



BUILDING SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

LOUISIANA'S FIRST READY START COMMUNITIES

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Building Sustainable Early Childhood Systems

Louisiana's First Ready Start Communities

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Getting Ready for Ready Start	2
Tackling the Pillars	3
Coalition	3
Governance	5
Blueprint	7
Fundraising	8
Impacts	11
Remaining challenges	12
Capacity	12
Data	13
Funding	13
Conclusion	14

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AIM 2 SUMMARY REPORT

Ensuring all young children have access to high-quality early care and education (ECE) requires strong community coordination, and over the past decade the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) has fostered coordination through local system-building. In 2012, Louisiana's legislature passed the Early Childhood Education Act, also known as [Act 3](#), a sweeping policy designed to unify the state's

READY START: THE BASICS

Each Ready Start Network was tasked with tackling four foundational activities, or pillars, while increasing focus on improving ECE access for families:

- Building a coalition of community members
- Forming a governing body with clear bylaws and procedures
- Writing a blueprint (strategic plan) with concrete goals
- Creating a fundraising strategy to support the work

Each Ready Start Network received:

- General infusion of funds:
 - \$100,000 for the first 18 months of work
 - Option to request additional funding during the first 18 months
 - Another \$100,000 for the following 12 months
- Prioritized access to other funds, including for:
 - Seats for children birth through 3 years old
 - Classroom materials for child care centers
 - Assisting families with subsidy applications
- Access to technical assistance for the first year from consultants with expertise in convening and community engagement, including:
 - Monthly phone calls on community engagement
 - An in-person visit on community engagement
 - An in-person workshop on governance building
- Guidance and feedback from LDOE, including:
 - Biweekly webinars convening all Ready Start Networks
 - Monthly individual check-ins, including a few in-person visits

fragmented ECE system and ultimately improve children's school readiness. As part of Act 3, LDOE created a system of early childhood community networks to coordinate all local publicly funded ECE programs (including child care, Head Start, and school-based pre-k programs). These networks were tasked with measuring and improving the quality of teacher-child interactions, increasing families' access to ECE by creating a unified enrollment system, and building coordination across ECE program types.

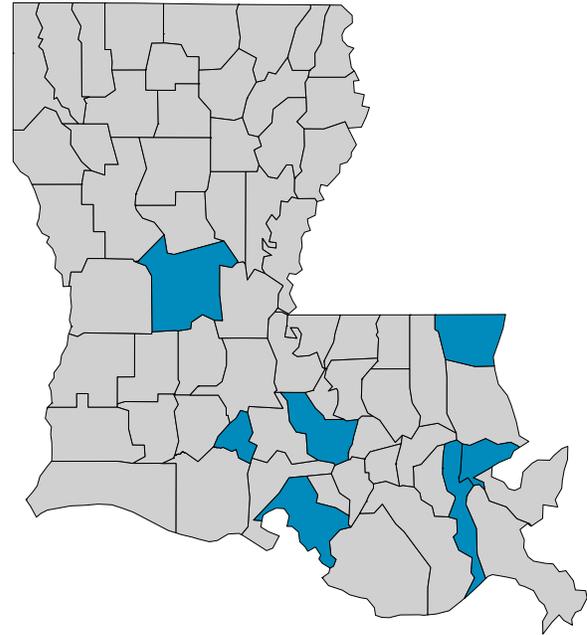
In January 2019, LDOE established the first cohort of "Ready Start Networks"—seven community networks that had made considerable progress towards these goals since 2012. These networks were given additional resources to advance their ECE system-building efforts and to increase their focus on improving access. Ready Start Networks were tasked with addressing four foundational activities, or

pillars, over the course of two years: 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 allocations from LDOE for general 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.

