

Designing and Evaluating Publicly
Funded Home-Based Child Care
Networks: Lessons from Delaware's
Family Child Care Networks Initiative

AN INTERACTIVE CASE STUDY • APRIL 2025

**Erikson
Institute**
Home-Based
Child Care Research

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In 2022, the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) received funding from the state of Delaware to develop a regional Family Child Care Networks Initiative (Networks Initiative). The primary goal of the initiative was articulated as preparing licensed family child care (FCC) educators to offer state-funded preschool¹ (SFP) aligned with federal Head Start standards as soon as the 2023-2024 school year, as well as secondary goals related to quality improvement, business sustainability, and provider well-being. DIEEC contracted with Erikson Institute (EI) to support the planning, launch, and initial evaluation of the Networks Initiative. The EI team's role was to provide evidence-based advice and to serve as a third-party evaluator, but not to have final decision-making authority about any components of the Networks Initiative.

This report describes the development of the Delaware Networks Initiative as an example of a step-by-step process for developing publicly funded home-based child care (HBCC) networks (see Box 1). Each step includes examples of [Network Benchmarks & Indicators](#)ⁱ, relevant strategies, stories, data, and lessons learned based on data collected during monthly meetings, surveys, interviews, and focus groups to facilitate reflection and adaptation. We also include links throughout the report to a Toolkit that other states and localities can use in their own network development processes.

This report provides examples from the Delaware Networks Initiative activities from January 2022 through December 2023. The timeline below serves as an overview for the Networks Initiative.



BOX 1.

DEFINING HBCC NETWORKSⁱ

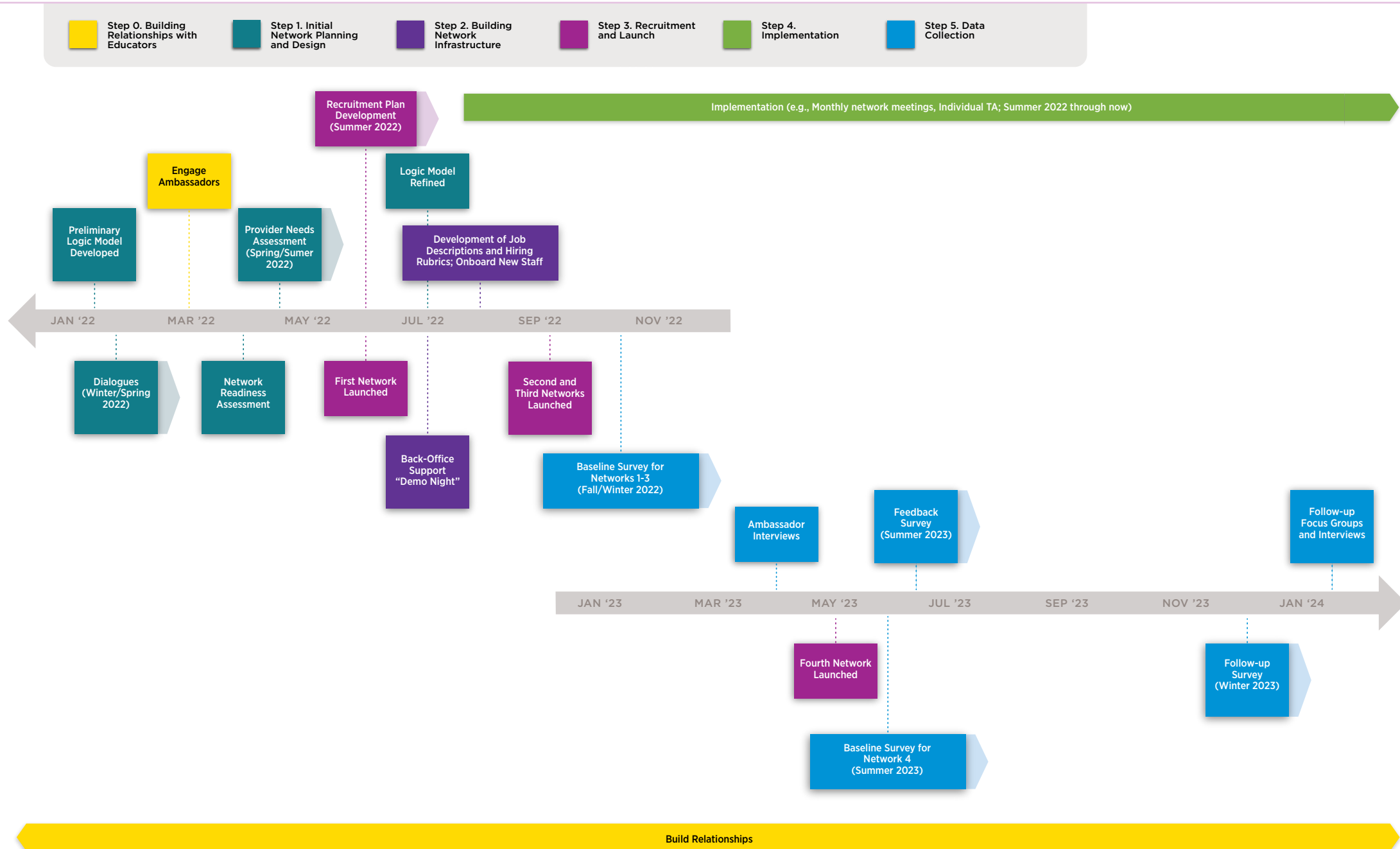
A **Comprehensive HBCC Network Strategy** is defined by Erikson Institute and Home Grown as “durable infrastructure that uses a publicly funded Network Hub to offer and measure the impact of services that enable providers to:”¹

- Offer high-quality child development services;
- Be financially sustainable and offer continuous care (as individuals or small businesses);
- Connect children, families, and providers to comprehensive services that improve their mental, physical, social, and economic well-being;
- Promote provider well-being”

Delaware's Network strategy focused on licensed family child care (FCC) educators instead of all HBCC providers in the state. We use both terms (educators and providers) throughout this report.

¹ Then known as the Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP); funded predominantly via Head Start and Early Head Start dollars.

FIGURE 1. TIMELINE OF THE DELAWARE FAMILY CHILD CARE NETWORKS INITIATIVE



STEP 0. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EDUCATORS

The foundation of a successful HBCC network is theorized to be positive, trusting relationships with providers.ⁱⁱ This includes (1) selecting partners that already know and understand the HBCC community and (2) setting up infrastructure to include provider voice in every step of network development and operations.

In the case of Delaware and DIEEC, there was a long history of providing relationship-based technical assistance (TA) for FCC educators as part of the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Delaware Stars. This made DIEEC the ideal entity to develop the Networks Initiative, but at the same time, serving as the intermediary between state policymakers and providers also presented potential challenges with trust from the outset. This challenging dynamic of balancing support and accountability is not uncommon among publicly funded entities wishing to build HBCC network Initiatives.ⁱⁱⁱ

• STRATEGY •

Before designing any initiative with HBCC providers, organizations must understand who providers already know and trust, who understands and appreciates their work, and the history of providers' experiences interacting with ECE systems and agencies in their communities. Selecting the right partners, being prepared for challenges that may arise before setting out, prioritizing provider voice, and building regular feedback loops can help guide planning, implementation, and evaluation processes in HBCC networks.

