

# READY START IN IBERVILLE: 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 – [Iberville](#) – 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 [Iberville Parish Early Childhood Network](#) has made substantial progress [at the local level](#) by improving the quality of teacher child-interactions as measured by CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), increasing the use of curriculum across sites serving all age groups, enhancing the provision of intensive training and coaching opportunities, and implementing a coordinated enrollment process.<sup>1</sup> The network has struggled, however, with increasing access, particularly for its youngest learners. Currently, there are no Early Head Start (EHS) sites in Iberville; the network has applied for an EHS grant several times in the past, but

has not received one. This lack of availability motivated network leaders to apply to become a Ready Start Network, as LDOE indicated that their participation would give them priority access to state funding for seats for children 3 years old and under.

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## THE FOUR READY START PILLARS

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Since becoming a Ready Start Network in 2019, Iberville’s work has focused mainly on three of the Ready Start pillars: building a **coalition**, establishing **governance**, and developing a **blueprint**.

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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 building a **coalition** in Iberville was a smooth process, as many community members were eager to get involved with ECE improvement efforts. One network leader explained: “At the drop of the hat, they’ll join your committee...it’s a small community, it’s close knit, you know them personally, so they’ll come on board.” After assembling a broad **coalition** that included representatives from the city government, the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency, and ECE providers, network leaders found it difficult to decide which community members to invite to join the **governing board** – a group that would be fully involved with every step of the Ready Start work – versus the less time-intensive positions on the advisory committee. Guidance from LDOE and from a consulting group the initially funded by the state helped network leaders make these decisions. They used potential members’ available time and capacity for serious engagement as key considerations.

Ultimately, the network formed a **governing board** consisting of a judge, the school board president, child care directors, and school principals, as well as representatives from Louisiana State University (LSU), the CCR&R, the local Department of Children and Family Services, and a prominent sugarcane farming family in the community. Iberville’s broader advisory committee includes more business-oriented representatives from the chamber of commerce, a local newspaper, Walmart, Union Pacific, and many chemical plants in the area. Network leaders have also relied on LDOE and the consulting group to help them develop bylaws and structure agendas for important meetings with potential partners and donors.

The network has started building the fourth Ready Start pillar – **fundraising** – but network leaders noted that the COVID-19 pandemic slowed their work. They reported meeting with the mayor and looking for applicable grants, but they plan to do more, particularly to address the continued lack of seats in the eastern portion of the network. The network has, however, successfully secured several new grants (from both the Union-Pacific Foundation and LDOE) to fund additional seats.

Of the four pillars, network leaders reported that the **blueprint** has had the greatest impact so far, as it has kept them focused on their goals. One noted that they are constantly reviewing the blueprint and that “It made you think – ‘What is the mission? Where is your weakness? What are your goals?’ – and it just drives everything we do.”

## IBERVILLE’S PROGRESS ON THE READY START PILLARS

- Built a **coalition** committed to advocating for ECE that includes representatives from the city government, child care centers, schools, and the CCR&R
- Developed a **governing board** with a wide array of stakeholders in the community and established bylaws
- Created a **blueprint** in collaboration with the governing board that outlines goals and strategies to increase quality and access in the network
- Began brainstorming strategic ways to use the governing board and advisory committee to **fundraise** and to identify community grants

## THE BLUEPRINT

**VISION:** *All Iberville Parish children birth through age five are afforded opportunities to achieve their maximum potential to succeed in school and life.*

**MISSION:** *The mission of the Iberville Parish Ready Start Network is to increase community awareness of early childcare and education, provide children, age birth to five, with equitable access to the physical, emotional, and high quality educational supports they need to enter school ready to succeed.*

**GOAL 1:** *Increase access to high-quality seats for children ages 2 and under by 10%*

- **PROGRESS:** Exceeded this initial goal through several new grants that funded additional seats for children ages 3 and under

**GOAL 2:** *Increase community awareness of early childhood in order to increase funding and resources*

- **PROGRESS:** Developed a website and a Facebook page while also leveraging coalition meetings and monthly network meetings to increase community awareness

**GOAL 3:** *Increase coaching and training opportunities and access to resources so that all sites can attain quality ratings of proficient or above*

- **PROGRESS:** Used Ready Start funds to provide child care centers with updated classroom materials and to offer training and coaching opportunities

### **MAIN BENEFITS**

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Iberville has made significant progress building the Ready Start pillars, strengthening community involvement, and tackling the goals set in their **blueprint**. Network leaders noted that prior to Ready Start, only the schools and child care centers were concerned with learning for young children, but now a diverse set of community members are more aware of the importance of early childhood and are committed to improving the local ECE system.

