

**History of Ready for School, Ready for Life—Final  
2007-2022  
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October 5, 2023**

## **Introduction**

Place-based initiatives that seek to achieve better results for residents of a community are not new. But ones that *start* with community leaders and actively seek direction and input from the people whose lives are impacted by disconnected, top-down services are unusual.

Ready for School, Ready for Life (Ready Ready) is a place-based initiative that grew from an informal grassroots effort actively working with parents in Guilford County, North Carolina, to an initiative involving more than 100 community partners and backed by a \$32.5 million commitment from large funders.

From its start, Ready Ready founders and funders looked at ways to create a new, more systematic way of making sure that children from prenatal to age 8 and their parents receive the services they need to give them the best chance at flourishing in life. They have done so, in part, by actively seeking direction from parents, connecting the myriad of organizations that touch on children’s lives with one another to develop a shared communication, data, and referral system, and insisting on using evidence-based early childhood programs that have been rigorously tested.

Rather than creating a new program, Ready Ready leaders and funders hope to reach its vision by creating an innovative pathway that smooths the way for parents and their children to receive effective services that they require.

As a place-based initiative that has attracted the support of national funders, Ready, Ready may serve as a model for other communities in North Carolina and around the country looking to provide their children with the best start in life.

In 2022, Ready, Ready founders and leaders commissioned a history of its work to date, including what has worked and what has not worked along the way. Among the themes that have emerged in a review of documents and interviews with 19 leaders and participants are:

- What does parent involvement in a large initiative mean in practice?
- How do a significant funder and the agency charged with overseeing an initiative navigate leadership over time? How has power shifted?
- What does it mean to promote racial equity in work such as this?
- How can an initiative be evaluated in ways that work for both large funders and the community organizations on the ground?

## The Problem

Parents are largely on their own in the time between expecting a child and up to age 5 when their child attends kindergarten and enters the school system. While an array of government and nonprofit agencies provide services for this age group, those organizations are often disconnected and difficult to navigate. A parent with a one-year-old who is overwhelmed may not know what to ask for to seek help for themselves or their child.

Even in the best-case scenario, where parents have specific needs and are looking for assistance, where do they start? No central place or position typically exists to help direct parents to the services they are looking for. Specialized agencies providing mental health care, housing assistance, child care, food resources, social-emotional counseling and other services are spread out across a region. Parents looking for multiple services can find themselves answering the same questions over and over to each agency, a frustrating and discouraging experience.

Once they find a service, parents often have no idea whether it has been evaluated and proven effective. What's more, some agencies set up to serve parents and children can, at least over time, become more focused on doing what *they* think is best for parents without asking what families need.

All of these issues come with a real cost—to the children, families, and society.

### Following the brain science

In recent years, brain science has shown that while all children are born ready to learn, what happens between birth and age five will largely determine whether or not children succeed in school and in life. Some 80 percent of brain architecture is shaped from prenatal to three years of age. The first 2,000 days are critical for developing brain connections. If parents do not have guidance in helping their children, those children can face an uphill battle catching up just at age 5.

In Guilford County, North Carolina, where 6,000 children are born each year, some 50 percent of them arrive at kindergarten unprepared. That fact alone is a wake-up call. It can also have a domino effect. By third grade, these children may not be reading at grade level. And third-grade reading is the primary indicator of high school graduation and a successful career.

### Laying the Groundwork for Ready Ready

In 2007, Susan Schwartz was just a year into her position as executive director of The Cemala Foundation based in Greensboro, N.C.—one of two large cities that encompass Guilford County. But Schwartz had long been involved in civic leadership, including heading nonprofit

agencies in the area dating back to the 1980s. In April 2007, she and two Cemala board members attended a Council on Foundations meeting in Baltimore, where they heard a presentation on a Brookings Institution report about effective investments for children. That presentation made a deep impression.

The report, *Cost Effective Interventions in Children*, written for the White House, outlined four areas for federal investments to ensure that children gain the skills they need to succeed in school and as adults. Those recommendations included high-quality childhood programs for three and four-year-olds and nurse home-visiting programs for pregnant and new mothers. The report included compelling statistics about how much money could be saved in later costs if a fraction of that were invested in early childhood development.

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**2007: Brookings Institution Report: *Cost Effective Investments in Children***

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It was a powerful presentation that moved Schwartz and the board members. While the Cemala Foundation had funded an early reading program, the sheer volume of evidence around the difference early investments can make in children's lives proved pivotal. On their return from that trip, the board told Schwartz to look for ways that Cemala could start making such investments in its home area.

At around the same time, Ed Kitchen, former city manager of Greensboro and someone who Schwartz had worked closely with for more than 30 years, developed a similar interest in funding early childhood interventions. Kitchen was the vice president of the Joseph M. Bryan Foundation, starting a year before Schwartz had been in her position. He had recently read the book "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development," which showed that environmental stress in infants and toddlers can interfere with the development of neural connections in the brain that children need for their social and emotional development.

As a long-time city employee and leader, Kitchen had seen first-hand families living in precarious situations where their children did not get the support and stimulation they needed. Later, he was part of a funder investment to raise math scores in local high schools that did not make a real difference. The evaluator of the initiative told him that the philanthropies had started much too late in a child's life.

Schwartz began asking community agencies for advice on how the Cemala Foundation could invest in the area. Kitchen accompanied her on some of those interviews. The answers all essentially came down to this: fund our agencies.

### **Two like-minded leaders**

Schwartz and Kitchen, who had similar approaches to tackling an issue—diving deep into a problem and sticking with it—began talking about what their two foundations could do to try taking a more broad-based and evidence-informed approach than simply providing more funding to existing programs in Guilford County.

“[Just spending money on local agencies] wasn’t something we wanted,” Schwartz said. “What we wanted was system building, though we didn’t call it that then.”

Robin Britt, a former US Congressman and Secretary of the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services who was also deeply involved in Guilford County as the former executive director of Guilford Child Development, noted that Guilford County was the third largest in the state and had long been active in working to provide a healthy start to children.

But he said the efforts of what became Ready Ready pulled together a vision of a system of early childhood care.

“The bad news is there was no system of early care,” Britt said. “The good news is that there is no system of early care because we didn’t have to deconstruct anything. So there are some real blessings to the fact that we were building something new.”

Kitchen added, “It just dawned on me that whatever happens, good or bad, in the earliest stages of life will largely determine the rest of someone’s life. So, I thought this is a space I can work in this community to try and create the conditions that will lead to better outcomes for our youngest children and the families who take care of them. It’s pretty much as simple as that.”

But both Schwartz and Kitchen felt like they did not know enough yet to fund a broader approach to helping babies and toddlers get the start they needed.

### **2007-2015: Laying the Earliest Groundwork**

#### **Turning to a local university for guidance**

To provide some guidance, in 2009, the two funders turned to a local university, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). They commissioned the *Ready Together* project to provide a comprehensive model for Guilford County that would outline the most efficacious delivery of parent education and early child care services

In what was to become a centerpiece of Ready Ready’s approach, researchers convened collaborative groups to serve as advisors to carry out a community assessment of ten primary

parenting intervention and parent education programs in Guilford County as well as child care programs serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. One such group was composed of mothers participating in the ten programs.

UNCG's final report noted that Guilford County has a rich array of services for young children and parents with competent program directors who want to provide high-quality, inclusive services to every family. But these programs are not coordinated with one another, which reduces each one's effectiveness. A persistent theme that came up in conversations with providers, parents, and directors of local agencies was the need for expanded and more effective mental health services for mothers and their young children.

The report laid out far-reaching recommendations to:

- Promote positive parenting.
- Support school readiness.
- Expand home visitation for vulnerable families.
- Carry out a mental health initiative.
- Focus on community awareness and resources.

### **Taking initial steps in the community**

Many of these recommendations are the core of Ready Ready's work today. But at the time, the local foundations did not have any way to fund all of the report's recommendations. It was simply too comprehensive and big for them to take on. Schwartz and Kitchen asked the report's author what they could do that would make the biggest difference, which they then funded.

Specifically, from 2012 to 2015 the foundations supported:

- A specialist in a pediatric clinic who met with families and helped them with non-medical issues that would contribute to the success and wellness of the children and the family. Once the parents established a relationship with the specialist, they could text her with questions, which they would not be able to do with their pediatricians.
- The specialist, as well as Schwartz and Kitchen, also began to get together organizations in the community that were working in the early childhood space to network, which had not been done before.

"The reason for this is that you need to use your resources well, and to do that you need to understand what services are available and make sure that people are referred to the right service," Schwartz said. "We were doing that very informally."

- A mental health nurse who was part of Family Connects, a program run out of the health department in Guilford County which provides one to three nurse home visits for every family of newborns and refers parents to additional services if needed. The mental health nurse was needed because a number of women were having postpartum depression or other mental health issues and not receiving the care they required. The mental health nurse could help other nurses identify such issues and work with the family to make sure they receive the services they need.

