

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS: LOUISIANA'S FIRST READY START COMMUNITIES

AIM 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ensuring all young children have access to high quality early care and education (ECE) requires strong community coordination. Over the past decade the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has invested in local system-building, beginning with 2012's [Act 3](#). As part of that sweeping policy, LDOE created a system of early childhood community networks, which are local teams charged with coordinating all publicly funded ECE programs (including child care, Head Start, and school-based pre-k programs), measuring and improving the quality of teacher-child interactions, and increasing families' access to ECE.

In January 2019, LDOE established the first cohort of "Ready Start Networks," seven community networks who had [made considerable progress in local ECE system-building](#). These networks were given additional resources to advance their ECE system-building efforts and improve access to ECE opportunities, especially for infants and toddlers. Ready Start Networks were tasked with addressing four foundational activities, or pillars: creating a **coalition** of community advocates, establishing a **governance** structure to guide decision-making, writing a **blueprint** to guide their work, and finding and developing **fundraising** opportunities. To support this work, they received direct funding from LDOE for ECE system-building, prioritized access to other state ECE funds, technical assistance from consultants with expertise in convening and community engagement during the first year, and ongoing guidance from LDOE. Based on interviews with network leaders, this report summarizes key **strategies** and **benefits** for each of the four pillars, and overall, ongoing **challenges** in their local ECE system building.

COALITION

The coalition pillar called on networks to build a broad base of community support for ECE work and recruit a smaller group of stakeholders with a diversity of experiences to engage more directly in the network's system-building efforts (e.g., by serving on boards or advisory councils). Network leaders shared the following common **strategies** to build their coalitions:

- Leveraging guidance from LDOE, consultants, and well-connected locals to identify coalition members and decide on a subset to involve more substantively
- Seeking out people with strong commitments to the community and wide-ranging expertise
- Building buy-in and efficacy by educating coalition members on the ECE landscape and the network's goals

Network leaders highlighted that the main **benefit** of a coalition was:

- Creating a strong foundation of community connections and support for future work

GOVERNANCE

To complete the governance pillar, networks needed to create structures for decision-making, specifically a governing board and bylaws. Network leaders noted that their main **strategies** for establishing governance included:

- Building on existing structures or common practices within their organizations, particularly school districts
- Drawing support from consultants' bylaw templates and advice on meeting agendas

Network leaders also emphasized the following **benefits** of having governance in place:

- Ensuring transparency and public accountability
- Fostering shared responsibility and collaboration

BLUEPRINT

The blueprint pillar required networks to write a strategic plan for improving ECE quality and access in their communities, including an overall mission and vision, concrete goals, and steps to achieve them. Network leaders reported employing the following **strategies** to write the blueprint:

- Collaborating closely with site leaders and/or a broader group of coalition members
- Using LDOE resources for training participants and engaging consultants to facilitate parts of the process

Network leaders described that creating a blueprint resulted in three main **benefits**:

- Unifying the coalition in working towards stated overall and specific goals
- Focusing the network on addressing concrete steps and achieving measurable success
- Providing a summary of the network's purpose that could be easily shared with community members and potential funders

FUNDRAISING

The fundraising pillar directed networks to assess present resources and formulate a strategy for acquiring additional resources needed to accomplish their goals. Network leaders shared the following common **strategies** in tackling fundraising:

- Leveraging existing state fundraising structures, including the School Readiness Tax Credits (SRTC) and a matching fund for local ECE dollars
- Hiring consultants with expertise in fundraising, marketing, and communications
- Creating tangible goals for specific fundraising efforts
- Analyzing data to identify concrete areas of unmet ECE needs and communicating these needs to potential funders

Network leaders expressed hopes that fundraising would bring one main **benefit**:

- Developing sustainable, independent funding for the network and its goals of increasing ECE access and quality for families

ONGOING CHALLENGES

While all network leaders indicated that the resources and tasks of Ready Start helped build stronger local ECE systems, they also noted that critical challenges and gaps in resources remain. These ongoing challenges included:

- Limitations of network leaders' own capacity to sustain the growing scope of their role, which increasingly involves managing the coalition, fundraising, and simultaneously meeting other network responsibilities
- Incomplete data on communities' true supply and demand for ECE
- Continued scarcity and uncertainty of funds, particularly given the short-term nature of most grants and allocations

Each of the Ready Start communities has made significant progress in building thriving ECE systems, and their efforts provide valuable guidance for other communities working to create more coordinated early childhood opportunities. [This report](#) elaborates on each of the above findings. It is supplemented by seven [Network Profiles](#), which provide more details about the experiences of each of the Ready Start Networks. Each profile summarizes the network's progress on the pillars, main strategies, benefits, and challenges (including COVID-19's impact) of the work, the network's central goals moving forward, and key lessons.