

HARRIS COUNTY ELQN PILOT: YEAR TWO EVALUATION REPORT

DECEMBER 2025



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Year 2 of Harris County's Early Learning Quality Network Pilot

Harris County's Early Learning Quality Network (ELQN) Pilot is a community-centered, 3-year initiative designed to strengthen early learning and child care across the county. The work, supported by the Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity (DEEO) and CHILDREN AT RISK (the Network Support Hub [NSH] organization), is guided by community input and local data to ensure that child care quality improvements are responsive to the needs of families and providers.

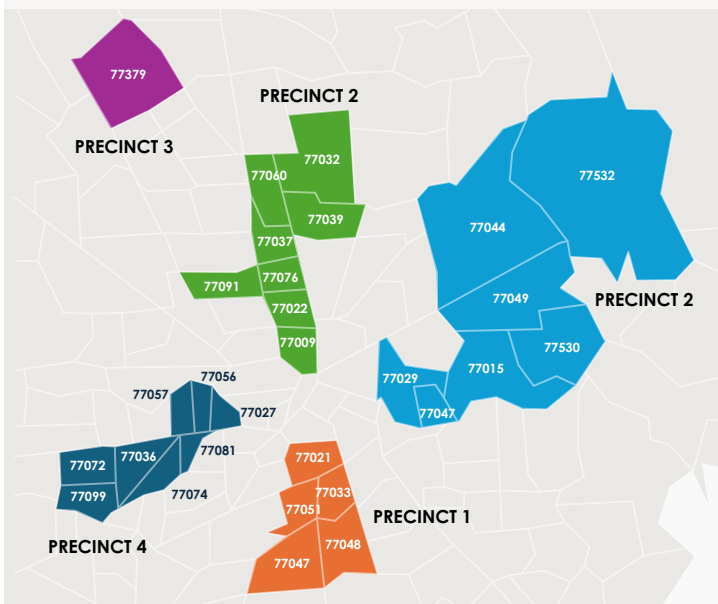
The ELQN, now operating for 2 years, is still focused on five communities identified as child care deserts. Local Network Organizations (LNOs), which are trusted community-based organizations with deep local ties, lead efforts in each of these five communities. LNOs also support vendors contracted by the NSH to implement initiatives selected during Year 1 of the initiative.



Map of Early Learning Quality Network (ELQN) Communities

Local Network Organizations (LNOs)

- EHCEC
- HCPL-Precinct 1
- HCPL-Precinct 3
- VNTW
- YMCA



Through the work of ELQN, Harris County aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- » More than 2,500 children will experience improved child care environments.
- » Families will have increased access to high-quality child care that meets their needs and preferences.
- » Additional community infrastructure will be developed to support quality child care across Harris County.



ELQN Year 2 Progress

KEY MILESTONES	2025												
	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	
Request for Vendor Proposal Period	STARTED IN OCT. 2024												
Initiative Launch and Implementation		THROUGH AUG. 2026											
NSH and LNOs Revised Key Design Documents, Including ELQN Policy Manual													
Initiative Application Window													
SRC Evaluation Site Visit & In-Person Focus Groups													
SRC Evaluation Virtual Focus Groups													

Overview of the Evaluation

During Year 2, School Readiness Consulting (SRC) continued an evaluation of the pilot of the ELQN, specifically focused on the initiative launch and implementation. This phase of the evaluation captures experiences from January through September 2025. Using diverse data sources—including site visits and tours with providers; key performance indicator (KPI) data from LNOs and vendors; and focus groups with LNOs, vendors, the NSH, the DEEO, providers, and community members—the findings in this Year 2 report will help stakeholders reflect on their progress so far and plan for the remainder of implementation based on successes and lessons learned.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR YEAR 2

1 How is the Quality Network designed and implemented?

- 1a. What are the experiences of participating communities as they design and implement action plans?

2 What are the lessons learned about implementing the Quality Network?

- 2a. What can the region learn about the implementation of the Quality Network in the early learning context of Harris County? How did perspectives evolve over time?
- 2b. What aspects of the Quality Network program were most important to ensure its success?
- 2c. What strategies would be most helpful in implementing new Quality Network efforts at future sites?
- 2d. What strategies would be most helpful in sustaining the Quality Network at participating sites?

Methodology

The evaluation team collected focus group and interview data and analyzed existing data, including LNO and vendor KPIs, LNO community survey summaries, and data from community outreach events. In May 2025, the team conducted site visits (n = 5) with ELQN providers, which included tours of an early childhood site in each community and interviews with site, LNO, and DEEO staff. While on-site, the team also conducted focus groups with providers (n = 7) and community members (n = 8). Virtual focus groups were offered for providers (n = 5) and community members (n = 3) who could not join in person, as well as NSH staff (n = 2). These touchpoints were focused on experiences with launching the initiatives.

SRC had another data collection period in September 2025 focused on experiences with ongoing implementation. This included virtual focus groups with LNOs (n = 9), vendors (n = 10), the NSH (n = 7), and the DEEO (n = 2). The team coded and analyzed transcripts to identify themes and experiences across participants.

Quantitative data from LNO KPIs, LNO community events, and vendor KPIs were accessed in October 2025 and included data through September 2025. The SRC team calculated counts and percentages using these data.

