

READY START IN JEFFERSON: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

READY START OVERVIEW

In 2019, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) piloted the Ready Start program, which was designed to provide resources to communities to improve early care and education (ECE) access and quality through local system building. LDOE designated seven communities as Ready Start Networks. Each was tasked with tackling 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. This first cohort of Ready Start Networks provides useful insights for both other Louisiana communities and efforts to improve local ECE system-building nationwide. Based on [interviews with network leaders](#), Ready Start and COVID-19 Child Care Recovery Grant application documents, and network blueprints, this profile highlights the work of one of these networks – [Jefferson](#) – as it tackled the Ready Start pillars and strove to further strengthen its local ECE system.

BEFORE READY START



In the years since [Act 3](#) was passed in 2012, Louisiana has invested in strengthening early childhood systems statewide. [At the local level](#), the [Jefferson Parish Early Childhood Network](#) has made substantial progress in unifying its ECE system and improving quality, with sites across the network steadily improving the quality of teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System).¹ Network leaders viewed Ready Start as an opportunity to broaden community involvement and shift their focus to improving access. One network leader explained, “For us, 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.

So 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 of increasing quality of the existing seats.”

THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

Jefferson network leaders reported starting the work of Ready Start by contracting with a consultant who helped them pull together a **coalition** of “thought partners,” that included a variety of community leaders, advocates, and businesses. With the help of this group and the consultant, network leaders began a strategic planning process to collaboratively write the **blueprint**. Network leaders noted that the process of

¹ The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a widely-used, validated observational measure of the quality of teacher-child interactions in ECE classrooms. It is the sole indicator in Louisiana’s Quality Rating and Improvement System; all publicly funded classrooms are observed with CLASS twice a year.

creating the **blueprint** united the coalition behind a common mission and provided a clear vision: it “says, in a nutshell, who we are and what we’re doing.”

Many of the initial **coalition** members – including representatives from universities, experts in mental health, and some school board members – signed on as official members of the Advisory Council, which acts as Jefferson Ready Start Network’s **governing board** and works in close coordination with the superintendent of Jefferson Parish Schools. Several other original “thought partners,” including some foundation representatives, opted to remain informal **coalition** members only, in part to avoid any conflicts of interest with future **fundraising** opportunities.

Initially, the network’s primary **fundraising** strategy was to leverage Louisiana’s existing [School Readiness Tax Credits](#), which provide businesses with a dollar-for-dollar tax credit, up to \$5,000. Network leaders believed that this strategy was “a no brainer” or “low hanging fruit,” but they soon discovered that encouraging

businesses to use the tax credit was more difficult than expected. At the same time, network leaders realized they wanted to shift focus to raising more money from larger businesses: “I’m going to ask [large businesses] for \$5,000? That’s crazy – I should be asking them for \$500,000! As we jumped in, we just began thinking differently.” Though the pandemic impacted its launch, network leaders planned an initiative to visit local businesses in person to discuss the importance of ECE, the network’s vision, and how they could get involved.

Of the four pillars, network leaders noted that **fundraising**, in conjunction with the **coalition**, has had the most impact as they have worked to tackle their Ready Start goals. One network leader emphasized, “You can’t do fundraising without coalition building. It very much is who do you know, or who do you know that knows somebody. That’s how we’ve gotten so many of these meetings and things moving forward.”

JEFFERSON’S PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS

- Pulled together a **coalition** of “thought partners” who helped launch an education campaign to spread the importance of ECE
- Created a **blueprint** that united the coalition behind a collective vision and provided concrete talking points to share with the community
- Progressed from an informal group of “thought partners” to an official **governing board** with broad representation from community organizations
- Launched a **fundraising** campaign, started applying for grants, set up a partnership with a community foundation, and began looking for permanent sources of funding from the parish government

THE BLUEPRINT

VISION: *All children birth to age five in Jefferson Parish have access to affordable quality early childhood educational experiences that prepares them to succeed.*

MISSION: *The Jefferson Parish Ready Start Network creates a culture of high quality, comprehensive early childhood education and services through engagement and partnerships with families, educators, and community members.*

GOAL 1: *Create and share data about ECE supply, demand, and outcomes*

- **PROGRESS:** Developed community-wide messaging and planned an education campaign to share information about ECE access and kindergarten readiness

GOAL 2: *Diversify and increase funding for ECE*

- **PROGRESS:** Launched an initiative that aims to engage local businesses and increase fundraising opportunities; set up a partnership with a foundation to apply for a large grant together

GOAL 3: *Increase and maintain ECE program quality*

- **PROGRESS:** Secured a grant from a foundation to fund additional professional development and training opportunities

GOAL 4: *Increase access to high-quality seats for infants and toddlers by 20%*

- **PROGRESS:** Plan to use Preschool Development Grant and anticipated COVID-19 relief dollars to fund seats; also working on an initiative to create more seats with local funding sources

MAIN BENEFITS

Jefferson has made significant progress in uniting their **coalition** behind the importance of ECE and tackling the goals laid out in their **blueprint**. Network leaders noted that one of the main differences they have observed since beginning the Ready Start work is the increase in community awareness and engagement with ECE. One network leader noted that several organizations in the community have included specific outcomes related to ECE in their own strategic plans for the first time.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Capacity. Becoming a Ready Start Network has brought new challenges, namely an increased workload for network leaders. One explained, “The biggest challenge we always have is manpower. We do not have enough people to do all this work.” Not only are there funding issues – most of the money consists of short-term grants that must be pieced together – but hiring qualified individuals who are passionate about improving ECE in the local community has proved difficult.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

One goal of Ready Start was to help community networks build an ECE system that could be flexible and responsive to any challenge that might arise. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the strength of this system, creating new challenges and disrupting Ready Start activities.

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In Jefferson, the response to COVID-19 was focused on supporting sites, especially smaller centers, by addressing staffing concerns, supporting teachers, and working to maintain high-quality learning opportunities.

- The network located and disseminated PPE and cleaning supplies, supported struggling child care centers with small grants, and offered additional grants to centers to fund bonus payments to help recruit and retain teachers.

EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON READY START ACTIVITIES

Jefferson had just launched their business fundraising initiative when COVID-19 effectively shut down their efforts. While the pandemic slowed their progress, the network persevered, shifting to virtual meetings and adjusting their messaging to highlight how critical ECE was during the crisis.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, network leaders are focused on advancing the business initiative (stalled by the COVID-19 pandemic) to raise community awareness about the importance of ECE and improve fundraising opportunities. They have also begun to explore promising opportunities for more stable funding sources, specifically through the Jefferson Parish government, and are in the beginning steps of developing ECE seats that are city-funded.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



The importance of a common mission and vision: Network leaders noted that while their goals had always felt fairly obvious to them, laying them out in the blueprint “was important to bring our coalition of ‘thought partners’ together to have a united purpose and a united voice.” Sharing this message about the importance of early learning and their vision for the network – and being able to adapt it for audiences who are less familiar with ECE – has been key for their work on other pillars.



Tireless pursuit of essential funding: Funding is an critical component of improving ECE quality and access, and network leaders shared that they are focused on identifying more permanent sources of funding that can sustain their efforts long-term. One emphasized that this focus was a main reason they became a Ready Start Network: “Every dollar that potentially has a good match for Jefferson we definitely go after.”