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 – St. Mary – 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 St. Mary Early Childhood Network has made substantial progress in unifying its ECE system, finding innovative ways to engage families, and providing professional development opportunities for providers to increase program quality. Network leaders were motivated to apply to be a Ready Start Network because they wanted to continue this work and "evolve to another level." They viewed Ready Start as an opportunity to partner with more community members and gain additional funding sources to increase the sustainability of the network.

THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

As they started the Ready Start work, network leaders drew on existing relationships and structures within the St. Mary Community Action Agency – an agency that manages over 40 social services in the community and has led the network since Act 3.

Network leaders leveraged these ties to build their **coalition**. They described recruiting anyone who has a passion for helping children and could add a new perspective, including representatives from the city government, financial and faith-based institutions, health care, and law enforcement. One noted, "We don't bring people to the table just to be at the table, but [because] they have something to add to early childhood development and moving it to the next level."

READY START IN ST. MARY

The St. Mary Community Action Agency already had its own governing structure in place, and network leaders used this to formalize a Ready Start-specific **governance structure** with two tiers: all site leaders are part of an executive board that makes decisions, and other community partners serve on an advisory board. In addition to the network-wide monthly meetings instated following Act 3, network leaders also hold smaller meetings focused on different topics – such as coordinated enrollment – with smaller subsets of these partners.

To create the **blueprint**, network leaders drew on data and discussions with ECE providers and community partners to determine the network's greatest needs. One network leader explained, "It wasn't a 'just us' thing, it was all of us working together as a network, getting their ideas, getting our thoughts, bringing all of those small pieces to the table to make a bigger piece." Network leaders described the **blueprint** as a "tentative document" that they frequently revisit to ensure it evolves over time.

Network leaders have started brainstorming ways to obtain sustainable funding for the network and have been able to use the St. Mary Community Action Agency's grant writer to help them apply for different funding opportunities. Network

> ### ST. MARY'S PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS
>
> - Established a **coalition** committed to advocating for ECE that includes representatives from the city government, financial institutions, public schools, and ECE providers
>
> - Built on an existing **governance structure**, adding additional community members to serve in an advisory role for Ready Start activities
>
> - Created a **blueprint** in collaboration with community partners that outlines goals and strategies to meet the needs of families in the network
>
> - Have started looking at innovative ways to **fundraise** for sustainability, including from community improvement grants and COVID-19-relief funding opportunities

leaders noted that they are in the early stages of this aspect of the work: "That **fundraising** part is the part that I think we will really have to hone in on more, but we're looking forward to what that looks like."

Network leaders described that while they believe that each of the four pillars leans on the others, the **coalition** has been pivotal and has felt like the most important for creating long-term sustainability. One noted, "If we don't have the coalition…we cannot maintain being a united effort."

THE BLUEPRINT

VISION: *The St. Mary Parish will be educated and united through childhood education in preparation for children ages birth to five's success in early childhood education.*

MISSION: *St. Mary Parish Ready Start Network brings together ECE providers to work together cohesively for the greater good while providing premier education for children ages birth to five throughout St. Mary Parish.*

GOAL 1: *Establish a governing structure that shares in the decision-making process*
- **PROGRESS:** Established a two-tiered governing board in which all providers share in the decision-making process and other community members serve in an advisory role

GOAL 2: *Measure the community need for access to high-quality, affordable ECE for children birth through age 4*
- **PROGRESS:** Began creating a coordinated enrollment system that will track the needs of each site, streamline the enrollment process, and compile data

GOAL 3: *Identify resources that can be used to increase access to seats for children birth through age 4*
- **PROGRESS:** Started identifying and applying for grants and funding sources that can be used to increase access to ECE seats

GOAL 4: *Assemble a financial portfolio and strategy to meet the community's need for access to quality ECE*
- **PROGRESS:** In the early stages of identifying funding sources to both increase the long-term sustainability of the network and increase access

MAIN BENEFITS
Network leaders noted that although COVID-19 created substantial challenges, they have still been able to start increasing access to ECE because of their Ready Start work. Through a grant and a partnership with one of their child care centers, they have increased the number of fully-funded ECE seats available for network families. Network leaders also noted that Ready Start has facilitated even more cooperation between the network partners. One explained, "We all have to collaborate together and that's increased morale, that's increased communication, we've had effective conversations that have produced real change for St Mary's Parish."

MAIN CHALLENGES
Keeping up with the growth. Network leaders expressed that the main challenge they have faced as a Ready Start Network is keeping up with the work as they enact their vision for moving the network forward. They hired a new team member at the start of Ready Start to serve as the network planner, but even with increased staff capacity, network leaders noted that it can be difficult to ensure that they are taking care of their sites' needs as the network's activities expand. One network leader described, "As we grow, there's so much more that is required of all of us to make sure that we are not missing anything

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because we have a lot of partners. We want to make sure that whatever we said that we would do, we make good on."

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 St. Mary, the response to COVID-19 was focused on supporting child care centers and helping them stay safe, maintain their businesses, and provide families with needed care.

- Network leaders distributed PPE, updated centers on the newest regulations, and made sure sites were aware of funding opportunities. Most child care centers in the network remained open, and network leaders helped connect essential workers with centers that could provide care for their children.

EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON READY START ACTIVITIES

Network leaders described, "We had a specific idea of how we were going to drive the network, but then…COVID changed everything." The network shifted to virtual programming where possible and used the pandemic as an opportunity to pilot new community outreach strategies. They filmed an infomercial and put up billboards to continue their work of branding the network, engaging the community, and providing families with important enrollment information.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, network leaders plan to focus on obtaining more sustainable funding opportunities for creating new ECE seats, especially in more rural areas of the community. Network leaders shared that they have met with parish government officials to discuss Ready Start and advocate for the inclusion of ECE as a candidate for community improvement funds when developing new budgets. One stated that while these funds are typically reserved for infrastructure projects like repairing roads and bridges, ECE "is a critical part of building a community [especially] when you have parents that need access to quality child care."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The importance of establishing connections: The St. Mary Early Childhood Network has worked to build strong relationships, focusing on clearly communicating their goals and taking the time to listen to community stakeholders. Network leaders have sought to include passionate people in their coalition, believing that greater collaboration is a key to continued growth and increasing children's access to high-quality early learning opportunities. One network leader stated, "It does take an entire village to raise children, and when you put all of the pieces in your community together, you can do so much more than trying to do stuff just by yourself."