



NOEEN CITY SEATS

Key Findings of Program Evaluation 2019-2020: Year 2



For accountability purposes and to ensure consistently high-quality programming, NOEEN City Seats is evaluated annually by the Louisiana State University (LSU) Health Sciences Center. This document summarizes the findings from Year 2 of the City Seats program, or the 2019-2020 school year.

BACKGROUND

In December 2017, the New Orleans City Council and Mayor approved a historic investment in early care and education, funding high-quality care for fifty economically-disadvantaged children ages six weeks to three-years-old, and pouring resources and development into local child care centers. Known as the New Orleans Early Education Network (NOEEN) City Seats Program, this initiative has been driven by three longstanding goals: to increase access to early learning, to improve the quality of participating centers, and to provide wraparound supports to caregivers and families.

To that end, NOEEN has tirelessly advocated for continuous program expansion and improvement. The City of New Orleans has responded by doubling its investment in the City Seats program year over year, growing the impact from fifty (2018-2019), to 112 (2019-2020), to 200 (2020-2021) fully-funded early education spots for needy young families. With the support of limited State funding, City Seats has grown to a total of 276 spots for the 2020-2021 school year, Year 3 of the program, more than quadrupling access to locally-funded early care and education. As investment grows, so do the supports and systems NOEEN has established to ensure the City Seats program enables families and educators to thrive.

ACCESS, QUALITY, SUPPORT

The research is clear: early learning sets the foundation for the long-term health, economic viability, and academic outcomes of our city's children and future, and has the power to reverse or undo systemic barriers and inequalities. Unfortunately, an estimated 9,300 children under the age of three are in need of affordable quality child care in New Orleans; over 85% of eligible children are currently unable to access early education due to prohibitive barriers such as cost or location.

NOEEN has advocated and organized for a substantial and sustainable increase in access, to meet this urgent and growing demand. Between Year 1 and Year 2 of the City Seats program, the number of spots available to qualifying families grew by 124%; overall, City Seats grew to represent nearly 20% of all publicly-funded birth-to-two year old options in New Orleans in Year 2, up from 5% in Year 1. For the 2020-2021 school year, or Year 3, City Seats will represent nearly 30% of program options for qualifying families, contributing to an overall 30% increase in total available free seats for needy young families citywide.

While progress in increasing access represents a positive and profound impact on the early care landscape in New Orleans, NOEEN recognizes that increasing access for the highest-needs families requires a greater investment than total available "seats" citywide: it requires meaningful, direct investment in families, providers, and communities. To this end, NOEEN City Seats emphasizes comprehensive supports that directly address health, development, nutrition, mental health, and family engagement. Building on the foundation of the early program years, and upon recommendations from Year 1's Program Evaluation, NOEEN has invested in enhancing its wraparound supports and program management structures, to provide consistent, replicable support to families and caregivers.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Outcomes for City Seats Year 2 were unavoidably impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic, which led to a broad shutdown of local public businesses, including child care centers, beginning in March of 2020. COVID-19 affected all corners of public life in New Orleans, especially education, family life, and the local economy, with substantial consequences for small business owners, such as child care centers, and for economically disadvantaged families. All City Seats programs temporarily ceased operations in March. While the interruption in services lead to an incomplete portrait of the program year, the City Seats program nevertheless demonstrated progress and positive outcomes:

- Added 62 seats and five new, quality partner sites, increasing access to high quality programs across New Orleans.
- Maintained high enrollment, attendance, and a robust waitlist, maximizing utilization and highlighting the need for early childhood services. Average program attendance was 84%, up from an average of 79% the first year.
- Executed 433 hours of mentor-coaching, including 140 center visits (in-person and virtual). Coaching focuses on cultivating teacher-child interactions, which boosts children’s emotional, mental, and intellectual outcomes.
- Conducted 45 mental health consultation visits, across all partner sites. Consultations enrich teachers’ understanding of development, building sensitivity to individual child needs, and bettering teacher-child relationships.
- Provided \$330,000 in funding to child care centers during a “Stay-at-Home” mandated closure, supporting these small businesses to remain in business and be ready to reopen quickly when safer to do so.

The additional six centers added for Year 2 were selected using a competitive application process. All 11 participating centers had a 2018-2019 Performance Rating of either High Proficient (82%) or Proficient (18%).

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Year 2 Program Evaluation concluded that NOEEN made progress on the two major recommendations from the initial evaluation, expanded program management structure and data systems to support daily operations of the NOEEN City Seats Program, and should continue to prioritize implementation. The evaluation offers additional recommendations to increase access, improve quality, and provide comprehensive services:

Family Supports and Systems

- Ensure all children receive screenings.
- Use monthly attendance monitoring to reduce duration of vacancies.
- Consider adding social work support to address complex family needs.
- Expand outreach efforts to target families who have children with disabilities, are in the foster care system, or are experiencing homelessness.

Caregiver Supports and Systems

- Ensure teachers and directors receive screening and referral training.
- Establish a protocol for intensity/duration of coaching based on need.
- Conduct a cost modeling analysis to determine the most efficient mixed-funds classroom configuration.
- Hold more frequent provider gatherings, and include aggregate data reviews.

It is inevitable that COVID-19 will continue to have an impact on the City Seats program, both on the long-term economic outlook of the participating centers, and on the emotional and developmental well-being of the children enrolled. Therefore, as a final recommendation, the evaluation emphasizes the need for NOEEN and all City Seats partners to consider these impacts as the program engages in continuous improvement for the year ahead.