Louisiana’s first cohort of Ready Start Networks provide seven case studies in how communities can build more coordinated, higher-quality ECE systems. This report and the [accompanying profiles](#) are the second in a set that aim to learn from these seven Ready Start Networks: Iberville, Jefferson, Lafayette, Orleans, Rapides, St. Mary, and Washington. Drawing on interviews with network leaders,¹ Ready Start and COVID-19 Child Care Recovery Grant application documents, and network blueprints, this second set describes networks’ experiences with Ready Start and highlights successful Ready Start implementation strategies. They summarize key lessons from the network leaders that may aid other communities—in Louisiana and across the country—in their efforts to build stronger local ECE systems.

Cohort 1 Ready Start Networks



This report explores the networks’ progress on the four pillars, and their key strategies, ongoing challenges, and resulting benefits, as described by network leaders. It also describes remaining challenges and lessons for other communities.

GETTING READY FOR READY START

Many of the communities selected for Ready Start viewed themselves as being at the forefront of Louisiana’s ECE improvement efforts even before they were officially selected. Several years earlier, five of the seven networks had volunteered to participate in the pilot years of Act 3, during which they pioneered the state’s work on improving local ECE coordination, quality, and access. When the Ready Start program was announced, applying

¹ To identify and explore key lessons, our team conducted hourlong, semi-structured qualitative interviews over Zoom videoconferencing software with 14 network leaders across all seven networks. In each network, we interviewed between one and four network leaders, either separately or together. We analyzed interview transcripts by identifying common ideas, keeping track of the number of similar opinions, and flagging representative quotes. The quotes cited in this report and associated profiles have been lightly edited for clarity. This study is qualitative, and our findings cannot be interpreted as representative of network leaders outside of our sample.

seemed like a natural next step. One network leader explained, “We saw the work of Ready Start as being the next step for us to continue to improve quality and access... [and] give us more control over what happens at the local level.” Another described how Ready Start’s stress on engaging broader local support aligned with their community’s goals: “The timing was right to think about moving from a collaborative network of providers to a broad network of community advocates, business leaders, other folks who could help us move our work forward.”

Most network leaders were also drawn to Ready Start’s focus on – and resources for – increasing access, particularly for infants and toddlers. According to one network leader, “It really created a unique opportunity to think differently about what we were doing, and to think more about increasing access to seats as opposed...to our focus at the time, which was increasing quality of the existing seats.” Many networks had recognized a severe shortage of seats for children 3 years old and under, and network leaders saw Ready Start and its prioritized funding for seats as an avenue for substantially addressing this gap.

TACKLING THE PILLARS

Once the seven initial Ready Start Networks were chosen, LDOE provided guidance on an overall set of goals and tasks that aligned with the four foundational pillars. Networks had considerable flexibility in implementation and prioritization of these tasks and pillars. In practice, the pillars involved highly related, overlapping activities, and networks approached these in various orders and combinations.

Most network leaders reported tackling the **coalition** building, **governance**, and **blueprint** pillars first: They began by building a team of invested stakeholders, creating guidelines for how to work together, and designing their strategic plans. Most network leaders planned to address the **fundraising** pillar after building a foundation with the other pillars.

COALITION

The coalition pillar directed Ready Start Networks to engage community members, build a broad base of support for ECE work, and identify a smaller group of key stakeholders with relevant skills and connections to involve more substantively in ECE system building (e.g., by serving on boards or advisory councils).

PROGRESS

Network leaders reported building local awareness of their work in ECE by boosting their web and social media presences. Two network leaders remarked that other local nonprofits or organizations added ECE-related goals or activities to their existing scopes, which they viewed as a sign of their success promoting the importance of ECE.

Beyond broad efforts to build awareness and buy-in for ECE, network leaders also reported successfully drawing in community members with wide-ranging skills and perspectives to be part of their coalitions.

STRATEGIES

As they worked to build coalitions to support their ECE efforts, network leaders prioritized a diversity of experiences and connections. They leveraged local knowledge, LDOE guidance, and consultants to identify potential coalition members and then select a smaller subset of the coalition to tap for more involved roles (e.g., serving on boards). Some networks then trained those board members to enhance their investment and efficacy.

Several network leaders engaged outside help as they strategized about how to develop and deploy their coalitions. Some used the LDOE-funded consultant, while others used their own Ready Start funds to hire local consultants with deep knowledge of the community landscape. One network leader highlighted this latter decision as “the best thing we did...she has lots of experience, she knows lots of people...we know the educational piece, but we don’t know the business side of it, or who the people were that we needed to bring in for our advisory board for it to be successful.”

Ultimately, network leaders aimed to build coalitions with both strong commitments to the community and wide-ranging expertise. One network leader explained the importance of seeking community-oriented individuals: “The primary characteristics of the people who you want on these types of committees are people who represent the community, who are from it, who have an interest in not just their own stake in that community, but the collective good of that community.” Another network leader described the diversity of the group they selected: “We have accounting, we have fundraisers, we have lawyers, we have big business, we have small business,” as well as representatives from local municipalities

“We spent so much time on the front end giving them information and making them understand, so that they now are so excited about it, they want to make a difference. They are the people that have the megaphones to the rest of the business world and the parish.”

and faith-based organizations. Another summarized that their resulting coalition is composed of people who “have a lot of leadership skills, they have a lot standing in the community, they have a lot of knowledge, they’re very well respected.”

After recruiting individuals, some network leaders also provided training, as many of the new coalition members were not familiar with ECE or the network. This training included orientations on “some of the acronyms and work of early childhood” and systems thinking. In addition, one network leader described organizing a field trip to child care sites: “We actually took a bus so we would have them all together and have that captive

audience and we could talk about it. And I'll never forget us getting back on the bus...and [a member] looked at me and said, 'I get it, this is wonderful, what do we do next?' It was just priceless." She elaborated, "We spent so much time on the front end giving them information and making them understand, so that they now are so excited about it, they want to make a difference. They are the people that have the megaphones to the rest of the business world and the parish."

CHALLENGES

Network leaders explained that after identifying a large pool of stakeholders to serve as a broad coalition, they also had to identify a smaller subset to take on a more intensive role. This step proved challenging: "It was a very hard process to decide who do I put on the governing board versus who I just put on my advisory committee. I know these people are busy ...do I have them come and be a part every step of the way, or do I advise them to be involved only sometimes?"

LDOE and the consultants they provided helped networks weigh their options and make these decisions. Most network leaders reported this guidance was useful, in part because managing groups of stakeholders and governing bodies took a significant investment of their own time, and external support for this step lightened their workload. Relatedly, some network leaders expressed concern about their capacity to continue managing these groups on their own, long-term.

BENEFITS

Network leaders noted that their coalitions may lead to new connections critical for system building. One explained, "You can't do fundraising without coalition building. It very much is who do you know, or who do you know that knows somebody." Another shared, "It does take an entire village to raise children, and when you put all of

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GOVERNANCE

The governance pillar of Ready Start required that networks create structures for decision-making, including a governing board to oversee network activities and budgets, along with bylaws to guide their work.

PROGRESS

Networks took different approaches to creating governance structures. In some networks, the governance structure is comprised of one board. In others, leaders implemented a two-

tiered governing structure, with one smaller board – often composed of site leaders – making most decisions, and a larger board including a broader set of community or coalition members serving in an advisory role. Helmed by network leaders, these boards are designed to guide networks’ efforts to improve ECE quality and access, including their work on Ready Start pillars.

STRATEGIES

Several network leaders expressed that the initial, LDOE-funded support from a consulting group was helpful as they developed and implemented protocols. In particular, they valued consultants’ templates for bylaws and guidance in mapping out meeting agendas.

Others found these supports less useful and leaned on their own existing structures or guidance from their school districts to form boards and write bylaws. As one leader noted, “When you work in a school system, you tend to have some fairly developed structures around meeting protocols.”

Some network leaders explained how defining roles and responsibilities, including details such as attendance and term limits, was important for clarifying board members’ expectations and keeping the collaborative structure running smoothly.

