



INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE

Early Childhood Reform In Louisiana

Louisiana has a rich history of advancing early childhood education reform. Our state has mandated that school districts offer full-day kindergarten since the 1980s, which is a legislative accomplishment that many states are still struggling to achieve. Progress continued when Louisiana legislators created a public prekindergarten program in 2001 that features a broad range of quality measures, including a 10 to 1 child to adult ratio, certified teachers and a full-day schedule. Louisiana's early childhood investments have not been limited to the public school sector. In 2007, legislators, agency staff, and early childhood experts worked together to create a research-based, comprehensive Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for

licensed child care centers. QRIS is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early education programs. It helps parents easily identify quality programs, while also giving programs a clear road map and support for improving quality. Louisiana's voluntary QRIS, referred to as Quality Start, has been very successful in improving quality in child care centers. Programs earn from 1 to 5 stars demonstrating progress and achievement in research-based quality standards. There are numerous quality standards on which centers are judged and the stepping stones for improving quality are built into the system itself through the way the standards are defined. Additionally, the system provides the supports needed for centers to move up the standards/stars.

- 748 Centers (over half of all Class A licensed centers) are now voluntarily participating in Quality Start.
- In addition, the number of centers achieving the highest rating, 5 stars, has nearly tripled in the last year.

In 2012, Act 3, the Early Childhood Education Act was passed, which was designed to further improve the quality of early care and education in Louisiana. The law requires a comprehensive redesign of the state's early childhood care and learning system for children birth through 4 years old. This redesign mandates the creation of a statewide, integrated early care and education network that establishes uniform standards of readiness for kindergarten and aligns standards for quality early

education in all publicly-funded early care and education programs, including those located in schools, Head Start programs and child care centers. Pilot work to implement this law has been underway in Louisiana through community networks since July 2013. Community Networks have been funded by the state, through a Request for Application process, to coordinate efforts to implement Act 3 at the local level, which includes piloting assessment tools, establishing best practices and developing coordinated enrollment processes for families. Community networks are now active in every parish, with 89% of networks being run by local school districts, 6% by Child Care Resource and Referral agencies and 5% by Head Start grantees. Funding for the pilot work decreases each year the Community Network is participating in the pilot, and the state has not committed to making ongoing funding available over the long term.

The Current Proposed Report Cards

The law requires the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) to fully implement the new system by the start of the 2015-2016 school year. The current focus of Act 3 centers on accountability. The law requires the establishment of a “uniform assessment and accountability system for publicly-funded early childhood education programs that includes a letter grade.” As a step towards that end, in August 2014, the LDOE published

draft copies of Report Cards as the proposed accountability tools for both the programs receiving public funding and the community networks supporting the implementation of Act 3 and requested feedback on the drafts. (See pages 15 and 16 for the draft Report Cards.)

The published drafts of the Report Cards have led to some misunderstandings as to what constitutes the letter grade for both the programs and the networks. Many stakeholders are under the impression that all the information provided on the Report Card drafts will be included in the factoring of the letter grades. However, the LDOE has made it clear that the intent is for one indicator of quality—the CLASS™ program assessment tool—to be used to determine the entire letter grade for the programs and with enrollment for the networks.

The CLASS program assessment tool is an observational instrument developed at the University of Virginia to assess quality in PK-12 classrooms with a focus on the quality of teacher- child interactions. Teachstone is the organization that provides information, training, and technical assistance related to the use of the tool. The CLASS instrument is a well-respected assessment tool with a strong evidence base demonstrating a link between CLASS scores and child outcomes. However, it is not clear when used alone whether this one tool can be an effective means to improve child outcomes,

the ultimate goal of Act 3, or even to implement Louisiana’s four part vision for the accountability system. In the fall of 2014, John White, the Louisiana Department of Education’s (LDOE) State Superintendent, toured Louisiana to present the Early Childhood Policy Blueprint, which included the state’s vision for the report card and its purpose. His presentation stated that **Louisiana should develop a report card system that:**

1. Defines and measures core elements needed for high-quality child outcomes
2. Provides simple, clear information about performance
3. Clearly articulates a path to improvement
4. Gives families a simple way to compare choices in their community

Purpose of This Brief

The purpose of this Brief is to respond to the state’s drafts of the Early Childhood Organization (Program) Report Card and the Network Report Card. This Brief provides analysis and recommended policies for various structural and process elements of the proposed Report Cards. Specific concerns and policy recommendations are set forth on the following pages.