

READY START IN WASHINGTON: 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 – [Washington](#) – 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. The [Washington Parish Early Childhood Network](#) has made progress [at the local level](#) in unifying its ECE system, building strong relationships across sites, and improving the quality of teacher-child interactions – as of 2017, all sites in the network were rated as “proficient” based on their CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) scores.¹ The network has continued to struggle with increasing access, especially for the network’s youngest children and for those living in the eastern portion of the network where there is a shortage of child care sites. This gap in access ultimately motivated Washington network leaders to apply to become a Ready Start

Network, as LDOE indicated their participation would give them priority access to state funding that could be used to serve more children. The network also aimed to use Ready Start to improve the network’s ECE application process to provide more information about the needs of the community.

THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

Network leaders tackled the **blueprint** first, holding small meetings with providers to determine their needs and using training materials provided by LDOE to articulate their vision and goals. They also used basic demographic data provided by the state to understand which areas of the network had the most at-

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.

risk children, and they included a goal in their **blueprint** to build more in-depth data collection into their enrollment system so that they could better understand community demand and trends in the future.

With the help of a consulting group funded by the state and guidance from LDOE, network leaders then compiled a list of community members who could support their ECE improvement efforts as members of either the broader **coalition** or the smaller **governing board**. While network leaders expressed that there has been interest from many groups – including representatives from the chamber of commerce, health care, the library, and faith-based organizations – deeper, long-term engagement has proven difficult. Though network leaders want to form a larger group that could bring new perspectives and strategies to tackling challenges, the **governing board** currently consists only of site leaders from each of the publicly funded ECE programs in the network. Network leaders reported that they are still in the process of finalizing bylaws and meeting structures for this body.

Network leaders hope that formalization of their **governance** structure and their continued

community engagement and **coalition**-building efforts will lead to greater **fundraising** opportunities. So far, a few individuals in the community have approached the network and offered to donate land and assist with **fundraising** to build new sites to increase access. Network leaders have also started working with a nonprofit organization to help them identify relevant early childhood grants. Network leaders noted that these concrete strategies and donations have helped unify the network. One described that it has helped the existing providers get “on board as a group – as opposed to each man for himself, basically – in seeing the larger picture of what we were going to try to do as a Ready Start Network.”

Of the four pillars, network leaders stated that the **blueprint** has been the most impactful so far, because it has organized their vision into clear and actionable goals that they can share with the community. One noted, “We know where we’re going, what we want to accomplish... [and] we created a one-pager that really breaks it down for people that aren't familiar with early childhood and why is it important.”

WASHINGTON’S PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS

- Created a **blueprint** with a defined vision in collaboration with network providers and with guidance from LDOE
- Developed a **governing board** with equal representation from the school system, Head Start, and each of the network’s four child care centers; currently finalizing bylaws and settling on meeting structures
- Working to increase community engagement, communicate their message, and continue building a **coalition** committed to advocating for ECE
- Engaged a nonprofit organization and plan to leverage coalition members to aid with **fundraising** and identifying applicable grants

THE BLUEPRINT

VISION: *All children, birth to age five, residing in the Ready Start Washington Parish Early Childhood Network will enter kindergarten ready for success.*

MISSION: *The mission of the Ready Start Washington Parish Network is to promote and develop educational and economic opportunities by providing quality developmentally appropriate early childhood care and education for children birth to age five so that each child enters kindergarten ready for success.*

GOAL 1: *Establish a formal governance structure, engage the community, and move towards establishing the network as a non-profit in order to access new funding streams*

- **PROGRESS:** Created a formal governing board and are finalizing bylaws

GOAL 2: *Develop a data collection system that will track demand for services and population shifts*

- **PROGRESS:** Used Ready Start funds to build a new website and are working to refine the online pre-k registration system to allow them to collect more in-depth information about families and track supply and demand

GOAL 3: *Provide ongoing professional development and raise funding to provide newly created classrooms with curriculum materials*

- **PROGRESS:** Used Ready Start funds to provide child care centers with a high-quality curriculum and necessary manipulatives, and are in the process of applying for new grants