From the beginning, Ready Ready leaders sought to engage other leaders in the community—an approach that has continued to the present. To drum up community support, in October 2013 they held a breakfast with local business and community leaders.

Presentations focused on the economic benefits of increased investments in early childhood development. The pitch was that the area's economic future depends on providing the right tools for early childhood education to create a highly educated and skilled workforce. The breakfast, which 150 people attended, featured state and national leaders who spoke about how communities must address the earliest years (prenatal to at least five years old) to prepare young children to be ready to learn and succeed in school.

Schwartz and Kitchen hoped that the leaders attending the breakfast would be so inspired that their reaction would be to collectively say, "Okay, we've got to tackle this," Schwartz said.

"And then everyone came up to Ed and me and said, 'What are y'all going to do next?'" she remembered.

While that was not the response Schwartz and Kitchen had hoped for, they continued to support discrete efforts in the county and hold meetings with community organizations looking for ways that they might work together.

At around that time, the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration made a large award to the state of North Carolina to work on system building for early childhood development. Because of the *Ready Together* report and evidence that the local foundations were engaging the community to work together, Guilford County was supposed to receive \$5 million of that award, Schwartz said.

### **Turning to a systems-based expert for help**

Knowing that money was coming, Schwartz and Kitchen felt that the financial pressure to support these efforts would lessen. If local organizations wanted to take on this work, Ready Ready leaders could point them to this pot of funding. But then something went wrong, perhaps in the paperwork, and the award was suddenly gone. With expectations set high for funding that put even more pressure on the local funders to try and figure out what to do next.

Schwartz shared her concerns with Cindy Watkins, the brand new head of the Guilford County Partnership for Children, one of the anchor institutions in the county that provides services for children from prenatal to five. Watkins was a savvy administrator and had also thought about how to make systems work for children and their families rather than just delivering discrete programs, Schwartz said.

Watkins introduced the local funders to Dr. Pennie Foster-Fishman, a psychology professor at Michigan State University and a systems change expert. The local funders hired Foster-Fishman and her colleague Joan Blough in 2014 to conduct a year-long process to design a system for early childhood development so that all children from 0 to 8 years old arrive at school ready to learn and ready for life.

“That is how Ready Ready really got started,” Schwartz said. “Pennie was there to help us design the system and identify barriers and help people understand what those barriers would be. She and Joan Blough are both academics, but they are also very practical.”

Much of this work focused on promoting community buy-in, building community capacity for change, and developing an infrastructure equipped to drive transformative system change.

### **Making the first hire—a community engagement specialist**

At the time, the infrastructure was envisioned as falling under Guilford County Partnership for Children. The organization had a leader who was eager to lead the work and its focus was on children at the youngest ages. The partnership also received Smart Start funding, a large program initiated under former North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt to increase the quality of early care and education in North Carolina. Beginning in April 2013, Ready Ready funders had paid for a position at the Guilford County Partnership for Children to help move this system-building work forward.

In that position, Mary Herbenick began working as a part-time community engagement coordinator. A former strategic planning and change management consultant for Fortune 500 companies and nonprofit organizations, Herbenick also had had a passion for early childhood care since the age of 11 when she and two friends started a summer daycare center in her family’s basement. Even at that young age, she said she learned a lot about how disconnected systems fail children and their families. In her position, Herbenick worked with Foster-Fishman and Blough to begin executing the community work.

Schwartz, Kitchen, and other leaders also took steps to formalize this work. Starting in late 2014, Ready for School, Ready for Life was established with a steering committee composed of representatives from 35 different organizations in Guilford County and North Carolina.

Schwartz and Kitchen carefully chose the organizations based partly on long-standing personal relationships and also on ones that would be central to implementing system change as well as sustaining the initiative. For example, a number of local government officials became part of the steering committee. Both Schwartz and Kitchen served as co-chairs along with the CEO of Cone Health, the large health provider in the area, and the CEO of the Housing Authority of the City of High Point.

### **Focusing on root causes of issues**

At the heart of the Michigan State University's researchers' work is focusing on the root causes of issues and then training community leaders and residents to tackle them at a systemic level. They start by going into communities and asking people about their experiences and needs and then give them the training to take on a systems change approach to address problems in those communities. Called the ABLe Change Framework, some participants join Action Learning Teams to work on specific areas.

### **Listening to families and mobilizing them to take action**

In Guilford County, Herbenick headed up an effort that gathered input from families about what was working and not working when it came to three key areas related to kindergarten readiness: access to services, coordination of services, and family voice. Her team held 22 family meetings and interviews with more than 240 families representing the diversity of the Guilford County community. Herbenick said the groups she listened to reflected the demographics of the county and included: families of all economic backgrounds, grandparents raising grandchildren, families who had children with developmental and intellectual disabilities, families experiencing homelessness, undocumented immigrants, refugees from nine countries, families who live in rural settings, residents of High Point Housing Authority communities, groups of fathers and more.

At the same time, Herbenick and the team launched three Action Learning Teams made up of direct service providers who started examining barriers related to the same three areas: (1) access to services; (2) service coordination; and (3) responsiveness to family voice. Those three areas were fundamental to the development of a connected early childhood system, Herbenick noted. Each team worked to identify targets to make changes, design, and test solutions, and adjust as they learned.

“We were working with Pennie Foster-Fishman about what system change is, what system building looks like, and what the components of that would be,” Herbenick said. “It meant moving the community mindset from ‘if we have enough money and programs everything will be solved and children will be ready’ to ‘we need to break through turf [issues], center families, and start working together differently’ to achieve the desired results. How do we build connections, how do we make sure that families get the services they want and need, when



they want and need them, so that their children can enter kindergarten happy, healthy, and ready to continue their learning journey?”

### **Pediatricians are trusted resources but face barriers to referrals**

One of the central findings from the process was that pediatricians were families’ most trusted resource for information, but many said that their pediatricians did not refer them to other resources. In an informal poll of 70 pediatricians, none felt comfortable making referrals within Guilford County to other services.

The reasons cited included long waiting lists for Head Start/Early Head Start, not wanting parents to experience a dead end such as making a referral and not receiving a response from the agency, and being unclear about what services were available to them. Families also reported that they wanted to get parenting information during visits to their OB-GYN. When they had their babies and went to the pediatrician, it often felt too chaotic to take in information. At the end of that intensive, year-long process in September 2015 the Action Learning Teams, led by the Michigan State researchers, Herbenick, Schwartz and Kitchen, had created a Pathway to Success & Framework for Change.

### **Designing a pathway to success**

The Pathway to Success provided a detailed road map for Ready Ready’s leaders to start a process of community change. Most broadly, the Pathway to Success looked like this:

## **Babies Born Healthy → Infants and Toddlers Developmentally on Track → 4-year-olds Ready to Transition to Kindergarten**

The Pathway would be achieved with supportive and supported families and a responsive and innovative early childhood system.

### **“Photovoice was therapy for us”**

During the project, participating families were asked to think about the root causes of the issues they experienced while making sure their young children got what they needed to develop and be prepared for kindergarten as well as what they did with their kids to have fun. Then the parents went out to their neighborhoods and their homes to take pictures that illustrated those root causes.

While parents were engaged in the Photovoice and Action Learning Teams, Schwartz, Kitchen, and other leaders were still drumming up funder and local interest. Schwartz remembers calling a program director at The Duke Endowment thinking that the foundation might be a good fit with Ready Ready. She implored the director to make a trip to Greensboro to see what they

were doing. However, she was told this system building approach was interesting but not an area in which The Endowment would invest in, Schwartz recalled.

However, largely unknown to Schwartz and others, The Duke Endowment *was* seriously looking at shifting some of its focus to early childhood interventions.

### **The Duke Endowment looks to broaden its work in early childhood**

Starting around 2015, The Duke Endowment began looking at expanding its work in early childhood, according to Todd Dalrymple, associate director at the foundation. The Duke Endowment had long funded programs in child welfare, targeting the investments on children who were at imminent risk for abuse and neglect. Much of that funding went to institutions such as children's homes and treatment facilities. Rhett Mabry, who at the time was vice president and oversaw the child care portfolio was exploring new approaches to grantmaking focused on children, Dalrymple said.

For years, the Duke Endowment had also funded the Nurse-Family Partnership program, which sends nurses out to regularly visit identified first-time mothers before birth up until the child is age two to help parents plan for their and their children's care and to ensure that the children are healthy and on track developmentally. The Nurse-Family Partnership is one of the most rigorously evaluated programs of its kind in the country.

### **A tested program that serves families of newborns**

In addition, since 2000, the Endowment had supported Ken Dodge, a professor and researcher at Duke University in Durham, to create a program that would lower the rates of child abuse not only locally but one that could be evaluated rigorously and eventually replicated in other places. That program became Family Connects.

