

# A PROFILE OF LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING: WASHINGTON PARISH EARLY CHILDHOOD NETWORK

Washington 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 Washington’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).

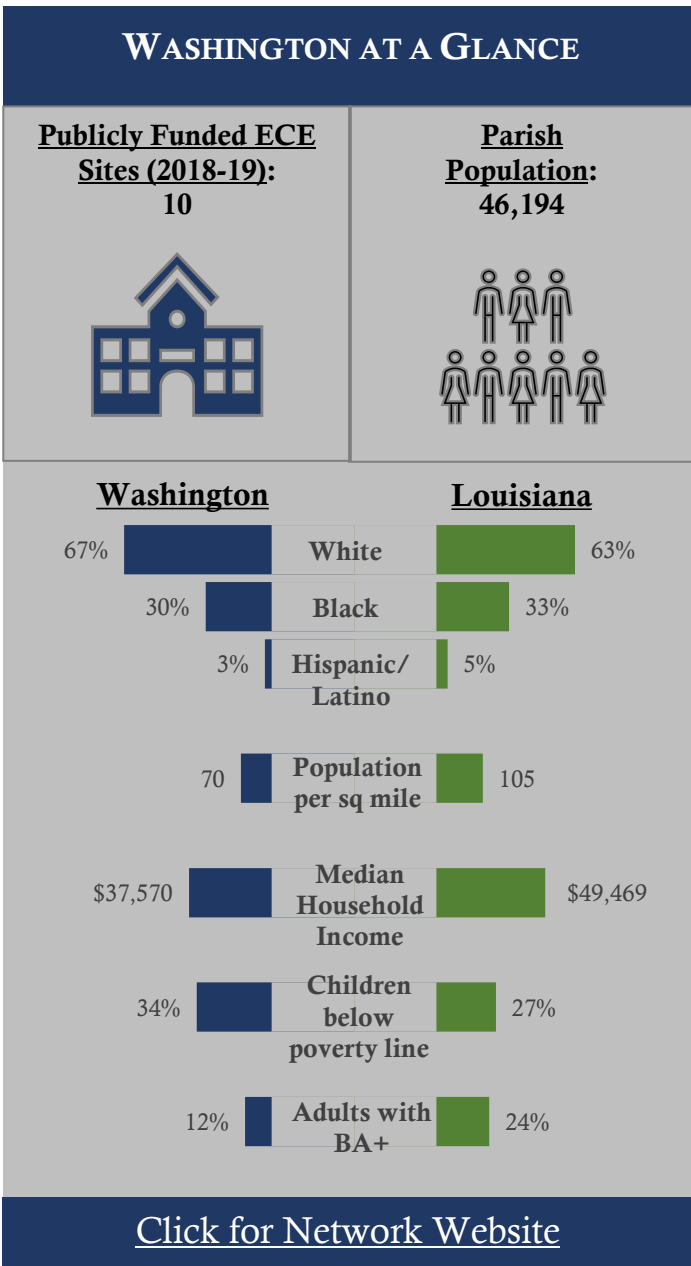
## ECE BEFORE ACT 3

Prior to Act 3, Washington had already substantially invested in increasing ECE access for 4-year-olds. By blending various funding sources, Washington was able to provide universal, school-based pre-k for all 4-year-olds, and each year, the school system held a cowboy- and cowgirl-themed “round up” to advertise pre-k to families and help them with the enrollment process. But, as a network leader noted, universal pre-

k “was just the tip of the iceberg...learning doesn’t just start when you’re 4 years old.” According to this leader, they needed to work on expanding access to high-quality ECE for younger children as well.

Network leaders noted that quality was highly variable across the different site types (child care centers, Head Start, and pre-k), and child care centers often lacked sufficient materials and training related to instruction. One network leader explained that the centers “did not have curriculums for the most part...the teachers were well meaning and caring individuals, as were the directors, and ready to learn, but they just didn't really know exactly where to begin.”

Lack of communication and trust across site types also posed a challenge to ECE system-building. According to a network leader, the advent of universal pre-k for 4-year-olds caused substantial changes in enrollment for child care centers and Head Start, who felt that “the 4-year-olds had been stolen from them, so to speak.” They feared that continued school system expansion might eventually put them out of business.



