



# Massachusetts Early Childhood Support Organization (ECSO)

## *Year 3 Annual Evaluation Report*



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Submitted to:

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## Executive Summary

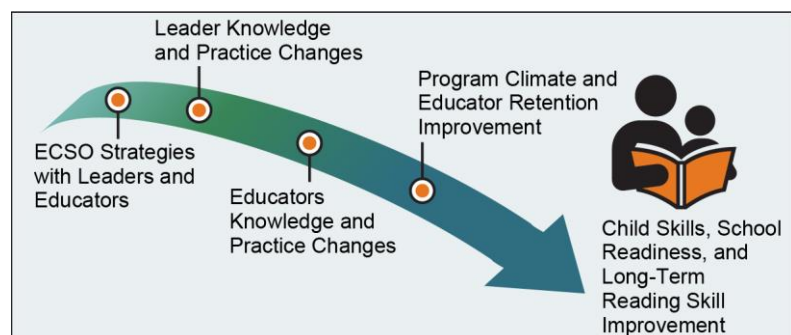
# Massachusetts Early Childhood Support Organization (ECSO) Year 3 Annual Evaluation Report



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 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 integration into the state's strategy to support quality.

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. After two years, the intensity of supports is stepped down. Each ECSO has its own model and set of planned services and supports, but all three models



*"The ESCO program has truly enriched my professional development, enabling me to provide better support to my staff and promote high-quality early childhood education." – EEP Leader*

align with the initiative's overarching theory of change.

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 the summer of 2022, ECSOs onboarded a third cohort of 26 EEPs. In total, 81 EEPs across all three cohorts received ECSO supports in the 2022-23 school year, though supports for the first cohort dropped in intensity per the model. All are licensed center-based childcare providers located across Massachusetts, including many in the greater Boston area.

Abt Associates, an independent research firm, is conducting an ongoing implementation and impact evaluation of the ECSO initiative. In the 2022-23 school year, 30 similar EEPs that were not receiving ECSO supports were recruited to serve as the first cohort of comparison programs for the impact evaluation, a quasi-experimental design (QED) that will ultimately involve two cohorts of ECSO-supported EEPs and two cohorts of comparison programs.

This report presents findings from the ongoing implementation and impact evaluations. The interim findings in this report focus primarily on data collected from ECSOs, participating Cohort 3 EEPs, and the comparison EEPs in the 2022-23

school year (see map), including surveys, classroom observations, and administrative data – data collected after the ECSO EEPs had experienced their first year of supports. Similar data from Cohort 2 after two years of supports are provided for context and to offer insight into what might be expected to happen in the QED after ECSO EEPs experience their second year of the initiative.

Although the findings are interim because the full QED relies on data from an additional cohort of treatment and comparison programs onboarded in the summer of 2023 and will not be completed until both cohorts experience the full two years of initiative supports, this report sheds light on the initiative's impact so far.

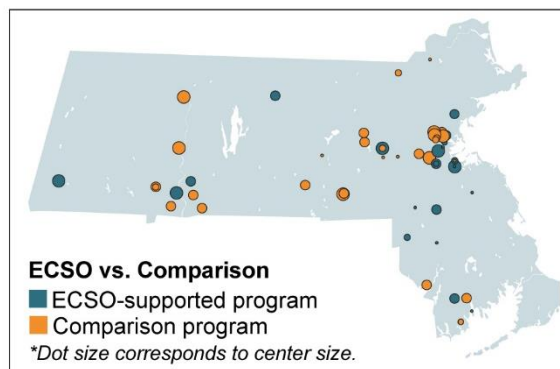
**ECSOs continued to deliver supports as planned and according to the initiative's theory of change.** On the whole, ECSOs succeeded in providing the types and intensity of supports to EEPs as

planned. They provided between 3 and 12 hours of monthly support on average to each Cohort 3



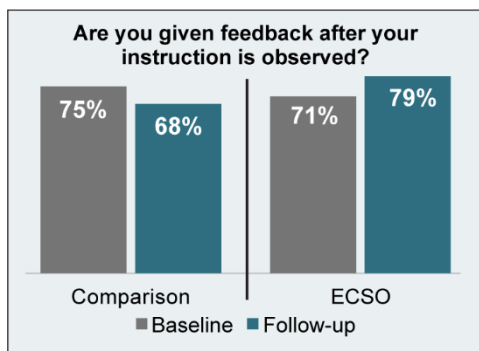
EEP focused on improving instructional leadership through support for using and reflecting on data, continuous quality improvement, staff support and development, and other topics. One ECSO also provided training and coaching directly to educators, with the goal of transferring these activities to instructional 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 intended fidelity.

**EEP leaders were more confident in their leadership skills and engaged in significantly more positive leader practices than leaders in comparison programs.** After their first year of





ECSO participation, EEP leaders in the third cohort of supported programs reported feeling more confident about their leadership and program management abilities than leaders in similar comparison programs. Leaders in ECSO-supported EEPs 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. They also reported engaging in significantly more positive leadership practices and observed educators more, more frequently, and provided them with feedback from observations more than did leaders in comparison EEPs.



**Educators in ECSO-supported EEPs maintained a positive view of program climate and positive intentions to stay in the field.** Educators in the third cohort of ECSO EEPs maintained high ratings of program climate throughout their first year of supports and had significantly higher ratings at the end of the year than did educators in comparison programs, an important outcome given the stressed EEC climate across Massachusetts and more largely. Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of educators in ECSO EEPs expressed a desire to stay in the field and/or at their current program at the end of the year than did educators in comparison EEPs, controlling for intentions at the beginning of the year. Though we did not see *change* in these metrics over the year, we did maintenance of positive sentiments whereas we saw decreases in comparison programs.

**After their first year of ECSO supports, ECSO programs did not have higher observed**

**classroom quality than comparison programs, though data from Cohort 2 suggest that another year of supports may lead to positive change.**

Overall scores on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS) across age groups did not increase meaningfully during the first year of supports in ECSO-supported EEPs, despite more positive change in comparison EEPs. We also did not observe consistent improvement in more nuanced behaviors observed with a different quality measure. After two years of supports, we see larger improvements in infant and toddler classrooms in Cohort 2 EEPs, providing some context for what we might expect in Cohort 3 in the coming year. ECSOs are working to strengthen their focus on these important outcomes.

**In the coming year the ECSOs, with support from EEC and New Profit, will continue to provide supports to leaders and educators across the Commonwealth, and the impact evaluation will continue, examining the initiative's impact on programs after two years of supports.** At this point in the ECSO initiative, we have found positive impacts on leadership beliefs, attitudes, and practices after one year of supports. As the second year begins for Cohort 3, we expect to see more changes in leader and educator practices as the ECSOs begin to shift the focus of their supports. Descriptive findings from Cohort 2 suggest that the second year of implementation has the potential to bring about positive change at multiple levels within participating EEPs compared to similar programs that are not receiving these leader and educator supports. 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 classrooms and the drivers of those changes. 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](mailto:ecsoeval@abtassoc.com)