meant it was “a huge challenge for us to get [Head Start] directors to buy in to the coordinated enrollment.”

To help bring child care centers fully on board with coordinated enrollment, the network created a committee composed of the center directors “who have the most influence” – these directors understood the purpose of the coordinated enrollment system and could communicate about it to their peers. Network leaders noted that increasing buy-in from the child care centers has been a gradual change, but one that has helped meet families’ needs. With the cooperation of child care centers, the network organized large community events several times a year to increase parental awareness of ECE options and the procedures for registering. The network viewed these events as an opportunity to give back to the community and “provide fun activities” like face painting and storytelling for the children, in addition to providing parents with information about registering for ECE at all the site types. The network also created a Facebook page and advertised on billboards, television, and the radio to improve access to information.

PROGRESS SINCE ACT 3

COORDINATION

Network leaders have seen tremendous improvement in their relationships with sites. One network leader



explained that it took a lot of time and trust to create any coordination, but now, “any time they have an issue, they’re going to come to us. They’re going to text us. They’re going to call us.” Network leaders believe that it is because they went “the extra mile and created the relationship” and “value them as people first” that the sites trust them for advice.

QUALITY

In the years following Act 3, Rapides has experienced considerable growth in quality, as

measured by CLASS scores. As shown in Figure 1, in 2016, only 13 percent of child care centers and 29 percent of Head Start classrooms were rated as proficient based on their CLASS scores. By 2019, these

figures had increased to 93 and 86 percent, respectively. Child care centers, in particular, have made steady progress. As shown in Figure 2, by 2019 the gap in quality between child care centers and pre-k classrooms was about half as large as it was in 2016. As sites have achieved these improvements in quality, network leaders have made a point to recognize them individually, often celebrating their hard work and progress with balloons or cookies.

ACCESS

In Rapides, nearly all at-risk 4-year-olds (95-100%) are enrolled in publicly funded ECE, but access is significantly lower for younger at-risk children, ages 0-3 (11-29% are enrolled). These numbers have remained fairly steady in the years since Act 3. Network leaders cited funding constraints as the reason for the gap in access between age groups, explaining “we’re doing a really good job with our 4-year-olds, but that’s because we have more funding sources,” including state funds for school-based pre-k. Network leaders acknowledged the greatest need is among the birth-to-2 population and noted they are strategizing how to fund slots for the youngest children.

In addition to increasing the supply of ECE seats, Rapides hopes to continue developing their coordinated enrollment system in an effort to help families find programs that meet their needs. To date, not all providers have fully committed to the coordinated enrollment process, and network leaders hope to improve participation among sites through continued relationship-building efforts.

ADVICE FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES



Strengthen relationships by building trust with follow-through and equitable treatment of sites: Rapides network leaders emphasized taking the time to build strong, collaborative relationships with sites above all else. Network leaders also mentioned the importance of following through – that “your actions and your words have to be the same.” They repeatedly prioritized the under-resourced child care centers in how they spent their funding, an action that instilled trust and signaled their commitment to helping all sites improve. Building these relationships and trust has taken years of effort and is an ongoing process, but network leaders believe they are an essential part of improving their ECE system.

