GETTING STARTED

Where to Begin

To be successful in launching a local Ready Schools Initiative, it takes a team approach that includes both schools and the larger community. It takes careful planning, leadership, and an ongoing commitment to building and sustaining partnerships to develop both a Community-District Team and a School-Based Team(s) that support the overall school district initiative. To meet your goals, you must take a broad-based and multi-layered approach that involves diverse representation from across your community and school(s).

Do you develop a Community-District Team or a School-Based Team first? Do you get central office staff involved first or a principal? Do you first develop a community-wide plan or an individual school plan? There is no right answer — it depends on what best fits your community and environment. The most successful Ready School efforts take both approaches.

If you start at the school district-community level, be sure to include principals and teachers from schools with a strong interest in implementing a Ready Schools approach. If you start with the development of a School-Based Team, make sure you quickly integrate participants from the community. Involve families, early education providers, civic organizations, and community leaders in your planning and implementation process.

When a Ready Schools effort starts at the school level, it is more likely to be sustained if there is a district-wide and community commitment to building a strong research-based educational foundation for young children ages 3-8. The Community-District Team is essential to the ultimate success of high quality PreK-3 education. However, it is equally important that Community-District Teams be informed by the Ready Schools efforts at the school level. Community-District Team work is grounded in the real issues and needs of schools and early care and education providers.

Most important is that you get started! Begin where you have your strongest advocates and build from there to create a shared vision for your local Ready Schools Initiative.

Ready School Teams — Roles and Responsibilities

The Community-District Team is typically comprised of representatives from the school district, individual schools, the local Smart Start partnership, early childhood providers, parents, community agencies, business leaders, and other stakeholders. The Community-District Team conducts assessments and surveys, including the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment; compiles and analyzes the data; and then creates an action plan. The Team is responsible for providing resources and supports to schools, addressing transition issues between the early childhood community and schools/district, promoting collaboration across the community to serve PreK-3rd grade children and families, and advocating for Ready Schools across schools and community.

The School-Based Team typically includes the school principal and/or assistant principal, PreK-3rd grade teachers, parents, early childhood providers, and other community stakeholders. The School-Based Team conducts an assessment using the High Scope Ready Schools Assessment instrument, analyzes data, and develops an action plan based on priorities and areas for strengthening. For more information on and guidance for School-Based Teams, please refer to the Ready Schools Toolkit, Part 1 available on the NC Ready Schools website: www.smartstart.org/readyschools

Ready Schools Implementation Process At-A-Glance

Collaborative Team Development

The Ready Schools Initiative begins with the development of the collaborative teams: the Community-District Team and the School-Based Team(s). While a community's Ready Schools process may start at either the school or community-district level, both are ultimately critical for sustaining a successful Ready Schools effort and the expectation is for continuous communication across the teams.

Needs Assessment

Community-District Teams use the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment Tool to start conversations among Team members regarding Team areas of strength and growth related to the Pathways. Each Community-District Team member completes the assessment and a profile of the Team results is generated (an online version is available on the Ready Schools website: www.smartstart.org/readyschools). The results of the Self-Assessment can be used to guide visions, missions, goals, and action plans. Individual schools use the High Scope Ready Schools Assessment as a tool to identify areas of need. This assessment is a planning tool designed to provide School-Based Teams with a profile of readiness features in their school.

Action Planning

The Community-District Team takes responsibility for developing a Ready Schools Community-District Action Plan that builds on Team strengths and includes goals based on data. Action plans are intended to guide the Team's work in educating the community about a PreK-3 continuum that serves all children and families. Teams advocate and provide resources and support for early childcare professionals and teachers at the district level so schools are prepared to educate all children who enter their doors for the first time. Team Action Plans should guide the Ready Schools Initiative across schools and communities. The School-Based Team takes responsibility for conducting the school needs and resource assessment, developing an Action Plan to be integrated with the school improvement plan, and implementing the plan. The expectation is for each school to focus on one or more Pathway, based on the priorities identified in the assessment.

Implementation

Once the Action Plans have been created for the Community-District and School-Based Teams, the Teams work on implementing their plans. This process has typically occurred over a seven month period.

Evaluation

The Ready Schools Community-District and School-Based plans should be living documents. It is essential to regularly assess progress and if necessary, change direction. To that end, Ready Schools plans should include measurable benchmarks of success and be reviewed and revised annually.