Acknowledging the importance of provider voice for successful HBCC Networks (see Box 2), DIEEC embedded provider voice in the Networks Initiative in several ways. First, they engaged three Educator Ambassadors early on to help guide network development. The Ambassadors were FCC educator leaders in their communities, two of whom had already been providing strategic advice to the organization as part of Delaware Stars. Ambassadors met regularly with DIEEC staff, reviewed planning documents and protocols, and supported recruitment and implementation for their local networks. Second, they solicited educator perspectives on their needs and interests for an FCC network throughout the planning process, as well as ongoing feedback from network members. Third, they attempted to hire dedicated staff with previous FCC experience to serve as Network Coordinators. Fourth, they sent several educators to the National Association for Family Child Care annual conference, where educators gained leadership experience and ultimately decided to launch their own statewide FCC association. Additional details of these planning, implementation, and evaluation steps are described later.

BOX 2.

PROVIDERS AS PARTNERS: A KEY BENCHMARK FOR HIGH-QUALITY HBCC NETWORKSⁱ

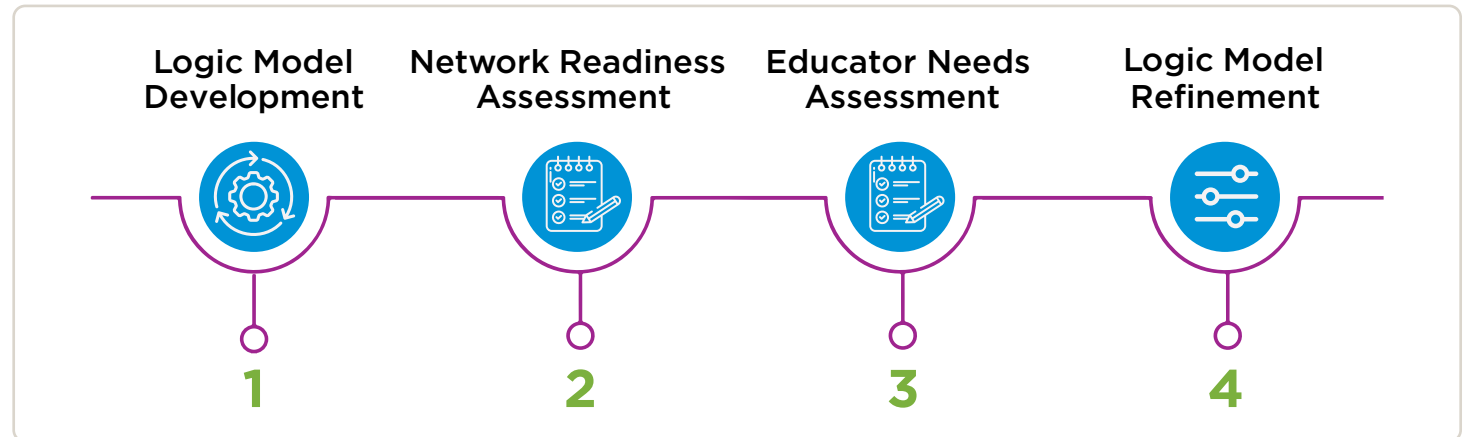
Benchmark B • Providers as Partners — The network includes providers as equal partners in network governance, operations, and accountability.

• LESSON LEARNED •

In the Delaware FCC Networks Initiative, Educator Ambassadors were envisioned as being central to the networks strategy. Overall, Ambassadors felt that their perspectives were valued by network staff and that they were a valuable resource bridging communication between DIEEC and other educators. However, they also experienced some challenges as part of the rapid scale-up of the Networks Initiative. For example, Ambassadors did not receive specific training on their new role, some faced barriers to receiving compensation in a timely manner, and there were some areas where Ambassadors did not feel that decision-making processes were transparent or accountable to providers. Based on Ambassador feedback, the Networks Initiative implemented changes after the first year to address these Ambassador concerns: the processes for receiving monthly payments were improved, and regular planning discussions were incorporated into monthly ambassador meetings with network staff to support co-facilitation of network meetings.

STEP 1: INITIAL NETWORK PLANNING & DESIGN

The Delaware FCC Networks Initiative included a multi-step planning process in collaboration with educators. This included:



Theory of Change Logic Model Development

Developing a theory of change logic model is an essential first step in developing an HBCC network implementation and evaluation strategy. A logic model includes several core elements: the scope (e.g., key population and other details about size of the initiative), inputs and resources (e.g., funding, infrastructure, staffing, provider leadership), implementation activities (e.g., provider engagement, content and approach of services and supports, process data such as dosage and relationships), and several types of outcomes (e.g., process, short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term).^{iv} The elements of logic models can be tailored to individual organizations and initiatives but generally will have these elements.



Theory of Change Logic Model Template

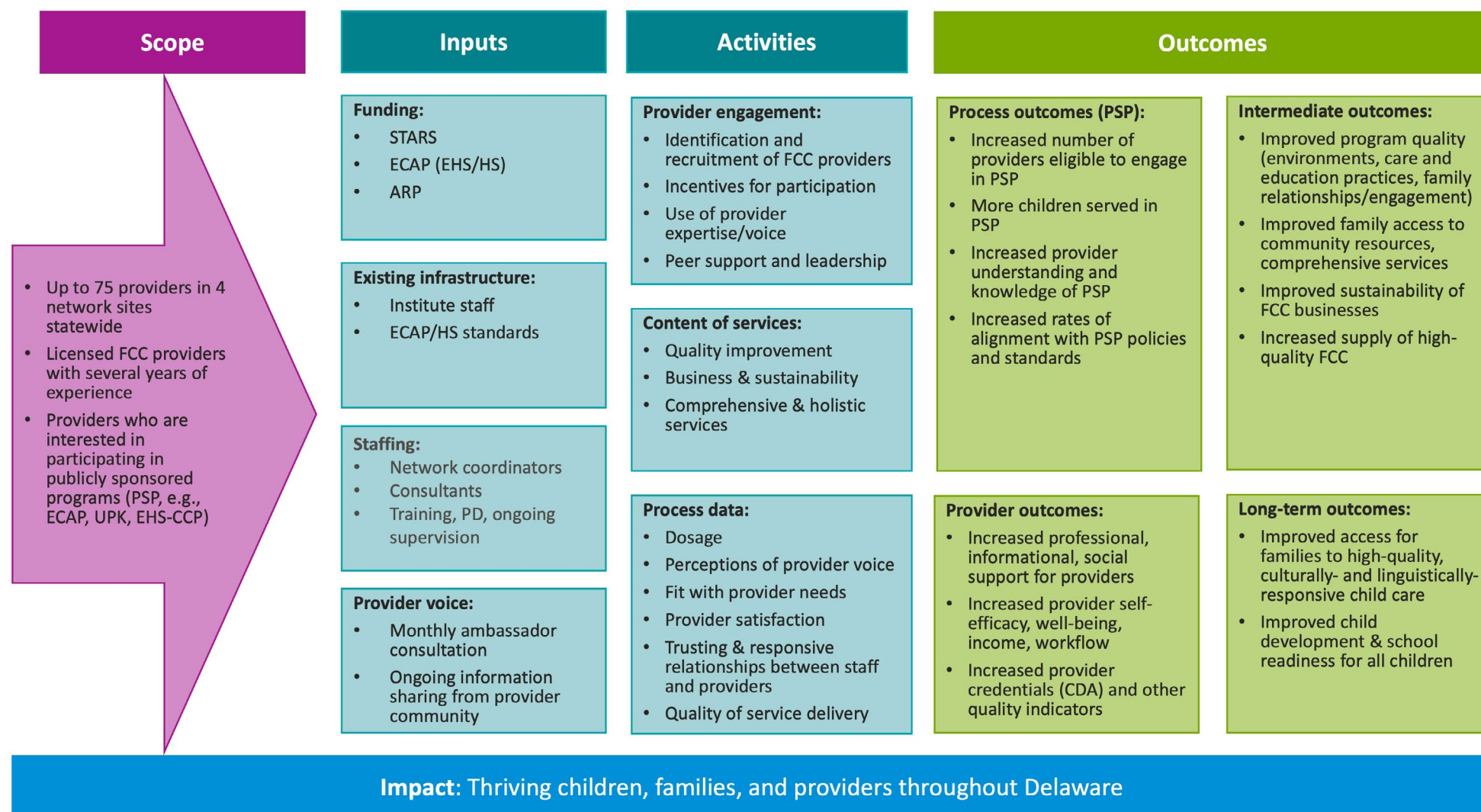
The Delaware Networks Initiative logic model (see Figure 2) specifies the **Scope** of the Networks Initiative as focused on a subset of licensed FCC educators interested in engaging in publicly-sponsored programs (PSP), clustered into four geographic regions of the state.

