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

Jefferson 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 Jefferson'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, there was very limited interaction between child care centers, Head Start, and school-based pre-k programs in Jefferson. According to one network leader, each site type operated in separate "silos," and each was governed by "different guidelines, different standards, [and] worked under different state agencies."

JEFFERSON AT A GLANCE

Publicly Funded ECE Sites (2018-19):
125

Parish Population:
432,493

	Jefferson	Louisiana
White	65%	63%
Black	28%	33%
Hispanic/Latino	15%	5%
Population per sq mile	1463	105
Median Household Income	$54,032	$49,469
Children below poverty line	28%	27%
Adults with BA+	27%	24%

Click for Network Website

Network leaders realized that each site type would be coming to the work of quality improvement with a different orientation towards CLASS as an evaluation tool. Head Start was already required by federal guidelines to use CLASS to support their instruction, but the tool was completely new for both child care centers and the school-based pre-k programs. Network leaders hoped that CLASS would be viewed as "a welcome change," for school-based pre-k programs, as the existing observation tools they used for accountability were designed for K-12 teaching, without ECE in mind. Still, they recognized that the state's new guidelines would represent a considerable shift from the status quo for all sites.

Jefferson did not shy away from the challenge of building buy-in for CLASS and the other system-building efforts included in Act 3. The network volunteered to implement the quality improvement initiatives of Act 3 before it was mandated statewide, joining the second cohort of pilot networks.
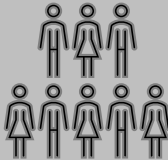

BUILDING A COORDINATED LOCAL ECE SYSTEM

COORDINATION

As they began this process, network leaders encountered feelings of distrust from site leaders over the role that the network would play, particularly about how it would spend its funds. To address this and build relationships across site types, network leaders said they put "a lot of time and energy and effort to bring people together to learn about one

another, learn about Act 3, and learn about what the requirements were." They held monthly meetings where they focused on communicating expectations, increasing transparency of network activities and decisions, and creating a forum where site leaders could give input.

To ensure that all site types were well represented in decision-making, network leaders established a small advisory group composed of eight site leaders in the community, including representatives from all site types and an overrepresentation of child care center directors. This group met more frequently and was tasked with thinking through the requirements of Act 3, communicating with their colleagues, and helping make network decisions. Network leaders say they established strong relationships with this smaller group, who in turn engaged with leaders at other sites to ensure that they also had a voice and felt involved.

QUALITY

The low levels of funding and resources available to child care centers created the biggest hurdle for system-wide quality improvement. "A primary concern," noted one network leader, "was that there were similar standards and expectations across the sectors, even though there weren't equitable resources. Clearly child care had less resources."

To build equity, the network invested its resources primarily in child care centers. Since school-based pre-k and Head Start already had funds for professional development, one network leader noted that they "really looked at it as an opportunity to support the child care sector." Network leaders offered frequent trainings for teachers. They held Saturday sessions and organized a group coaching series on CLASS, in addition to one-on-one coaching in the centers.

Network leaders noted that teacher turnover, particularly in child care centers where compensation is much lower than the other site types, was a major barrier to their quality improvement initiatives. To incentivize teachers to invest in professional development, teachers who attended trainings received stipends to compensate them for their time. Network leaders also invested in the child care directors, training them on CLASS and TS GOLD and working to "deepen their knowledge and deepen or support their ability to help their teachers." This way, they would be able to train and support new teachers as necessary and maintain the quality of teacher-child interactions at their site.

APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING EXISTING CHALLENGES

- Lessen feelings of distrust by bringing representatives from all site types together in an advisory group to build relationships and improve transparency

- Improve equity by investing network resources into training and coaching for sites with the least funding and most need

- Address high rates of turnover by compensating child care teachers for the time they invest in professional development

- Streamline information for families by creating a single website that shows them their ECE options based on income and other criteria

ACCESS

To create a coordinated enrollment system, network leaders prioritized building a family-facing website. This website now functions as a "one-stop shop of information about what kinds of programs might be available" for all families and includes a single application that network leaders say truly meets the needs
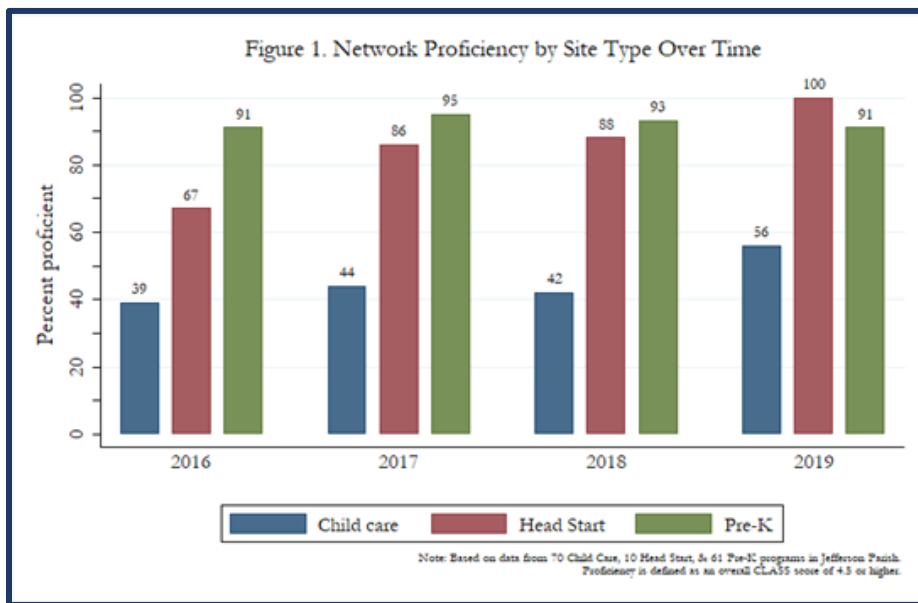
of all site types. For example, if families are over the income eligibility thresholds for the child care subsidy program (CCAP), they are shown private-pay child care center options. Network leaders supplemented the website with face-to-face help sessions and informational fairs where they directly assisted families with completing applications and the enrollment process.