Guilford County also offered a similar program. The idea is that every family of a newborn child in a community meets with a specialist nurse who conducts a home visit to check on the baby and mother. Depending on the needs of the family, the nurse can offer follow-up visits to help directly or to connect the family with ongoing community resources for support, such as parenting classes, professional treatment for postpartum depression, and other issues. Randomized controlled trials showed that Family Connects improves parental mental health and lowers the community rate of child maltreatment by a third, Dodge noted. Family Connects has since been disseminated across North and South Carolina and the nation.

Mabry was interested in building out a continuum of care that started prenatally and went through kindergarten, Dalrymple said. As part of his charge, Dalrymple began looking for communities in North Carolina and South Carolina that were already engaged in work like this. The Endowment did not want a community to organize solely around an opportunity for funding, he said.

“It was an instinct that we couldn’t launch something on our own that was intended to create collaboration across sectors,” Dalrymple said. “We wanted the community to already be motivated on their own. We didn’t want to be the motivator. We thought we had the best chance of success if we were to capitalize on a couple of communities that were already strong collaborators and had assets in place.”

### **An opportunity to partner with a powerhouse funder**

While Dalrymple was researching local communities, Mabry was exploring an opportunity to potentially bring \$100 million into the Carolinas to focus on issues that the foundation cared about. Blue Meridian Partners is a structure that was originally incubated by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, an early funder of the Nurse-Family Partnership and an organization Mabry knew well. Blue Meridian Partners’ innovation was to bring together ultra-high net worth individuals as well as foundations to collectively make a large, and long-term investment on strategies that could make both a local and national impact on social problems confronting young people and families in poverty.

## **A New Potential Phase of Investment 2016-2018**

In 2015 and into 2016, The Duke Endowment leaders and staff continued to hone their ideas and their partnership with Blue Meridian Partners. Meanwhile in Guilford County in early 2016 Ready Ready staff and leaders were busy preparing for a big convening to bring together people and organizations that had worked with Pennie Foster-Fishman and other local leaders to unveil the Pathways to Success, speak about behavior change, and kick off a 100-day challenge for small teams to dive into looking for specific solutions to parts of the system that touches on early child care education.

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**2016: 450 people participate in the Get Ready  
Guilford Early Childhood Summit**

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The Get Ready Guilford Early Childhood Summit was held on February 4, 2016, and attracted more than 450 participants including families, early childhood professionals, funders, government officials, nonprofit leaders, and more. The event was carefully orchestrated as an immersive and participatory experience, said Mary Herbenick who had been named executive director of Ready Ready in July 2015.

Attendees were greeted by a Photovoice project display with panels representing the experiences of 10 Guilford County families, most of whom lived in poverty. The large photos illustrated what it was like for families to try and help their children get ready for kindergarten. Another display had fencing around it to illustrate the barriers families face in obtaining the services their children need. The morning of presentations included nationally known systems changes experts such as Foster-Fishman who provided a detailed look at the Pathway to Success.

### **Attendees form groups to take immediate action**

Prior to the meeting, Foster-Fishman had advised Ready Ready leaders against rolling out a plan to carry out the Pathways for Success model and say that they would implement it all at once. Instead, she emphasized, it was important to immediately engage attendees in taking action on aspects of the pathway they found most compelling.

Grounding the system-building work in data was essential. Each participant received a 12-page packet with quantitative and qualitative data about the current state of children from birth to age five in Guilford County, which had been developed by the Ready Ready team.

In the afternoon, attendees broke up into small groups around themes that interested them and committed to work on those themes together for the next 100 days. The recommendations from parents in the Photo Voice project influenced the formation of the 100 day challenge and ensured that family voice would be a key component of the work moving forward, Herbenick said. Organizers thought they might end up with 3 to 5 groups. Instead there were 12 themes attendees chose. These became Action Learning Teams.—with similar missions as the initial teams. Their charge was to report back in 100 days with action recommendations on the theme they chose.

### **An unexpected member of the audience**

In the audience at the summit was Arthur Morehead, the general counsel at The Duke Endowment. According to most people interviewed for this history, they had no idea he would be there, and he kept a low profile. His presence would become significant just a couple of months later.

People on the 100-day Action Learning Teams got to work right after the Summit, meeting every other week to dive deeply into their areas of interest. Those included: (1) breastfeeding-friendly community; (2) early literacy; (3) families as change agents; and (4) high-quality, affordable, and accessible child care. The teams used the ABL Change Framework with Ready Ready staff and Joan Blough facilitating the meetings. The goal of the groups was to take a deep dive into the root causes of the issue they had chosen, evaluate best practices, and look for local data about the problem. The groups were told that they must base their recommendations on the data, not just gut instinct, Herbenick noted.

“One of the things we learned from the process is that people said that there is a lack of comprehensive data about whether children are developmentally on track during this critical time of life, Herbenick noted. “One of the first recommendations that came out of this process is to invest in or build a data system to capture some key indicators about how children and families are doing so we can better understand what is working, what is not working, and what needs to shift so more children are on track developmentally.”

### **Learning teams tackle long-standing problems and suggest solutions**

In one team, the group focused on the question of what it will take in Guilford County to attract and retain a qualified, educated early childhood workforce, said Ashley Allen, work environment and compensation coordinator for EQuIPD, a project out of the University of North Carolina Greensboro that provides professional development supports, training, coaching, and mentoring to all licensed child care programs in Guilford County. The team ended up focusing much of its work on compensation for child care professionals. Among their recommendations was to secure funding to implement a salary supplement program to attract and retain high-quality teachers. That work led to a 2018 strategic plan to attract, retain, and engage a highly qualified early care and education workforce in Guilford County.

“At the end of the day, if you want to frame it from the perspective of children, attachment is 90 percent of where social-emotional development comes from,” Allen said. “And when you have a revolving door of caregivers it makes a big impact on that.”

In the midst of this process, in April 2016, The Duke Endowment released a letter of interest seeking to learn more about community-based initiatives in North and South Carolina for a potential investment. Ready Ready responded.

### **The Duke Endowment looks for communities to invest in**

In all, the Endowment received about 60 responses from communities, Dalrymple said. From there, they analyzed, responded to inquiries, and conducted further research to develop a short list of about a dozen that had features and goals that aligned with the Endowment’s. One of several aspects of Ready Ready’s approach that stood out was its focus at the county level, he said. That focus enabled the possibility for making system change and population-level change, rather than individual changes by simply funding programs, he said.

“We wrestled at the time, do we want to work at a regional level, a county level, a city level, or a neighborhood level?” Dalrymple noted. “And ultimately we had become persuaded of the importance of working with public systems rather than funding programs alone. We believe you need the combination of systems reform with evidence-based interventions and programs in order to have the potential to realize community-level effect where we actually see changes in the county’s rates of pre-term births or reading proficiency.”

He added that working at the county level, rather than the neighborhood one, enables government to be a major participant.

“You’re talking about serving enough people to actually get the systems’ attention and want to work with you,” Dalrymple said. “We defined the county level as a sweet spot between programs being small enough to have a reasonable chance to accomplish our goals but large enough to be able to have the kind of policy and system effects that we were aspiring. So that helped narrow our list down further.”

### **Ready Ready and The Duke Endowment start talking**

Starting around mid-2016, The Duke Endowment and Ready Ready leaders and staff began having conversations about a potential investment. After another round of research and visits to communities by The Duke Endowment, Guilford County had emerged as a promising candidate for funding.

At the same time, in May 2016, the groups in the 100-day challenge presented their reports and recommendations. Those became the basis for Ready Ready’s original 10 priorities (see box for list of priorities).

**Ready for School, Ready for Life  
Ten Priorities**

1. Ensure all new parents are connected to critical early childhood and community support services.
2. Bring helpful resources to more young children and their families by coordinating developmental screening and referral processes into settings that provide services for families and children.
3. Create an effective referral and coordination network to ensure families can easily access the services they need.
4. Leverage and expand early literacy resources and services to reach more children and their families.
5. Leverage and expand parenting resources and services to meet the needs of families.
6. Make high quality early care and education affordable and accessible to all children.
7. Ease progression to Kindergarten by aligning Pre-K and Kindergarten priorities, curriculum, and transition policies.
8. Ensure the local early childhood system is responsive to and respectful of family needs and voice.
9. Increase public demand for school readiness by implementing a public awareness campaign about the importance of early learning and development.
10. Embed continuous improvement orientation within the local early childhood system.

After the May 2016 100-day Challenge meeting, the Ready Ready steering committee and Herbenick continued to convene and facilitate teams composed of parents and organizations working in the child care sector to advance the vision of the Pathway to Success. The first team that was established was the Guilford Parent Leader Network, a group of parents who met monthly to serve as consultants for Ready Ready's work and as advocates for change in their communities.

