SEELA

Network Leader Survey Report

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Overview

In 2012, Louisiana passed *Act 3*, a law designed to unify the fragmented ECE system, improve the quality of early learning opportunities, and increase school readiness statewide. Act 3 sought to bring together all early childhood sites receiving public dollars— including public school pre-kindergarten (pre-K), Head Start, and subsidized child care—into a single system with consistent quality standards and supports.

To implement the law, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) created local early childhood community networks. The networks generally serve as the leader for local early childhood quality improvement efforts. Every network has a lead agency that oversees the implementation of Act 3's provisions. They coordinate local classroom observations for publicly-funded sites, facilitate a coordinated enrollment process to help families find programs that meet their needs, and organize community meetings to bring together site leaders from all site types. Today, 64 networks operate across the state. While the LDOE plays a central role in setting the quality improvement agenda, many implementation and management decisions are left to individual network leaders, who work in diverse contexts with different local needs.

In September 2019, leaders from all 64 networks were invited to participate in a Network Leader Survey. The goal of the survey was to better understand how local communities responded to Act 3. Leaders from 58 networks responded to this survey, resulting in an overall response rate of over 90%. This report summarizes key findings from that survey.

In this report we provide information about who Louisiana's early childhood network leaders are, describing their educational background and experience working in education. We then summarize their perspectives on quality improvement efforts in their networks, focusing in particular on: (1) building a cohesive system that brings together public school, Head Start, and child care sites; (2) the CLASS™, and Louisiana's approach to accountability; (3) professional development opportunities; (4) curriculum; (5) child assessments and; (6) credentialing opportunities for child care teachers. We also highlight their key successes and challenges in fostering system-wide quality improvements.

The findings indicate that leaders generally believed their networks are making progress toward building unified early childhood systems. Network leaders largely supported Louisiana's approach to measuring classroom quality and reported providing various resources to their sites and teachers through professional development, curriculum, and other supports.

Who are Louisiana's network leaders?

Figure 1.

Leaders' levels of education

- Bachelor's or some graduate work — 8%
- Master's — 80%
- Doctorate — 12%
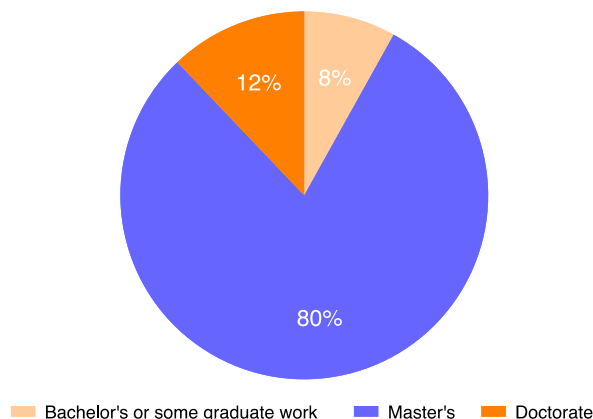
On average, site leaders had high levels of education and substantial experience in ECE. As shown in **Figure 1**, over 90% of network leaders had earned either a master's degree or a doctorate. Network leaders also brought many years of experience to their roles. They spent, on average, 14 years working in early education within their communities (**Figure 2**).

Figure 3 presents network leaders' prior professional experiences in education roles. Over 75% of network leaders had previously served as leaders in a public school system, and about a quarter had served as a leader at a Head Start site. About 40% had previously worked as ECE teachers in either a public school, Head Start, or child care site, and some network leaders had teaching experiences in multiple ECE settings.
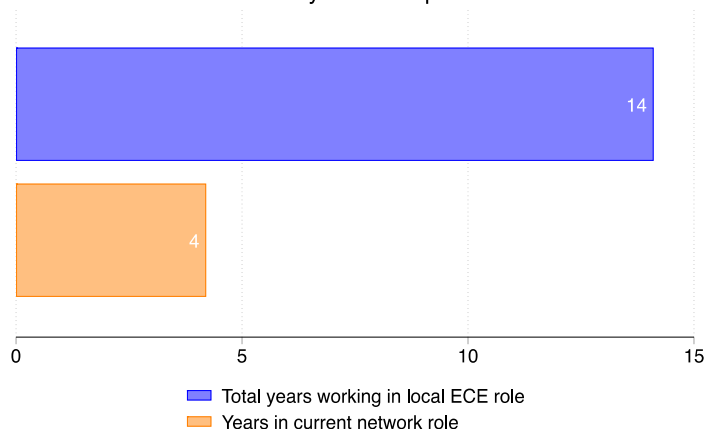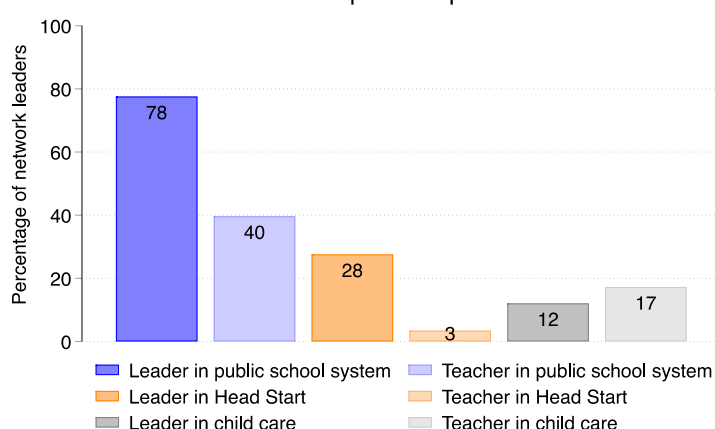
Figure 2.