OVERVIEW OF LAUNCH AND IMPLEMENTATION

INITIATIVE LAUNCH

At the end of Year 1, the ELQN finalized the seven initiatives and began the request for proposal (RFP) process for selecting vendors to support implementation of the initiatives. The RFP process for the ELQN initiatives began in October 2024 and concluded in June 2025. During this time, the NSH released RFPs for each of the seven initiatives and vetted proposals before selecting the final vendors. Ultimately, a vendor was selected for each of the initiatives, and all contracts were executed by July 2025. The contract length for the initiatives varied: some initiatives began in early spring 2025, and others did not launch until summer 2025. Selected vendors were expected to design project plans, solicit applications from caregivers and child care centers for participation in the initiatives, and procure any materials needed to implement their respective initiatives.

Throughout early 2025, the DEEO and the NSH prepared LNOs for the launch of the initiatives by sharing relevant information and timelines for contracting and implementation. Vendors were also invited to ELQN All Hands meetings to introduce themselves and share an overview of their project plans for the LNOs.



INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Each vendor was responsible for carrying out tasks outlined in the scope of work for each initiative and for tracking progress against the vendor’s contract goals. Progress was measured using key performance indicators (KPIs), which varied according to the purpose of each initiative. Vendors submitted their KPI data to the NSH on a monthly basis. The focus of each initiative and how progress was tracked are summarized below, and details regarding all the vendor KPIs are available in the appendix.

TRACKING PROGRESS

As part of their contracts for ELQN implementation, vendors were required to track progress on KPIs related to each initiative. All initiatives had KPIs for number of participants as well as other KPIs more specifically related to each initiative (e.g., number of trainings, number of kits distributed). A full list of the KPIs for each initiative is available in the appendix.

At a high level, the vendor KPIs summarize overall progress of the ELQN initiatives in Year 2. As of September 2025, almost 2,000 applications had been received for services provided by the initiatives, and several initiatives were still accepting applications. Vendors reported serving more than 700 caregivers and more than 3,000 children across ELQN communities.



1,860
APPLICATIONS RECEIVED



740
CAREGIVERS SERVED



3,064
CHILDREN BENEFITING FROM THE INITIATIVES

The timeline and scope for each initiative was determined by the nature of services being provided and the number of communities that selected the initiative as part of their Child Care Quality Action Plan. For instance, an initiative that was selected by all communities, such as Training and Professional Development, had a longer

Training and Professional Development - The Rupani Foundation

Vendor Contracted: February 2025

Initiative End: August 2026

VNTW Precinct 4, Harris County Public Library (HCPL) Precinct 1, HCPL Precinct 3

Provides training and coaching to enhance the skills and knowledge of families, regulated child care providers, and Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers.

KPIs include tracking participation in trainings and/or mentoring and coaching sessions, and tracking distribution of professional development resources.

Facility, Safety and Security - Collaborative for Children

Vendor Contracted: July 2025

Initiative End: August 2026

YMCA Precinct 2, EHCEC Precinct 2, VNTW Precinct 4, HCPL Precinct 1, HCPL Precinct 3

Supports facility updates and enhances safety by providing developmentally appropriate indoor and outdoor materials and equipment that meet specific needs, as well as improvements that promote the security and well-being of both children and staff at regulated child care providers.

KPIs include tracking needs assessments and procurement of any necessary supplies/equipment.

Emergency and Temporary Care - WorkTexas! and Neighborhood Schools

Vendor Contracted: May 2025

Initiative End: August 2026

YMCA Precinct 2, EHCEC Precinct 2, VNTW Precinct 4, HCPL Precinct 3

Supports regulated child care providers in serving families with children ages 0-8 who are facing financial hardships or emergencies or are on the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) waitlist by providing funding for child care and ensuring quick, easy access to support for the families served.

KPIs include tracking recipients.

Curriculum Development and Implementation - Frog Street

Vendor Contracted: April 2025

Initiative End: December 2025

HCPL Precinct 3

Provides families, regulated child care providers, and FFN providers with high-quality, developmentally appropriate curricula and learning materials aligned with Texas Early Learning Guidelines, including bilingual support and direct consultation.

KPIs include tracking participation and distribution of materials.

timeline than Early Learning Kits and Materials, which was active in only one community.

The targets set for each initiative also reflected the scope of the initiative, with larger initiatives having higher targets to meet than smaller initiatives. Progress toward these targets varied considerably across initiatives, perhaps partly due to the delays and challenges vendors shared during their implementation reflections, as described in the next section.

Tables 1 and 2 provide more detail on the progress each initiative had made toward its targets in terms of applications and actual participation as of September 2025. The initiatives providing services at the individual caregiver level (Table 1) made significant progress with applications, and one of the initiatives, Technology for Households, received more applications than its target number, ensuring a robust pipeline for the possibility of successful implementation and suggesting a high need for services. As they approached the halfway point of implementation, the two initiatives ending in August 2026—Technology for Households and Training and Professional Development—were serving lower percentages of their targets, which may be something to monitor to ensure these initiatives can meet their KPIs in time.

Early Learning Kits and Materials – National Literacy Institute

Vendor Contracted: March 2025

Initiative End: December 2025

HCPL Precinct 3

Provides families and FFN providers with high-quality learning materials tailored to young children’s ages and language needs. Participants receive kits filled with books, toys, and activities designed to support early learning and development.

