

READY START IN ORLEANS: 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 – [Orleans](#) – 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 [New Orleans Early Education Network \(NOEEN\)](#) has made substantial progress in unifying their large ECE system, creating a coordinated enrollment system, and improving the quality of teacher-child interactions, as measured by CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System).¹ One network leader described that applying to become a Ready Start Network felt like “a no brainer, a natural fit for Orleans” to expand the work they were already doing to improve ECE quality and access. Network leaders viewed Ready Start – and the resources that came with participation – as “a way to kick start some of the ideas that had been kind of bopping around” the

network and think more about how to achieve long-term sustainability for ECE.

THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

According to network leaders, they were making steady progress on many of the key goals of Ready Start – local **governance**, strategic planning, and **fundraising** – prior to Ready Start’s launch. Participating in Ready Start allowed them to focus on improving this existing foundation.

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.

Orleans had already satisfied the **governance structure** requirement of Ready Start by creating their Steering Committee, which included representatives from all of the different site types and early childhood funding sources in Orleans. One network leader explained that the goal of the Steering Committee was to “capture voices from each of those perspectives with the hope that, when we bring everybody together at one table, we are able to view the issue from all sides.” They used Ready Start as an opportunity to update their bylaws and think more about how to ensure their efforts centered the voices of providers.

With the Steering Committee and help from a consultant, network leaders had also created a strategic plan several years before becoming a Ready Start Network, and they used this existing document to fulfill the **blueprint** requirement.

Prior to Ready Start, network leaders had found it somewhat difficult to establish a broad **coalition**, not because of a lack of support for ECE, but rather because there were several competing organizations in Orleans focused on similar early childhood initiatives. Ready Start, they noted, gave the network leverage as the state-sanctioned partner to encourage these other advocacy groups to work alongside them. They are now focused on “building a group of minds that are willing to work together towards a shared goal in common interests, who are willing to compromise their own best interest sometimes in favor of the larger system good.” They also shared that tangible results – particularly in **fundraising** – have been important for expanding the **coalition** and building buy-in.

Network leaders have focused their **fundraising** efforts on raising money for specific initiatives, such as the [NOEEN City Seats Program](#), which created new, city-funded ECE seats and free wraparound services for eligible families. The network has also tried to leverage the state’s [School Readiness Tax Credits](#), which provide businesses with a dollar-for-dollar tax credit up to \$5,000. It has been difficult to convince businesses to actually use the credit, however, so network leaders have recently shifted their focus to educating accountants and encouraging them to recommend the tax credit to their clients.

Network leaders described that the four pillars are interconnected and together lay a strong foundation for improving ECE access and quality. However, one network leader described the **coalition** as the most impactful, noting, “All of the progress we have seen in New Orleans has been due to the strength and the diversity of our coalition.”

ORLEANS’ PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS

- Updated existing bylaws and formed a **governance structure** that includes representatives of all ECE site types in the network
- Formed a **coalition** of committed individuals and other advocacy organizations committed to improving ECE
- Used their existing strategic plan to fulfill the **blueprint** requirement
- Have focused **fundraising** efforts on specific goals – like raising money for their City Seats Program – and brainstorming strategies to increase engagement with the state’s School Readiness Tax Credits

THE BLUEPRINT

VISION: *The New Orleans early childhood sector supports families' aspirations for their children from birth through age 8 by providing access to high-quality early learning programs and schools, ensuring that all children receive a strong foundation for their future success.*

MISSION: *The mission of NOEEN is to ensure an excellent start for every child in New Orleans by strengthening the early childhood education sector.*

GOAL 1: *Strengthen the quality of ECE and better meet community needs*

- **PROGRESS:** Have offered professional development opportunities to ECE providers that are focused on improving quality

GOAL 2: *Influence state and local-level discussions among policymakers to advance ECE*

- **PROGRESS:** Use Ready Start forums to share feedback with the state

GOAL 3: *Increase public and private ECE funding*

- **PROGRESS:** Have focused on raising funding for specific initiatives – like the NOEEN City Seats Program – and are working to increase engagement with the state's School Readiness Tax Credit