Leaders' years of experience

- Total years working in local ECE role — 14
- Years in current network role — 4

Figure 3.

Network leaders' previous professional roles

Percentage of network leaders

- Leader in public school system — 78
- Teacher in public school system — 40
- Leader in Head Start — 28
- Teacher in Head Start — 3
- Leader in child care — 12
- Teacher in child care — 17

Site types represented across community networks

Community networks aim to maximize families' access to high quality programs through collaboration between public school, Head Start, and child care sites. **Figure 4** shows that most network leaders (83%) oversee all three of these site types in serving publicly-funded children.

Figure 4.

Network composition

Note: N=58 leaders
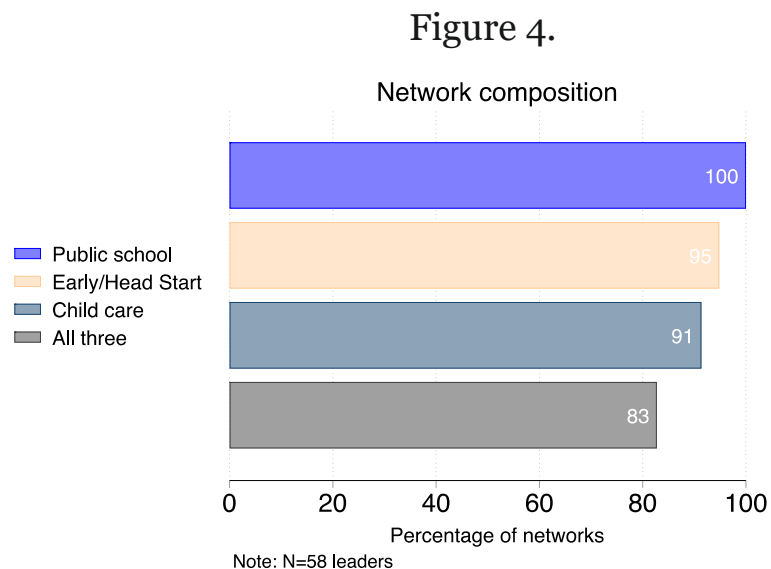
Leaders' perceptions of collaboration and fragmentation across sites