### **Parent leadership group forms**

Paulette Bernard, a grandmother and one of the early members of the parent network, noted that she has been involved in initiatives seeking to help children's lives for decades. She said that from the start, Ready Ready had a different feel than other ones.

"[I remember how] committed they were to getting parents involved and teaching the kids, and being vulnerable to the parents...Other organizations where they have parents involved can be standoffish like, 'hey, we run this.' But Ready Ready is not like that. They say, 'can we help you? What do you need? Let me check this so I can get you this resource' and the turnaround time is quick. You don't have to wait six months. It's none of that. If a parent needs something from Ready Ready, they're there."

The parent leader group later began holding meetings in Greensboro and in High Point to make it easier for families from those areas to participate. Additionally, an early literacy task force worked on identifying root causes and developing strategies to create systems change to ensure that all Guilford County children are on track when they enter kindergarten.

### **Starting a pilot project to embed a parent navigator in a pediatrician's office**

In 2016, Ready Ready also expanded its work in the High Point community, beginning a pilot project of seeding a parent navigator in a pediatric practice and funding behavioral assessments. Still, at this point, Ready Ready had a budget of about \$300,000 and one full-time staff member. The potential of partnering with The Duke Endowment which not only had financial resources but expertise around the research in this field was exciting, Kitchen noted.

"I was always worried about how are we going to garner the resources to actually attack this?" Kitchen said.

He remembered that it was not only the potential funding and deep research expertise that was attractive about working with The Duke Endowment.

"We hit it off from the get-go," Kitchen said. "It was almost like dating, there was chemistry. That's the first thing I remember is that we were of like mind and had the same objectives but that we also built off each other. We could be serious and also have fun at the same time."



Working together on these things we could challenge each other and that led to better ideas, not conflict.”

### **A central funder requirement: programs must work together**

A cornerstone of The Duke Endowment’s approach was that the leaders wanted more than evidence-based programs at the heart of any initiative it funded. It was also critical that these separate programs find a way to work *together*.

In October 2016, The Duke Endowment convened a meeting with Ready Ready representatives, foundation staff, leaders from Blue Meridian Partners, and national representatives of evidence-based programs that the foundation wanted to fund or expand in Guilford County.

Those programs were: Family Connects, the program that the foundation had nurtured from the start, Nurse-Family Partnership, the program originally seeded by Edna McConnell Clark and also funded for years by the foundation, HealthySteps, a program that helps pediatric practices offer holistic care for children and caregivers along with enhanced screenings for children and parents, and Reach Out and Read, an early literacy program.

### **An attractive feature of Guilford County’s work in early childhood**

Another reason why Guilford County was attractive to The Duke Endowment was that it already had most of these programs in place. The Nurse-Family Partnership had been in the county for about two decades, Guilford County offered universal access to home visits, and Reach Out and Read was also active in the county.

But in the October meeting, Mabry and his colleagues wanted these evidence-based programs to do something they had never done before—work together collaboratively to make a bigger impact on the lives of children and parents than they could do individually. Part of that might require that they loosen their grip on their specific and tested approach.

“At the convening of the four programs, Rhett [Mabry] asked what it would take for everyone at the table to work together, to potentially break the evidence base of each single program and build a stronger, more family-centered program that would work better for Guilford County families and that could potentially become a national model,” Herbenick remembered. “He made an offer that The Duke Endowment would help fund it. The purveyors were pretty wed to their programs, and it was a frustrating session. At one point, there was a discussion about the importance of brand for each of the four programs, and I remember speaking into the microphone saying ‘the families we’ve listened to don’t remember the names of your programs. They don’t care what it’s called, but they do want excellent services for their children.’”

“At the end of the meeting, there was a tentative agreement to explore stronger collaboration among the four programs, but the skepticism was real and it was clear that a lot of trust would need to be built since these programs had a long history of competing with each other for work as people are required to operate differently, to give up power, or to share resources. That’s why we always grounded the work in what families told us during focus groups, family Action Learning Teams, and more. It’s hard to argue with that.”

Todd Dalrymple said he recalled some, but not much tension, at the meeting. He said that the programs had some reservations and questions about what it would mean to integrate their models but that the representatives were “almost entirely collaborative and productive” at the meeting.

### **Joining the team**

Meka Sales had taken a new position at The Duke Endowment as director of special initiatives and would oversee the work with Ready Ready with Dalrymple and another colleague. Over time, their jobs would become almost singularly focused on Ready Ready.

## **2017**

### **The year of conceptualization and forced marriages**

In April 2017, the Duke Endowment released a one-page document detailing its interest in investing in Guilford County. The document stated that the foundation found Guilford County to be an attractive place to build on existing early childhood efforts. It noted that the community had already made significant progress mobilizing service providers, businesses, and funders around a shared agenda for improving early childhood outcomes.

While the foundation was contemplating a large investment, it began providing funding to lay the groundwork for a potential longer-term engagement. Much of those investments centered around work that Ready Ready had begun or hoped to do including matching families to services beginning in pregnancy through a partnership with Family Connects, HealthySteps, and Nurse-Family Partnership, as well as steps to monitor and improve programs, and link the evidence-based programs through a shared data system.

At the same time, The Duke Endowment had narrowed its candidates for funding to two places: Guilford County, N.C., and Charleston, S.C.. As a funder that covered both the Carolinas, the foundation initially hoped to fund both with a budget of \$100 million. But as they began crunching the numbers, foundation staff realized that from a money or staff perspective, they would not be able to do in-depth work in both places, Dalrymple said.

### **Guilford County close to receiving an influx of funding**

What finally tipped the balance to Guilford was an educational program that had recently set up shop there, promising to pick up where Ready Ready left off, preparing students for college,

and covering college tuition beyond a student's scholarships. The program, called Say Yes to Education, was making a big splash in the county. Foundation officials had a vision of the two programs working closely together, perhaps even merging. They asked the organizations to write a proposal about how they would collaborate. In 2016, at the foundation's behest, Ready Ready and Say Yes began discussing how they might work together.

"There is a potential for any gains in early childhood to fade out," Dalrymple noted. "We heard from other funders that it is difficult to work with public school systems. So to have a stakeholder that already has a close relationship with the school system, which Ready Ready did not, was important to us."

### **A major sticking point arises**

But in 2017, a central point of disagreement came to a head between The Duke Endowment and Ready Ready that threatened the continuation of the partnership. That spring, news reports about Say Yes to Education began emerging that the organization lacked the promised funds to help pay college tuition for students graduating from Guilford County schools. The news was a shock to the community, many of whose organizations had donated millions to support the effort. Additionally, some of the Say Yes resources that might have complemented the Ready Ready work did not come to fruition.

The abrupt turnaround from a national organization that had come to the county just two years ago with grand promises left a sour taste for many people in the community. But Duke Endowment leaders were convinced that the way to reach their ultimate goals was to create a pipeline from prenatal to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and Say Yes was an integral part of that.

"There was a sense of a forced marriage between Ready Ready and Say Yes," said Todd Dalrymple at The Duke Endowment. "Funders tend to want to forge partnerships for efficiency and have initiatives amplify each other."

Yet Schwartz and Kitchen had reservations about uniting the two efforts. They felt strongly that building the system of care was going to be complicated and they were unsure that Ready Ready would benefit from an alliance with Say Yes. They said they remember how stressful it was to try and balance the need to collaborate with a potentially huge funder for whom they had respect and found to be an ideal partner with their instinct that working with Say Yes was not in the best interest of Ready, Ready.

"I told Rhett [Mabry] that that was the worst summer of my life," Schwartz said. "We wanted to partner with The Duke Endowment. We admired, trusted, and appreciated the Duke staff; yet Ed and I were worried that we would need to go along with this even if we thought it would not work. I would wake up in the middle of the night. I would get up in the morning thinking about it."

Eventually, The Duke Endowment agreed with Ready Ready and the collaboration continued without Say Yes

### **The Duke Endowment chooses Guilford County as their partner**

By the end of 2017, the foundation had officially selected Guilford County as their partner in developing a place-based prenatal to age 8 strategy. Ready Ready and the Endowment would now jointly develop the “Get Ready Guilford Initiative.” Christina Dobson began working alongside Mary Herbenick as the Get Ready Guilford Initiative Project Manager, a position funded by the foundation. Endowment leaders, Kitchen, Schwartz, Mary Herbenick, and Ken Dodge had crafted a theory of change for the initiative. The theory of change incorporated Ready Ready’s 10 priorities with what the foundation called its “value adds” that they had conceptualized before they had made the decision to fund Guilford County, Dalrymple said. Those were six ways they thought they could help support a collective impact place-based initiative.

“It read along the lines of if we can reach, assess, and understand the needs of the full population, connect them with effective resources in their community that are coordinated in their service delivery and supported by data and the community is aware of the importance of early childhood development and there is sufficient buy in from the public sector than we can change individual outcomes for families and have the potential to improve outcomes for the entire community,” said Dalrymple.

