

Executive Summary

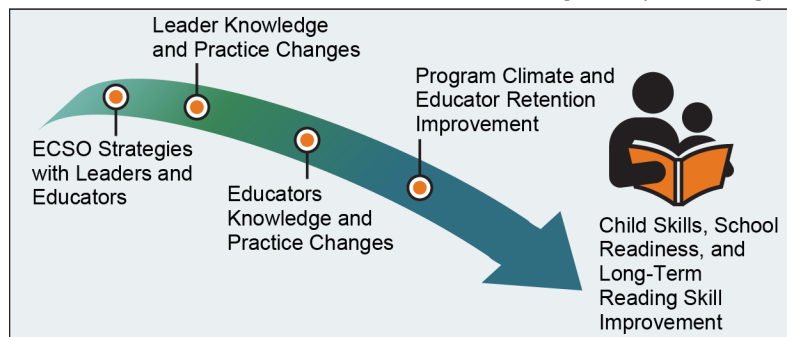
Massachusetts Early Childhood Support Organization (ECSO) Year 2 Annual Implementation Evaluation Report



Equitable access to high-quality early education programs (EEPs) is essential for supporting young children's development and preparing them to succeed in school and in life. Although leadership is recognized as a key driver of organizational performance (Senge, 2006), little rigorous evidence exists on its role in driving EEP quality and outcomes for staff and children (Kirby et al., 2021; Douglas & Kirby, 2022). Effective EEP leadership has the potential to positively influence the work environment, educators' motivation, and – crucially – children's learning. Researchers agree that EEP working conditions influence educators' decisions about whether to stay in their programs and in the field (Totenhagen et al., 2016). Relationships between EEP leaders and educators, planning time, and support for responding to children's needs can mitigate or exacerbate educator stress, depression, and burnout (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Whitebook et al., 2017). Surveys of Massachusetts EEP leaders and educators reveal a range of needs and fewer supports available for leaders compared to educators (Hanno et al., 2020; Patel, 2020; Bookman et al., 2018). Situated in this early education landscape, the ECSO initiative leverages a research-based understanding of EEP leadership to develop and test a unique model of support.

The ECSO initiative seeks to improve the quality of EEPs by supporting leaders to strengthen their organizational climate, provide job-embedded professional learning (JEPL) opportunities for educators, support the use of instructional curriculum and child assessments in their program, and engage in continuous quality improvement. Ultimately, the initiative aims to empower EEP leaders to support educators in their provision of high-quality instruction that promotes positive outcomes for young children. Launched in 2020, the initiative is a public-private partnership between New Profit, a venture philanthropy organization, and the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). Bridging the support of these two stakeholders allows for sustainability and opens the model to the real possibility of scaling.

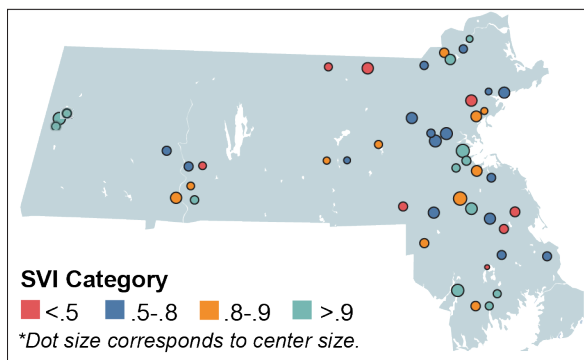
In 2020, New Profit and EEC contracted with three ECSOs to carry out the initiative: (1) The Children's Literacy Initiative (CLI), (2) Flamingo Early Learning (Flamingo) at the University of Florida's Lastinger Center for Learning, and (3) The Institute for Early Education Leadership and Innovation at UMass Boston (UMB) in partnership with Start Early. The ECSOs provide intensive supports to EEPs over two years, including coaching, training, and other support for leaders and some direct support for classroom educators. Each ECSO has its own model and set of planned services and supports, but all three models align with the initiative's overarching theory of change.



“The consistent support that is specifically for leadership [is the most beneficial aspect of participation]. I don’t think I have ever had this as a leader. I cannot express how thankful we are. We are benefiting personally, the staff are benefiting, and the children are benefiting.” – EEP Leader

The theory of change models the intended flow of improvements beginning with program leadership and eventually improving outcomes for children.

In the initiative’s pilot year, ECSOs supported 28 EEPs across Massachusetts, beginning in March of 2021. In late summer 2021, ECSOs onboarded an additional cohort of 27 EEPs. In total, 55 EEPs across both cohorts received ECSO supports in the 2021-22 school year. All are licensed center-based childcare providers located across Massachusetts, including many in the greater Boston area. Although programs range in size from 1 to 19 classrooms, the average size is 5.5 classrooms and 65 enrolled children. In fiscal year 2022 an average of 34% of enrolled children received a childcare subsidy across EEPs.