KPIs include tracking participation and distribution of materials.

Technology for Households – Easter Seals of Greater Houston

Vendor Contracted: May 2025

Initiative End: August 2026

YMCA Precinct 2, HCPL Precinct 1

Provides families with developmentally appropriate technological learning tools and training related to the use of technology with young children.

KPIs include tracking participation, trainings, and distribution of resources.

Technology for Child Care Centers – Collaborative for Children

Vendor Contracted: May 2025

Initiative End: August 2026

YMCA Precinct 2, HCPL Precinct 1

Connects regulated child care providers with improved technological resources aimed at enhancing early childhood development and improving the efficiency of business operations.

KPIs include tracking participation and distribution of resources.





TABLE 1. Progress Toward ELQN Initiative Targets for Services at the Individual Caregiver Level

Initiative	Caregiver Target	Number of Applications	% of Applications Toward Caregiver Target	Number of Caregivers Served	% of Caregiver Target Served
Technology for Households	93	145	156%	27	29%
Early Learning Kits and Materials	115	106	92%	53	46%
Training and Professional Development	1,600	1,339	84%	517	32%

The initiatives providing services at the program/classroom level (Table 2) were also working through their application pipelines. Two of these initiatives—Technology for Child Care Centers and Emergency and Temporary Care—received applications in numbers that overwhelmingly exceeded their targets. This suggests a critical need for these services in Harris County and aligns with participant experiences of high child care costs, shared later in this report. Also of note, the Curriculum Development and Implementation Services initiative appeared to be off to a slower start. This may have been due to an initial period of learning about the landscape of providers in Harris County and confirming eligibility for services, as described in focus groups conducted in fall 2025.

TABLE 2. Progress Toward ELQN Initiative Targets for Services at the Program/Classroom Level

Initiative	Program/ Classroom Target	Number of Applications	% of Applications Toward Program/ Classroom	Target Number of Programs/ Classrooms Served	% of Program/ Classroom Target Served
Technology for Child Care Centers	25	106	424%	10	40%
Emergency and Temporary Care	25	151	604%	37	148%
Curriculum Development & Implementation Services	185	13	7%	13	7%
Facility, Safety and Security*	40	NA	NA	NA	NA

* Data for this initiative was not available at the time this report was written.



Utilization of grant funds varied widely across the initiatives (Table 3). The initiatives concluding at the end of 2025 had understandably spent down much higher percentages of grant funds than those concluding in August 2026. The initiatives ending in 2026 still have time remaining to achieve their KPIs and fully spend down their grants, but it will be important to continue monitoring asset utilization in conjunction with KPI target performance to ensure the initiatives meet their goals and deadlines.

TABLE 3. Utilization of Grant Funds Across ELQN Initiatives

Initiative	Vendor Contracted	Initiative End	Months Remaining (as of September 2025)	Asset Utilization
Early Learning Kits and Materials	March 2025	December 2025	3	85%
Curriculum Development and Implementation Services	April 2025	December 2025	3	76%
Training and Professional Development	February 2025	August 2026	11	25%
Technology for Households	May 2025	August 2026	11	22%
Technology for Child Care Centers	May 2025	August 2026	11	19%
Emergency and Temporary Care	May 2025	August 2026	11	14%
Facility, Safety and Security	July 2025	August 2026	11	3%

The tables above provide a snapshot of implementation so far and demonstrate the varied progress each initiative has made in terms of gathering applications, providing services, and spending down grant funds. Currently, the KPI data indicate that some initiatives may find it challenging to meet their targets; others may achieve their KPIs without completely spending down their grants. Some initiatives may also leave many applications in their pipelines unserved, suggesting a lingering need for services in ELQN communities. The DEEO and the NSH have an opportunity to review progress toward initiative goals and grant spend-down to assess what the next few months might look like for the ELQN. The DEEO and the NSH can use these tracking data to help make strategic decisions regarding resource allocation and create more balance across initiatives, if necessary.



ELQN PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

During site visits and focus groups in May 2025, ELQN participants and Harris County staff members reflected on their experiences with launching and implementing the ELQN. This section of the report describes the key takeaways from these conversations, organized into three facets of experiences: building a foundation for success, learning along the way, and planning for the future. Each key takeaway, indicated in bold, is followed by a more detailed description of the takeaway along with example quotations from participants. Each section also contains recommendations for next steps as well as potential action items.



Building a Foundation for Success

LNOs, vendors, the NSH, and the DEEO shared their experiences with launching the ELQN initiatives, highlighting factors that contributed to their success and that will remain critical for continued progress. They also suggested valuable lessons learned that could benefit other communities looking to replicate similar types of initiatives.

Most members of the ELQN team felt ready to launch and were exceptionally motivated to implement the initiatives. Furthermore, their experiences during early implementation suggest that the initiatives are strategically addressing needs in ELQN communities.

ELQN team members indicated that LNOs worked incredibly hard to prepare for the launch of the ELQN initiatives. This initial groundwork laid by the LNOs during planning and launch—including development of action plans, collection of community voices via surveys, and community outreach and engagement efforts—was cited as an effective foundation for implementation of the initiatives.