## BUILDING A COORDINATED LOCAL ECE SYSTEM

### COORDINATION

Network efforts to build an ECE system that connected child care centers, Head Start, and pre-k were hindered in part by stark differences across site types, particularly in funding, teacher pay, and public perception. Ensuring that leaders from all site types became engaged in the work of Act 3 was a central challenge. Network leaders noted that they grappled with an existing sense of distrust across site types and with leaders feeling “just sort of overwhelmed...trying to become familiar with all of these new systems” during the rapid rollout of Act 3.

In response, network leaders focused on “building friendships,” an approach that was aided by the small size of the network. They conducted frequent site visits, informal meetings, and conversations to walk directors and teachers through the new regulations and make sure they felt supported and heard.

Washington also targeted funding specifically towards child care centers in an effort to bring them to greater parity with the more resourced Head Start and pre-k classrooms. For example, to account for their lower hourly wages, Washington offered stipends to center-based teachers for attending professional development. Sharing these resources and inviting those at all site types to participate in network-wide professional development activities together helped to foster trust and mutual respect.

### QUALITY

Washington’s quality improvement strategy focused on providing intensive training on CLASS and TS GOLD for all site leaders and teachers, including practice “walk-through” observations for teachers (before the official, state-mandated observations) to “give them feedback to make them feel more comfortable and to see areas that they needed to work on.”

A network leader explained, “I felt like that was the most important thing,” to make sure that teachers had “some basic understanding of what they were trying to do, you know, and why.” Network leaders also noted a concerted effort to include center directors in these trainings because of the high rates of teacher turnover in the child care centers. This way, directors would be better equipped to train new teachers when necessary and offer them constant guidance and feedback on their teaching practices.

Washington network leaders also decided that all three site types would use the same curriculum so that they could “speak the same language” and share resources and experiences with one another. In choosing which curriculum to use, the network drew on input from school-based pre-k teachers, and they settled on a curriculum that was appropriate for all age groups. The network purchased this universal curriculum for all sites not already using it, and they leveraged grant money to obtain necessary manipulatives and provide continuous professional development around using the curriculum. Network leaders have

### APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES

- Improve trust and communication by “building friendships” through informal meetings and frequent site visits
- Equalize resources across sites by targeting funding to those with greatest need
- Combat the instability caused by teacher turnover by providing site leaders with training to support and train new teachers

continued to emphasize frequent training opportunities, believing that, “If you don't really follow up on your professional development, [it] doesn't matter how much money you throw at it.”

## ACCESS

To improve access, Washington concentrated on information campaigns, including a billboard and the annual round up, which, in the years following Act 3 included the child care centers and Head Start. A network leader explained, “We thought if we did a big push in spring, you know, for everybody, it would help them as well. And I think it has.” The round up has become a signature event in the community: Families have an opportunity to learn about the different educational programs available to their children, fill out a universal application (a single enrollment form used by all sites), participate in health screenings, and receive information on funding sources, transportation, and before and after care options. Although centers enroll children year-round, the annual round up event helps families understand all of the options that are available.