Inputs and resources included existing state funding and DIEEC infrastructure; a new staffing plan for the Networks Initiative including network coordinators and consultants who would receive ongoing training and supervision; and multiple elements of provider leadership and voice, including monthly ambassador meetings and feedback from the provider community.

Implementation activities included: a focus on the process of engaging providers through recruitment and peer community building; the content of services with a planned focus on quality improvement, business sustainability; comprehensive services; and process data about services, including dosage, fit with provider needs and interests, quality of services, relationships between Network staff and providers, and provider satisfaction.

Outcomes and impacts included process outcomes specific to PSP engagement (e.g., more providers and children eligible to participate in PSP in FCC settings), short-term provider outcomes (e.g., increases in peer support, well-being, and credentials), intermediate outcomes (e.g., increased quality of programs and family outcomes), long-term outcomes (e.g., improved access and school readiness), and overall impact (e.g., thriving children, families, and providers throughout Delaware). The project period was intended to measure process and short-term provider outcomes but not longer-term outcomes.

FIGURE 2. FINAL THEORY OF CHANGE LOGIC MODEL FOR THE DELAWARE FCC NETWORKS INITIATIVE



The Delaware FCC Networks Initiative’s logic model was intended to be an iterative document that would be updated over the course of the Networks Initiative as it took shape. We initially developed it at the start of the planning period (January-March 2022), updated it around the time of network launch (July 2022) based on needs assessment and community dialogues (described below), and refined outcomes throughout the evaluation period (through January 2024).

Network Self-Assessment

A network self-assessment tool (see Figure 3) was developed based on the [Benchmarks and Indicators for High-Quality HBCC Networks](#). This tool allows organizations to (1) identify which benchmarks and indicators (B&I) they plan to address in their network development efforts, (2) develop a plan for who will work on addressing the benchmark and how, and (3) track progress toward benchmark completion.



Network Benchmarks & Indicators Self-Assessment

During the initial phase of the Networks Initiative, the B&I were still in development. However, an early version of this tool was used as a checklist for a subset of B&I that were most relevant to Delaware's Networks Initiative approach. The primary purpose of the Networks Initiative was to move providers toward readiness to offer SFP, rather than a more comprehensive network strategy. DIEEC's Self-Assessment included various "why" (Focus on HBCC, Providers as Partners), "what" (Economic Sustainability, Quality, and Holistic Services), and "how" (Staffing, Data, and Recruitment) benchmarks.

Needs Assessment

Needs assessments are an important approach to incorporating provider voice into HBCC network strategies. Rather than determining a discrete set of services without input from providers, needs assessments conducted at the start of a planning process gather feedback from those affected about their existing strengths as well as their needs for and interest in additional supports. Later in the implementation and evaluation process, needs assessment data also allow organizations to check the fit between the services they are providing and providers' stated needs and interests. Needs assessments can be done using multiple methods (e.g., surveys, focus groups, town halls, interviews).

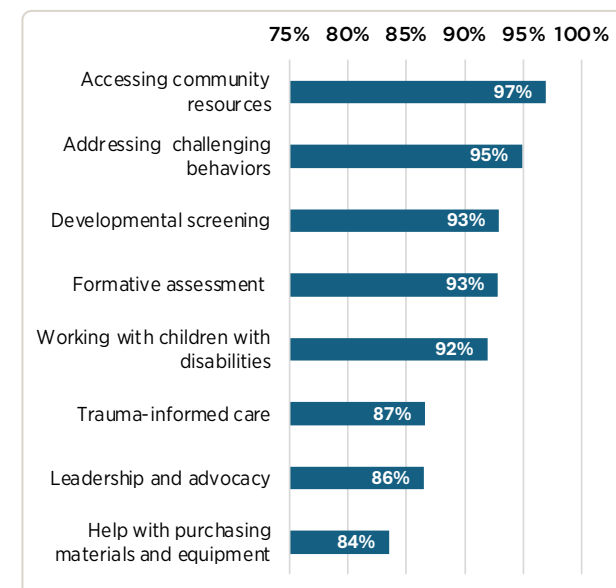
For Delaware's Networks Initiative, the needs assessment was conducted via a statewide survey of licensed FCC educators (see Data Collection section for additional information). The needs assessment survey was open to all licensed FCC providers in the state, translated into a variety of languages, and shared via email and during events by DIEEC staff. One hundred providers completed the survey, approximately a quarter of all licensed family child care providers in the state of Delaware. Results were analyzed both in aggregate as well as disaggregated by region to inform local network differentiation. Accessing community resources, developmental screening, formative assessment, and working with children with disabilities and challenging behaviors were some of the most common areas where providers wanted support (see Figure 4). This became an early area of focus for professional development across networks, along with plans to hire dedicated consultants to support early intervention needs. Providers expressed less interest in support with increasing their educational credentials or participating in early childhood systems, likely because of existing supports.

FIGURE 3. SAMPLE SELF-ASSESSMENT ITEMS

Benchmark B: The network includes providers as equal decision-making partners in network governance, operations, and accountability

Benchmark/Indicator	Do you plan on addressing this area?	Who will do this?	Please describe your plan. Please be specific about the staff roles who will implement this feature and the roles of the Network, Organization, or Community Partner
B.1. Offers scaffolding, transparency, preparation, training, and support for providers to meaningfully engage and share power as decision-making partners at the network.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not yet <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Network <input type="checkbox"/> Organization <input type="checkbox"/> Community Partner	
B.2. Supports and compensates providers as leaders through their engagement in distributed decision-making around governance and services design as well as through co-creation of network operations. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a diverse provider leadership board or advisory group. Includes providers on the agency Board of Directors. Adopts clear and transparent agency policies about processes for provider input and governance. 	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not yet <input type="checkbox"/> Not sure	<input type="checkbox"/> Network <input type="checkbox"/> Organization <input type="checkbox"/> Community Partner	

FIGURE 4. TOP DESIRED SUPPORTS FROM NEEDS ASSESSMENT



• STRATEGY •

Field a Needs Assessment to HBCC providers in your community to learn more about what they would want most from a network, and refine your plans based on their feedback.

Educator Awareness and Feedback

After collecting planning data and before launching a network strategy, it is essential to develop clear messaging around the planned purpose of networks and to gather additional feedback from educators about the intended purpose and possible benefits of the network strategy. DIEEC held a series of statewide information sessions with FCC educators about the network strategy (see sample flyer, Figure 5), including inviting an FCC educator to share her experience participating in a network in another state. They also developed a streamlined version of the Logic Model (described below) to share with the provider community for their feedback and to illustrate the possible impacts of the Networks Initiative.