Figure 5.
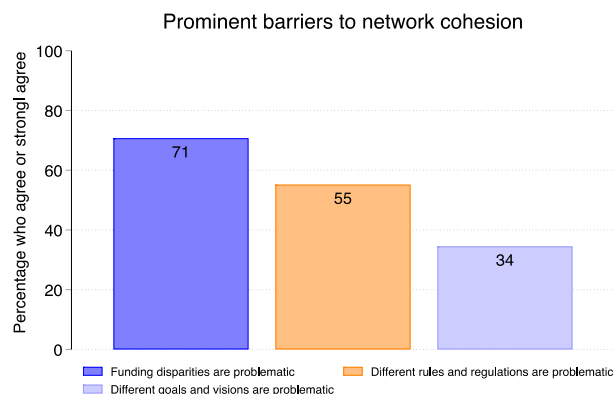

Perceptions of network cohesion
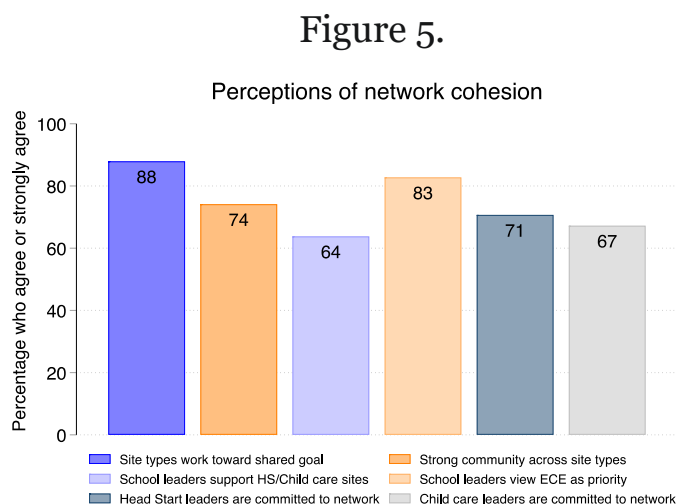
A key goal for network leaders is to unify the diverse early childhood landscape, which includes public schools, Head Start, and child care, into a more cohesive system. **Figure 5** highlights that most network leaders (88%) believed these site types work together toward shared goals and that there is a strong sense of community across site types (74%).

Network leaders also reported high levels of support for collaboration among ECE leaders in each of the site types. Nearly two thirds (64%) agreed that public school leaders "had invested time and resources in supporting quality improvement efforts in Head Start and child care" and most (83%) indicated that public school leaders view ECE as a priority. About 70% reported that Head Start and child care leaders were actively engaged and committed to the network's efforts.

Box 1. *Quotation from the Network Leader Survey:* **"Our greatest challenge is engaging our child care center directors in the work we do. They are very limited in the time they can get away from their centers…"**

Public school, Head Start, and child care sites differ substantially with respect to their funding levels, the regulations they face, and their goals. **Figure 6** highlights the extent to which these differences created barriers to network cohesion. Most network leaders (71%) viewed funding differences as problematic, and over half (55%) agreed that differences in rules and regulations posed problems, as well. Notably, only 34% of network leaders reported problems associated with disparate visions and goals across site types.
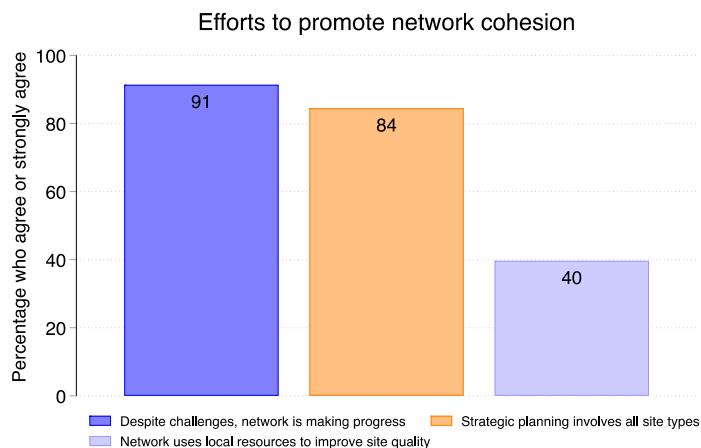
Figure 6.

Prominent barriers to network cohesion

Percentage who agree or strongl agree

- Funding disparities are problematic
- Different rules and regulations are problematic
- Different goals and visions are problematic

Box 2. *One leader noted that while* **"supporting new child care partners that have limited resources"** *is among the greatest challenges facing the network, one of the network's most notable successes was the* **"cohesive and collaborative relationship between/among all partners and support agencies."**

Despite barriers to network cohesion, network leaders cited multiple strategies to bring sites together. As **Figure 7** indicates, over 90% of network leaders reported that their networks were making progress despite the challenges they faced. Eighty-four percent reported that they involved all site types in their strategic planning, and 40% strategically targeted local community resources such as corporate funds, local non-profit support, or school district funds to improve local site quality.

Figure 7.