Added Meka Sales, director, special initiatives at The Duke Endowment, “Our aspiration is to make a population level impact. That is what will make a big difference in the field and how people might pick up pieces to replicate it.”

## **2018**

### **A pitch to Blue Meridian Partners and good news**

Now that The Duke Endowment had selected Guilford County for its investment in early child care system change, much of early 2018 was focused on making the larger pitch to Blue Meridian Partners for funding. Participants remember it as an exciting time, with nationally known figures associated with Blue Meridian Partners such as Steve Ballmer, the former CEO of Microsoft, planning to participate in a site visit in April.

“[The whole process] was intense,” Dobson said. “I can’t tell you how many in-person meetings we had in preparation. It was really fleshing out the different elements and documenting the various partnerships that were part of the planning and what we anticipated was going to happen over the next three years.”

At this stage, Sales, Dalrymple, and another colleague were working full time on this initiative, an unusually large commitment for a single endowment investment but one that was necessary given the depth and complexity of the work, said Rhett Mabry, president of The Duke Endowment. He noted that another colleague, Bill Bacon, who is director of evaluation, spends about a quarter of his time on Ready Ready, and he devotes around 15 to 20 percent.

Dalrymple remembered, “Ready, Ready was so new. It wasn’t even an official nonprofit organization when we started with them. It was Meka and I essentially helping to staff Ready Ready. Meka and I worked with Mary and Christina to write our strategy, funding, proposal, etc. for the three years spanning 2019 through the end of 2021.”

The Duke Endowment staff had worked closely with Schwartz and Kitchen to develop a rudimentary theory of change earlier in the process.

### **Learning from other communities**

Ready Ready also had an opportunity to learn from other communities around the country doing similar work and share what they are learning. In 2018 leaders learned that they had been selected to be part of a learning cohort that is organized through the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington, DC. They were funded at \$150,000 per year through the Pritzker Family Foundation, which is also part of Blue Meridian Partners. Some 14 communities are in the cohort in states including California, New York, and Connecticut.

As was the case at the October 2016 meeting, the evidence-based programs had to again grapple with requirements to integrate their models, Dalrymple said.

“In 2018, a lot of the collaboration we imagined among partners got a bit more challenging because they were really starting to have to give things up,” he noted. “The way they implemented their models in other places would be different from how they implemented them in Guilford County. For example, the Nurse-Family Partnership, which is a home visiting program, would no longer be seeing all first-time low-income moms. They would be seeing a subset with higher risks that had been identified as having the greatest potential for impact. It was not the way they had been doing things, and they had a little bit of uncertainty if they were going to get all the referrals that they need.

### **Navigating tensions between local providers and national programs**

Tension also existed between the local providers and national evidence-based programs. A local program had been in existence for many years in Guilford County prior to officially adopting the Family Connects evidence-based model. Because the local program had been implementing different protocols before adopting Family Connects it did not always strictly follow families more intensively after birth than the local program was doing, he noted. The Endowment

requested that closer adherence to the evidence-based model as a part of its investment in the local program.

“It became more difficult when we actually had to start implementing changes,” Dalrymple added. “So 2018 was a more challenging year in that respect.”

### **Ready Ready becomes an official nonprofit organization**

In preparation for the hoped-for funding, Ready Ready leaders also needed to take steps to make their work more official. Cindy Watkins had long left the Guilford County Partnership for Children and the leadership there did not embrace the vision of Ready Ready. To receive potentially large funding, Ready Ready needed to become a separate 501(c)3 organization. Ready Ready Leaders moved from the more informal steering committee structure to forming a board of directors. In October 2018 Ready Ready received its 501(c)3 status. The new nonprofit organization would serve as the “backbone” organization for the initiative, overseeing the work that community organizations were implementing, serving as a champion to keep the initiative moving ahead, and setting up and supporting a data infrastructure to make informed decisions and shifts to get better outcomes for children and families.

“Becoming a 501(c)3 organization would make Ready Ready more of a formal organization and would signal credibility and stability for the community and Blue Meridian,” Sales said.

While Mary Herbenick was serving as the executive director, Ready Ready began discussing hiring a chief executive officer to helm the organization. Herbenick was valued for her deep roots in the community and her community organizing experience. According to Schwartz and Kitchen, however, with a potentially large windfall of funding coming their way, they felt they needed to look for someone who had experience managing that funding and building the organization.

### **Ready Ready awarded \$32.5 million from Blue Meridian**

In April, the Blue Meridian site visit took place and Ready Ready leaders soon learned that they would be awarded \$32.5 million over three years from Blue Meridian with The Duke Endowment providing half of that funding or \$16.25 million. This was funding the first of three planned phases (Phase 1-prenatal to three, Phase 2 three to five and Phase 3 five to eight) over ten years for a total investment of around \$100 million.

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**2018: Blue Meridian Partners and The Duke Endowment  
Award Ready Ready \$32.5 million in funding**

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For the foundation, it was one of its largest single investments, Sales said. The foundation would also receive all the funds from Blue Meridian Partners and distribute them to key partners including Ready Ready. The Duke Endowment was in the position of being a grantee from Blue Meridian and therefore answerable to them like any other grantee. At the time, Ready Ready was also relatively small—about five people were on staff. Because of all these factors, the foundation staff would take a much larger and in-the-weeds role than they typically carry out in their initiatives.

In June 2018, the strategy for the Get Ready Guilford Initiative was released. The document noted that over the next three years, Ready Ready and The Duke Endowment would advance six phase 1 priorities to further design, implement, and scale the system of care for Guilford’s youngest children and families. Specifically, the priorities were:

1. **Expanding and integrating proven programs.** The prenatal to three strategy is anchored by the expansion and integration of three programs with proven effectiveness: Family Connects, HealthySteps, and Nurse-Family Partnership. These programs will serve more families and play a central role in the development of a new system of care.
2. **Creating a system of navigation.** Navigation will connect families to effective services so that needs are identified and met on a continuous basis. The system includes universal assessment at five points through 36 months, targeted referrals to services based on assessment results, and ongoing support for families between assessment periods.
3. **Build a culture of continuous quality improvement.** To fill service gaps left by proven programs, up to 30 promising local programs will engage in a continuous quality improvement (CQI) process to improve their use of data in service of better outcomes. The CQI strategy engages the initiative with a larger set of programs that, in combination with proven programs, can address the broad array of needs in the community.
4. **Building an integrated data system.** An integrated data system is needed to connect the activities and services. Such a system will allow for referral management, create care coordination, and support evaluation.
5. **Strengthening the backbone organization.** Ready Ready will increase its capacity to manage and execute the growing initiative. Ready Ready will also take the lead in building public support for the financial sustainability for the initiative, including a messaging campaign targeted to caregivers, providers, and policymakers.

6. **Evaluating for learning and impact.** Rigorous evaluation will be employed to test new strategies, make decisions at the initiative level, and understand what works for families. Following a national search, MDRC and Frank Porter Graham Institute (housed at UNC-Chapel Hill) will co-lead evaluation focused on implementation during Phase 1.

Some of these priorities were well established, such as expanding evidence-based programs while others would require building something from scratch like designing an integrated data system, Dalrymple noted.



### **How Does Ready Ready Work? (Prenatal to Three)**

With Ready Ready, parents are no longer on their own to figure out how to best care for and prepare their young children for success in life and school. From a mother's first visit to her OB GYN, she is connected with a navigator who will take time to learn her and family's story and, together, create a plan to help them prepare for and care for their baby including making sure they have a pediatrician lined up.

The plan may include services the mother needs, from a mental health referral, to housing loans, to job resources. That navigator will see those the parents at five regular intervals up to the age of three. Mothers can also connect with the navigator in between visits if they have questions.

A subset of mothers, such as first time mothers or those with low incomes, may be referred to the Nurse-Family Partnership, where nurses will come to their homes on a regular basis up to age two to provide specialized services. Mothers will receive additional touch points through specialized navigators. After the birth of their child, they will receive home visits from a Family Connect nurse who will refer them to additional services if needed.

Additionally, in their pediatrician's office, if parents have questions beyond the scope of a pediatrician's time or expertise, they can meet with a HealthySteps specialist. All of these services and touchpoints will be connected so that parents will not have to answer the same questions over and over again as they move from their OB GYN to their pediatrician or receive specialized services. Ready Ready has created an integrated data system that, with parents' consent, will link their information and enable providers to make referrals and identify gaps in services.

Central connection points—Nurse-Family Partnership, Family Connects, and HealthySteps--have all been rigorously evaluated. Community Navigation at Children's Home Society is the fourth program that connects parents to services. Other participating organizations are engaged in a quality improvement process to ensure their programs are meeting the needs of the people they serve. In addition, an overall evaluation is underway. The organization Ready Ready oversees the implementation of this work.