Jefferson raised families' awareness about the coordinated enrollment system website and other ECE resources through public service announcements, television commercials, billboards, and local events. They noticed, however, that "it is less about the formal expensive advertising campaigns and more about the more informal kind of approaches and networking," so the network also partnered with community organizations to pass out flyers, post on bulletin boards, and use word of mouth to spread information to families.

PROGRESS SINCE ACT 3

COORDINATION

Network leaders reported that the emphasis on CLASS has improved relationships and coordination across site types, as it has given educators "the opportunity to have a shared lens, to look at, talk about, train on, [and] support…adult-child interactions." They also noted that the small advisory group has helped them coordinate decision making and build buy-in across all the site types. Moving forward, network leaders are still working on building stronger relationships with all sites.

Figure 1. Network Proficiency by Site Type Over Time

Note: Based on data from 70 Child Care, 10 Head Start, & 61 Pre-K programs in Jefferson Parish. Proficiency is defined as an overall CLASS score of 4.5 or higher.

QUALITY

The quality of teacher-child interactions in Jefferson has increased since the start of Act 3, which network leaders attribute to frequent training opportunities. Both child care centers and Head Start classrooms have seen notable increases in proficiency rates over time, as seen in Figure 1. For instance, the percentage of Head Start classrooms rated as proficient rose from two-thirds of programs in 2016 to all programs in 2019. As shown in Figure 2, the quality gap between pre-k and the other two site types has narrowed considerably. One network leader described the network as making "great strides, particularly in the child care sector."

Furthermore, network leaders reported that most educators are on board with using CLASS and are highly motivated to use it now that they have witnessed the positive impact it can have. Network leaders said that once they were trained on the tool, many educators "fell in love with it." They also noted that they consistently hear from child care educators that CLASS has "really professionalized their field."

While CLASS has provided sites with a common framework, there is still room for growth, and more professional development around curriculum and assessment is critical. Network leaders noted that

teachers across all site types struggle with the fidelity of curriculum implementation, and that the network needs to focus on helping "teachers to understand child assessment" and how to "connect that to [their] knowledge of where the child is developmentally."

ACCESS

Network leaders noted that the website and coordinated enrollment efforts are a step in the right direction, but challenges remain. While Jefferson has increased parent awareness and eased the application process, reaching families

Figure 2. Network CLASS Scores by Site Type Over Time

Note: Based on data from 70 Child Care, 10 Head Start, & 61 Pre-K programs in Jefferson Parish.

whose primary language is Spanish has been challenging. Network leaders also believe that more could be done to improve communication and coordination across site types to better meet families' needs. They noted that perhaps more children could be served with better strategic planning across site types.

According to network leaders, there are a sufficient number of seats in Jefferson for 4-year-olds, and 95-100% of at-risk children in this age group are enrolled in an ECE program. While they have made progress in increasing the number of seats available for younger at-risk children, ages 0-3, less than 10% of children in this age group are enrolled in a program. Network leaders noted that the real work will be expanding the number of available seats for these younger children. Despite successful attempts to advertise to families and encourage them to apply for ECE programs, one network leader described, "all we're doing is putting 90% of the families of infants and toddlers on waiting lists." To address this, the network is working on strategies to increase funding to support the creation of more slots.
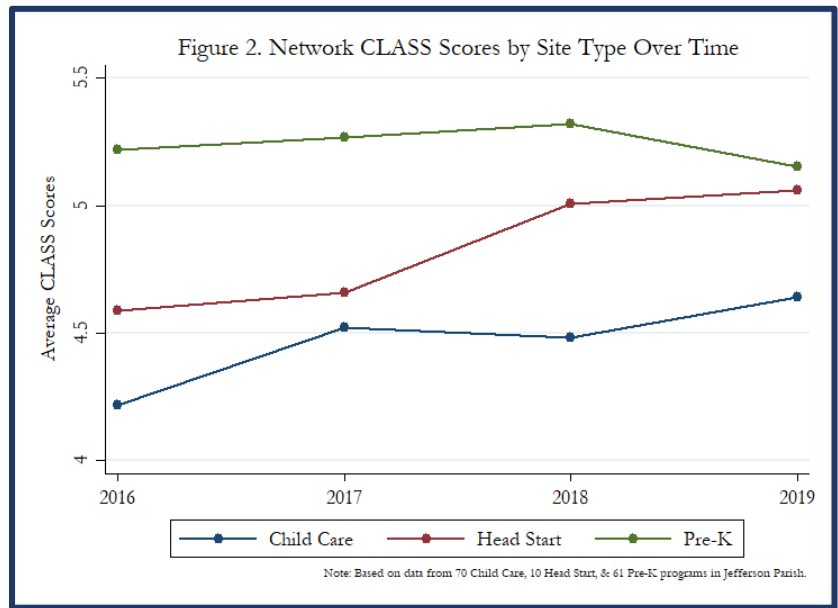
ADVICE FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

Build a foundation for collaboration with relationships: Jefferson network leaders believed that the most important strategy for improving the ECE system is building strong relationships, as relationships are the foundation for tackling all other goals. They noted that fostering trust and collaboration across sites and within the community is "ongoing work" that it is essential.