Efforts to promote network cohesion

Percentage who agree or strongly agree

- Despite challenges, network is making progress
- Strategic planning involves all site types
- Network uses local resources to improve site quality

Box 3. *"All our early learning site leaders serve on our Network leadership team. We meet at least every other month (and sometimes monthly). Everyone has an equal voice, and all are expected to attend."*

Perceptions of CLASS™ and early childhood performance profiles

Louisiana's efforts to overhaul their early childhood system were unique in their approach to accountability. In most states, accountability systems, known as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), measure multiple features of ECE settings (e.g. class sizes, teacher credentials, assessment use, and classroom observation scores) that are hypothesized contribute to high quality early learning experiences. Unfortunately, the existing research suggests that the ratings from these systems are not systematically linked to children's learning. In contrast, Louisiana bases its quality ratings on a single measure—the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS™), which is a widely validated observational tool that captures the quality of teacher-child interactions in ECE classrooms.

Since 2015-16, community networks have been charged with facilitating local CLASS™ observations in their networks. Network leaders ensure that each classroom, in every publicly-funded site is observed at least twice per year.

Figure 8.
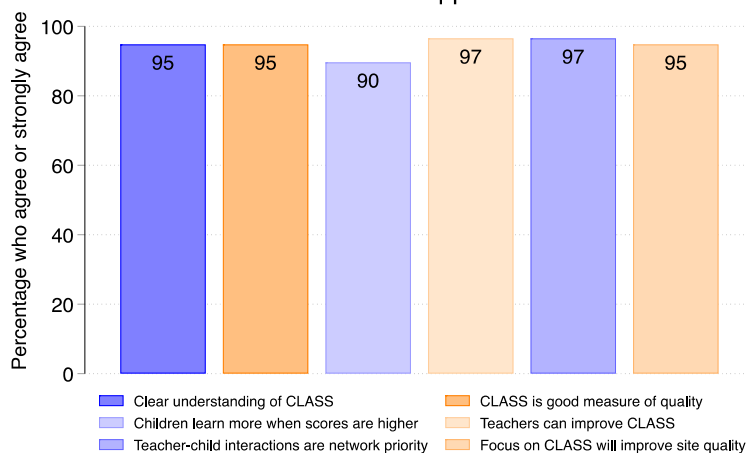
Network leaders reported nearly unanimous enthusiasm for CLASS™ as a quality measure. **Figure 8** shows that 95% reported they had a clear understanding of CLASS™ and believed it to be a good measure of site quality. Further, 90% agreed that children learn more in classrooms with higher scores and 97% agreed that teachers can improve their scores with practice and support. Finally, 97% indicated that teacher-child interactions are a network priority and 95% believed that the focus on CLASS™ will improve site quality in Louisiana.

While support for CLASS™ was nearly universal among network leaders, they expressed somewhat less enthusiasm about Louisiana's early childhood accountability system, and the way ratings are calculated. In Louisiana, CLASS™ observations are conducted by local observers who must pass a reliability test. To ensure the validity and reliability of these local ratings, the LDOE also contracts "third party" observers to conduct CLASS™ observations in half of classrooms; scores from these third party observations are compared to local raters' scores for the same classrooms, and replace local ratings if the scores are meaningfully divergent.

CLASS™ scores are then averaged across all classrooms within a site, and those aggregated scores determine sites' ratings: each site receives an overall rating of "Unsatisfactory," "Approaching Proficient," "Proficient," "High Proficient" (beginning in 2018-2019), or "Excellent."

Each year, LDOE publicly releases these site ratings, using the Louisiana School and Center Finder website. Ratings are also linked to various resources and supports for sites, including training and professional development opportunities, as well as a set of refundable tax credits.
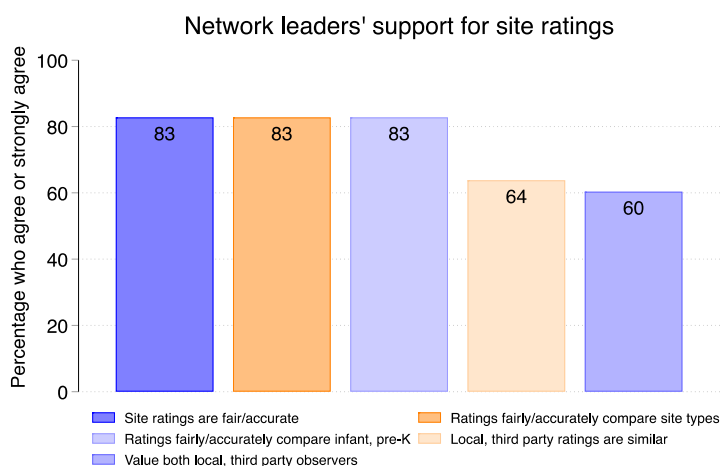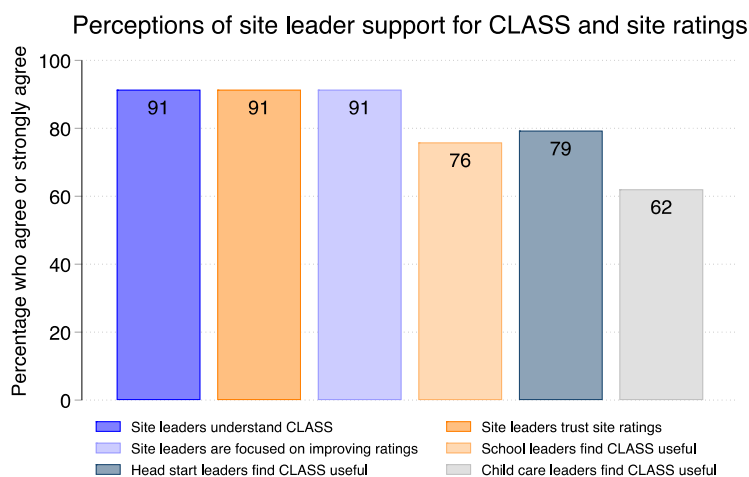
Figure 9.