CHALLENGES

A few network leaders noted concerns about keeping board members engaged and focused given competing demands and interests, and in one network, leaders reported issues with board members resigning because of other commitments. Another network leader was concerned that too much focus on governance and protocol, particularly early on in the board’s existence, could decrease members’ enthusiasm for the work: “That’s not why they’re coming together, and I found that it’s the quickest way to get them disengaged, to start talking about meeting minutes and voting on things.”

BENEFITS

Almost all network leaders voiced that a governance structure made decision-making more collaborative, lessening their individual burdens. One summarized, “I like having a team to make decisions with...[Before we created the board] it was always just me making decisions on what to do with money and grants and things that came through. Now it’s more of a shared responsibility and decision-making process.”

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Some network leaders also noted that governance structures created public expectations for transparency and were “hugely helpful” for ensuring “resources get used in transparent and accountable ways.”

BLUEPRINT

The blueprint pillar tasked networks with writing out a strategic plan for improving their community's ECE coordination, quality, and access – including an overall vision and mission, concrete goals, and steps to achieve them.

PROGRESS

Writing the blueprint was a tangible deliverable due to LDOE, and all seven networks completed this document in the first year of their Ready Start work.

STRATEGIES

In two networks, existing leaders wrote their blueprints as a precursor to tackling the coalition and governance pillars. Most networks, however, engaged groups of coalition members in a strategically planned writing process and leveraged resources provided by LDOE as they developed and refined their mission, goals, and action plans.

“It wasn’t a ‘just us’ thing, it was all of us working together as a network – we had everybody’s thoughts and ideas, so that it wouldn’t look like the blueprint was just the blueprint of the lead agency, but of the entire network.”

Leaders in these networks described collaborating closely with site leaders and/or a broader group of stakeholders serving on the boards that made up their governance structures. One network leader explained, “It wasn’t a ‘just us’ thing, it was all of us working together as a network – we had everybody’s thoughts and ideas, so that it wouldn’t look like the blueprint was just the blueprint of the lead agency, but of the entire network.”

One network leader shared the long, carefully planned process she used to shepherd the group through writing the blueprint. She noted, “We wanted to make sure we didn’t rush that process, because it was so critical.” They iterated on their goal-writing across six meetings that included training sessions and strategically curated small working groups.

Another leader in this network also emphasized the value of these small, well-planned working groups: “We all need a visionary, we all need somebody that’s very detail-oriented, we need the different players...it seemed like every group had the right people to make sure that we were productive.”

Many network leaders also noted that resources from LDOE aided the writing process. According to one leader, consultants funded by LDOE helped to “facilitate the process, put it initially on paper and do some wordsmithing.” One network leader described how useful she found LDOE resources on SMART goals, especially because individuals working on the blueprint varied considerably in their backgrounds and experiences with formal goal setting: “We did training to make sure that they were at the same level, to be prepared to write it ...

I think that that simple activity that was facilitated made the biggest impact on how precise our goals were.”

BENEFITS

Network leaders indicated that while they already had a vision for ECE in their networks, writing down concrete goals while creating the blueprint increased focus and allowed them to plan steps and measure their success more easily. The blueprints explicitly stated a network’s “united purpose and united voice” and “put down on paper for people to see and for us to actually agree upon what our work was going to look like.” One network leader explained, “It drives what we’re doing, and then it also lets us see that...we’re having success towards those goals.” Another shared that the blueprint helped define the network’s purpose to community members and potential funders: “It did give us that one pager that so many people like to get that says, in a nutshell, who we are, what we’re doing.”

FUNDRAISING

The fundraising pillar required that networks take stock of available resources and create a plan to procure the additional resources necessary to accomplish their goals.

PROGRESS

Most network leaders reported that they viewed the coalition, governance, and blueprint as foundational for fundraising and that they planned to tackle fundraising after those first three pillars were more established. One network leader explained, “We’re just now, this school year, getting to the fundraising part, because we had to make sure everything else was in place ... You had to build that board, you had to give them the knowledge... and from there, building that coalition, getting more of that local governance, getting all the players involved that needed to be there.” Another noted that “a successful fundraising strategy and model is really dependent on having both a successful blueprint and a successful governance coalition.”

