

# A PROFILE OF LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING: ST. MARY EARLY CHILDHOOD NETWORK

St. Mary 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 St. Mary’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


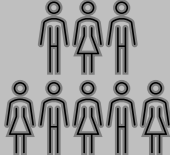
When Act 3 was implemented, the St. Mary Community Action Agency, the network’s lead agency, was motivated to improve ECE opportunities across the network, but building coordination across all site types (child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k) posed a challenge.

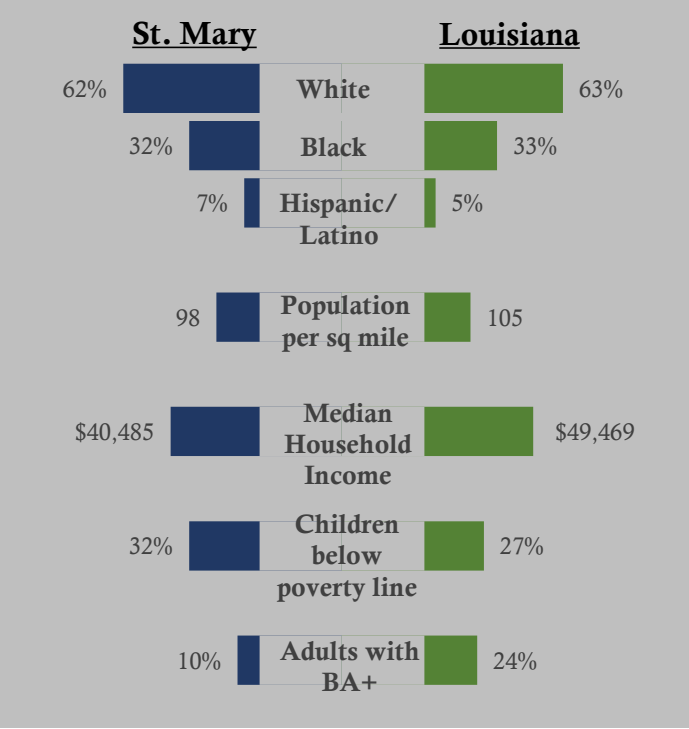
One network leader explained that before Act 3, sites were in constant competition with each other for

children and funding, and there was no interaction or communication between site types: “We really didn’t know anything about each other.” Quality and access to resources varied considerably across sites, and site types were employing different instructional approaches and curricula.

While the school district took on the role of the lead agency in most networks, St. Mary is unique in that its lead agency is the local Head Start grantee, the St. Mary Community Action Agency. This agency also manages over 40 other social services, including housing, transportation, and rehabilitation. Through this work, network leaders were already connected with diverse groups within the community, which positioned them well to build coordination across site types.

### ST. MARY AT A GLANCE

<p><b>Publicly Funded ECE Sites (2018-19):</b> 27</p> 	<p><b>Parish Population:</b> 49,348</p> 
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## BUILDING A COORDINATED LOCAL ECE SYSTEM

### COORDINATION

The network’s initial efforts to build coordination across site types were met with resistance. In addition to feeling competitive towards each other, sites were wary about the role that the network would serve and feared that it was going to take their seats. As one network leader explained, “People resist what they are not familiar with.”

To address these concerns and to foster relationships with sites, network leaders explained that they

“started off just trying to find out where everyone was, what were the strengths and the weaknesses across

all of the early childhood programs.” Network leaders held monthly meetings with site leaders where they discussed network activities, addressed concerns, and brainstormed collective strategies to improve ECE quality. In between meetings, they frequently called and emailed site leaders, sometimes just to “say hey” and keep the lines of communication open and to emphasize the importance of each site’s participation in the network’s efforts to improve ECE. Through regular communication, network leaders forged relationships with sites, taking care to frame their effort as a collaborative one. One network leader explained that they often stress that “we cannot do this without them...it’s more than just us, we need everyone to have a collaborative effort.”

The network also specifically focused on addressing the needs of child care centers, which lack stable public funding, explaining that, “whenever we find any pots of funding or opportunities where we can help them with some funding or help them get supplies, anything that we can do to help them, the child care centers, we do that to let them know that we’re all-inclusive, we’re all in this together.”

## QUALITY

St. Mary’s quality improvement strategy centered on providing frequent professional development opportunities and ensuring that teachers at all sites had access to key resources. Network leaders worked to train all educators on CLASS and regularly sought input from teachers on the training that they needed. To ensure consistency throughout the network, teachers and leaders from all sites trained together. A network leader explained, “that way, when a child leaves Head Start or leaves child care, or leaves the charter school, wherever they leave, we’re all training...we’re all learning the same thing, and the same basic techniques to move the children farther.”

St. Mary also worked to ensure that all sites had access to the resources and supplies that they needed for children to receive high-quality learning experiences. The network helped child care centers obtain a curriculum – the same one that school-based pre-k classrooms were already using, which was compatible with the one that Head Start was using. When the school board bought books for the pre-k classrooms, they purchased enough for the child care centers and Head Start as well.

## ACCESS

According to network leaders, the largest challenge when working towards a coordinated enrollment system was the varying eligibility requirements across site types. Child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k all had differing income eligibility thresholds, and programs affiliated with the local Chitimacha Tribe could only accept children who lived on the reservation.