Figure 9 highlights network leaders' responses to items asking about site ratings and the performance profiles publicizing these ratings. Most network leaders (83%) believed that site ratings were fair and accurate overall, as well as in their ability to compare quality across site types and to capture quality in classrooms serving different ages (e.g. infant, pre-k). Support for the third party observers was lower. Only 64% agreed that third party ratings are similar to those of local observers and 60% valued the idea of having both local and third-party observers assessing quality in their classrooms.

Network leaders also reported on their perceptions of local site leaders' support for CLASS™. As highlighted in **Figure 10**, most (91%) network leaders believed that site leaders understood CLASS™, trusted their site ratings, and were focused on improving them. However, they reported varying levels of support for CLASS™ across site types. While over three-quarters of network leaders believed that public school and Head Start leaders found CLASS™ to be a useful tool for improving quality, only 62% of network leaders agreed that child care leaders also held this view.

Figure 10.

Professional development and instructional coaching

Figure 11.   Figure 12.

Network provision of professional development
Opportunities in the previous 12 months

- Provided training on CLASS
- Provided literacy or math training
- Sufficient training to meet teachers' needs
- Provided training on TS Gold
- Provided social/emotional training
- Training has improved instruction in network

Network provision of instructional coaching

- Provides coaching
- Provides sufficient number of coaches
- Provides coaching in all site types
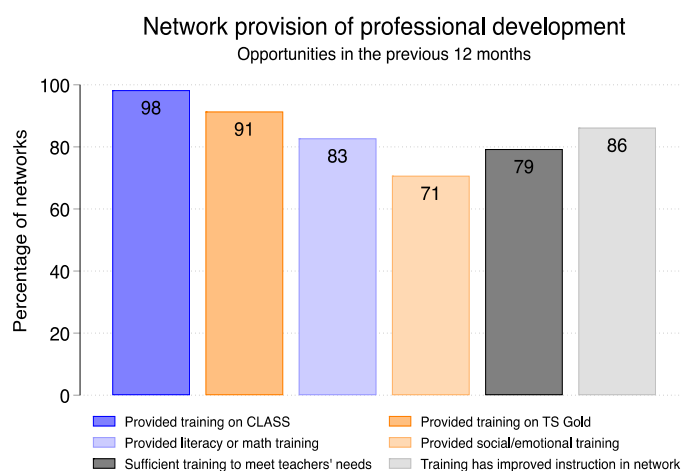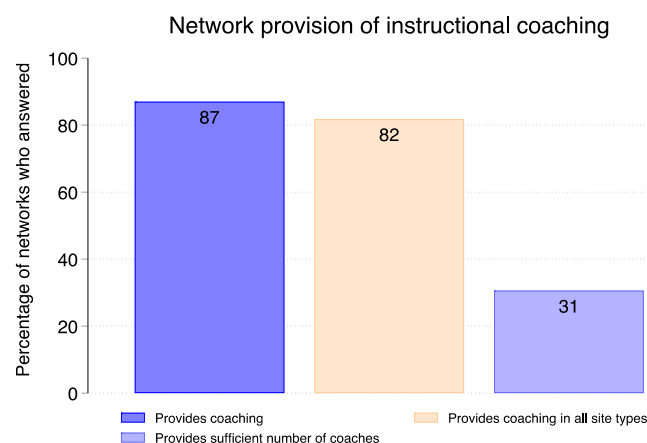
The Network Leader Survey asked several questions about the professional development and coaching opportunities provided across networks. **Figure 11** demonstrates that nearly all network leaders (98%) reported that their networks had provided training or workshops on the CLASS™ rubric in the past year and 91% had provided training on TS GOLD. Fewer offered training on literacy or math (83%) or socio-emotional issues (71%). Nonetheless, 79% reported that the training opportunities provided were sufficient to meet teachers' needs and 86% believed that the opportunities provided had improved instruction in their networks.