“ The pre-work that went into this with the LNOs, I really have to give it to them, because I think they really did get their finger on the pulse of what was needed within their specific areas. ”
– VENDOR

LNOs expressed continued gratitude for the responsiveness from the DEEO and the NSH when they reached out with questions or needed technical assistance. This support also helped to create the foundation for the successful launch of the ELQN initiatives.

“ They are a really amazingly supportive Network Support Hub for all of the LNOs. Whenever I have a question, I know I can text or email or call, and I will absolutely receive an answer in a timely fashion. I don't have to wait for support. [NSH team member] has been a constant provider of that support for me. And on the other hand, Harris County has also done really well. [DEEO team members] specifically, again, if I have any questions about compliance, or purchasing, or items that need to be turned in, they are really great at providing that guidance and that feedback. ”
– LNO STAFF

The foundation set by the ELQN team not only helped to create awareness and excitement for ELQN in the communities, but ensured that community needs and priorities remained top of mind as implementation moved forward. At launch, LNOs and vendors sounded motivated by their interactions with the community and expressed feeling ready to do whatever they could to successfully implement the initiatives.

“ Everybody is so ready. We've been promoting all this information for a really long time ... everyone is ready to just begin that process. So I think it's going to be really exciting to ... or it is really exciting as we're finally able to share that one of the initiatives is open, and especially one that's going to benefit families and staff simultaneously, [it's] really exciting to begin that process. ”
– LNO STAFF

Similarly, providers shared their excitement and indicated that they were looking forward to seeing how initiatives could help meet their needs. The variety in initiatives allowed providers to anticipate multiple ways of supporting their community members.

“ A lot of my dreams are coming true. Because I grew up in this community and it means a lot to me to give back to these children ... some things I wish I could have had as a child ... and so I love to help the families. We want them to be proud of where they attend ... We just want to make a good learning experience and to boost our quality. ”

– PROVIDER

The trust and spirit of collaboration cultivated during the planning phase for the ELQN were still evident in Year 2 and were cited as contributing to a successful launch and to the early strengths of implementation.

In the second year of the ELQN, there was a palpable spirit of commitment and dedication to the goals of the ELQN, and this spirit carried through in the efforts the LNOs made to continue to engage their communities. Throughout the planning and launch phases, the LNOs invested considerable amounts of time and effort to create a presence and build trust in their communities. LNO staff members believed that these efforts had been integral to their success thus far, as they helped create awareness of the ELQN among community members and prepared them for the launch of the initiatives.

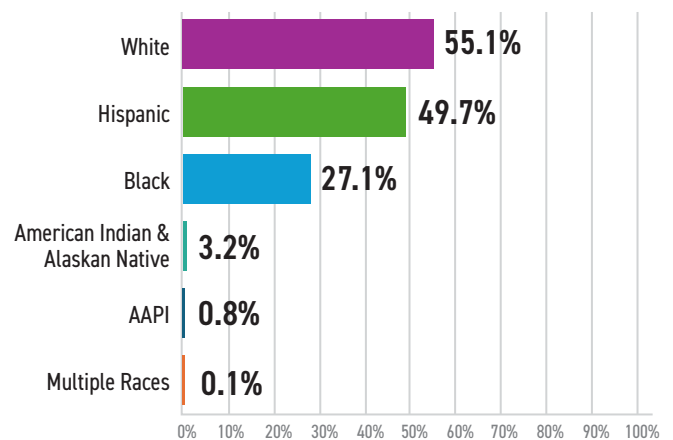
“ I think the community being receptive has been going well. We’ve been building these relationships for over a year now, going out, coming here regularly, speaking with the staff, letting them get to know us and then get to know about the project. Also having the meetings in the community with other stakeholders and parents and the schools so they know our faces, they know what the project’s about, they know what’s coming. ”

– LNO STAFF

As part of their participation in the ELQN, the LNOs tracked participation in their various community engagements, including town hall meetings and tabling events. Figure 1 shows the demographics of individuals who participated in community outreach events. Over half of participants identified as White (55.1%), followed by Black or African American (27.1%). About half of participants (49.7%) identified as Hispanic/Latino of any race. In a testament to their efforts, the data indicated that LNOs had far exceeded their original goals for community outreach by September 2025. Figure 2 illustrates the engagement counts and targets by key community audiences for the ELQN overall.

