



Strengthening Connections: State Approaches to Connecting Families to Services

Louisiana's Coordinated Enrollment Process



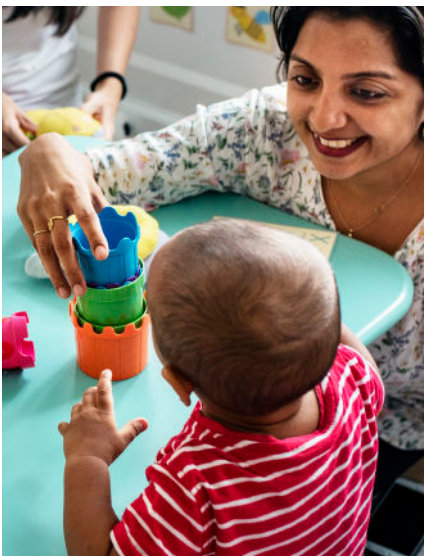
ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

SUMMARY

The Louisiana Department of Education houses all early care and education programs—pre-K, Head Start/Early Head Start, and child care. Between 2013 and 2015, Louisiana established 65 early childhood care and education community networks, which are parish-based and cover the entire state. Each community network has a lead agency, which serves as the fiscal agent and is responsible for conducting CLASS® observations in birth to 5-year-old classrooms, coordinating enrollment to improve processes for families, and applying for state funding. The majority of lead agencies are school systems; however, nonprofits serve as lead agencies for some community networks.

Coordinated enrollment in early care and education programs has been a responsibility of the community networks since their inception. On an annual basis, community partners conduct an information campaign, hold enrollment events to determine eligibility, use a unified application form to identify families' preferences, and match children to programs. Each summer, community networks complete a self-assessment in which they rate their performance on key aspects of the process.

In Louisiana, every publicly funded early childhood program—including public and nonpublic pre-K, subsidized child care, and Head Start/Early Head Start—participates in Louisiana's unified rating system and receives a performance profile based on CLASS® observations. Sites' performance profiles are published on the [Louisiana School and Center Finder](#), an interactive website designed for families to browse and learn about care and education options.



Louisiana's Approach to Strengthening Connections

- community networks generally led by school systems
- coordinated enrollment for publicly funded early care and education programs
- unified application for publicly funded early care and education programs
- program profiles available online

GETTING STARTED

Prior to 2012, Louisiana’s early childhood system was fragmented and prepared too few children to enter kindergarten ready for success. There was little coordination of the multiple programs serving young children, inefficient use of limited funding, no unified measure of quality, and limited information and supports for families navigating a complex system.

In 2012, the Louisiana legislature enacted Act 3, a set of sweeping reforms designed to unify the state’s early childhood system and strengthen the coordination and quality of early care and education programs at the local level. All early care and education programs—pre-K, Head Start/Early Head Start, and child care—were moved to the Louisiana Department of Education. Between 2013 and 2015, Louisiana established 65 early childhood care and education community networks, which are parish-based and cover the entire state. Each community network has a lead agency, which serves as the fiscal agent and is responsible for conducting CLASS® observations in birth to 5-year-old classrooms, coordinating enrollment to improve processes for families, and applying for state funding. The majority of lead agencies are school systems; however, nonprofits serve as lead agencies for some community networks.

ADMINISTRATION

The Louisiana Department of Education currently funds 66 early childhood care and education community networks (one network recently split into two) using Child Care and Development Fund dollars and state general funds. Community network lead agencies receive \$525 per infant, toddler, or pre-K classroom. To stabilize allocations, the Department uses a rolling 3-year average of the count of classrooms observed at the end of each fall semester. In instances where there has been a natural disaster or unforeseen circumstances like COVID-19 that significantly impacted access in a given year, the Department averages classroom count to reflect a more typical year of enrollment for each network.



Coordinated enrollment has been a responsibility of the community networks since their inception and is embedded fully in policy as one of the duties of lead agencies. The goal is for parents to have clear information and easy access to early childhood programs for which their children are eligible.

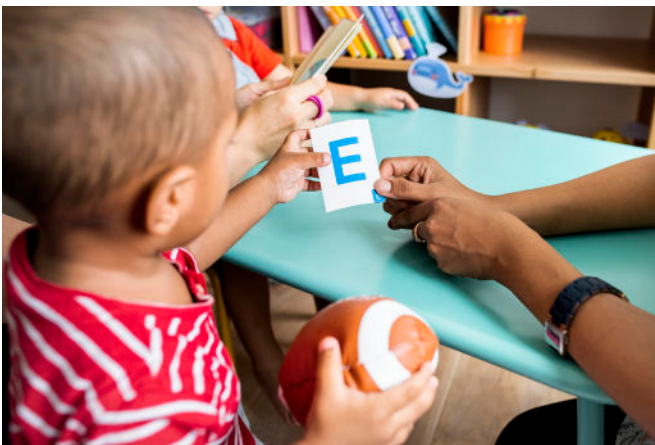
The coordinated enrollment process encompasses publicly funded early care and education programs—Head Start/Early Head Start, child care centers that accept subsidies and are part of the unified quality rating system, public pre-K, and private preschools that are publicly funded. Family child care providers will be able to opt into the unified quality rating system starting in the 2022–2023 school year. The coordinated enrollment process is for all families with young children. Coordinated enrollment establishes a “no wrong door” model that creates efficiencies and streamlines the enrollment experience for families.