FIGURE 5. DELAWARE FCC NETWORKS INFO SESSION FLYER

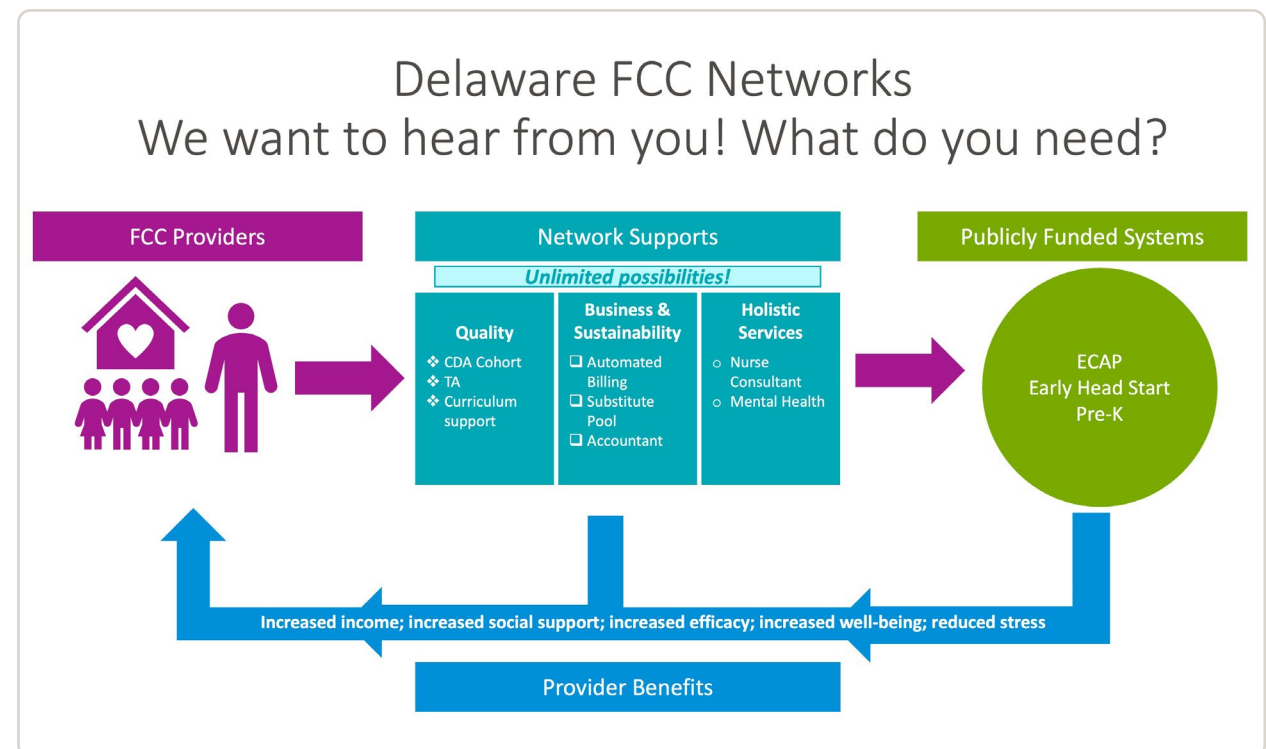


Logic Model Refinement

Logic models are designed to be living documents that need regular iteration. Logic models should be refined after assessing network readiness, gathering data about strengths and needs, and getting feedback from educators about the network strategy. Refinement may include adjusting inputs and activities based on available resources and provider needs, as well as narrowing the scope of outcomes based on planned data collection activities (described further in the Data Collection section).

In Delaware, an extra step we took was to develop a streamlined version of the logic model to support communications about the Networks Initiative (Figure 6). In collaboration with the FCC Educator Ambassadors and other members of the FCC community, DIEEC and EI developed this graphic to illustrate the intended supports and benefits of networks, leaving space for more supports to emerge and be differentiated based on educator needs and interests.

FIGURE 6. STREAMLINED LOGIC MODEL FOR FCC COMMUNITY DISTRIBUTION



STEP 2. BUILDING NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE

Staffing

Paid staff who work to support HBCC providers are at the core of network strategies. Ideally, staff specifically work with HBCC providers, understand the HBCC context, share cultural and linguistic backgrounds with providers in the network, and receive initial and ongoing training to work with this population. Staff may provide technical assistance and training on a variety of topics, deliver specific shared services to providers or children (e.g., early intervention supports), organize network activities, and more. When developing an HBCC network, it is important to have an intentional staffing strategy that will meet network and provider needs.

In Delaware, DIEEC hired a Network Program Manager to supervise the local Network Program Coordinators, who are responsible for facilitating network meetings and communicating with FCC providers. Several indicators were prioritized during the hiring process, including experience working in FCC (including as an FCC provider), knowledge about FCC, and sharing cultural, ethnic, or linguistic background with providers in their assigned network. This focus on multiple dimensions of shared experience with FCC providers is a strength of the Delaware Network Initiative's hiring process. Contracting with outside consultants to provide mental health, nursing, nutrition, and financial supports to providers was not able to be completed in the first phase of the Networks Initiative.