Community-District Team Process

The saying *"it takes a village to raise a child"* is an essential philosophy of the Ready Schools movement.

Effective Community-District Teams:

- Create a community- and district-wide vision for Ready Schools that assures the success of all children in all schools.
- Target changes that need to occur in every school such as a district-wide transition plan, Kindergarten orientation program, and PreK-3 curriculum approaches.
- Create a district-wide professional development program for school leaders that emphasizes Ready Schools concepts.
- Conduct community forums to solicit broader community input into and involvement in a district-wide Ready Schools approach.
- Build bridges to greater understanding and cooperation between families, early education, and K-3 teachers.
- Generate increased resources as well as greater integration and use of community assets into schools.
- Serve as an advocate at the local, state, and national level for the resources and support necessary for Ready Schools.

Who should be on a Ready Schools Community-District Team?

The composition of this team will vary by community. It should be customized to fit each community's needs, resources, and realities. Participants might include:

- ☐ Central office staff, including superintendents, school board members, curriculum specialists, and support services staff;
- ☐ School personnel, including administrative and support staff and teachers working in an elementary school;
- ☐ Early education professionals, including teachers and program directors;
- ☐ Early childhood service providers and advocates;
- ☐ Families with children ages 3-8;
- ☐ Social service providers;
- ☐ Medical professionals;
- ☐ Community, business, and faith leaders; and
- ☐ Higher education representatives.

Note that school system personnel are at the top of the list of members for the Community-District Team. School leaders at all levels are critical for the success of Community-District and School-Based Teams. Evaluation results from the NC Ready Schools Initiative showed that principals' participation on both the Community-District and School-Based Teams were instrumental to the overall success of the Ready Schools efforts in communities.

Steps to Success for a Ready Schools Community-District Team

1. Create a vision for what you want Ready Schools to look like in your schools and community. This vision should be comprehensive for what the district, schools, and communities need to do both independently and in partnership to support Ready Schools efforts.

2. Use the Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment to examine your Team's capacity, strengths, and barriers to; as well as potential areas of focus for; achieving your Ready Schools vision.

3. Determine the role of the Community-District Team in advocating for and guiding Ready Schools efforts. Building leadership, public engagement, and political will is essential. Leadership for the Ready Schools Initiative should be shared by the community (e.g., local Smart Start partnership) and the schools.

4. Conduct forums to get broad input into how the community can best support the Ready Schools Initiative. Hear what families, teachers, school administrators, early care professionals, and community members have to say. Have them talk with each other to build greater understanding about the challenges as well as the potential resources and assets that may be available. Participants can engage in conversations about the nature of preschool and elementary school, how to support effective transitions, what families dream about for their children, where schools are strongest in their response to families, and how to set priorities for the future.

5. Conduct an inventory of community and school assets, resources, and needs.

6. Integrate input from any forums held by the School-Based Teams.

7. Use the data and input gathered to develop a Community-District Action Plan that includes strategies for integration of Ready Schools concepts across the community and schools. Consider ideas such as:

   » Community-wide school transition plan;
   » Kindergarten orientation process that links with early education and supports both children and families;
   » District-wide professional development program that is for families, early educators, and PreK-3 teachers and staff; and
   » Alignment of the curriculum in the district's elementary schools across early education and PreK through 3rd grade.

8. Integrate existing and new community resources into this Community-District Action Plan.

9. Use a variety of tools to measure the progress in individual schools. Use the data from these tools to update your Community-District Action Plan.

10. Develop the infrastructure and communication plans necessary to ensure regular communication among the Community-District Team, the individual School-Based Teams, and the broader community. Consider taking a few minutes at each meeting to highlight a program or agency or issue that impacts children (ages 3-8), schools, or families.

11. Talk with community and business leaders, sometimes the value of high quality early education is not realized until the topic greatly impacts the workforce. There are two key points to mention related to the workforce issue:

   » First, the early childhood field represents thousands of workers, a significant part of the labor force. Their contributions to the overall workforce are tremendous. Without early care and education professionals it would be difficult for other businesses to operate because their workers would not have adequate, quality child care.

   » The other issue is the development of our next generation of workers. Without high quality child care, the next generation of workers may not be up to the tasks that will be in demand. See Appendix A Resource for Getting Started for more information and resources to support your Team in this effort.