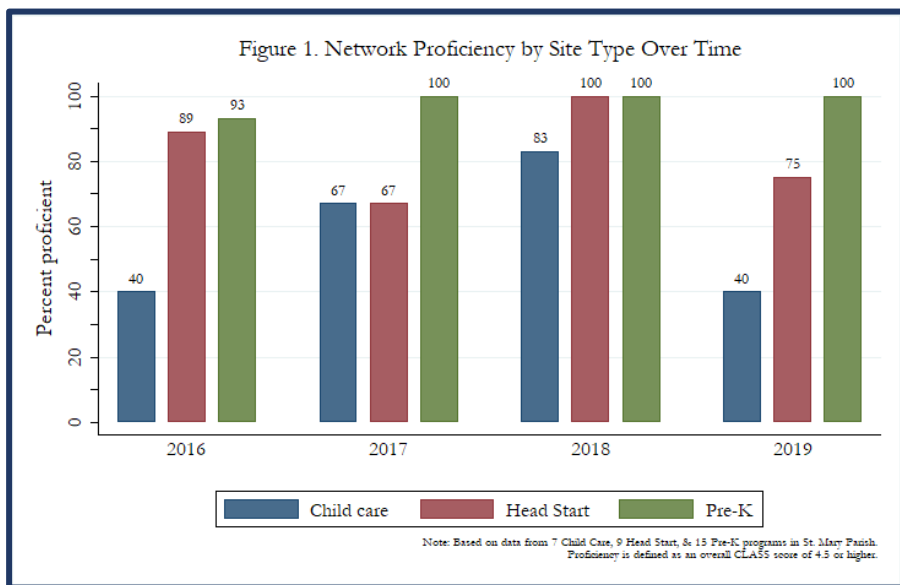
St. Mary focused on designing their coordinated enrollment system so that they could accurately place children into programs for which they were eligible while also maximizing their available seats to serve the

## APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES

- Build relationships through regular communication like monthly meetings and frequent emails
- Bridge gaps in public funding by capitalizing on the network’s ability to identify and pursue funding opportunities
- Use the coordinated enrollment system to maximize available seats and publicize ECE options via community events

largest number of children possible. At the same time, they emphasized that they “needed to learn how to let the parent have the choice and we just present ourselves as the best educators that we can be.” To do this, St. Mary organized various community meetings and events, including a parade and a “coordinated round up” that they held in conjunction with other community organizations. They also distributed pamphlets and flyers about ECE options in both English and Spanish to locations throughout the community, including libraries, hospitals, and doctors’ offices.

## PROGRESS SINCE ACT 3



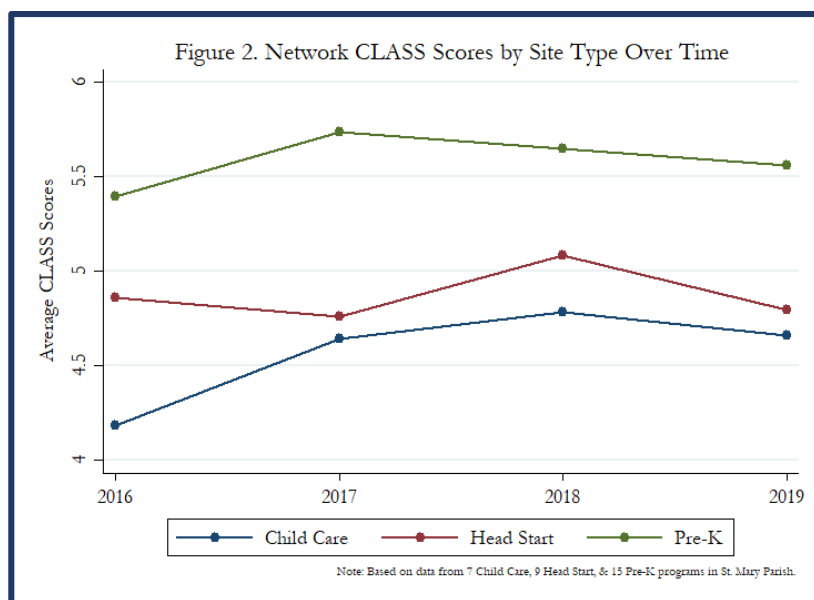
### COORDINATION

Network leaders credit their monthly meetings with helping them to better understand the dynamics of the sites and coordinating their efforts to create one cohesive ECE system. They believe that by working to address the distinct needs of each site and giving them individualized attention, they have made all of the site leaders and teachers feel valued. A network leader described that the spirit of competition has transformed into one of collaboration and that it now feels like “we’re all in this together.”

### QUALITY

Since 2017, all pre-k classrooms in St. Mary have been rated as proficient, as seen in Figure 1. Head Start and child care centers have made some improvements in their average CLASS scores, as seen in Figure 2, but their progress has been uneven.

Network leaders feel confident that the trainings have been paying off and that “everyone wants to improve themselves.” The network leaders believe that “no matter where the [children] were going to go, they are going to receive high-quality education all the way around because our network really implements and enforces and really believes in providing...quality education to the children.”



### ACCESS

Access to ECE seats is high for at-risk 4-year-olds, with 95-100% enrolled, but the access to seats for younger children, 0-3, has remained much lower, with just 11-29% of this age group enrolled in an ECE program.

While access remains a problem and many child care programs have waiting lists, network leaders noted that the coordination between site types introduced by Act 3 has led sites across the network to work together to provide children with seats. A network leader explained, “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... there’s another child care center that may have that availability.”

Moving forward, St. Mary is working to find innovative ways to engage families and make sure they understand the ECE opportunities that are available for their children, including a television commercial and a social media presence. The network is also working to streamline the burdensome registration process by implementing an online enrollment program that will consolidate the registration processes for all of the different ECE programs into a universal, web-based application.

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## ADVICE FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

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**Build relationships across all community partners:** Network leaders emphasized the importance of building personal relationships among all sites and involving all community partners in discussions to better integrate ECE services for families.



**Invest in a common curriculum and training across sites:** St. Mary network leaders recommended that other communities working to improve ECE quality and access should invest in a common curriculum for all site types as well as a rigorous training program that empowers teachers and site leaders to maximize their potential in supporting young learners.