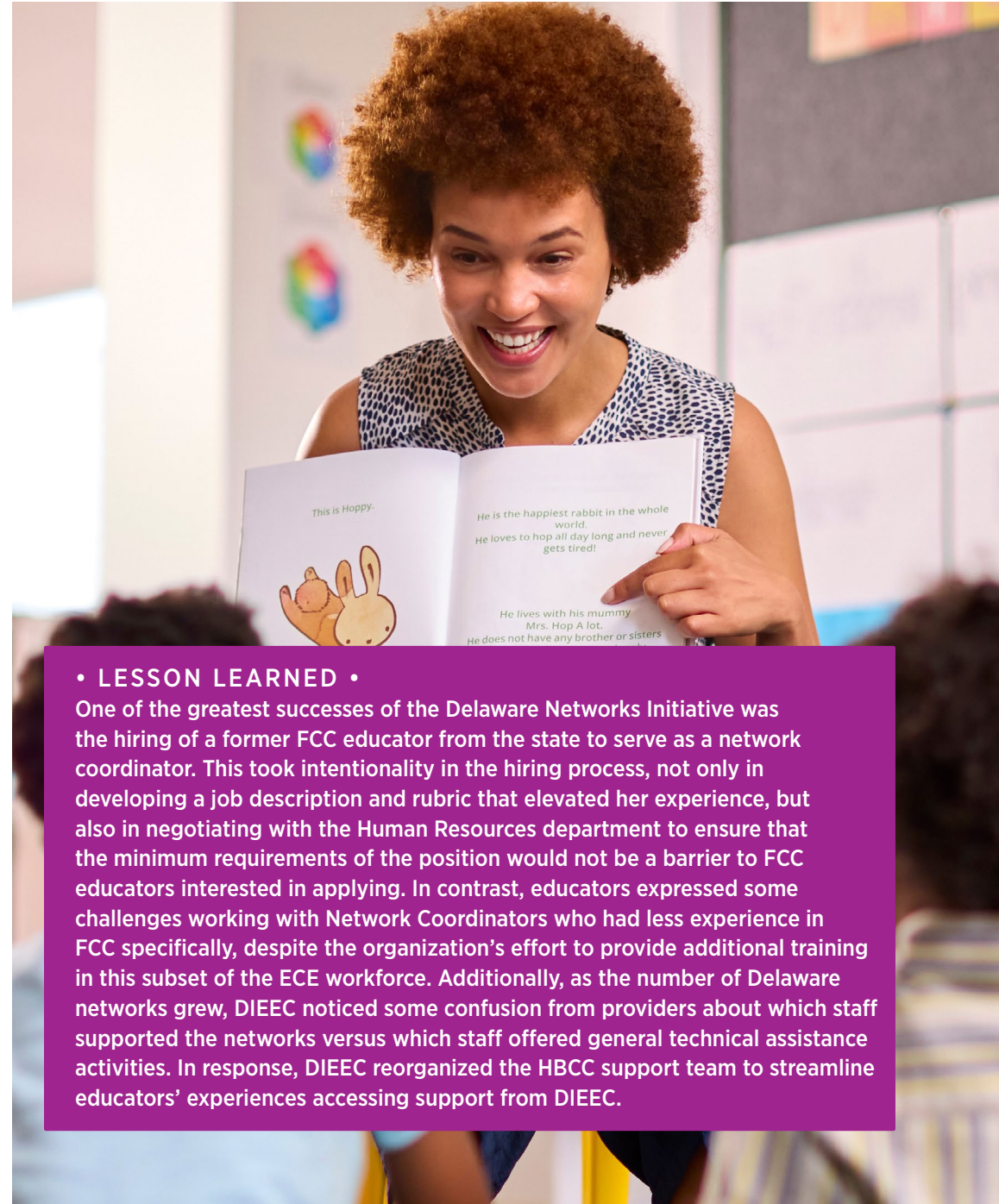


Network Hiring Rubric

BOX 3.

STAFFING: A KEY BENCHMARK FOR HIGH QUALITY HBCC NETWORKS

Benchmark J • Staffing — The network uses intentional staffing strategies to support providers.



• LESSON LEARNED •

One of the greatest successes of the Delaware Networks Initiative was the hiring of a former FCC educator from the state to serve as a network coordinator. This took intentionality in the hiring process, not only in developing a job description and rubric that elevated her experience, but also in negotiating with the Human Resources department to ensure that the minimum requirements of the position would not be a barrier to FCC educators interested in applying. In contrast, educators expressed some challenges working with Network Coordinators who had less experience in FCC specifically, despite the organization's effort to provide additional training in this subset of the ECE workforce. Additionally, as the number of Delaware networks grew, DIEEC noticed some confusion from providers about which staff supported the networks versus which staff offered general technical assistance activities. In response, DIEEC reorganized the HBCC support team to streamline educators' experiences accessing support from DIEEC.

Shared Services Platforms and Technology


Shared services are a common HBCC Network strategy. Shared services can include supports for business and financial management, bulk purchasing, and other services that can help streamlined administrative burden and reduce the costs of FCC businesses. Part of building the infrastructure for a network is to identify what technology or platforms will support a shared services strategy. It is important to gather perspectives from educators early on in the process so they have input in the tools that will be selected to make sure they fit their needs.

In Delaware, DIEEC facilitated a virtual “Demo Night” presentation by two vendors (Figure 7). Providers voted and chose Brightwheel as the tool of choice for back-office administrative support. DIEEC encouraged engagement with the platform by hosting Brightwheel orientation sessions for providers and monitoring monthly usage reports to target 1-to-1 supports to providers. Additionally, the Program Manager & Network Coordinators engaged in a Community of Practice with Brightwheel and other states using the platform to ensure network staff competency with the platform.

• STRATEGY •

After selecting a few options for shared services platforms that might meet Network goals, take it to providers to vote on the option that they think would work best for them.

FIGURE 7. DELAWARE FCC NETWORKS INITIATIVE
DEMO NIGHT FLYER



The flyer is for a "DELAWARE FAMILY CHILD CARE NETWORKS" demo night. It features a blue header with the title in white and yellow text. The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood logo is in the top right. The main text is white on a blue background, announcing a "SAVE THE DATE: THURSDAY, JULY 28" for a "CHILDCARE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE DEMO NIGHT" from 6:00-7:30 p.m. via Zoom. It invites family child care educators to learn about two systems: Early Learning Ventures Alliance CORE and Brightwheel. A schedule of events follows, listing Q&A, a live demonstration of the CORE system, and a live demonstration of the Brightwheel system. A section for "ZOOM MEETING INFORMATION BELOW:" includes the phrase "We'll see you there!". At the bottom, it says "Contact us at: Learn more:". A photo of the Sussex FCC Networks Pilot Group is on the right side.

DELAWARE
FAMILY CHILD CARE
NETWORKS

SAVE THE DATE: THURSDAY, JULY 28
CHILDCARE MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE DEMO NIGHT
6:00-7:30 p.m. (Virtual via Zoom)

Family child care educators in Delaware are invited to take part in this exciting opportunity to learn more about two child care management systems that are being considered to support network providers. Join us to learn more about Brightwheel and Early Learning Ventures Alliance CORE, while connecting with your family child care peers.

Schedule of events as follows:

- 6:00-6:30 p.m.**
Open time for Q&A and conversation with FCC ambassadors/educators
- 6:30-7:00 p.m.**
Live demonstration of the Early Learning Ventures Alliance CORE child care management software system
- 7:00-7:30 p.m.**
Live demonstration of the Brightwheel preschool & childcare software system

ZOOM MEETING INFORMATION BELOW:

We'll see you there!

Contact us at:
Learn more:

Sussex FCC Networks Pilot Group

STEP 3. RECRUITMENT AND LAUNCH

Recruiting for and launching a network strategy requires an intentional process that is transparent, balances logistical constraints with provider interests, involves multi-modal recruitment activities, and relies on provider guidance and experience. This includes careful consideration of the timeline for the launch of each network as well as planning for what recruitment activities will be implemented when leading up to that launch.

The Delaware Networks Initiative was planned as having DIEEC as the network hub that provided infrastructure and staffing with four networks organized regionally around the state. To learn from and iterate on the network process as they went, Delaware's regional networks were rolled out sequentially over a one-year period, beginning with a pilot site.



BOX 4.

RECRUITMENT: A KEY BENCHMARK FOR HIGH QUALITY HBCC NETWORKS

Benchmark K • Recruitment — The network uses recruitment strategies that result in ongoing provider participation.

• LESSON LEARNED •

There are benefits and drawbacks of sequentially rolling out a network strategy. Delaware Networks Initiative's pilot process and subsequent sequential rollout created additional time to build up staffing, capacity, and network procedures. For example, as the first few networks were launched, DIEEC discovered that there was still a lack of clarity about the purpose of networks, what supports they would provide, and how providers would be able to engage with them. By the time the fourth network was launched, staff had honed their messaging and created a Network Overview and Interest Form (see Tool) that attempted to clarify the purpose of the networks, resources that would be provided, and responsibilities of all parties. At the same time, the fast pace of the sequential rollout strategy contributed to challenges in communications with educators, some of whom were unsure why one region was receiving services first, perceived that some regions had more advantages than others, and in the case of pilot participants, lack of clarity about the purpose of networks. Others considering this approach may want to reflect on the pros and cons of sequential rollout strategies, and plan in advance for transparently communicating the rationale and timeline to educators in their communities.



Network Overview and Interest Form

In Delaware, a recruitment plan was developed early on in the planning process in collaboration with the Educator Ambassadors representing each regional network. Planned recruitment strategies included a range of general (e.g., web and email updates, tabling at FCC community events, information sessions described earlier in the Educator Awareness and Feedback section) as well as more targeted (e.g., regional info sessions and individual outreach from network staff and peers) approaches.



Network Recruitment Plan

STEP 4. IMPLEMENTATION

Comprehensive HBCC network strategies leverage varied services to holistically support providers, children, and families (i.e., by promoting provider well-being, financial sustainability, quality practices, and comprehensive services for children and families) and implement services in relationship-based ways (see Box 5). In line with their Theory of Change and the Educator Needs Assessment results, the Delaware Networks Initiative intended to focus on aspects of each of these elements in their approach to service delivery.

