

Building Buy-In: Teacher and Leader Views on a Statewide Effort to Improve Teacher-Child Interactions

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SUMMARY

- In 2012, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 3 which mandated an overhaul of the state's early childhood system.
 - Act 3 centered around improving access to, and the quality of, publicly-funded early childhood opportunities through an accountability system focused on observational measures of teacher-child interactions.
 - This brief describes early educators' reactions to the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) focus on teacher-child interactions using data from the Study of Early Education in Louisiana (SEE-LA), a workforce survey fielded in two Louisiana communities.
 - We find high levels of support among early educators for Louisiana's approach.
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BACKGROUND

High-quality early care and education (ECE) can have a profound impact on children's lives. However, creating high-quality ECE experiences at scale has proven difficult. To address this challenge, nearly all states have introduced a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), which are accountability systems that aim to measure, publicize, and incentivize quality in early childhood settings.

Louisiana's approach to QRIS is unique in two ways. First, unlike most states which allow ECE sites to opt-in to the accountability system, Louisiana requires all publicly-funded sites including Head Start, state preschool, and subsidized child care centers to participate. Second, while most states measure a large set of quality features in their accountability system, Louisiana's system is focused solely on the quality of teacher-child interactions as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)—a widely-used measure of interactions that has been repeatedly, albeit modestly, linked to young children's learning.

In Louisiana's QRIS, all publicly-funded classrooms are observed at least twice a year using the CLASS. These scores are aggregated up to the site level, and, based on their scores, sites are categorized as: Excellent, High Proficient, Proficient, Approaching Proficient, or Unsatisfactory.

Ratings are publicized so that parents making ECE choices have better information about ECE quality.

The ratings are also tied to a variety of supports and resources, such as access to training opportunities for both teachers and leaders. Providers and families are also eligible for refundable tax credits depending on the quality ratings.

The effectiveness of any accountability effort depends on the extent to which it yields changes in practice on the ground. In turn, this depends on support for and implementation of reforms at the site and classroom levels. The state has invested substantial resources in ensuring early educators understand both the CLASS tool itself and the broader goals of the accountability system. This brief uses a large workforce survey from two Louisiana communities to better understand how early educators have responded to LDOE's efforts to improve ECE quality through a focus on teacher-child interactions.

DATA

We explore local buy-in for Louisiana's unique approach to quality measurement using data from the 2018 SEE-LA Workforce Survey. In the fall of 2018, all site leaders and lead teachers in all publicly-funded ECE sites in two Louisiana parishes were invited to complete the survey. Jefferson parish is an urban, densely-populated parish in southern Louisiana outside of New Orleans. Rapides parish is a geographically large, rural parish in central Louisiana. Overall, 85% of early educators responded, providing a comprehensive picture of ECE in these parishes.

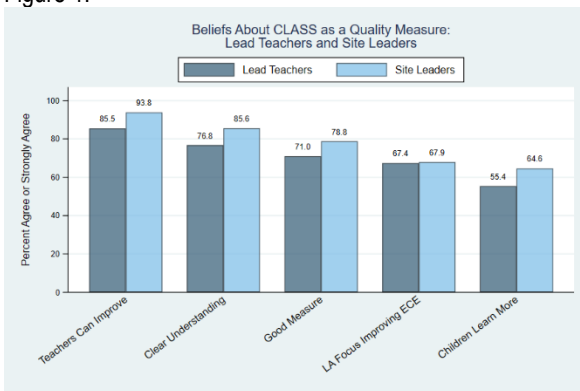
Our sample included about 736 lead teachers and 132 leaders. On average, lead teachers were 42 years old; site leaders 49 years old. Almost all teachers were female. Lead teachers had an average of 11.4 years of ECE experience; site leaders had slightly less at 10.6 years. Sixty-five percent of site leaders held a Bachelor's degree as compared to 45% of lead teachers.

This brief highlights the percentage of early childhood leaders (including principals, child care directors, and Head Start directors) and lead teachers who reported that they "agree" or "strongly agree" with a series of items asking them about CLASS and teacher-child interactions.

FINDINGS

General buy-in for Louisiana’s approach to measuring quality. The majority of teachers (77%) and leaders (86%) in both communities indicated they had a “Clear Understanding” of the CLASS (see Figure 1). Early educators also reported high levels of support for CLASS. Most site leaders (79%) and lead teachers (71%) indicated that CLASS is a good way to measure the quality of teachers’ interactions with children (“Good Measure”), and two-thirds believed that CLASS will help improve the quality of ECE sites in Louisiana (“LA Focus Improving ECE”). Most teachers (86%) and leaders (94%) viewed CLASS as something they can change in their classrooms (“Teachers Can Improve”). Finally, 65% of leaders and 55% of teachers endorsed the statement that children learn more in classrooms with high CLASS scores (“Children Learn More”). Together these findings suggest that most early educators in Louisiana believe in the CLASS as a tool that they can use to improve the quality of their classrooms and programs.

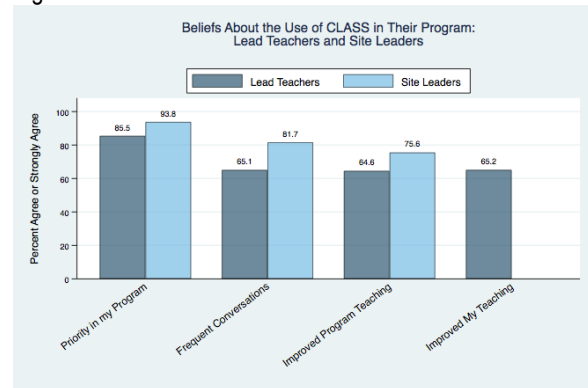
Figure 1.



Early educators’ experience with the CLASS in their programs. As expected, nearly all teachers who were eligible to receive a CLASS observation in the previous year reported being observed. Although nearly all leaders reported providing CLASS feedback to teachers at least twice a year (92%), just 50% of teachers reported receiving feedback this frequently (not shown), suggesting that more attention is needed to ensuring Louisiana’s substantial investment in CLASS observations can translate into actionable feedback for teachers.

Still, when asked about the use of CLASS in their own site (see Figure 2), the vast majority of site leaders (94%) and lead teachers (86%) agreed that ensuring high quality teacher-child interactions is a “Priority in my Program,” and about 85% of leaders and 65% of teachers reported having “Frequent Conversations” about CLASS.

Figure 2.



CLASS as a driver of quality improvement. Most leaders and teachers agreed that they have seen improvements in teaching since Louisiana adopted CLASS (see Figure 2). For example, 75% of site leaders and 65% of teachers agreed that CLASS has improved teaching in their program (“Improve Program Teaching”); and 65% of teachers agreed that CLASS has “Improved My Teaching.”

Variability across sectors. Support for the CLASS did not vary meaningfully across Head Start, state preschool, and child care centers. Teachers in schools were less likely to agree that they had frequent conversations about CLASS, or that Louisiana’s focus on CLASS had improved teaching in their site or in their classroom compared to teachers in child care or Head Start; however 60% of teachers in schools still agreed with each statement.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

LDOE’s ambitious efforts to change the quality of children’s ECE experiences depends on early educators’ implementation of the state’s unique approach to measuring and incentivizing quality. The SEE-LA survey provides evidence that buy-in is generally high across two diverse communities and across ECE site types. The majority of teachers and leaders believe that CLASS is a useful tool and support LDOE’s focus on CLASS.

As LDOE continues to invest in efforts to improve teacher-child interactions at scale, it should continue to monitor buy-in, and work with sites and parishes to ensure improvement strategies are approachable and related to the core work of early educators.