

# READY LOUISIANA COALITION: 2024 Legislative Priorities

The Ready Louisiana Coalition — a bipartisan group of over 150 organizations including chambers of commerce, civic organizations, businesses, and advocacy organizations representing more than 1 million people in Louisiana’s workforce — exists to advocate for one issue: increased access to high-quality early care and education for the Louisiana children and families who need it. Our membership believes that investing in high-quality early care and education will enable parents to be productive in the workforce, serve as an economic engine for communities across Louisiana, and prepare our youngest children for a smart start in life.

During the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers made a historic investment by allocating \$52 million in new funding for early care and education. However, with Congress’ failure to replace relief funds for child care, there remain more than 100,000 unserved in-need children, birth to age 3, in the state. Without further investment, too many Louisiana families will not have access to affordable, quality child care and too many children will arrive at kindergarten behind.

## **We, the Ready Louisiana Coalition, urge the Louisiana Legislature to:**

- **Appropriate an additional \$115 million to expand access to high-quality early care and education for more in-need children by 2032**, as previously recommended by the bipartisan Louisiana Early Childhood Care and Education Commission;
- **Appropriate at least \$31 million in one-time funds to the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund**, which matches local investments in early care and education dollar-for-dollar, to ensure the success of the program for another year and serve thousands of children in communities across the state; and
- **Ensure that future Legislatures keep the dollar-for-dollar promise to local governments** by modifying the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund statute to require matching state appropriations are made every year.

**Early care and education is a two-generation investment: When families can access high-quality early care and education for their children, parents can go to work and strengthen our economy now.**

Early care and education access for young children strengthens the Louisiana economy, which loses \$1.3 billion a year due to the impacts of child care breakdowns on working parents, and helps reduce the number of working parents who miss work, leave or change jobs, come in late, or leave early because their child care situation was unreliable, unaffordable, inaccessible, or some combination of the three.

There are over 100,000 children, birth to age 3, in need of high-quality early care and education programs in Louisiana today. Two years ago, the Louisiana Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Commission found that it would take a significant investment, with subsequent investments for 10 years, for Louisiana to close the gap for all in-need children to have access to an early care and education program by 2032.

Recent polling showed that more than 80% of likely voters from across all parties and regions of the state support dedicating an additional \$115 million per year for the next 10 years to expand early care and education programs for working families. If Louisiana kicks the can down the road on this \$115 million investment, in 10 years, our state will experience a collective \$14 billion economic loss. But if we make that investment, and continue making it, we will experience a collective \$1.8 billion economic gain.

Working families who benefit from state investment in child care are a crucial part of the workforce and keep our economy running by working as nursing assistants, cashiers, elementary school teachers, sanitation workers, construction laborers, and more. It is crucial that the Legislature expand access to early care and education in order to give thousands of parents the support they need to be productive members of the workforce.

**Early care and education is a two-generation investment: When children have high-quality early learning experiences, they arrive at kindergarten ready for lifelong academic success and are less likely to be engaged in the juvenile or criminal justice systems in the future.**

Increasing state funds in early care and education programs will help participating children achieve long-term positive outcomes and prepare our youngest learners to enter kindergarten while their parents work, look for work, or go to school. Public investment in the early years provides a greater return than any other time of life; Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman's recent research shows a return on investment (ROI) of up to 13%.

When children arrive at kindergarten with the critical social and cognitive skills we all want them to have, they are more likely to read by third grade, stay in school and graduate high school, go on to higher education, and are even less likely to become involved in the juvenile or criminal justice systems. If less than 1% of our total state dollars are spent on early care and education now, there is room for us to truly make children our priority. Louisiana must follow the ECCE Commission's recommendations.

**Solving the early care and education issue requires state and local partnership: Localities need state matching funds to incentivize local investment in high-quality early care and education, and local businesses need early care and education to have a consistent, reliable workforce. The Legislature should make a one-time investment this year and ensure that future legislatures always include matching funds in the state budget.**

The Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund (ECE Fund) is a state fund that offers local entities, including cities and parishes, a dollar-for-dollar match on investments made to expand access to quality early care and education for children who need it most. Though the ECE Fund has several revenue sources, those sources are not generating enough revenue to match local commitments year after year and is likely to be depleted in the next two to three years. Many communities in Louisiana have been making investments in expanding early care and education, such as Ascension, Bossier, Caddo, Jefferson, Orleans, and Pointe Coupee parishes, and these investments will total \$34 million a year in 2024, with more communities exploring similar plans. Louisiana needs to match these investments this year to incentivize more local communities to invest in high-quality early care and education. State policymakers must support local efforts for communities across the state, and should ensure that future legislatures keep the promises that were made to local communities.

**We, the Ready Louisiana Coalition, urge our leaders to invest state dollars in early care and education programs and the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund during the 2024 legislative session to ensure children have the quality early learning experiences they need and to support Louisiana working families.**

# READY LOUISIANA COALITION, INCLUDING THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS