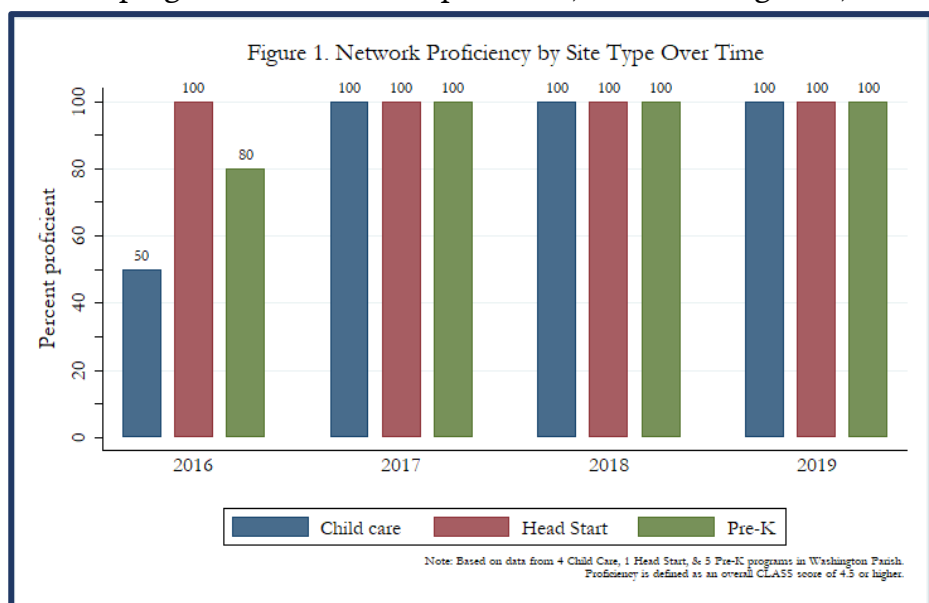
## PROGRESS SINCE ACT 3

### COORDINATION

Network leaders noted that leaders’ and teachers’ engagement with the network across all site types increased as they “began to understand what this [the work of Act 3] is all about and the value of doing this. Not just because the state says you have to do it, but because it’s good for the children and it improves outcomes for them.” Each site has an equal vote in network decisions. In addition to equal representation, network leaders believe that the systemwide training opportunities have helped to eliminate some of the “us vs. them” mentality across site types and create close bonds and friendships that are built on mutual respect and understanding. Moving forward, they are continuing to focus on relationships, hoping to improve connections within the broader community and engage politicians to advocate for the importance of ECE.

### QUALITY

Washington has shown considerable improvement in CLASS scores in the years following Act 3. By 2017, all ECE programs were rated as proficient, as seen in Figure 1, with several rated as excellent. The

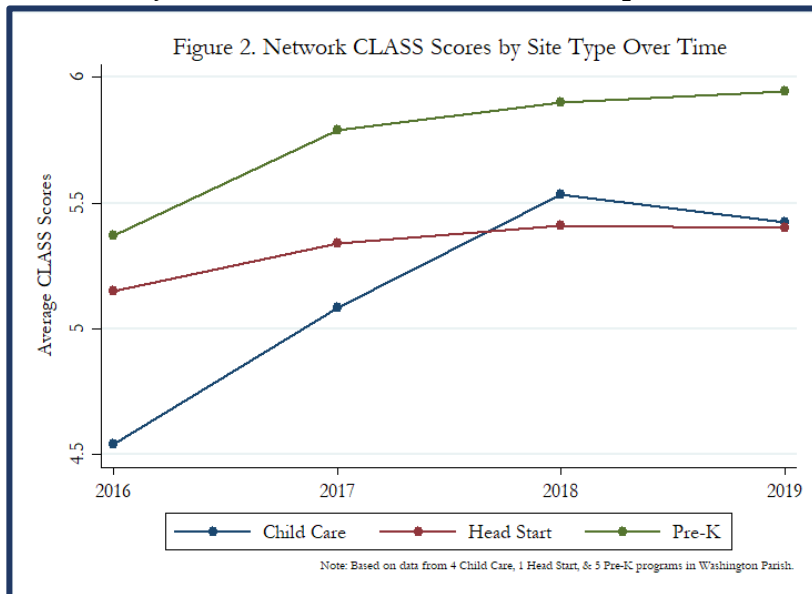


progress that child care centers, in particular, have made is evident in Figure 2. While all site types improved their CLASS scores, the gap in quality that existed between child care centers and pre-k classrooms narrowed considerably over time. Network leaders shared that they have heard anecdotally from pre-k teachers that the children who come to them from publicly funded centers are now more prepared and more advanced in their language skills and social emotional development than other

children. A network leader described, “We have seen a great level of improvement in instructional strategies... Not that the teachers weren't kind and caring and providing emotional support, but even that has been fine-tuned and improved. We're still not exactly where we want to be, but we are proficient across the board...And we know that the better we get, the better outcomes for the children.”

## ACCESS

Access to ECE seats for at-risk 4-year-olds in Washington is high, thanks to universal pre-k (95-100% are enrolled), but access to seats for younger children, ages 0-3, is far lower (11-29% are enrolled). According to network leaders, this is in part because families of these younger children may not be interested in ECE outside of the home or may be relying on family members. One leader summarized, “We're still not where we want to be on that, but we're serving more children than ever before within the network.”



Network leaders believe that families in the eastern portion of the network in particular may lack access to high-quality programs. While the network has added seats, they have been focusing on gaining more funding and renewing partnerships within the community to increase access to ECE opportunities. Network leaders also aim to improve data collection on families' needs and preferences to help assess demand, prioritize resources, and improve coordinated enrollment.

## ADVICE FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES



**Build relationships and enlist support across all community partners:** According to Washington network leaders, one of their greatest strengths has been building close relationships and treating everyone as equally important partners. For other communities working to strengthen their own ECE systems, Washington leaders emphasized the importance of building mutual respect and understanding; enlisting the support of local community members, businesses, and politicians; sharing grant money and prioritizing sites with access to less funding when possible; and continually investing in professional development.