Mishawne Carrington, program director for Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) of Guilford, noted that she has worked in Guilford County with families for 36 years, 10 of them with NFP, and attended a number of national conferences with presentations on other place-based initiatives. She said that the planned initiative addresses some of the central problems she has seen the families she works with confront, which is running from program to program for specific services only to find out that the rules have changed for one and another one is full, and a third one has dissolved.

“It’s a unique approach,” Carrington said. “I’ve never heard of another county or state doing the same thing. When I learned that [Ready Ready] was wanting to create a system that went from pregnancy all the way up to age eight to help families receive the services they needed, I was excited about it. I thought my clients would be able to get the resources they needed and that we would be working together, as Ready Ready called it, to make a collective impact. To me that meant we were going to have a collective impact, not just one program [working separately]. We would no longer be working in silos but we would be working collaboratively and collectively to help the people we work with.”

### **Taking initial steps**

While the official notice of funding took place mid-year, The Duke Endowment had already provided some initial investments to help Ready Ready get started on some of the priorities. Among the work that took place in 2018 was taking first steps to involve programs serving children in a quality improvement process, which was a new approach for these programs.

Under this process, 13 organizations partnering with Ready Ready participated in a cohort, which provided them with a CQI coach to help them find ways to better understand and use their data to shape decision making and long-term planning. The idea was to give staff in these organizations an opportunity to step back from the daily work of running programs and, through looking at their data, see if their programs were making the difference they hoped for. If not, the process could help them adjust. For these programs, it was often the first time they had been given these tools, the time, and the help in understanding how to assess the quality of the programs they were implementing. Root Cause, the organization selected to head up the Continuous Quality Improvement initiative also conducted an initial program quality assessment.

In addition, Ready Ready convened a navigation steering committee to design the navigation system with local and national representatives of the three evidence-based programs as well as representatives from The Duke Endowment and Ready Ready. The steering committee focused on essential questions such as who carries out navigation, what is the role of evidence-based programs, whether families interact with a single navigator over the prenatal to three continuum, or whether that function can be carried out effectively by a series of providers.

Christina Dobson said that there was an evolution from shifting decision power from external national partners to the internal local partners who carried out the work. That shift began with the establishment of the navigation steering committee, she said.

“Mary [Herbenick] and I really pushed to have a balance between local and national representatives on the committee,” Dobson said. “That has served us really well” because the local and national partners can work together to sort out how best to deliver services that adhere to a model but also work in the practical realities the local partners face.

### **Navigating tensions with evidence-based programs**

That does not mean that tensions did not exist at times, she said. Dobson recalled a turning point meeting in early 2019 with the navigation steering committee.

“We had some meetings where there were some turf issues,” Dobson said. “There was a lot of ‘this sounds cool, but this is how we do it,’ and someone else would say ‘this sounds cool, but this is how we do it.’ We [ended up] talking about the ideal family experience and I can say that this about our partners is that they are all in on what is best for families. And that was a really important lesson for us—framing around what is going to work best for families. It is a lot harder to push back and say, ‘well that doesn’t work as well for me’ when we’re talking about what is best for families.”

Still, Carrington said that there are parts of the Ready Ready initiative that are difficult for a long-standing, well-known organization like Nurse-Family Partnership. In Guilford County, the four proven programs are now collectively referred to as Routes to Ready. While that can provide cohesiveness to the initiative, it potentially poses challenges for individual programs down the line.

“The branding was the hardest thing to accept,” Carrington said. “Because Nurse-Family Partnership has such a rich history of being identified in the community and now we have to introduce ourselves as Routes to Ready, what we don’t want is for Nurse-Family Partnership to get washed out.”

## **Ready Ready/Get Ready Guilford Initiative Phase 1 (Prenatal to Three) 2019-2022**

### **2019**

#### **A year of transition and hiring**

With funding from The Duke Endowment and Blue Meridian Partners, in 2019 Ready Ready could dive into much of the work that the founders initially envisioned some ten years earlier when they commissioned the *Ready Together* report.

Meka Sales, Todd Dalrymple, Mary Herbenick, and Christina Dobson were meeting twice a week or more as they made plans to convene groups of community partners, providers, and families and begin testing some of their conceptual plans by placing community navigators and specialists from Family Connects and HealthySteps in OB-GYN and pediatricians' offices. Sales and Dalrymple distributed funding from Blue Meridian Partners and the foundation to different organizations carrying out the work including the Guilford County Department of Health.

"2019 was a year of formation and hiring folks," Sales said. "We had a lot of urgency about setting up the integrated data system, so we hired someone for that role in January."

Ready Ready also held a large convening in Greensboro pulling all of the partners together for a big project kickoff with about 150 people attending.

### **Parent leaders receive advocacy training**

Parent leaders also traveled to attend Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) training at the instigation of Ready Ready. The aim of COFI is to "build the power and voice of parents, primarily mothers and grandmothers from Black and Brown communities, to shape the public decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their families," according to the COFI website. For parents and grandparents like Paulette Bernard, the training gave them practical tools and confidence to challenge institutions like schools and local governments when their children and grandchildren are not receiving the services they are entitled to.

Even though the planned ten year initiative had just started, The Duke Endowment and Ready Ready leaders were already looking ahead to securing government funding down the road. They began holding meetings with state health officials and health plans that would administer Medicaid to explore funding possibilities for Ready Ready programs.

Much of the year focused on setting up a navigation system, overseeing participation of the 13 organizations in the continuous quality improvement project, and discussing how to evaluate this large initiative.

### **Implementing the Basics Guilford**

As Ready Ready focused on creating the necessary underpinnings to create a system that would work for parents and their young children, the team also implemented a practical tool to help parents and caregivers to communicate with their children up to age five funded by The Cemala Foundation. Called the The Basics Guilford, it is a tool developed by Harvard professor Ron Ferguson with the goal of eliminating achievement gaps.

The Basics are five simple ways for parents and caregivers to interact with their children each day and help close the skills gaps between socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups. Sharing the Basics with parents and caregivers was a concrete step for Ready Ready in its early days to

help parents as they navigated the uncertainty of how to help their children be prepared for kindergarten.

#### **The Basics Guilford**

- 1. Maximize Love, Manage Stress.** Children flourish in a world that feels safe and predictable. Help them see, hear, and feel your love.
- 2. Talk, Sign and Point.** Respond to your infant’s sounds or your toddler’s words with eye contact and a loving voice.
- 3. Count, Group and Compare.** Talk about numbers, shapes, patterns. Compare everyday objects as you go about your day.
- 4. Explore Through Movement and Play.** See what interests your child and help them learn when they play and explore.
- 5. Read and Discuss Stories.** Make reading a fun routine from the start. Point at pictures, speak with excitement, and ask questions.

Source: <http://basicsguilford.org>

#### **A CEO arrives**

In September 2019 Charrise Hart became the CEO of Ready Ready. Hart had deep roots in Greensboro as well as an extensive nonprofit and business background. A social worker by training, she had previously served as the chief operating officer of the YWCA Greensboro and held an MBA. She was most recently CEO of the YWCA Lower Cape Fear in Wilmington, N.C.. Hart noted that the mission of YWCAs is to eliminate racism and empower women and that she has a strong background in and passion for racial equity and supporting the well-being of children and families.

“When I first walked in the door I said there is a lot of power in this room but there’s still a lot of voices that are missing,” Hart said. “Ready for School, Ready for Life has an ambitious mission and is doing powerful work but who really holds the power? I said what are we doing to elevate parent voice?”

As one of her first acts, Hart attended the parent leadership group. Hart said she knew that with the investment from Blue Meridian and The Duke Endowment they were not going to make a real change in Guilford County with five parent voices. But with the focus on producing

outcomes to help attract future funding, her point initially did not receive much traction from the board or foundation, she said

### **Unexplored considerations on sharing power**

Hart was hired in part for her experience in managing large budgets and organizations. However, at the start of her tenure, The Duke Endowment did not fully consider how they might begin to share some of the power and decision making with Hart, Sales and Dalrymple said.

“I’m sure we didn’t think about it as deeply as we could because we were so financially and emotionally invested in it,” Sales said. “I’m sure we did a lot of pushing and pulling—jumping in and jumping out and weren’t as methodical about it as we probably could have been. And we didn’t have the capacity to because we’re operating on a clock. And we’re grantees to Blue Meridian.”

By the end of 2019, Ready Ready estimated that it had served 9,040 children prenatal to age three by at least one of the evidenced-based programs, or 38 percent of the target population of 16,000. Two community navigators were field testing the full prenatal Navigation process with women at their first OB-GYN appointment. Ready Ready had also created an inventory of all prenatal to age three services available to families for targeted referrals, a crucial step in setting up an effective navigation system. In November, some 100 people participated in a continuous quality improvement conference.