FIGURE 1. LNO Community Outreach Demographics

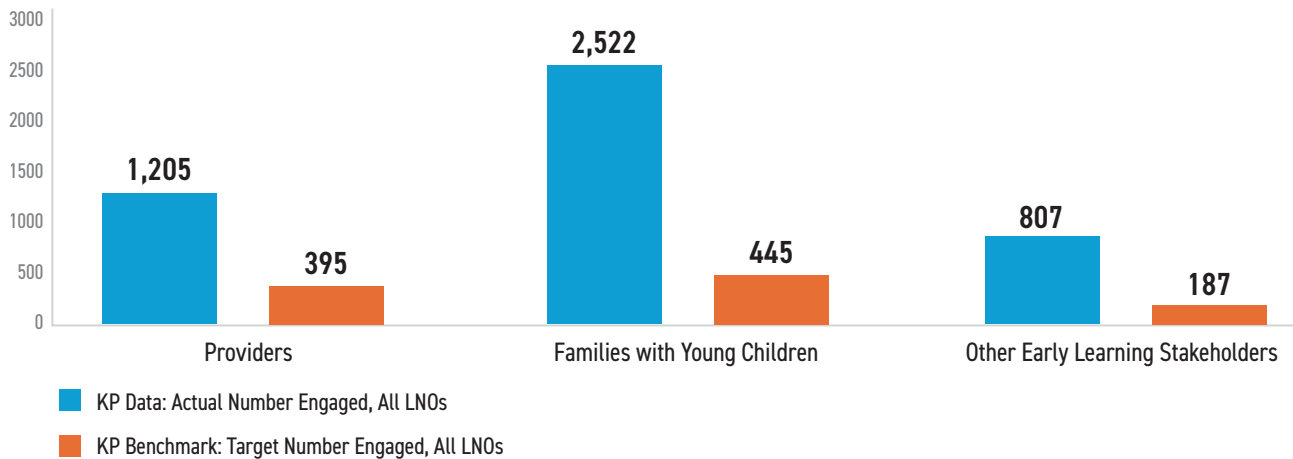
RACE / ETHNICITY IDENTIFICATION



NOTE: This graph represents overlapping categories that do not sum to 100%.

FIGURE 2. LNO Community Outreach KPIs

LNOs EXCEEDED THEIR KPI TARGETS SIGNIFICANTLY BY SEPTEMBER 2025



The efforts the LNOs made to establish trust was also echoed in responses to the community surveys administered by the LNOs during their various outreach events. These surveys allowed community members to provide quick, ongoing input on the ELQN initiatives. Generally, community members felt that the initiatives were serving their communities well, and they were interested in seeing what more could be done. One LNO specifically noted that community members affirmed the strong presence the ELQN had cultivated in their community. As LNOs continue administering the surveys, these pulse checks could be tremendously helpful for understanding community attitudes toward the initiatives and could contribute to effective sustainability planning.

Moving forward, LNOs suggested that a similar level of trust will need to be established between vendors and the community for implementation to be successful. LNOs were hopeful that could be accomplished in the coming months.

“ I’ll mention that the vendors are going to really need to collaborate closely ... in order to have the community engagement be successful, because as LNOs, we have gained the trust of the community, my communities know my face. They know when I come, what I’m going to talk about, and so it’s going to be really instrumental for not only the vendors to attend our sessions, but for us to attend the vendor sessions as well, like I previously mentioned. And I think that [the NSH] has already created a system where that’s going to happen, where we’re going to have quarterly meetings, we’re going to have a plan to execute together so that cross-collaboration can happen. ”

– LNO STAFF

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS

In Year 1, LNOs, the NSH, and the DEEO partnered together to establish a strong foundation for the launch of the initiatives. Together they developed blueprints, built systems, and established relationships, creating momentum for the launch of the initiatives. Going forward—and particularly with the addition of vendors to the ELQN—partnership, collaboration, and trust will continue to be key to meeting the ELQN objectives.

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS

- ➔ Continue leveraging open lines of communication between the NSH, the DEEO, LNOs, and vendors to maintain effective technical assistance.
- ➔ Consider a strategic shift in focus to quality over quantity in order to maintain engagement while avoiding burnout. In Year 2, LNOs far surpassed the targets set for community outreach. However, as the LNOs continue building on their success with community engagement, it may be prudent to consider the quality and depth of the engagements in addition to the sheer quantity of individuals who are participating in community events.
- ➔ Consider the lessons learned by the ELQN team in Year 1 to support vendors in building trust with the community. Moving forward, LNOs can serve as powerful liaisons as vendors grow in their engagement with the community.

Learning Along the Way

In addition to reflections on their initial successes, LNOs, vendors, the NSH, and the DEEO shared their challenges and lessons learned, highlighting several areas where potential action steps could increase the effectiveness of the ELQN moving forward.

ROLE AND PROCESS CLARITY. In early implementation, LNOs and vendors experienced a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities that contributed to inefficiency and frustration.

Echoing some of the early challenges of the planning phase, both LNOs and vendors expressed that in early implementation the lines were sometimes blurred in regard to their roles and responsibilities, and that created some friction in their work. LNOs and vendors were unsure about who was responsible for outreach for initiative applications and at times had different ideas about how outreach should be done. LNOs were accustomed to leading community outreach efforts and had developed their own systems and processes for engaging members of their communities. They expressed difficulty in letting go of this part of the work, which they had expertly led for so many months. Furthermore, the ongoing changes to processes and requirements emphasized a sense of instability and resulted in some frustration for LNOs.

“ If it was clear on some of the expectations and allowed us to make some decisions that would have been clear from the very beginning. It was a lot of back and forth, making changes ... At the very end, it had an impact on the process. ”

– LNO STAFF

“ Just not really knowing exactly how they’re outreaching, especially because we are very boots on the ground, and that’s how we have gotten the participation that we have up to this point. Just kind of adjusting to them having to be in control of that, and then also figuring out how far do we step in and help, and then also when are we supposed to step back and allow them to do what they’re supposed to do on their end? It’s been a struggle for [us]. ”

– LNO STAFF

Vendors, who were part of established professional organizations and experienced with community outreach in their own right, were also unsure about where the lines of responsibility fell and sometimes felt frustrated by having to work in ways that were new and different. It was particularly challenging for some vendors to adjust to the ELQN processes already in place, especially when they had established internal processes for doing similar work. Vendors also felt challenged by joining an initiative that had been underway for more than a year and by the ever-changing nature of the pilot, which contributed to some initial delays and caused additional frustration.