Provider Well-Being

The Delaware Networks Initiative promoted provider well-being in multiple ways. First, they offered **peer support activities** in the form of monthly network meetings, app-based communication, informal communications, and providing funding for network-designated activities (e.g., social events, t-shirts). Second, as described earlier, they provided a shared services platform (Brightwheel) that could help **reduce administrative burden**. Third, they supported **educational and professional advancement** by creating a parallel Child Development Associate credential cohort and sending a subset of providers to the National Association for Family Child Care Annual Conference.

Finances and Sustainability

The primary purpose of the Delaware Networks Initiative was to **provide training and technical assistance to help providers navigate systems**, although in practice DIEEC was limited in its ability to do so when it came to the rollout of the state's new SFP initiative (further described in [Lessons Learned: Reflections on Delaware's State-Funded Preschool Process](#)). As part of their Quality Improvement Planning process, DIEEC staff helped providers **calculate their revenue based on the actual costs of care**, and the Brightwheel platform provided some **recordkeeping support and other shared services**. Two networks also developed Resource Rooms to promote shared access to learning materials and resources, one of the things providers reported wanting in the needs assessment. Other goals of the Networks Initiative that were explored but not implemented during the project period included facilitating access to benefits and tax preparation supports.

Quality Practices

Because quality practices were not identified as a primary area of need by providers, this was not one of the main focal areas of the Networks Initiative. However, the Networks Initiative did engage in a Quality Improvement Planning process with providers to **support continuous quality improvement** in individualized areas selected by providers.

Comprehensive Services

The Networks Initiative offered **training and support in administering developmental screenings**. Though they initially intended to staff consultants to support family engagement and mental health supports to children and families, this was not completed during the project period.

Relationship-Based Implementation

The Delaware Networks Initiative prioritized continuity of relationships between network staff and providers by establishing consistent, location-based caseloads who met regularly for monthly network meetings scheduled at times and in modalities (in-person or virtual) that worked best for providers in that network. Network Coordinators maintained those relationships via phone support between meetings. Network Coordinators were either former FCC educators or previously known TA specialists who could build on previous relationships with providers.



BOX 5.

SERVICE DELIVERY AND IMPLEMENTATION: KEY BENCHMARKS FOR HIGH-QUALITY HBCC NETWORKS

Benchmark D. Provider Well-Being. The network offers services that promote provider well-being and attachment to HBCC work.

Benchmark E. Finances & Sustainability. The network offers services that promote economic well-being and sustainability.

Benchmark F. Quality Practices. The network offers services that build on and enhance culturally-relevant and community embedded provider practices that contribute to positive child and family outcomes.

Benchmark G. Comprehensive Services. The network offers holistic services for children and families beyond the supports offered for providers.

Benchmark H. Service Delivery & Implementation. The network uses research evidence to inform how services are implemented including a focus on relationship-based approaches to service delivery.

STEP 5. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is an essential component of HBCC network strategies, both for the purposes of informing and evaluating service delivery, as well as for accountability and case-making purposes in the case of publicly-funded network initiatives. At the outset of a network initiative, it is important to develop a data collection plan that is **aligned with the theory of change logic model**; includes **process data** about network operations as well as **data about outcomes for providers, children, and families**; and considers **how to use and share data for network change**.

Planning for Data Collection Aligned to Theory of Change Logic Model

A HBCC network data collection strategy should always prioritize alignment with the organization's theory of change. This means considering not only *what* you want to measure (e.g., what outcomes and for whom) and *how* you want to measure it (e.g., what tools can you use), but also *when* you will be collecting data (e.g., within the next year, two years, five years, etc.) and your plans to *reevaluate* based on the data collected (e.g., who will you share the data with and how will it be used to inform future work). The [HBCC Network Evaluation Toolkit](#) has additional helpful guidance and examples for developing Network evaluations.

For the Delaware Networks Initiative, the initial evaluation period was less than two years. We therefore focused on collecting process data as well as short-term outcomes connected to PSP participation and educator well-being. Networks with a longer scope might also plan to evaluate intermediate outcomes (e.g., program quality, business sustainability, family access to comprehensive services, family satisfaction) and/or long-term outcomes (e.g., access to child care and early education in the state, child outcomes). We collected a mixture of quantitative data (surveys), qualitative data (interviews and focus groups), and observational data (an observation tool described below) at three time points (baseline in Fall 2022 or at network launch, mid-point in Summer 2023, and follow-up in Winter 2023).



Network Data Collection Plan

BOX 6.

DATA COLLECTION: A KEY BENCHMARK FOR HIGH-QUALITY HBCC NETWORKS

Benchmark I • Data Collection — The network uses an intentional and collaborative approach to data collection and analysis that informs service delivery.