As seen in **Figure 12**, instructional coaching opportunities were slightly less common and generally considered to be in short supply. While 87% of network leaders reported that they provided some form of coaching and 82% reported that coaching was available across all site types, only 31% reported that there were sufficient coaches to meet teachers' needs.

High-quality curriculum

LDOE incentivized the adoption of approved curricula meant to promote learning in ECE sites. In 2016, LDOE began an internal review process for ECE curricula and classified all curricula reviewed into three tiers. Tier 1 reflects the closest level of alignment with Louisiana's Birth to Five Learning and Development Standards. To facilitate implementation of Tier 1 curricula in ECE sites statewide, LDOE provided reimbursements to child care sites that purchased these curricula.

Box 4. *One leader expressed that the primary instructional improvement goal in her network was "ensuring that all children have access to a Tier I curriculum and training staff to use the curriculum with fidelity."*

Tier 1 Curriculum Use Across Site Types	
Site Type	**"Most/All" Using**
Public schools	93%
Head Start	93%
Child care	69%

Network leaders reported high levels of Tier 1 curricula use. Nearly every network leader (93%) reported that "Most" or "All" public school and Head Start sites in their network were using Tier 1 curricula as of September 2019, though this percentage was lower among child care sites (69%). Access to professional development about curriculum use was also lower in child care sites. Only about 40% of network leaders reported that Head Start and child care sites received curricular training at least twice in the past year, as compared to 55% in public schools (not shown).

Assessment

Since 2015, Louisiana has required the use of formative assessments to monitor children's learning progress in ECE sites. Nearly all networks use TeachingStrategies® GOLD as their assessment. **Figure 13** displays network leaders' perceptions of these assessments and their roles in informing network practices. Overall, network leaders agreed that formative assessments such as GOLD accurately captured children's skills and that results from these assessments provided them with useful information. Ninety percent reported that formative assessments informed professional development decisions and 86% agreed that results helped them identify sites for support.

Figure 13.

Network leaders' perceptions of formative assessments
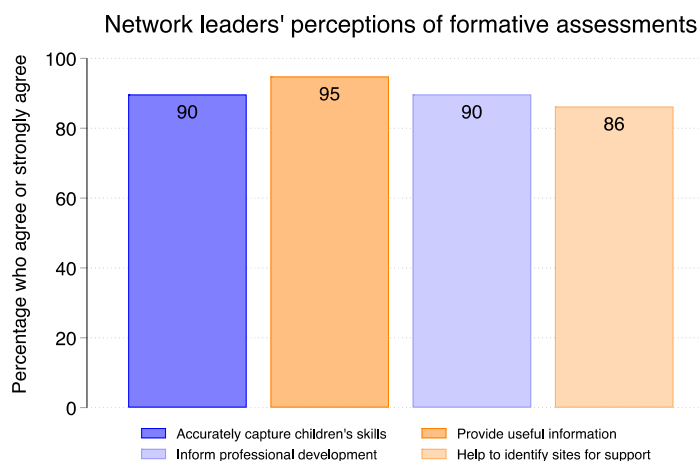
Once children enter kindergarten in the public schools, local school districts require they complete readiness assessments. **Figure 14** highlights network leaders' perspectives on these school entry assessments, which were generally less favorable than those on formative assessments. For instance, fewer than 60% of network leaders indicated school readiness assessments informed professional development decisions or helped them identify sites for support. Write-in comments, captured below, suggest that network leaders often did not have access to data from the readiness assessments.

Figure 14.