Leaders in all networks emphasized that they made sure to include people with backgrounds in business or fundraising in their coalitions to prepare for the fundraising pillar. One network leader mentioned having established a specific committee within their governing structure focused on fundraising.

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Progress on the fundraising pillar varied widely, and almost all network leaders noted that COVID-19 disrupted their fundraising plans to some degree.

STRATEGIES

Several network leaders described starting with some existing fundraising infrastructure because they are based in nonprofit organizations with their own funding needs. Others shared that they had only recently begun to research available funding opportunities and brainstorm potential strategies.

Most network leaders discussed beginning their fundraising work by taking advantage of a state resource: [Louisiana's School Readiness Tax Credits \(SRTC\)](#), which allow businesses to receive tax credits for up to \$5,000 when they make donations to local ECE. Network leaders said they “started with [the SRTC] as a premise for fundraising” because raising awareness about this existing fundraising structure seemed like “the low-hanging fruit to go after.” One network leader described her thinking at the time: “Hey this is a no brainer; why would a business not donate five grand, if it's a tax credit?” A few network leaders also mentioned leveraging the existence of a state matching fund for local ECE dollars to try to persuade their parish governments to allocate funds.

Network leaders also discussed other strategies, including hiring consultants to help with identifying funding opportunities and keeping fundraising efforts narrowly focused on concrete goals.

Some networks used their own funds after the first year to continue retaining the initially LDOE-funded consultant, and others hired local consultants with expertise in fundraising, local marketing, or communications. One network leader explained, “We realized that if we're going to fundraise locally, we probably need someone who's locally invested, knows the local area more, and so we actually have contracted so far with an agency that does a lot of political campaigning... they're currently working on some ideas around marketing and branding and pushing out a campaign so that we can get the message of Ready Start out there and then start requesting funds to come in.”

Leaders in a few networks, particularly those with existing fundraising infrastructure, described focusing on specific needs to enhance their efforts. They explained that tangible goals and the ability to link fundraising to successes builds buy-in. One emphasized, “People are not going out and just saying, ‘Let's raise money to increase access and quality.’” Instead, these network leaders reported fundraising for concrete purposes such as creating new seats or buying curricula for centers. For this latter effort, one network established an “Adoption Agency”: a business could adopt a particular center, purchase a curriculum for it, and then put up a sign at both the center and the business, which “the businesses love.”

A few network leaders noted that exploring data to understand the exact unmet need in a community before approaching potential funders was also useful. One network leader

shared the benefits of having hired a consultant to study their data on need: “We actually had a data person drill down to the zip code of where those students are missing seats, and although it’s probably obvious because it’s our biggest impoverished area of the parish, we really never sat down and looked at that. I think Ready Start has really opened our eyes to the data, given us a true picture, but also we now can apply for targeted grants to say [this] zip code has five centers, but it needs to have 25.”

CHALLENGES

Across networks, leaders were met with fundraising challenges. First, while many network leaders had initially viewed the SRTC as a promising approach to fundraising, several noted it was more difficult than they expected to convince businesses of the viability of the approach: “Even though they’ve been around for a while, people don’t really believe it because it does sound too good to be true that you’re going to make this donation and it’s completely tax refundable...it’s really hard to convince the business to spend \$5,000 up front to get it back later.” In one network, leaders reported making plans to address this problem by educating local accountants about the SRTC in hopes that they will recommend it to their business clients.

A few network leaders also emphasized that while the state fund that offers a dollar-for-dollar match on ECE funds allocated by local governments is potentially an “extremely powerful” fundraising tool, this pot of money has historically been insufficiently funded. They noted that uncertainty about the availability and distribution of these state funds has put a damper on this particular strategy.

Some leaders mentioned that networks operating within school districts had notable advantages, as school districts “have a more reliable blanket of support, because K-12 is fully funded” by government sources. However, this government funding also means that networks based in school districts are not eligible for some grants.