Collecting Process Data

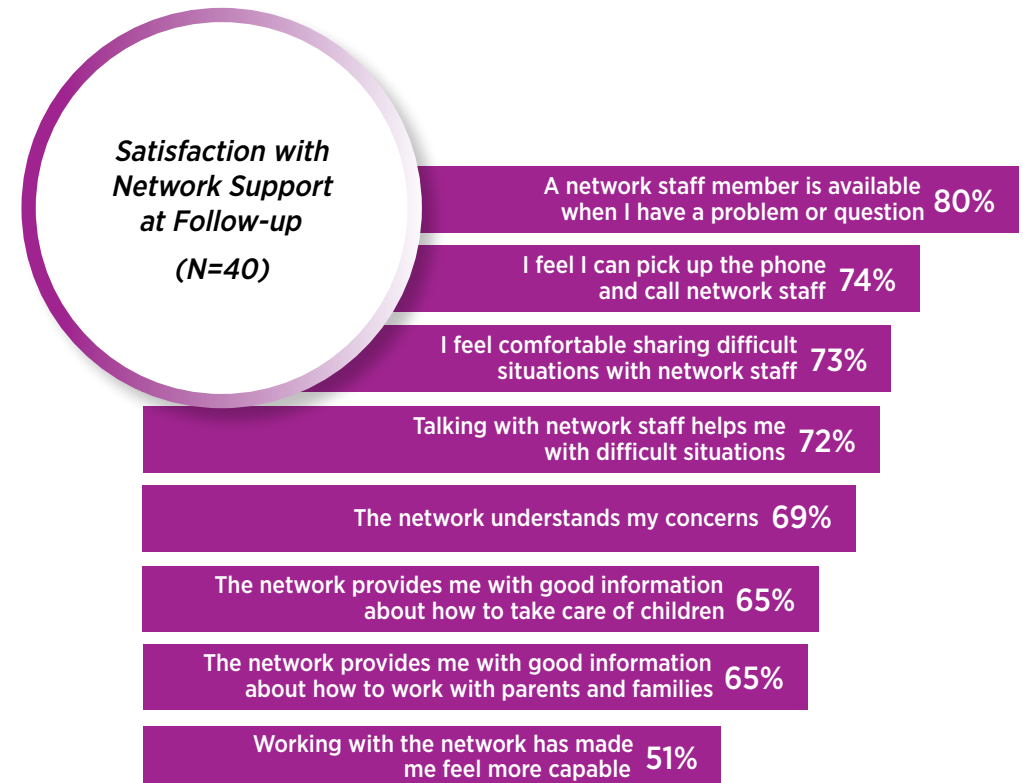
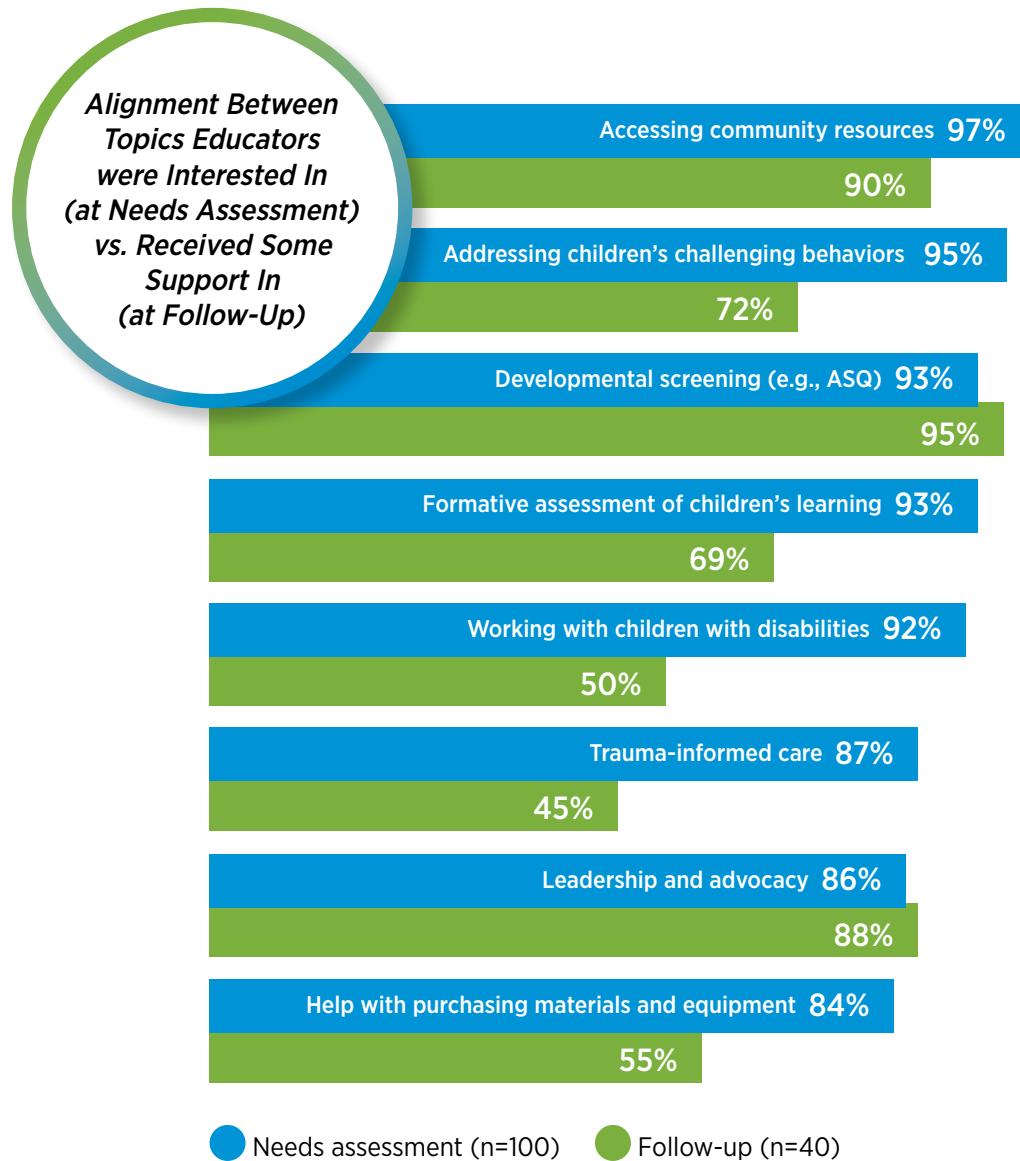
Process data measure the features of implementation of an initiative. Process data in HBCC networks can include metrics on whether the desired number of providers were recruited to the network(s), the dosage of network supports that providers receive over time, and the quality of network services (e.g., fit between provider interests and network services, provider voice in network development, provider-staff relationship quality, quality of meeting facilitation, etc.).

For the Delaware Networks Initiative, we collected process data in a variety of ways. In addition to tracking dosage through meeting attendance, we fielded several surveys throughout the implementation period to gather feedback. We also developed and implemented a Network Meeting Observation & Feedback Tool to measure the quality of network facilitation and offer support for continuous quality improvement.



Network Meeting Observation & Feedback Tool

FIGURE 8. PROCESS DATA PREVIEW
FROM DELAWARE FCC NETWORKS INITIATIVE



Collecting Outcomes Data

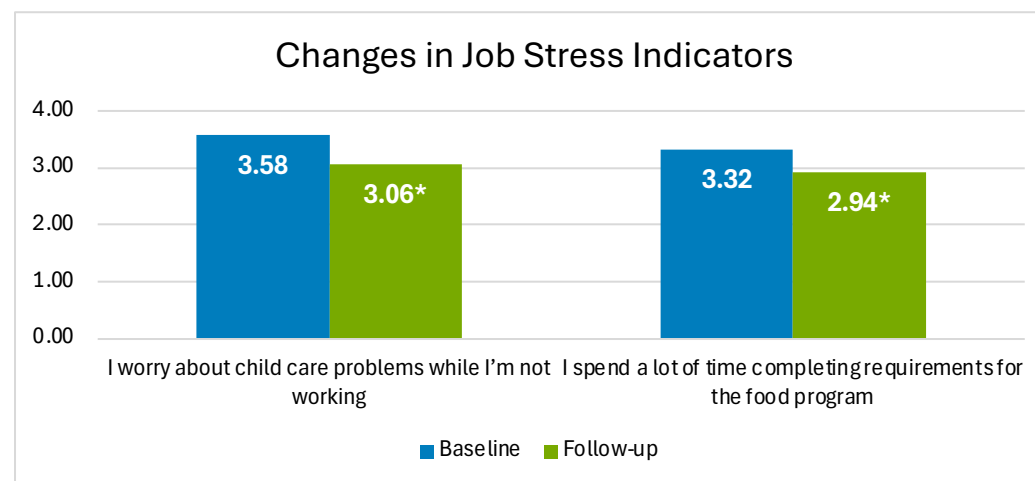
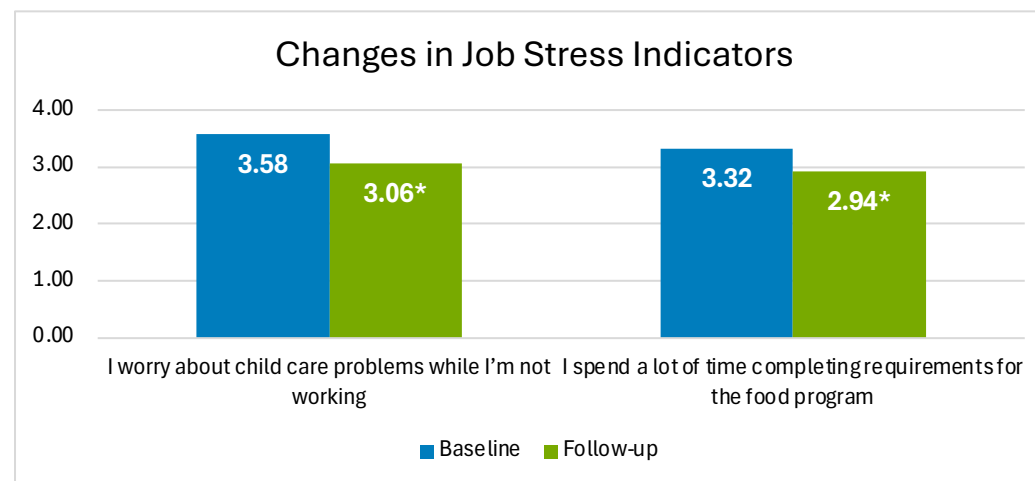
Network outcomes data collection includes several features: content of the outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, well-being, quality), beneficiary of the outcomes (e.g., providers, programs, systems, children, parents, communities), and time period to achieve outcomes (e.g., short, intermediate, and long term).^{iv} Based on your organization's logic model you can deduce what combinations of these features are most important to measure and when.