GOAL 4: *Increase access to high quality ECE for all families regardless of zip code, economic circumstance, availability of transportation, or special needs*

- **PROGRESS:** Received funding for additional seats in child care centers for children 3 years old and under from the state's Preschool Development Grant and forged a partnership with Head Start that also provided new slots

MAIN BENEFITS

Since undertaking Ready Start activities, the network has made progress in improving access for children 3 years old and under, which was their main motivation for becoming a Ready Start Network. Through a partnership with Head Start and with funding from the Preschool Development Grant, Washington has been able to increase the number of at-risk children receiving ECE services. Network leaders noted that without these new funded slots, many of these children – some of whom have special needs – would not have otherwise been able to attend a program or access necessary services. One network leader emphasized, “It has helped those families immensely because...it was a real financial hardship for them to pay for child care.”

MAIN CHALLENGES

Community engagement. Network leaders described that the main challenge they continue to face is effectively engaging the community, especially community members who do not feel that they have a direct stake in promoting high-quality ECE. One network leader described, “You’re going to have business owners say, ‘Why should I invest in this? Why do I care? I don’t have children in school.’ You’ve got to explain, ‘You may not have children in school or school-aged children, but your employees do, and you are part of this community, so if we can provide quality early childhood education, then this is going to benefit you.’” Network leaders noted that broader community engagement – both within the coalition and on the governing board – will be vital to finding and securing additional funding opportunities. One emphasized, “It’s going to be a hard sell, and it’s going to take commitment from everybody that serves on that board as a community leader to promote early child care and education, because we have families that need it.”

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 Washington, the response to COVID-19 was focused on addressing staffing concerns, providing sites with necessary cleaning supplies and PPE, addressing technology gaps, and maintaining high-quality learning opportunities.

- Network leaders described their response to the pandemic as a community effort they helped coordinate. One explained that as a result, “there was always a child care center that was open and available for families and first responders in the community.”

EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON READY START ACTIVITIES

COVID-19 shifted the network’s priorities from developing bylaws, coalition building, and fundraising to meeting the community’s immediate needs: helping child care centers and schools find stability and reopen. One network leader noted, “We were on the right track last year until COVID happened, and that kind of put everything on the back burner.”

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, network leaders are focused on finalizing their **governance structure** and increasing community engagement to bolster **fundraising** efforts. One described, “We know that we need to have a formal governance structure in order to pursue fundraising opportunities, but also we need to have greater community engagement to even know about the opportunities that could be out there.”

Network leaders are working to find ways to achieve long-term financial sustainability as a rural network with a high poverty rate, and they have begun talking to their state senator about potential fundraising strategies. They are also hoping to make progress on addressing the lack of child care centers in the eastern portion of the network. Prior to the pandemic, a community member offered to donate land to the school

system that could be used to build a new early learning center, but that project is now stalled until they can raise funding to construct a building. One network leader noted, “It’s still something that I think will get support from the community if we can get the funding to build a building.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Knowing the needs of the community: Network leaders noted that determining the needs of the community is always an important first step to creating lasting change. When starting the Ready Start work, network leaders consulted existing demographic data and talked to ECE providers to ensure that they had an accurate understanding of the demand for ECE. One described that “knowing those needs really is the driver behind what we’re trying to do, to serve as many children and families as possible and provide them with the best early childhood educational experiences that they can have.” By building a better system for collecting data about families through their ECE enrollment process, network leaders hope to increase their understanding of demand and how best they can continue serving families and increasing access.



Building community buy-in: Network leaders described the difficulty of cultivating long-term community engagement, but they also highlighted the value of collaborating with committed community members. Concrete offers of donated land and time have served as a rallying point for uniting the network behind the mission of providing access to high-quality ECE for *all* children. Network leaders emphasized patience in this process of building connections and gathering community support: “It’s not going to be exactly what you want or where you want it to be immediately; it’s going to be a process. It’s going to take some time for everyone to come together in the way that you want them to as a functioning network.”