In contrast, non-school district networks based within nonprofit organizations can apply for most grants but “don’t have any kind of net,” as one network leader noted. They lack stable funding and governmental infrastructure, and networks can struggle to operate and manage seats when they are funded via reimbursement. Network leaders pointed out that fundraising for Ready Start within these nonprofits can be challenging because they need to figure out how to “not be in competition” with their organizations’ existing fundraising needs.

Regional differences in commerce and wealth are also significant. One network leader explained, “We’re rural. We don’t have a lot of big businesses...we are not a big industry town, so there’s not a lot of opportunities like that.” Another shared that she believes there are only a handful of large, suitable funders available for all networks across the state, and this scarcity creates competition.

Finally, several network leaders expressed that lacking full understanding of the size and nature of need for ECE in their communities was a challenge when framing pitches to potential partners or funders: “So many people want data, and so many times I’m giving them broad estimates... you’re estimating the population of 4-year-olds based on Census data that’s eight years old now... We have no clue really what those numbers are because the Census data is so old.”

BENEFITS

Network leaders described the potential benefits of fundraising as the opportunity to develop sustainable, independent funding for their work – “to look at funding other than just the Department of Education, and to bring on our partners long term.”

IMPACTS

Each pillar was named by at least one network leader as the pillar that felt most impactful for their network, and several network leaders named more than one pillar or stressed their interdependence. One summarized: “Encouraging all of them as a foundation is the right way to think about quality and access.”

Most network leaders reported that the biggest shift they had seen from their Ready Start work has been improvement in buy-in, collaboration, and coordination across their local ECE systems. Network leaders noted that informing and involving the broader community “as partners” has made them feel more supported in their work, “whereas before you felt like it was just the schools and the child care centers that were worried about early childhood, not having a lot of support from the community.”

With increased collaboration through their coalitions and more formalized decision-making processes, network leaders expressed that they have a clearer vision for ECE in their community and a stronger sense of the networks’ ownership over this work.

One shared, “I can definitely see a difference in how we approach things...In the past, we were relying on the Department of Education to guide our work and make those decisions for us...It’s this shift of ownership and responsibility on behalf of our community. If we want things to change, we have to do the work, we have to set the goals, we have to implement strategies and see if they’re effective.”

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Another network leader emphasized the success her network has seen in improving coordination and efficiency by engaging community members into its work: “We have a very, very strong Advisory Board... We had that knowledge piece that we had to give each

of them...and once they saw our passion and our vision, they became part of that. They're talking about the same things and they're actually even taking ownership... they are actively searching and working on the fundraising piece, they're updating that blueprint, as it needs to be done, they're adding people to our board that really will strengthen what our purposes are and what we're doing right now."

Network leaders also reported that their work on the required Ready Start activities, in combination with the direct funding Ready Start provided, was yielding concrete progress towards the ultimate goals of improving ECE quality and access in their communities. They highlighted using Ready Start-related resources for expanding seats, particularly for children ages birth through 3, and for materials and training for teachers. For instance, one explained, "Because of Ready Start, we have had access to more seats" through designated funding from LDOE. Another shared, "We definitely can see that the quality is increasing, because of the funding that Ready Start has provided to do trainings and coaching with the teachers. We have seen the number of proficient centers rise."

REMAINING CHALLENGES

Ready Start coupled new funds to support expanded access and improved quality with a commitment to developing more effective local systems. While all network leaders believed the resources helped them improve their early childhood systems, they also emphasized that major challenges (beyond those of COVID-19; see box) and crucial gaps in resources remain, particularly around network capacity, availability of data, and funding to increase access.

CAPACITY

Network leaders reported feeling overwhelmed by their expanded roles: "As we grow, there's so much more that is required of all of us to make sure that we are not missing anything...a lot of communication, a lot of quick decisions. So that has been a challenge in trying to keep up with the growth."

Another described working with the coalition as one of the most time-consuming aspects of her job: "You have to put so much into it...because you're with people from businesses, universities, mayors...you know you can't go into a meeting unprepared and then you can't just make up an agenda that is going to be a waste of their time...you have to make everything very professional, and everything has to be planned out, so it takes a lot of time."

One network leader summarized: “The biggest challenge we always have is manpower. We do not have enough people to do all this work.” Although Ready Start funds could be used for staffing, network leaders expressed concerns about hiring with short-term grants, given organizational guidelines – “Our district doesn’t like to allow people to hire someone with grant funds because you don’t know how long the grant funds will be there” – and the quality of candidates willing to take a job with a short-term contract.

DATA

Network leaders indicated that after years of work on quality improvement under Act 3, they felt maintaining and improving classroom quality was manageable. Meanwhile, increasing access, particularly for children 3 years old and under, was more daunting, in part because the extent and shape of the need is largely unknown.

While LDOE had encouraged networks to implement a system to track local ECE supply and demand, several network leaders mentioned that they have not yet been able to put these systems in place. Network leaders noted that setting up a functioning data system would help them better understand community needs, set more specific goals, and communicate about these concrete needs and goals to potential partners and funders.

FUNDING

Lack of resources emerged as the main barrier for networks meeting their goals of providing all families with access to high-quality ECE programs. To date, many networks are only in the early stages of fundraising and have not yet seen large gains in this area from Ready Start activities.

READY START AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 broke out during the spring after the first cohort began their Ready Start activities. Network leaders reported that it impacted their work on the pillars:

- Pandemic-related emergencies needed immediate attention, slowing down the pace of their work on Ready Start.
- Engaging with coalition and governing board members remotely put a strain on relationships.

One network leader explained, “Coalition building and governance is really hard when you’re on Zoom. It’s hard to build relationships, it’s hard to build buy-in. It’s hard to ensure consistent attendance and maintain momentum over conference calls... to ask [site leaders] to sit on one more webinar because the state has required us to hold it was just really tricky. It didn’t feel like the right thing to do.”

- Financial instability meant fundraising, which many networks had just begun to tackle, felt untenable.

One leader shared, “I hate to say it, but I personally just put Ready Start on the side because I was thinking, I’m not going to push for more kids to get into child care when no one’s going to child care right now, or I’m not going to fundraise when everyone’s financially unstable right now.”

Network leaders also noted that having built strong relationships with site leaders through their Act 3 and Ready Start work helped them respond to COVID-19 because they had previously established open lines of communication.

Leaders in two networks noted that their communities would require substantial capital investments before they would even have the infrastructure to provide ECE access to all families who want it. One stated, “We don’t physically have enough buildings... If the state dropped \$50 million into my backyard tomorrow [to] serve every single infant, I don’t have a place to put them.”

Several network leaders highlighted how disruptive it can be to rely only on short-term funding to provide seats. One explained, “Each funding cycle is really just a one-time

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Two networks have secured funding for seats from their parish governments. Network leaders in those communities hope that getting these commitments for slots written into their local budgets will lead to repeated or even expanded funding in future years, especially if they

can double the investment through the state matching fund. Still, so far, the local investments and other funds that networks have obtained are relatively short-term and limited. Networks are far from serving all families in need of ECE, and leaders stressed the need for more sustainable funding.

While network leaders expressed enthusiasm and dedication to fundraising, they also indicated that finding long-term funding for all necessary seats and supports for family engagement, quality improvement, and coordination in their communities would be a monumental task.

CONCLUSION

Ready Start has empowered network leaders to engage broader community support and take greater ownership of their local ECE system improvement efforts. With support from LDOE, network leaders have assembled teams of committed people, structured their work processes, defined goals, and begun raising money. These system-building efforts will not,

on their own, allow networks to successfully support all families and young children in their communities. Adequate long-term funding for staff, supports, and seats is needed. However, each of the Ready Start communities is laying the groundwork for more coordinated, effective, and thriving ECE systems, and they are beginning to see real impact with respect to both quality and access.

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