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Beginning in 2019, the Louisiana Department of Education launched Ready Start Networks. Currently, 36 of the 66 community networks are Ready Start Networks. Each Ready Start Network is funded at \$100,000 per academic year through the Preschool Development Grant–Birth through Five and the Child Care and Development Fund. Their local responsibilities are expanded to include:

- assessing local demand for early care and education
- creating a blueprint to address gaps and set a vision for the network's future
- establishing goals
- determining strategies to increase access to early care and education
- recruiting partners to expand their early childhood coalition
- establishing local advisory councils to make collaborative decisions
- developing strategies to secure local funding

In addition, the Louisiana Department of Education has funded six organizations serving nine parishes to have an [Early Childhood Guide](#). These local enrollment coordinators help families learn about child care options in their community and apply for the child care subsidy program. As part of this pilot program, Early Childhood Guides provide individualized assistance to families throughout the application process for child care assistance. Since July 2020, over 1,000 families have been linked to subsidy services.



APPROACH

Each January, every community network's lead agency develops a coordinated enrollment plan and submits it to the Louisiana Department of Education. Following feedback and technical assistance from the Department, each network implements its plan beginning in the spring of that year. The plan consists of four components:

- Coordinated information campaign: Every network conducts a community-wide information campaign using locally determined strategies. The campaign is designed to inform families about the importance of early care and education, the availability and quality of publicly funded options, eligibility requirements, and information about programs for diverse populations, including children with disabilities, children whose home language is not English, and children experiencing homelessness. Each network engages with community partners to hold one or more coordinated events to enroll children. Some networks include home visiting and/or early intervention and early childhood special education programs in these events.
- Coordinated eligibility determination: Each network plans and coordinates with program partners to create a way for families to understand their eligibility for various early childhood programs. Networks adopt a process to refer families, year-round, to other available programs when they do not qualify for a program or if a space is not available in their program of choice.
- Unified application: Networks adopt a unified community-wide application—either paper or online—to collect family preferences regarding enrollment choices for publicly funded programs. Some networks use a portion of their funding to support enrollment software to coordinate and monitor applications.
- Matching based on preference: Once families have completed the application, networks enroll children based on stated family preferences, as long as space is available.

Each summer, community networks complete a self-assessment in which they rate their performance on key aspects of the process. The self-assessment process guides community planning, informs the Department of Education's technical assistance, and identifies promising practices to share across communities. Networks gather data, such as the number of applications received and the number of families placed on a wait list, which are submitted annually to the Department. Beginning in 2020, community networks complete their coordinated enrollment plans via [Jotform](#). Using online forms made the process easier and has enabled the gathering of additional state-level data. Other changes in Louisiana's approach to coordinated enrollment over time have included:

- starting to collect information on developmental screening, such as tools used by community networks and processes to make referrals
- analyzing data at the state level and sharing exemplars to promote peer-to-peer learning
- staying flexible to allow local approaches to evolve, particularly during COVID
- promoting additional family engagement through more opportunities for families to ask questions and offer feedback



CHALLENGES AND IMPACT

Challenges faced by Louisiana in implementing the coordinated enrollment process included:

- Some community networks needed additional guidance and technical assistance in designing a strong, continuous, and consistent coordinated information campaign and did not see the value to families, especially initially.
- Implementing the coordinated enrollment process can be challenging due to a variety of barriers unique to the communities served, including child care deserts, areas that lack transportation, and family language barriers.
- Some families can be excluded if the enrollment process is solely a technology-based system.
- The centralized nature of the process means some sites may lose publicly funded spots for children as parents become aware of other programs that better meet their needs.

Self-assessments from the community networks have yielded valuable information about the impact of the coordinated enrollment process:

- Families and community members have a better understanding of quality care.
- Families can see what programs are available in their community.
- Parents have an easy way to understand their eligibility for programs and enroll their children.
- Families' stress is alleviated through streamlining the access and enrollment process.
- Community networks are better able to connect to providers and support them.

Lessons Learned from Louisiana

- **Establish the infrastructure for cross-sector work.** In Louisiana, all early care and education programs are housed under the Department of Education, and community networks cover the state.
- **Deliberately seek buy-in.** State agency staff shared the vision and goals with many community partners and incorporated their feedback as much as possible.
- **Be transparent in sharing plans for implementation.** The state agency's relationship-based approach includes open lines of communication and consistent messaging.
- **Support community networks.** Department of Education staff offer guidance, technical assistance, and opportunities for peer learning.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The Louisiana Department of Education staff shared their hopes for the coordinated enrollment process in the future:

- deeper analysis of data at a state level and further sharing of good examples among communities
- additional partnerships at the community level through increased stakeholder involvement, buy-in, and support for young children and families
- increased access to early care and education services, particularly in child care deserts

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the individuals whose generous collaboration and insights made this brief possible, including ZERO TO THREE staff Morgan Brill, Debbie Cheatham, Jamie Colvard, Emmy Marshall, Amanda Szekely, and Ricky Webster. A very special thanks as well to our partners in Louisiana for sharing their experience for this case study. For their invaluable input and feedback, we thank Amanda Colon, Lizzie Cosse, Leslie Doyle, Amy Hook-Poirier, and Karen Powell.

For other case studies in this series, see [here](#).