This report presents findings from an implementation study conducted by Abt Associates, an independent research firm. The findings are based on data collected from ECSOs and participating EEPs in the 2021-2022 school year, including surveys, classroom observations, and administrative data. Although the findings are descriptive and changes over time cannot be attributed to the initiative because there is no comparison group, they show promise and warrant further study.

ECSOs demonstrated that delivery of the model envisioned in the initiative’s theory of change is feasible to implement. On the whole, ECSOs succeeded in providing the types and intensity of

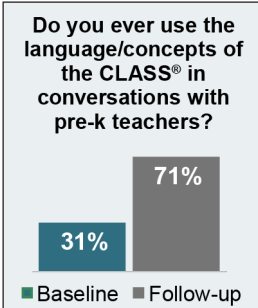
supports to EEPs as planned. They provided between 5 and 23 hours of monthly support on



average to each EEP focused on improving instructional leadership through support for using and reflecting on data, continuous quality improvement, staff support and development, and other topics. One ECSO also provided training and coaching directly to educators, with the goal of transferring these activities to instructional leaders over time. The other two ECSOs provided various supports to educators directly and via partner relationships. Moreover, ECSOs reported implementing many elements of their models with fidelity. This is a promising finding, because research shows that full implementation of an intervention often takes two to four years ([Metz et al., 2015](#)).

EEP leaders reported gains on several target outcomes, and leaders who had been in the program longest reported larger gains. For example, EEP leaders in the first cohort of supported programs

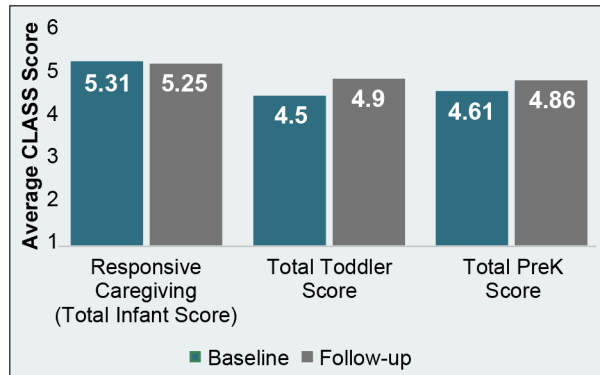
reported feeling more confident about their leadership and program management abilities. They also reported engaging in positive leadership practices, using quality improvement tools, and observing classrooms more often in spring 2022 than in fall 2021. Across cohorts, leaders were much more likely to engage in practices like providing on-site educator training to improve instructional practice and sharing images of high-quality instructional practice with educators in the spring than they had been at the beginning of the year.



Educators also reported positive changes. More than 60% of educators reported receiving some training on key quality improvement strategies, such as collaborative data collection, use of classroom observation and child assessment data, and goal development. From fall 2021 to spring 2022, more educators reported having planning time in their schedules and receiving more feedback on classroom observations. Educators who had been a part of the initiative longest reported more positive feelings of respect by and collaboration with program leaders. Overall, educators reported high levels of job satisfaction and self-efficacy in fall and spring, and their self-reported plans to stay or leave their positions did not change over time.

From fall 2021 to spring 2022, observed instructional quality in toddler and pre-k classrooms improved, especially classrooms at EEPs that had participated in the initiative the longest. Overall scores on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS) for toddler and pre-k classrooms increased by a statistically significant amount, and gains were larger for classrooms in the first ECSO cohort. The increase in pre-k scores was driven by gains in the Emotional Support and Classroom Organization domains. However, Instructional Support quality also increased significantly in the first cohort of EEPs served by two of the three ECSOs. Findings on CLASS scores are comparable to those of the Massachusetts Preschool Expansion Grant Evaluation (Checkoway et al., 2019).

In the coming year the ECSOs, with support from EEC and New Profit, will aim to use these



findings to improve the initiative. Abt Associates will continue conducting the implementation study. In addition, based on the promising descriptive findings, Abt will begin a quasi-experimental design study to examine program impacts on leader, education, and classroom outcomes. To date, the evaluation has focused primarily on the initial pieces of the change theory; ECSO inputs, leader and educator knowledge and mindset, and leader and educator practices. Early positive signs of improvement in these aspects support promise for the long-term positive impact of the initiative. The ECSO evaluation has the potential to produce actionable insights for instructional leadership policy and practice and contribute to the early childhood knowledge base at both state and national levels. Data from the impact evaluation will shed light on the ECSOs' impact on leaders, educators, and children and the drivers of change in practice and child outcomes. Findings from both the implementation and impact evaluations can inform scaling of an enhanced statewide system of technical assistance and training to support EEP quality.

For more information on the ECSO evaluation, please contact: ecsoeval@abtassoc.com