## **2020**

### **COVID-19 and a time to focus on building the infrastructure**

As Ready Ready was gaining momentum with placing navigators and specialists in pediatrician’s and obstetrician’s offices, COVID-19 hit in March 2020. Organizers had to scramble to set up virtual visits, which was a new approach for both nurses and families.

But Ready Ready was able to take advantage of this time to work on other critical projects to strengthen its work and infrastructure. One that turned out to be especially important was that Ready Ready codified its values and principles. This work began with the funder partners' focus on evaluation.

### Ready for School, Ready for Life Values

- We believe in being Family-Led.
- We believe in being Inclusive.
- We believe in being Equity-driven.
- We believe in being Responsive to Evidence.
- We believe in being Transparent.
- We believe in being Collaborative.

Having an evaluation of the Get Ready Guilford Initiative was of central importance to The Duke Endowment from the beginning. But it is not a straightforward task to evaluate such a broad and deep initiative with so many parts. To help provide guidance, starting in 2019, an Evaluation Advisory Steering Committee was formed with nationally known members, mostly from universities, to explore the pros, cons, and feasibility of a variety of designs to evaluate the impact of the initiative.

#### **Tensions around how best to conduct an evaluation**

In 2020, tensions between community organizations and national evidence-based programs about how to carry out such an evaluation came to a head.

“We [at The Duke Endowment] inserted this evaluation frame,” Sales said. “And there was a lot of tension surrounding the best approach to conducting a rigorous evaluation. We didn’t want to be at odds with community needs. We understood that the components of the initiative still needed to be designed based on what the community wanted, and we wanted the selected changes to have a measurable impact.”

Ken Dodge, the creator of the Family Connects program and a believer in the value of randomized controlled trials to test the effectiveness of initiatives noted: “Early on, Guilford community leaders decided that there could be evaluation but that they didn’t want any randomized controlled trials going on. I think they didn’t want the community to get the message that our children are guinea pigs. I get it. I understand. I happen to believe that they are not guinea pigs. But I completely understand for the community, they did not want to think that way.”

To help address the conflict around evaluation, Mary Herbenick, who was still working at Ready Ready on special projects, worked with the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Social Work (UNCH) to design a three-month process to make sure that the values and

principles of community organizations and parents were captured so that those could lead the direction of any evaluation.

### **One response to tensions: a community engagement process**

In the summer of 2020, Herbenick and UNC-Chapel Hill researchers carried out an intensive community engagement process—all virtually—with 25 people representing families, nonprofit organizations, government entities, and Ready Ready employees to develop the values and principles for Ready Ready. Participants agreed on Ready Ready’s values and principles and worked according to them, Herbenick said.

“The values and principles work [was important because] we knew the systems work would get even more messy if partners weren’t grounded in some agreed upon core values and principles, including ones that had made the effort successful up to that point,” Herbenick said. “We wanted this to be a living, breathing opportunity to stay connected to the roots of the effort and to align work as new partners entered.”

Sales added, “This ended up being a really important activity because Ready Ready refers to it often. I think having values as an organization helps you when you get into hard spaces, especially if you are doing work that at some level is going to be shifting power to groups that don’t normally have power.”

### **Planning for the next phase of Ready Ready**

In late 2020, Ready Ready staff also began looking ahead to the next phase of the work that would encompass families with children ages 3 to 5. To do so, they and a University of North Carolina-Greensboro design team launched the Ages 3-5 Design Team. The design team, made up of 32 community members, was charged with recommending strategies that could make county-level change in school readiness. In its early meetings, the team identified three priority areas to focus on: (1) home and community resources; (2) early childhood collaboration; and (3) cross-sector collaboration.

### **Racial equity comes to the foreground**

While Herbenick was undertaking the values and principles work, the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis that May brought to the forefront—again—the deep racism and racial inequality in this country. The days and weeks of protests in cities across the country provided a natural opportunity for Hart to again bring up the importance of Ready Ready putting racial equity at the center of its work to the board and The Duke Endowment. Hart asked Sales to join an equity strategies committee along with other board members, community members, and staff liaisons, which selected a pair of consulting firms to help lead the Ready Ready board, staff, and community on best practices related to family voice and empowering the family voice.



In 2020, Hart also commissioned an organizational assessment of Ready Ready. The results ended up marking a pivotal moment to define the relationship between Ready Ready and The Duke Endowment, or more broadly between a funder and a backbone organization, she said.

The structure of the Get Ready Guilford Initiative was that the foundation provided the funding directly to organizations carrying out the work but Ready Ready was responsible for making sure the work was implemented. That could lead to confusion among community members, particularly about who was in charge of this work. Additionally, The Duke Endowment leaders said that they were mainly interested in supporting the defined Get Ready Guilford Initiative and yet Ready Ready had existed for years prior. To the extent the work was known by other funders, it was known as Ready Ready, not Get Ready Guilford.

### **An organizational assessment reveals areas for growth**

The August 2020 organizational assessment found that Ready Ready's strengths included its board leadership and commitment to get Ready Ready to its current place, its CEO, staff knowledge and commitment, and support from The Duke Endowment and Blue Meridian Partners.

Weaknesses included confusion about the difference between Ready Ready and Get Ready Guilford Initiative, centralized decision making among a few board members, lack of family voice and racial diversity on the board, and not enough staff capacity in relation to the workload.

With the results of the organizational assessment in hand, Hart began hiring or promoting more staff, including Kelly McKee as operations manager and later vice president of operations, Heather Adams who later became vice president of public will building, hiring the organization's first director of communications, and building out a Community Alignment Team. When Ready Ready started as a 501(c)3 organization, it did not have a set budget. Herbenick and later Hart would ask The Duke Endowment for funding as they saw necessary for staff positions. When Hart started, there were six employees, and Ready Ready's annual budget was around \$800,000. With the additional hiring, it increased to \$1.5 million.

To address issues identified in the board by the organizational assessment, Ready Ready staff and board members became more intentional in their recruiting, including seeking additional members from the High Point community, more parents, and more people who represented the racial diversity of the area.

### **Ready Ready can point to accomplishments**

At the close of 2020, Ready Ready reported that 11,836 children from prenatal to three, or 49 percent of the population had been serviced by at least one evidence-based program, some 2,800 more children than the previous year. Once the COVID shutdown took place, programs like Family Connects and HealthySteps were able to reach families through phone calls though

in the case of HealthySteps they reached fewer families who had been identified as needing more services.

Ready Ready had also taken concrete steps to launch the community navigation program by executing a memorandum of understanding between itself and the Children's Home Society, the host agency. In addition, prenatal navigation services were in the early stages of scaling to all OB-GYN practices in Guilford County.

## **2021**

### **A focus on racial equity and an unexpected absence of the CEO**

In early 2021, two consultants carried out racial equity training with Ready Ready board members, staff, and community members. Sales remembers the training as powerful because it went beyond perhaps the typical approach of defining equity and equality. Instead, the consultants provided an historical backdrop and provided a framework for structural racism as it is perpetuated in systems.

The training also provided a chance for people to talk about a vision for racial equity and the intersection with early childhood work. Participants had an opportunity to speak about where they learned about racism, their childhood experiences, and other experiences including their work around racial equity in their organizations. The consultants also conducted listening and learning sessions that included interviews with the board, staff, and community members and used that information to begin to identify areas for action in an equity action plan.

For Hart, the racial equity training and continued work is critical for Ready Ready and its hoped-for impact on the community. Large racial and ethnic disparities in health and educational outcomes exist between white children and Black and Latino children. If Ready Ready were to take a broad-based approach without specifically addressing the systemic issues that led to worse outcomes for Black and Latino children it would not make its hoped for impact, Hart said.

"The vision is to shift our community's early childhood strategies to eliminate these disparities," she said. "If we have interventions in Guilford County where all the kids are improving, that's not closing the disparity."

After the racial equity trainings, the Equity Strategy Committee led the creation of an equity action plan. That work has largely been in abeyance since then, Hart noted

Sanaa Sharrieff, a parent who has volunteered and served in leadership positions with Ready Ready since 2018 said its mission around racial equity is critical.

"Ready Ready has a plan to erase inequity in Guilford County and reach the most disadvantaged families, the Black and Brown, and Indigenous people here," Sharrieff said. "I know that the

wording can seem kind of cliché or trendy but as a person who is part of that population it absolutely matters.”

### **Strengthening the participation of family members in Ready Ready**

That year, a number of other organizational changes were underway. Parent leaders made recommendations for how Ready Ready can strengthen family voice in its work. Those included that the new System-Building Committee should have a dedicated liaison to communicate on a regular basis with the parent leader network for direct input.

In addition, parent leaders said that the Ready Ready board and each of its committees and design teams should have two parent representatives. Parents also requested that Ready Ready increase staff capacity to enable more on-ongoing two way communication with families and that Ready Ready board members attend one parent meeting a year to better understand the lives and needs of parents. Ready Ready began implementing some of those suggestions. That year the governance committee presented a nominating slate for the board that included three parent leaders.