“ The launch of the project was delayed, unnecessarily, so that you are not starting this project now, and then once we launch it, you would start. So this delay was hard for us because we were not able to go into the community ... That frustrated us as a vendor ... And, the process has been changing, maybe till, even now, Monday, yesterday, we had a meeting again, and they were also adding more requirements to the reporting, and that’s really overwhelming for us. ”

– VENDOR

“ It has been ... very, very challenging ... And, you know, we understand the tweaking of it, but ... We have had to touch the application at least 30 times, and ... it delays the work for the community, doing the paperwork. Because there's not a clear understanding ... of what they want, and how they want it to be delivered. ”

– VENDOR

Some of the challenges experienced by LNOs and vendors as they learned to work together were regarded as growing pains typical of a time- and resource-bound effort in which multiple organizations must come together for the first time, and several ELQN team members acknowledged this was expected as part of a pilot initiative. However, the frustration that resulted from unclear roles and boundaries, and the ongoing changes to processes and requirements for both LNO and vendor staff members, sometimes contributed to wariness between organizations and perhaps prohibited true collaboration and trust from blooming early on.

CAPACITY BUILDING. Spaces for connection, such as meetings and lunch-and-learns, have been appreciated, but both LNOs and vendors desire more opportunities to learn from each other, especially as their minds turn toward sustainability.

LNO staff indicated that ELQN meetings were helpful spaces to discuss logistics, and the lunch-and-learns helped them feel supported, but they also shared some challenges and a desire for more flexible support. Some LNO staff suggested that meeting topics did not always align with what was top of mind for their teams, and that it was difficult to make the most of meetings when the challenges they were experiencing were not a topic of discussion. LNO staff also shared that they struggled when there were changes to requirements or when there was staff turnover on their teams, requiring institutional knowledge to be rebuilt in what felt like an incredibly fast-paced environment. To help make their time together more productive, LNO staff suggested creating more space to collaborate with other LNO staff, ask each other questions, and learn from each other in a more hands-on way.

“ Giving us opportunities to support one another ... if they're not able to fill in that gap at this point, because ... we could do that for each other, right? We could help [NAME]. We could help her ... answer her questions, or really just vent with each other and problem-solve with one another if we were given those opportunities. And I feel like a lot of the times when I go to the COP [Community of Practice] or the lunch-and-learn ... there are so many other things that we could be talking about, working through, than the information or the schedule, the agenda that they have for that day. ”

– LNO STAFF

MAINTAINING A COMMUNITY-CENTERED EFFORT. ELQN initiatives are supporting several community needs, but there are opportunities to ensure that the ELQN remains a community-centered effort as implementation continues, particularly by considering the cultural and linguistic needs of community members and by supporting caregivers of children with special needs.

While ELQN initiatives were perceived to be filling gaps in services and supporting community needs, ELQN participants made suggestions for improving the support provided by the ELQN and highlighted additional needs. Survey summaries from several LNOs indicated that community members desire more inclusivity from the ELQN, specifically related to special needs and language/bilingual resources. In three of the five LNOs, community members expressed a need to strengthen outreach with Hispanic/Latino families, especially through more bilingual English/Spanish communications and resources. In addition, discussions about cultural representation from vendors surfaced in at least one community. For this LNO, a lack of cultural match between ELQN vendors and community members was seen as a barrier to building rapport and establishing trust with the community. They hoped representation would be a consideration moving forward but also acknowledged that the timeline of the ELQN may necessitate quicker solutions, all in the spirit of making sure community members felt seen and heard.

“ One of the challenges that were brought up in [our community] was representation, in the vendors and who is working for the organization. It took us a long time to really get in [and] get the trust ... they don't always feel represented in government programs and projects. We invited some of the vendors to our advisory committee meeting and the question about representation came up from one of the vendors, and so now we're kind of having a back and forth ... just about what the vendors are going to do in order to have more Black representation in their organization ... But at the same time, managing expectations of our community, to let them know, hey we hear you, [but] there are limitations to what we can do, especially in this short amount of time, but figuring out quicker solutions to make people feel a little bit more comfortable. ”

– LNO STAFF

Community members from two LNOs also raised concerns over a lack of resources for supporting children with special needs and managing challenging behaviors. Concerns in these areas were shared at the launch period during the site visits in spring 2025 as well as later in the year, once implementation was underway. Families shared their challenges with finding child care that could support their children's needs, citing a lack of resources, staff, and appropriate training at existing child care programs. Providers echoed similar concerns and acknowledged the need for this support in their programs, along with a desire and willingness to help children and families with special needs in their communities.