Network leaders' perceptions of readiness assessments

Box 5. *"The entry assessments are not aligned. We have two different tools and no connections have been made in district to align them. Essentially both [are] done in isolation, however, EC assessment is used to drive instruction."*
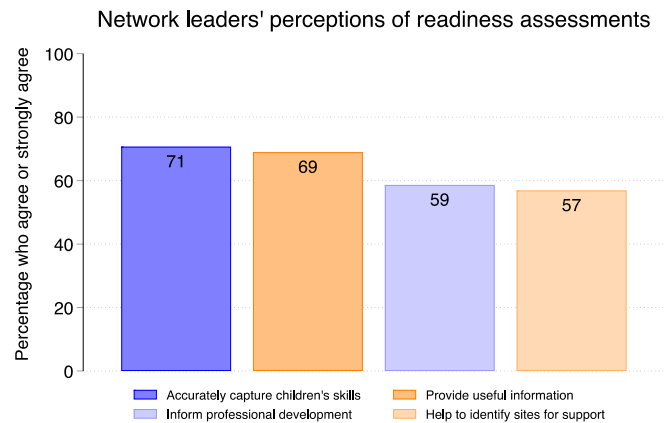
Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC)

In 2014, Louisiana passed a policy requiring that by mid-2019 <u>all</u> lead teachers in publicly-funded child care sites attain a new educational credential called the Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate (ECAC). The ECAC was designed to provide training that is well-aligned with best practices for educators. ECAC programs combine typical CDA requirements with a more explicit focus on teacher-child interactions, as well as purposeful opportunities for the practice, mentoring, and coaching teachers need to effectively support young children.

Figure 15.
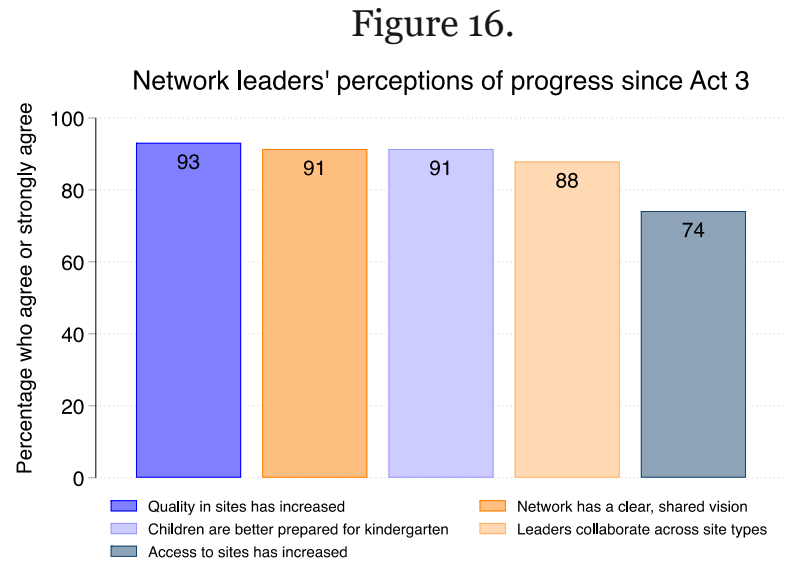
Network leaders' perceptions of ECAC
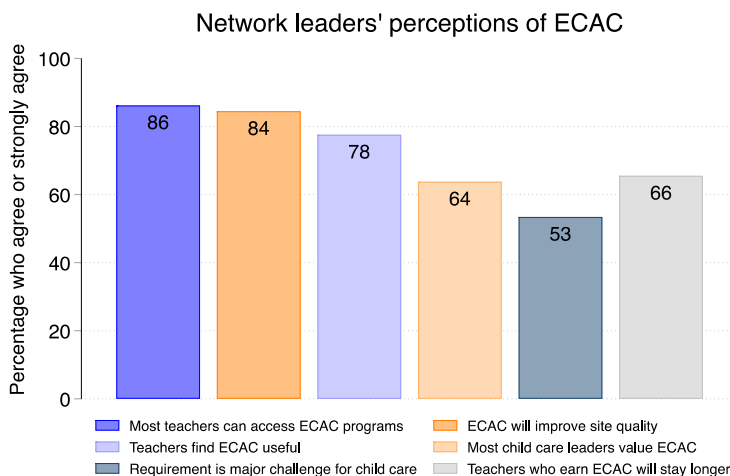
As presented in **Figure 15**, the majority of network leaders (86%) found the ECAC accessible for teachers in their networks and believed the credential will improve site quality (84%). They also reported that teachers found the ECAC useful in their work (78%). About half (53%) reported that the ECAC requirement presented a major challenge for child care leaders in their networks; yet nearly two thirds (66%) agreed that teachers who earn the ECAC will remain in their jobs longer than teachers who do not.