### **A name clarification and tighter focus**

Additionally in May, it was announced that the initiative would be called Ready for School, Ready for Life (rather than Get Ready Guilford) to avoid the ongoing confusion about the differences between the two. Ready Ready also announced it would reduce its original number of priorities from ten to six:

1. Develop navigation system to connect families with effective services.
2. Expand and integrate evidence-based programs to meet community need.
3. Build a culture of continuous quality improvement.
4. Build enabling technology.
5. Conduct rigorous evaluation and build sustainability.
6. Build public will.

### **A leave of absence and new hires step in**

As Ready Ready was gaining momentum both on building an organization and implementation of its goals, Hart unexpectedly had to take a temporary leave of absence. Starting in late March, Hart began feeling unwell with symptoms that she could not overcome. Eventually, she was diagnosed with long COVID and had to take short-term disability from June to September 1. That diagnosis was a blow, both for Hart and for Ready Ready at a critical time in the organization. Kelly McKee, who had been hired just the previous year, assumed the position of acting CEO. Other new hires also stepped in to fill the leadership void while Hart recuperated. Sales and Dalrymple, who had started to take some steps back in their involvement, also began to take more active involvement again.

“I was panicked and extremely concerned for Ready Ready,” Hart remembers. It was the worst timing for the organization. But a lesson learned is hire a dedicated team of leaders, build a strong organizational structure, and have a really engaged board. [The staff] just stepped up and ensured that the work moved forward and the board was really supportive during that time period.”

### **Securing government funding for some of Ready Ready’s priorities**

Some of the work that continued in Hart’s absence was the push to secure government funding for Ready Ready’s work. The Duke Endowment leaders, Ready Ready staff, and representatives from community organizations met with government officials at the county and state level to begin the slow, steady work of public will building. When it comes time to ask for funding, the hope is that government leaders and state representatives will support Ready Ready.

Ready Ready, in collaboration with the Chambers of Commerce of Greensboro and High Point submitted a joint request to the North Carolina General Assembly for public funding of local staff to implement the community-level case management system and a pilot project at child care centers in High Point and Greensboro to offer salary supplements and training. The request for funds was part of a county-wide legislative agenda.

The Ready Ready Legislative Action Committee had a win in late 2021 when it garnered \$1.2 million in funding from the North Carolina General Assembly. The funds would be used to support the continued development of the integrated data system and a pilot project focused on the model standards in the early childhood workforce. The integrated data system will enable communication, data sharing, and a cumulative record of services and outcomes for all consenting families. The integrated data system was another central goal of Phase 1. The pilot project came out of a recommendation of one of the Action Teams during the 100-day challenge.

“[The legislator’s initial response] really underlies the importance of explaining that Ready Ready is not just another early childhood program,” said Ryan Blackledge, Legislative Action Committee chair and director of government affairs at Cone Health. “It’s an attempt to create a system that can connect all of the different programs. Depending on your audience, you then lead with the argument that Ready Ready creates better outcomes for families and children or alternatively, leads to more efficient use of tax dollars.”

### **A sprint on hiring**

To provide more staff support for this and other work, toward the end of 2021 and into 2022, Ready Ready further increased its staff making nine new hires. Those included vice president of strategic impact, vice president of public will building, senior director of information technology, and family engagement coordinator.

Those new positions would help Ready Ready provide greater attention to critical areas of the initiative like providing more support to parents involved in committees and later in paid positions, oversee efforts to build public and government support, and create the data infrastructure that is central to meeting its goals.

All of those were critical hires, Dalrymple noted.

“It allowed Ready Ready to function more fully as the backbone organization and then to lead the work locally and be seen as the authority among community partners as opposed to the Endowment being the authority,” he said.

## **2022**

### **Preparing for a new funding pitch**

In early 2022, Ready Ready staff and board and The Duke Endowment were looking ahead to making a request for Phase 2 funding that would cover ages 3 to 5 from Blue Meridian Partners. While the pandemic had slowed progress, and all of the pieces of the initiative had taken longer than anyone had hoped to come to fruition, the partners hoped to show enough progress to Blue Meridian Partners to garner continued support.

One piece that had not been originally envisioned but started in 2022 was the hiring of two part-time parent liaisons. These liaisons—both parents who had been long time volunteers—was in response to both parents’ requests for more interaction with Ready Ready and Hart’s contention that parents needed to play a greater role in the organization.

Sharrieff, who had volunteered with Ready Ready as a parent leader of the Guilford Parent Leader Network since 2018, was hired as one of the part-time liaisons.

“Creating paid positions is a big thing because if you say you are going to use these funds to bring families into true leadership and you’re not actually doing that—well, that’s something that nonprofit agencies often do,” Sharrieff said. “Typically agencies [hire] people they already have connections with or who are credentialed but they are not necessarily a representative of the community.”

As a parent liaison, Sharrieff said that she serves as a bridge between parent/family voice and agency. She said she also helps parents grow their leadership and advocacy skills.

Allie Blosser, a Ready Ready board member from High Point, added that the organization has made real strides in terms of making sure it has racially diverse representation. She also appreciates that Ready Ready compensates parent representatives for their time. And she thinks that the board could do more.

“I do think we could use more socioeconomic diversity on the board because a lot of the organizations that Ready Ready supports serve families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds,” Blosser said. “I want to make sure that there are plenty of reality checks of ‘this is what it’s like to live [in these circumstances].’ I also think as a board it could be really interesting to spend time getting proximate with the communities that we are serving. We haven’t done that as a board. We’ve done racial equity training where we’ve seen statistics about our city but that’s different than getting proximate and being in relationship with people in the community.”

### **A fruitful site visit**

In August 2022, Ready Ready and The Duke Endowment organized a site visit for Blue Meridian Partners to show the initiative’s progress since its funding in 2019. The visit was also an opportunity for Ready Ready leaders to demonstrate why Blue Meridian Partners should provide funding for Phase 2 of the initiative, which covers ages three to five.

Among the accomplishments of the initiative was that In 2021, 81 percent of Guilford County’s OB-GYN practices had implemented or committed to offering navigation services to their patients. The system of care offers universal access – that is, it is offered to every pregnant person in these participating medical homes. Of the families who completed prenatal navigation services in 2021, 77 percent used Medicaid or were uninsured – indicating their incomes are 196 percent below the federal poverty line.

### **Ready Ready’s accomplishments in Phase 1**

Ready Ready did not reach its original target number of serving 16,000 children (67 percent of the prenatal to three population) instead reaching an estimated 10,608 children. The lingering pandemic continued to play a role in the reduced number. But a new navigation system was established which could help increase those numbers. Ready Ready and its partners had created the Routes to Ready system to reach the full population of Guilford County’s youngest children and their families as part its effort to reach the full 16,000 children and families. The Routes to Ready system consist of four programs, Community Navigation, Family Connects, HealthySteps, and Nurse-Family Partnership. The national and local representatives of the three evidence-based programs worked together to design the system.

In preparation for using the navigation service, Ready Ready participants also created the architecture for the integrated data system.

Additionally, Ready Ready made progress on establishing an evaluation after several iterations of possible approaches including an impact evaluation, which was eventually deemed impractical. Leaders plan to conduct an evaluation to monitor outcomes.

Ready Ready could also point to \$1.5 million that it received from Guilford County as part of the American Rescue Plan Act to support the Routes to Ready Navigation system.

Ready Ready itself grew from a staff of 6 to 19 with an operating budget increasing from \$800,000 to about \$5 million. By the end of 2022, some one-third of Ready Ready's board was composed of parents of children under the age of eight.

"I think Ready Ready stands in a really, really good place," Sales said. "The site visit we had in August was awesome. It was awesome to see the 20 or so employees and strong board and lots of good will and enthusiasm from the community as well as investments and contributions. It is developing and I think we are largely on track."

In late 2022, Blue Meridian Partners and the Duke Endowment committed to additional funding to Ready Ready of \$34 million over two years. That was a substantial increase from the \$32.5 million over three years for the first phase.

Phase 2 was set to begin.

## Looking Forward

A number of interviewees pointed out the positive changes that Ready Ready has made in starting to set up an infrastructure to create a system of care that works for young children and their families. They also said that Ready Ready has taken practical steps to help families find their way around a complicated system of care and prepare their children for kindergarten through navigators and tools like the Basics Guilford.

As part of the next phase of the initiative, Ready Ready leaders are piloting new programs for families with children ages 3 to 5 that are connected to early literacy, kindergarten readiness, and evidence-based social-emotional practices. Ready Ready leaders are also putting their focus on the implementation of an evaluation of the initiative, building public will in the communities they are serving, and securing additional funding to sustain this work. The integrated data system came on line in 2023 and is actively tracking children and families. Ready Ready staff are moving ahead with helping policy makers use data to drive decisions.