During the first year of the Delaware Network Initiative implementation and in light of its immediate focus on preparing FCC educators to deliver the state-funded preschool program, our focus was on outcomes related to SFP outcomes and short-term educator outcomes. SFP outcomes included the extent to which educators were interested in, engaged in, and/or eligible for SFP along several indicators over the first year of the Networks Initiative. Short-term educator outcomes included improvements during the first year on professional and social support, administrative burden, economic and psychosocial well-being, and quality practices. We assessed both sets of outcomes by observing changes on the same items asked on baseline and follow-up surveys with a sample of 31 FCC educators who completed both surveys, as well as descriptive information about all educators who completed the follow-up survey and focus groups and interviews with subsets of FCC educators. Questions used throughout our data collection process (e.g., Needs Assessment survey, Baseline and Follow-Up surveys, and Feedback Focus Groups and Interviews) are available in the Provider Data Question Bank tool.



Provider Data Question Bank

FIGURE 9. SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES DATA PREVIEW FROM DELAWARE FCC NETWORKS INITIATIVE



*Note: These data are from a sample of 31 FCC educators who completed the survey at both baseline and follow-up. * Indicates statistical significance on paired-sample test ($p < .05$).*

Using and Sharing Data for Network, Policy, and Practice Change

Data collected about network implementation and effectiveness can be used for a variety of purposes. Data can be shared back with providers as a mechanism for processing findings and gathering additional feedback for network change. Data can also be used for case-making, advocacy, policy, or practice change purposes within or outside of the network community.

In Delaware, data collected throughout the implementation process was used to inform network service delivery, changes to network meetings, and plans for the future of the Networks Initiative. For example, these data were used in conversations with the state to shift both who the Networks Initiative serves (i.e., a more comprehensive group of FCC educators) and how SFP fits within the Networks Initiative focus (i.e., going forward, it will no longer be the sole focus but a piece of what the Networks Initiative supports). Additionally, per educator request, support is now being offered for individual business advising and a grant cohort opportunity. Network meetings will continue to be offered in person in four locations, as well as an additional virtual option (5 total meetings per month), and these meetings will be open to any FCC provider interested in attending. The Networks Initiative is actively planning out supports and informational sessions for the upcoming year using data collected throughout this implementation process.



LESSONS LEARNED: REFLECTIONS ON DELAWARE'S STATE-FUNDED PRESCHOOL PROCESS

The state of Delaware's primary goal for the FCC Networks Initiative was to prepare licensed FCC educators to offer SFP as soon as the 2023-2024 school year. While this goal was not met to the extent that DIEEC originally hoped, significant progress was made toward it within the initial two-year timeframe. Successfully onboarding FCC educators to deliver SFP was challenging for a number of reasons, including bureaucracy at the state level; multi-layered communication problems and missing feedback loops between the state, DIEEC, and FCC educators.

In January 2023, the state rolled out a new SFP program without engaging DIEEC or FCC educators in the planning process. This was unexpected for DIEEC, who envisioned that the Networks Initiative would be a natural partner in implementing a pilot program of SFP in FCC settings in intentional and inclusive ways, as well as for providers, who were confused and skeptical about why DIEEC did not warn them about the new process. Although FCC educators were eligible to apply for the new SFP program for the first time, the application process involved a request for proposals (RFP) that was extremely long, had a very short turnaround time, and was not adapted for the FCC context. As a state contractor, DIEEC was often not able to provide the types of supports FCC educators requested in preparing their proposals for the state.

Several of the educators who successfully completed the application shared that they were only able to do so because of support from their peers.

As a result, few FCC educators were able to engage with the SFP program. Only nine FCC educators successfully submitted the application and all nine educators were initially accepted to receive state funding for FCC programs, although only one of these received a state-funded slot. The others were instead designated to be part of a "Getting Ready Group" cohort that would receive additional technical assistance and additional Quality Improvement Awards instead. Upon learning about this change, three educators turned down the additional funds, opting out of participating within the first few months of the process. Across the Getting Ready Group cohort, there were negative sentiments about the way they were initially informed that they were selected for the program, only to find out that they would not receive seat funding but rather funding for the "Getting Ready" cohort. As one educator put it, "I get to the finish line to get my trophy, and you say you'll get your trophy next year, but here's a paper for completing the race." Despite these challenges, educators spoke positively about being able to

use the additional funds to supplement their incomes and provide additional supports for children and families. The educator who did receive SFP funding shared that the program had a very positive impact on her work, particularly in terms of salary, benefits, and curriculum, although she did have to obtain waivers for some of the less FCC-friendly SFP requirements.

On the whole, the rollout of the new SFP program contributed to decreased morale across FCC educators in the Networks Initiative. For many educators, it enhanced feelings of distrust toward the state and DIEEC. There was a decrease in interest in the SFP program (from 63% at baseline to 50% at follow-up within a paired subsample), indicating less interest in exploring this opportunity in the future. Especially within the pilot network where multiple educators applied to the SFP program and three refused the Getting Ready funds, this compounded existing issues around ongoing miscommunication and interpersonal dynamics between educators and network staff.

Despite these challenges, the Networks Initiative had numerous positive outcomes as highlighted above, despite the very short period of implementation. Future work to repair relationships with FCC educators and authentically support them through a sustainable Networks Initiative may continue to yield positive outcomes in the longer term.

SUMMARY:

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING PUBLICLY FUNDED HBCC NETWORKS

Other organizations or agencies wishing to employ networks as a strategy to support HBCC providers in implementing publicly funded early care and education programs can take several lessons away from the case of Delaware's FCC Networks Initiative:



1. Start with relationships.

Take the time before launching a network strategy to build relationships with providers, understand the history of their interactions with relevant systems, and commit to infusing relationship-based practices throughout network activities.



2. Value provider voice.

Rely on provider leaders for guidance and decision-making, ask providers what they want out of a network and align network activities and supports to their preferences as much as possible, and build feedback loops throughout design and implementation so that educators continually have a voice in how the network is run.



3. Prioritize equity.

Be thoughtful about the backgrounds of the providers your network is working with, including intentionality in staffing (e.g., staff with shared cultural and childcare experiences), implementation (e.g., offering support in culturally and linguistically responsive ways and tailoring supports as needed), and data collection (e.g., offering survey and interview opportunities in preferred languages).



4. Incorporate HBCC intentionally.

Before developing a network strategy, particularly one where a primary goal is to support participation in publicly funded systems, do your best to ensure that HBCC inclusion is a priority for decision-makers as well as implementers and that all partners have a shared understanding of how to involve and support the HBCC community.



5. Communicate clearly and consistently.

Build a clear communication strategy in consultation with providers to ensure that the intentions and processes of the network are clear and that providers understand their role, and maintain transparent communication throughout all network operations.



6. Follow through.

Ensure that the primary goals and activities of the network are implemented as promised to providers. When policy contexts interfere with these plans, work with providers to understand the challenges and advance solutions.

ENDNOTES

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