“ So more and more kids are being diagnosed with special needs, autism, all kinds of things. And so that was hard for us because we would find a lot of places who would say, ‘We just don’t have the resources, we don’t have the staff, we don’t have the space for things like a sensory lab or a motor lab.’ And so we got turned away from some people and places simply because they couldn’t accommodate our specific needs. ”

– COMMUNITY MEMBER

“ We’re not behaviorists, we’re not psychologists, but we see it almost before anybody ... And so we’re on the front line of a lot of special needs and just behavioral challenges. And for us personally, we do the best we can and then if we can’t do anymore, we dis-enroll and I hate that, but we’re just not equipped to deal with the very real special needs that are out there. So I don’t know if that looks like mentoring us. I don’t know if that looks like having some kind of pipeline ... but the school systems have counselors and they have special assessments and they have the tools to handle some of these issues in ways that we don’t. ”

– CHILD CARE PROVIDER

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUED LEARNING

As ELQN team members moved through implementation, they experienced some challenges and potential lessons along with their successes. Uncertainty about roles and expectations surfaced between LNO and vendor staff. Team members desired more dynamic approaches to meetings and other supports. And community members suggested additional ways for the ELQN to maintain a community-centered focus. Relying on some lessons learned from Year 1 and maintaining a flexible approach to implementation will help the ELQN team continue to make progress in their communities.

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS

- ➔ Help LNOs and vendors clarify their approach to community engagement and support definition of boundaries. Consider creating more clarity by openly sharing the scope of work for each organization to ensure every team member has access to the same information and can operate from the same source of knowledge.
- ➔ Create more flexibility within the Community of Practice model and meetings. For instance, consider setting a hybrid agenda with predetermined objectives and items for part of the meeting, while leaving space for flexible or unplanned discussion topics. Also consider rotating responsibility for all or part of meeting agendas.

- ➔ Continue to brainstorm approaches for right-sizing support and finding the balance between too little support and support that is perceived as “micromanaging.”
- ➔ Continue to support LNOs and vendors in considering community needs while implementing initiatives. Make room for conversations and planning to support families and children of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Ensure that programming is focused on meeting providers’ top priorities, including supporting children with special needs.

Planning for the Future

Community members also shared what remains top of mind for families and children in Harris County. ELQN members considered how the contributions of the ELQN will be felt in their communities and what can be done in the future to continue the momentum created by this effort.

Looking ahead, access to high-quality child care remains a top concern for ELQN communities, and participants hope future efforts will prioritize this need. In addition, ELQN team members are already thinking ahead to the end of the ELQN funding and hope to begin or continue conversations about sustainability.

As they prepared to launch and began rolling out initiatives, LNO staff continued to hold community priorities in mind. Access to affordable high-quality early childhood education remained an important need in Harris County. LNOs and providers shared that they were acutely aware of the high cost of care in their communities, and providers in particular were challenged with how to make care affordable for families while keeping their doors open.



“ I’m hopeful that families in the zip code can get some relief on child care costs. It’s so expensive. It’s so expensive. And again, our fee is very reasonable, but even our reasonable fee can be a burden on people. We tend to serve a low-income demographic. ”

– CHILD CARE PROVIDER

Other community members also identified the availability and cost of child care as an important issue in Harris County. They were excited about the investment the ELQN is making in helping more families experience high-quality care. Initiatives such as Emergency and Temporary Care provided hope and relief to some families, while highlighting the acute need for additional support.

“ A lot of the daycares, they said low income or a certain income, but somehow [the cost] was still high. They say that these daycare centers are low income or they can afford it or whatever. I still think it's still high to me. And then also, I still don't see a lot of locations of daycares that meet the needs of when people are leaving their houses. You'll see one here, there ... they're scattered. ”

– COMMUNITY MEMBER

As implementation moved forward, it was also evident that LNO staff and vendors were deeply committed to the communities they served and hoped to continue to support long-term solutions for systemic challenges. The ELQN initiatives had already started to provide valuable and tangible resources to children and families in Harris County, but ELQN team members were keenly aware that this type of support is finite. Some LNO staff and vendors were already thinking about the future and expressed a desire to learn more about alternative ways to fund the kinds of programs currently supported by ELQN and how to think about sustainability together. DEEO staff members similarly indicated that support for sustainability is becoming an important consideration for their team.

“ My biggest concern is that we have done so well in the project that when ELQN ends, that sustainability portion just scares me. I think we have provided so much support, and ... we have those monthly meetings and just hearing some of the testimonials from participants and even from the vendors ... I feel like ELQN has been a bright spot, but I worry about what our communities will have to figure out and go through once ELQN ends. And I know that these are ARPA [American Rescue Plan Act] funds, and there's not too much that we can do about sustaining it, besides making those connections and gathering those resources. But I think that when we lose this project, the community will lose a lot of that bright light that I think we've been able to provide. ”

– LNO STAFF

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Moving forward, ELQN team members should feel encouraged to know that their efforts are making a difference in the lives of children and families in Harris County, but continued efforts to advocate for early childhood resources are critical. ELQN team members would welcome opportunities to continue to build partnerships, strategize for the future, and potentially extend the impact of the ELQN initiatives.

POTENTIAL ACTION STEPS

- ➔ Pool ELQN team members' knowledge on funding and grantmaking. Consider whether vendors and LNO staff members have skills to share with each other that could be useful when the grant ends, and create continued opportunities for team members to share and learn from each other.
- ➔ Continue to document and share the story of ELQN widely to bring attention to the needs of communities as well as the resources needed to support them.
- ➔ Support LNOs in pursuing additional funding and resources by creating connections to available opportunities. Encourage the use of ELQN resources as external-facing artifacts to help share the success of ELQN as well as the urgency for additional funding.



NEXT STEPS

Implementation for the ELQN pilot is ongoing, with initiatives concluding in either December 2025 or August 2026. Throughout this time, vendors will continue working with LNOs, the NSH, and the DEEO to reach their KPIs. As the ELQN pilot progresses toward the final months of implementation, the DEEO and the NSH will focus on supporting sustainability efforts across ELQN communities.

The SRC team will conduct another strategic learning session in winter 2026, focused on findings and action steps from this report. Additional evaluation activities, including a community survey and additional site visits, will take place throughout 2026.



APPENDIX

The Appendix contains definitions of the Key Stakeholder groups and a table with more detailed information about each of the ELQN initiatives.

Key Stakeholder Groups

Families with young children: parents/guardians with children ages 0-8

Regulated child care providers: licensed child care centers, licensed child care homes, and registered child care homes in Texas

Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers: informal, non-parental caregivers who provide flexible child care to families with young children (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors)

Note: These are general definitions based on Harris County's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the Early Learning Quality Network program. Specific eligibility requirements for each initiative can be found on the CHILDREN AT RISK website.

ELQN Initiatives

Initiative	Description	LNO(s)	Vendor	KPIs
<p>Training and Professional Development</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: February 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: August 2026</p>	<p>Provides training and coaching to enhance the skills and knowledge of families, regulated child care providers, and Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers</p>	<p>YMCA Precinct 2, EHCEC Precinct 2, VNTW Precinct 4, HCPL Precinct 1, HCPL Precinct 3</p>	<p>The Rupani Foundation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of regulated child care and FFN providers participating in Quality Initiative • # of children benefiting from Quality Initiative • # of FFN providers who applied • # of regulated child care providers who applied • # of FFN providers trained • # of regulated providers trained • # of child care centers trained • # of kits distributed to FFN providers • # of kits distributed to child care centers • # of mentoring and coaching sessions delivered to child care centers • # of home visits with FFN providers
<p>Facility, Safety, and Security</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: July 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: August 2026</p>	<p>Supports facility updates and enhances safety by providing developmentally appropriate indoor and outdoor materials and equipment that meet specific needs, as well as improvements that promote the security and well-being of both children and staff at regulated child care providers.</p>	<p>YMCA Precinct 2, EHCEC Precinct 2, VNTW Precinct 4, HCPL Precinct 1, HCPL Precinct 3</p>	<p>Collaborative for Children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs assessments conducted • Procurements completed

Initiative	Description	LNO(s)	Vendor	KPIs
<p>Emergency and Temporary Care</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: May 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: August 2026</p>	<p>Supports regulated child care providers in serving families with children ages 0–8 who are facing financial hardships or emergencies or are on the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) waitlist by providing funding for child care and ensuring quick, easy access to support for the families served.</p>	<p>YMCA Precinct 2, EHCEC Precinct 2, VNTW Precinct 4, HCPL Precinct 3</p>	<p>WorkTexas! & Neighborhood Schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of regulated child care providers participating in Quality Initiative • # of children benefiting from Quality Initiative • # of applications received • # of regulated child care providers onboarded
<p>Curriculum Development and Implementation</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: April 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: December 2025</p>	<p>Provides families, regulated child care providers, and FFN providers with high-quality, developmentally appropriate curricula and learning materials aligned with Texas Early Learning Guidelines, including bilingual support and direct consultation.</p>	<p>HCPL Precinct 3</p>	<p>Frog Street</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of families, regulated child care providers, and FFN providers participating in Quality Initiative • # of children benefiting from Quality Initiative • # of applications received • # of trainings conducted • # of curricula distributed to regulated child care providers • # of supplemental curricula distributed to regulated child care providers • # of support materials distributed to regulated child care providers • # of materials distributed to families and FFN providers
<p>Early Learning Kits and Materials</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: March 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: December 2025</p>	<p>Provides families and FFN providers with high-quality learning materials tailored to young children’s ages and language needs. Participants receive kits filled with books, toys, and activities designed to support early learning and development.</p>	<p>HCPL Precinct 3</p>	<p>National Literacy Institute</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of families and FFN providers participating in Quality Initiative • # of children benefiting from Quality Initiative • # of applications received • # of kits distributed

Initiative	Description	LNO(s)	Vendor	KPIs
<p>Technology for Households</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: May 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: August 2026</p>	<p>Provides families with developmentally appropriate technological learning tools and training related to the use of technology with young children.</p>	<p>YMCA Precinct 2, HCPL Precinct 1</p>	<p>Easter Seals of Greater Houston</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of families and FFN providers participating in Quality Initiative • # of children benefiting from Quality Initiative • # of applications received • # of trained families and FFN providers • # of trainings conducted • # of learning tools distributed to families and FFN providers
<p>Technology for Child Care Centers</p> <p>Vendor Contracted: May 2025</p> <p>Initiative End: August 2026</p>	<p>Connects regulated child care providers with improved technological resources aimed at enhancing early childhood development and improving the efficiency of business operations.</p>	<p>YMCA Precinct 2, HCPL Precinct 1</p>	<p>Collaborative for Children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of regulated child care providers participating in Quality Initiative • # of children benefiting from Quality Initiative • # of applications received • # of technology kits distributed to regulated child care providers