GOAL 4: *Collect, analyze, and share data that increases transparency and improves program quality*

- **PROGRESS:** Share information on program quality from the state-mandated CLASS observations with the community

GOAL 5: *Support parent choice through coordinated enrollment and parent information initiatives*

- **PROGRESS:** Working to improve their coordinated enrollment system and provide families with more information to help them choose a program that will best fit their needs

GOAL 6: *Allocate publicly funded seats to high-quality providers to meet local demand*

- **PROGRESS:** Using data to direct public funding towards high-quality programs in areas where need is greatest

GOAL 7: *Increase the ability of ECE to attract, develop, and retain educators*

- **PROGRESS:** Developing teacher incentive programs

MAIN BENEFITS

In many ways, NOEEN was already making progress on the four pillars before they were selected to be a Ready Start Network. According to network leaders, Ready Start allowed them to build on efforts already underway while also shifting the way they think about ECE systems. One noted that Ready Start is “aspirational, it’s more visionary.” It also encouraged them to have new conversations about long-term

goals, collaborate with key community members – like business leaders – who are not traditionally associated with early childhood, and brainstorm creative ways to increase access.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Lack of stable funding sources. Network leaders described the volatility of funding for early childhood as one of the main challenges they faced as they worked to improve ECE and ensure access for families in the network. One described, “Each funding cycle is really just a one-time funding cycle. You never know if things like the Preschool Development Grant – which is a three-year grant – we don’t know if, after year three, that money is going to exist anymore, which means we don’t know if those seats are going to exist anymore, which means we don’t know if those families are covered. The sort of revolving door of funds is really challenging.”

Building and maintaining the coalition. In addition to funding challenges, network leaders also described the difficulty of keeping their growing coalition focused on specific aims. One described, “The more diverse your coalition, the bigger your coalition, the more voices that are at the table, the harder it is to keep focus, because with every new voice you add they have their own perspective.”

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 Orleans, the response to COVID-19 was focused on supporting child care centers as they faced staffing challenges, revenue losses, and pressing health and safety concerns.

- Like many urban areas across the country, Orleans was hit hard by COVID-19, and many child care centers in the network shut down for health and financial reasons. Network leaders worked to ensure that families still had access to safe options for care. They supported centers as they struggled to reopen and remain afloat, and they distributed PPE and other cleaning supplies.

EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON READY START ACTIVITIES

Network leaders explained that focusing on Ready Start activities was challenging as their priorities shifted to responding to the pandemic. They expressed that it was difficult to continue building relationships and maintain momentum in a virtual environment.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, network leaders noted that they intend to revisit their strategic plan to focus more directly on the goals of Ready Start and to acknowledge how the community has changed since they first created it several years ago. One network leader explained, “I want to look at it and think about how the Ready Start Network can shape my thought instead of how my thought can shape the Ready Start Network.”

Network leaders also emphasized that they need to address the limited physical capacity of ECE programs in Orleans. Thanks to the success of the NOEEN City Seats Program and funding from the Preschool Development Grant, the network has substantially increased access for families, but their ability to continue that growth is constrained by current facilities. One network leader stated, “We don't physically have enough buildings. We don't physically have enough providers. If the state dropped \$50 million into my backyard tomorrow [to] serve every single infant, I don't have a place to put them.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Honor the community: Leaders of NOEEN noted the importance of community involvement, especially from the coalition and the Steering Committee. They have sought to let the voices of the providers lead the network while also involving other community members with unique perspectives and community-oriented values. One noted that it is of utmost importance “to be willing to not just speak down about what your vision is but to adapt your vision to meet what you're hearing on the ground from community members.”



Interconnection of the pillars: Network leaders also emphasized that together, the four Ready Start pillars are a foundation that supports the work of the network. They noted that it is important to continually invest time, energy, and resources into all of the pillars and “to think about these things as connected and not focus on one at the expense of another...because as each of them grows stronger, the entire foundation will grow stronger.”