Network leaders also noted that the **governing board** has created a more formal, organized structure that has increased feelings of a shared responsibility in the decision-making process. Having this broader array of stakeholders has also been helpful in making the network aware of different grants for early childhood. In fact, funds from one grant secured in collaboration with a member of the broader advisory committee has allowed the network to exceed their initial **blueprint** goal of increasing access to high-quality seats for children 2 years old and younger by 10%.

### **MAIN CHALLENGES**

**Time & capacity.** Network leaders noted that time and capacity are the main challenges they have faced as a Ready Start Network. The addition of Ready Start activities has substantially increased their workload, but the size of their staff has remained the same. One network leader noted that preparation for meetings to engage stakeholders and increase community awareness is crucial but very time consuming: “You can’t go into a meeting unprepared...you have to make everything very professional, and everything

has to be planned out, so it takes a lot of time.” While the state does allow networks to allocate some Ready Start funding for administrative purposes, the network has shied away from hiring and funding positions with temporary grants.

## 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 Iberville, the response to COVID-19 was focused on addressing staffing concerns and supporting struggling child care centers while maintaining high-quality learning opportunities.

- The network bridged the gap between the state and individual sites by sharing critical information, helping with grants, providing sites with necessary PPE and supplies, and supporting sites as they struggled to remain open.
- One network leader recalled the praise of one child care director in particular: “If it wouldn't be for you, and what you've done for us, then we wouldn't be open right now.”

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

The network has been unable to host events or fundraisers but has continued to promote early childhood through social media and by holding virtual meetings. One network leader noted that the virtual meetings are “a little less effective...they're definitely still moving us along, but I think in-person meetings, of course, are more effective.”

### ***NEXT STEPS***

Moving forward, network leaders are focused on continuing to increase access to high-quality ECE programs. Since they have already exceeded their initial goal of increasing access for children 2 years old and younger by 10%, they are revising this goal and aiming to further increase the percent of infants and toddlers able to access high-quality ECE opportunities in Iberville. The network is hoping to obtain some state funding to develop new child care centers in the eastern portion of the network, where there is a severe shortage of ECE sites. Network leaders are also looking to develop some city-funded seats, an initiative they paused because of COVID-19. As recovery from the pandemic continues, network leaders are hopeful that the members of the business community that serve on the advisory committee will be helpful in securing necessary funding.

More broadly, network leaders emphasized that they are committed to continuing the work that Ready Start has set in motion in Iberville – specifically taking ownership of their own local system-building, increasing community engagement, and driving improvements in access and quality. One network leader described that Ready Start “opened the doorway” for making connections, building community involvement, and meeting their goals, adding, “Why would you stop when you're seeing all this success?”

...a goal of ours is to sustain [the work of Ready Start] in any way that we could and continue working towards [our] goals.”

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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***The importance of teamwork:*** The Iberville Parish Early Childhood Network has benefitted from increased community engagement. One network leader reported, “in early childhood...there’s not a lot of manpower” so “it’s nice to even just have other people who are interested in early childhood because...it’s not ever the big thing in the forefront for the school district.” The network has created a diverse group of stakeholders who provide new perspectives, additional funding sources, and a team to help make decisions.



***The value of clear and focused goals:*** When creating their blueprint, Iberville network leaders set lofty yet attainable goals, and they have used these goals to keep them focused on their mission to improve publicly funded ECE in the network. As the network has achieved some of their initial goals, they have continued to set new goals to push their work forward.