Box 6. *"Many of our teachers expressed that transportation and time are key factors with enrollment into an ECAC program. The closest program is about 45 minutes away."*

Reflections on progress since Act 3

As documented throughout this report, network leaders reported meaningful progress toward building more unified ECE systems in their networks. As presented in **Figure 16**, over 90% of leaders believed that their networks had a clear, shared vision for improving program quality across site types, that site quality had increased since Act 3, and that children were better prepared for kindergarten as a result of Act 3. Most (74%) also believed that access to sites had increased in their networks since Act 3.

Figure 16.

Network leaders' perceptions of progress since Act 3

Legend:
- Quality in sites has increased
- Children are better prepared for kindergarten
- Access to sites has increased
- Network has a clear, shared vision
- Leaders collaborate across site types

Box 7. *"Kindergarten teachers constantly comment about students who enter with foundational skills attained from one of our EC programs. They are ready to fly!"*

Key achievements

The survey asked network leaders to describe their most notable achievement since the implementation of Act 3. The two most commonly reported achievements were (1) a growing sense of community and collaboration across site types and (2) improvements in site quality. Below, **Box 8** highlights selected quotes that highlight these themes.

Box 8.
"We have grown together in the understanding that our greatest priority is to prepare our children to be ready to enter kindergarten… The initial meetings were very emotionally charged and cooperation was very poor. Today, all partners have arrived at the understanding that networks and the collaborative effort are here to stay regardless of personal feelings."

"I think our greatest success is genuinely listening to what all the contributing entities have to say and coming up with real life solutions we can all live with…"

"I believe we have improved the quality of the learning experiences provided to our children…I think we are valued more than we were in the past and therefore supported more."

Other noted achievements included improvements in the availability of ECE slots, progress on coordinated enrollment efforts, greater use of Tier 1 curricula, and increases in the school readiness of children in their networks.

Key challenges

When asked about the key challenges they faced in their work, the most common was the challenge of addressing fragmentation across site types.

Box 9.
"Our greatest challenge is the willingness from all partners to being more open to increased collaboration. We work together in only those avenues mandated by the state. When the potential for another classroom or grant opportunity comes along, my partners do not want to come together for expansion or overall growth."

On buy-in across site types
"(Some sites) try to fly under the radar and do only what they are required to do."

On managing various requirements and demands across site types
"(The greatest challenges are the) regulations related to different funding types (HS) not always working/aligning with others which prevents things like enrollment from being fully or consistently operationalized."

"They struggle keeping up with CLASS + TSGold because of licensing regulation[s]."

Other notable challenges included insufficient funding and local teacher turnover.

Using additional resources

Resource constraints are a common challenge facing early childhood leaders. The Network Leader Survey asked network leaders how they would leverage additional funding if it were available. The most common response was that additional funds would be used to increase personnel, including lead agency personnel, classroom staff and coaches. Network leaders also noted they would use additional funds to provide increased professional development, instructional materials and computers. Finally, multiple network leaders cited the need for funding for additional program seats, particularly for 0-3 year-olds.

Box 10. "Human capital is the number 1 resource that is lacking. The amount of work required to continue this work is outgrowing the initial personnel used by lead agencies."

Conclusion

> *Box 11. "We have come a long way as a network but still have much to do. It is all about the children."*

Most network leaders indicated they have made progress in unifying their networks around the shared goal of improving the quality of early childhood learning opportunities. Network leaders also expressed high levels of support for CLASS™. They reported offering regular professional development opportunities, including instructional coaching, and widespread use of state-endorsed curricula. The majority of network leaders also indicated that the ECAC, which was designed to support the professionalization of child care teachers provides accessible, useful support for teachers.

Improving system quality is a long, difficult process and survey findings also highlight various challenges network leaders face in their roles. Many network leaders reported challenges related to a lack of cohesion across site types. They noted that child care leaders were less engaged in network activities and showed lower support for CLASS™ than leaders in other site types. Many also raised differences in funding, as well as in rules and regulations, across site types as a significant challenge in building a more cohesive early childhood system. Other challenges noted included insufficient access to publicly-funded ECE opportunities for eligible children, particularly infants and toddlers, as well as a need for more staff to support quality improvement.

Taken together, the Network Leader Survey highlights network leaders' perceived successes and challenges since the enactment of Act 3, and identifies several opportunities to inform future system-building efforts in Louisiana.