The Community-District Team should serve as an ongoing resource to individual schools and district-wide efforts. Ongoing communication and regular updates to the Action Plan are essential for continued progress. Toolkit, Part 2 provides information, strategies, and resources for Community-District Teams to support implementation of the Ready Schools Initiative. The Ready Schools Toolkit, Part 2 is divided into nine Pathways.

Pathways At-A-Glance

Part 2 of the Ready Schools Toolkit addresses the specific and unique roles and efforts of Community-District Teams in each of the Pathways. In addition to the eight Pathways in Toolkit, Part 1 there is a ninth Pathway entitled Grassroots Community Building in Part 2 of the Toolkit.

1. **Leaders and Leadership**

   Community-District Teams have leaders who are charged with engaging a diverse cross-section of the community to develop a shared vision, mission, and set of goals to guide the district-wide implementation of the Ready Schools Initiative. The leadership establishes a safe environment for the sharing of diverse perspectives. The Community-District Team leader(s) recruit and involve stakeholders in the work of Ready Schools.

2. **Family, School, and Community Partnerships**

   Community-District Teams communicate that families serve as their children's first teachers. Members of the Team advocate for schools and communities to actively work together to address academic, social, and cultural needs of their students and families. Community-District Teams partner with families, schools, and the community to provide opportunities, services, and information to children and families district-wide.

3. **Transitions**

   Community-District Teams support the development and implementation of effective district-wide transition plans that address the needs of the school, family, child, and community. Teams facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration among elementary schools, early care and education programs, and families to ensure smooth transitions from the Infant-Toddler Program (IDEA, Part C) to preschool, from preschool and home to school, and across grade levels within and between schools.

4. **Respecting Diversity**

   Community-District Teams are representative of the community they serve and provide active voice to all participants as they work to meet the needs of children from all circumstances and backgrounds. Members of the Team are essential in meeting the needs of families in the communities in which they live and making school a relevant and meaningful venture for children.

5. Engaging Environments

Community-District Teams advocate and provide resources for providing a safe, welcoming atmosphere and using developmentally appropriate practices. Active learning environments that engage children in a variety of learning activities both inside and out of the school walls are a crucial component of Engaging Environments. Teams reinforce the notion that all students should be immersed in environments that encourage them to explore, create, manipulate, change, question, imagine, respond, and reflect.

6. Effective Curricula, Instruction, and Child Assessment

Community-District Teams are essential in advocating for the use of research-based and data-driven educational methods and materials shown to be effective in helping a diverse population of children, including those with special needs. Diversity is inclusive of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, physical, and cognitive characteristics. There is alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment from preschool through elementary grades and beyond. The goal is that all children achieve appropriate academic growth to reach essential standards.

7. Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities

Community-District Teams support the learning of adults as essential to children's well-being and achievement. District-wide goals include high-quality sustained professional development of school personnel, as well as intentional parent and family participation in the planning and evaluation of children's learning.

8. Assessing Progress and Assuring Quality

Community-District Teams systematically use both formal and informal assessments to assess their progress in identified areas for focus in order to improve outcomes for all children. The Team monitors progress and redirects focus to new goals as needed.

9. Grassroots Community Building

Community-District Teams reach out to individuals and organizations to serve as advocates who either have a shared interest in PreK–3 educational environments or whose work could be mutually beneficial to both parties. Team members take time to develop and maintain meaningful, long-lasting relationships with individuals from other organizations and attend their meetings and events to communicate and share the work of Ready Schools. A critical role of the Community-District Team is to gather a variety of sustainable funding sources.

Overview of Toolkit, Part 2

Information in each Pathway in Toolkit, Part 2 is organized in several main sections. First, **Key Understandings** of the Pathway are presented in order to communicate the essential elements of the Pathway, and thus, provide the foundation upon which the Community-District Teams operate.

Next, **The Work** of the Community-District Team is clarified. Suggestions are then given for those who might serve on the Team, thereby providing a starting point for **Who** might be involved with the Team, and outlining possible **Roles** they may play and **Responsibilities** they might undertake. As with much of the information provided in Toolkit, Part 2, the information is provided to generate ideas. Each Community-District Team should use the information as a starting point, not as a model to be replicated exactly. