

READY START IN LAFAYETTE: 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 – [Lafayette](#) – 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 [Lafayette Parish Early Childhood Community Network](#) has made progress in unifying its ECE system, creating a coordinated enrollment system, and improving the quality of teacher-child interactions, as evidenced by increased CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) scores.¹ Network leaders viewed Ready Start as an opportunity to undertake new initiatives to enhance quality and begin addressing the community’s gaps in ECE access.

THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

Network leaders began laying the groundwork for Ready Start even before they were officially awarded the grant. They contacted key community members and asked them to join an Advisory Council, which would later fulfill the **governing board** requirement for their Ready Start Network. A network leader described, “We had a group of people who said, ‘Yeah, we’re on board. We’re willing to support you when you do get it.’”

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.

Once they were awarded the grant, network leaders worked in tandem with a state-provided consultant and LDOE to set up a **governance structure** that outlined the roles and responsibilities of the Advisory Council. They spent the next year holding training events for the Advisory Council, establishing the roles and responsibilities of the group, orienting them to early childhood, and thinking critically about what they wanted to accomplish as a network. One network leader explained: “We wanted to make sure we didn't rush that process because it was so critical to the beginning, so we took one step at a time, and we had the consultants come train in between so that we could make sure that the group was prepared [and] that we weren't just setting goals that weren't going to really inform practice.” Together, this group developed a **blueprint** divided into four buckets of goals: access, quality, family engagement, and fundraising.

The network has recently contracted with a local marketing company to brand the network and launch a campaign to bolster **fundraising**.

Network leaders described devising new strategies to complement rather than compete with other ECE fundraising conducted by the local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency. For example, the network and the CCR&R collaborated on a fundraising effort that leveraged the state's [School Readiness Tax Credits](#) – which provide businesses with a dollar-for-dollar tax credit up to \$5,000 – to encourage local business to “Adopt-A-Center” and purchase curriculum and materials for it.

Network leaders are now beginning to build the **coalition**, which they viewed as the final pillar to tackle. Due to some turnover and capacity issues, they are considering transitioning some of their Advisory Council members to less time-intensive roles within the **coalition** while simultaneously reaching out to new community members. One network leader stated that she could see how the **coalition** will “be beneficial when it's fully built because it's going to be more boots on the ground to say, ‘Here's what Ready Start Lafayette does,’ and so forth, but I think we just haven't built it to its capacity.”

Network leaders identified the **blueprint** as the most impactful Ready Start pillar, as it laid out their goals on paper for the first time. One network leader emphasized, “We all had agreed upon this document which we worked very hard on to say, ‘this is what Lafayette Ready Start wants to do.’ So, as opposed to checking the boxes like we were doing in the past, this was where we were going next, so it wasn't like we were just going day by day, we were actually looking to the future.”

LAFAYETTE'S PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS

- Used guidance from LDOE and consultants to create a **governance structure** for members of their Advisory Council and are in the process of developing formal bylaws
- Developed a **blueprint** slowly and deliberately in collaboration with the Advisory Council
- Began working with a local marketing group to brainstorm new and innovative **fundraising** strategies
- Starting to build an expanded **coalition** that can support the work and help spread the network's mission

THE BLUEPRINT

VISION: *High quality early care and education available to all children in Lafayette Parish.*

MISSION: *Improve the quality of early care and education of children from Birth to age 5 in Lafayette Parish through providing professional development, network providers and community awareness.*

GOAL 1: *Increase access by 25% over the next 5 years*

- **PROGRESS:** Increased the number of seats in the network through funding from the state's Preschool Development Grant and have analyzed data to better understand the network's geographic variation in need for additional seats

GOAL 2: *Increase the network's overall score in the Performance Profile by an average of 0.05 points each year*

- **PROGRESS:** Used donations from local businesses and Ready Start funds to purchase high-quality curriculum for all sites in the network and provide trainings to increase quality

GOAL 3: *Increase the network's fundraising by 20% each year*

- **PROGRESS:** Launched an "Adopt-A-Center" campaign that encouraged local businesses to take advantage of the state's School Readiness Tax Credits by donating curriculum and other materials to specific child care centers

GOAL 4: *Increase family awareness of ECE opportunities in the network by 5% each year*

- **PROGRESS:** Plan to focus on increasing family engagement and enrollment as the network recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic

MAIN BENEFITS

Network leaders reported that because of Ready Start, they are now taking greater ownership of their network and its future. One network leader stated, "We're still doing the same work...but who's responsible for that has shifted. I think that was the idea and intent of Ready Start, that we had the authority to move forward, rather than waiting on or trusting or sitting back and letting [LDOE] just kind of guide us."

Network leaders described how their increased initiative has impacted their approach to increasing access. With the help of a data consultant, they identified specific areas of the network that have the greatest unmet need for child care, and they are using this data to inform grant applications and fundraising efforts.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Capacity & commitment. Network leaders expressed that meeting the Ready Start requirements has been an overwhelming challenge for them, given their other responsibilities. One noted that "keeping up with the timeline and not letting the work get behind" is a constant struggle. One large task has been managing

the Advisory Council. While the Advisory Council has been a driving force of their Ready Start work, they have struggled to retain members, jeopardizing the group's ability to play an effective leadership role. One network leader noted that they are currently considering how they can restructure the group in a way that will minimize a few recent member losses and increase long-term commitment.

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 Lafayette, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic was focused on addressing staffing issues and ensuring health and safety at sites.

- Most centers remained open for the duration of the pandemic, and the network sought to provide sites with necessary cleaning supplies and PPE and offer staff training on how to meet the new health and safety guidelines.

EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON READY START ACTIVITIES

- The pandemic slowed the network's Ready Start progression as priorities shifted to "just survival" and reopening sites. One network leader stated, "We were right at that moment of trajectory where we were ready to lift off, and I think COVID kind of said, 'settle down for a second.'" The network shifted to virtual meetings and paused their initiatives to increase access and fundraising.
- As they re-focus on Ready Start activities, the network's goals have not changed, but they have reassessed their timelines to account for the pandemic's impact.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, network leaders are focused on building their broader **coalition** and increasing Ready Start-specific **fundraising** efforts. Network leaders explained that for both purposes, they are honing their communication strategies: "As we build our brand and build our message, we think that the **coalition** piece will be built alongside that."

Network leaders also noted that the pandemic will have long-lasting impacts on how they continue to approach this work. One network leader described, "Lafayette's changed a lot; our economy is not the same, our oil industry is down...we're in a whole different place." They have revisited their blueprint with this in mind, and while their goals remain the same, they have readjusted timelines and recognized a need for greater focus on family engagement and enrollment.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Identifying & training partners: Network leaders highlighted the impact of carefully identifying community members with a wide range of expertise and educating them on the value of high-quality early learning opportunities and Lafayette’s ECE landscape. Network leaders also noted the value of engaging with local consultants and fundraising experts who know the community and are invested in its success.



Communication and transparency: Network leaders emphasized the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships through communication and transparency. One stated, “If you're not transparent then, of course, other partners may not feel so welcome, or they may think that it's a hidden agenda.”