

# READY START IN RAPIDES: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

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## READY START OVERVIEW

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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 – [Rapides](#) – as it tackled the Ready Start pillars and strove to further strengthen its local ECE system.

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## BEFORE READY START

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In the years since [Act 3](#) was passed in 2012, Louisiana has invested in strengthening early childhood systems statewide. The [Rapides Early Childhood Network](#) has made marked improvement in building coordination between sites and increasing quality [at the local level](#). CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) scores have continued to improve across the network, with the greatest growth occurring at child care centers.<sup>1</sup> Network leaders viewed becoming a Ready Start Network as an opportunity to build upon this progress: “We saw the work of Ready Start as being the next step for us to continue to improve the quality and access.” Network leaders noted that they were particularly drawn by the promise of greater control over local operations and their desire to increase the

number of publicly funded ECE seats for children 3 years old and under.

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## THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

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Rapides network leaders viewed each of the four pillars as part of a collective mechanism through which they could accomplish their goals of improving ECE access and quality. They first created the **blueprint**, in collaboration with two consultants – one provided by LDOE and one local consultant with strong connections to the community. In their **blueprint**, network leaders set out their priorities for Rapides in sequential order, focusing first on the goals they could tackle immediately and leaving what they saw as the most difficult pillar – **fundraising** – for later.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Network leaders noted that they had effectively raised awareness of ECE in the community in the years following [Act 3](#): “We’d already done a lot of **coalition** building. We had spent five years building our coalition and getting it to where it was fine-tuned, and we had that trust and we had that cohesiveness.” They viewed Ready Start as an opportunity to make the **coalition** even stronger by adding more members with various perspectives and strengths.

When creating their **governance structure**, network leaders created an Advisory Board of community members to complement the governing board of providers. They worked in tandem with the local consultant to identify community members for the Advisory Board who were ready to commit to the work and the time it would require. One network leader described, “We actually went through a very stringent vetting because we wanted to get the best of the best.” They ultimately formed a board of about 30 members

with diverse expertise, including in accounting, business, fundraising, and law, as well as representatives from the municipalities and faith-based organizations in the network. Network leaders have taken great care to ensure that the Advisory Board is able to take ownership over the work by educating them on the ECE landscape, including by taking them on field trips to sites. One network leader emphasized, “We didn’t want it to be a board that was just a board in name only.”

Network leaders have more recently shifted their focus to what they view as the fourth and final pillar – **fundraising**. A fundraising committee within the Advisory Board has been researching opportunities across the state, including [Louisiana’s School Readiness Tax Credits](#) – which provide businesses with a dollar-for-dollar tax credit up to \$5,000. They are also creating a strategy to raise money locally, something network leaders noted is challenging given that Rapides is a mostly rural community with few large businesses.

When asked, network leaders asserted that no pillar stands out as the most important and that they instead all “go hand-in-hand.”

## RAPIDES’ PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS

- With the help of consultants, created a **blueprint** with clearly defined goals
- Built upon existing community support and added new perspectives to strengthen their **coalition**
- Developed a **governing board** consisting of all network providers and an Advisory Board composed of community leaders
- Established a **fundraising** committee that has begun researching opportunities

## THE BLUEPRINT

**VISION:** *Every child in the Ready Start Rapides Early Childhood Network is prepared to enter Kindergarten, and in turn, more children are positioned for success in the early elementary grades and beyond.*

**MISSION:** *The Ready Start Rapides Early Childhood Network will develop new strategies to increase access to and improve the quality of publicly funded early childhood care and education starting at birth through age four.*

**GOAL 1:** *Create an advisory board of community leaders that will promote and support the network*

- **PROGRESS:** Have assembled about 30 local community members and trained the group on the importance of ECE

**GOAL 2:** *Establish a formal local governance structure for the network to guide decision-making and adherence to public meeting laws*

- **PROGRESS:** Created an Advisory Board that meets independently and is able to take action on network goals without direct oversight from network leaders

**GOAL 3:** *Use public and private funding opportunities to increase access to high-quality ECE for children birth to age 3*

- **PROGRESS:** Fundraising committee has begun to explore funding opportunities; received funding for some additional ECE seats from the state's Preschool Development Grant

### **MAIN BENEFITS**

Network leaders emphasized that, because of Ready Start, there has been greater community involvement in supporting ECE. They noted that their work is no longer just the vision of a few individuals but a collaborative effort with shared goals. Most notably, they described how the Advisory Board has become self-sufficient and able to lead the Ready Start work: "They don't need us to spoon feed them anymore about everything that needs to be done. They're actually taking the initiative, and 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."

### **MAIN CHALLENGES**

**Building bridges.** Despite the progress that network leaders in Rapides have made in engaging the community and creating a collaborative Advisory Board, they noted that getting to this point was challenging, as it required navigating differences between their own vision and expertise and that of community members without ECE experience but with other valuable expertise. One network leader noted, "We get all these professional people [and] our world is not their world." With the help of their local consultant and strategic training sessions, network leaders have built a bridge between these two worlds, introducing the board to the ECE landscape and forming goals in collaboration with them.

## 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*

The response to COVID-19 in Rapides was focused on supporting struggling providers and families.

- Network leaders worked to address staffing concerns at child care centers and to ensure providers were able to meet new health and safety guidelines and maintain high-quality learning opportunities.

### *EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON READY START ACTIVITIES*

Network leaders described that the pandemic “flattened” them, and many of their Ready Start initiatives were put on hold for several months as they focused on other priorities, like reopening schools. While there has been an uptick in Ready Start activities the past few months, fundraising has been particularly challenging, especially with so many local businesses still working remotely. Network leaders believe that they would have finished creating a fundraising strategy by now if they had not been slowed down by the pandemic.

### *NEXT STEPS*

Since becoming a Ready Start Network, Rapides has increased the number of children 3 years old and under who are able to access ECE opportunities, but network leaders noted that they are still not able to meet the needs of all young children in the network. The network does not have the funding or capacity to serve all children, and one network leader noted that more children, “are not going to be able to take advantage of a quality early learning experience...if we don't provide those funds, then they'll never have the opportunity.” The network is now fully focused on building the fourth and final pillar – **fundraising** – to help them better meet this need, and network leaders emphasized that finding new funding sources will continue to be the most critical piece.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS



***Identifying the right people:*** When first starting the Ready Start work, leaders of the Rapides Early Childhood Network focused on finding community members who had valuable expertise and were ready to learn more about early childhood. They added passionate individuals to their coalition and Advisory Board and helped them understand the goals of Ready Start and the importance of improving ECE quality and access. One stated, “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.”



***Funding is an essential final step:*** From the very beginning, network leaders recognized that fundraising would be both the most difficult pillar to build and the most critical piece for increasing access. Now that they have assembled the Advisory Board and built a diverse coalition, network leaders are fully focused on leveraging the expertise of their community partners to find a fundraising strategy that will work for Rapides, because without more funding, it will not be possible to meet their goal of providing all children in the network with high-quality early learning opportunities.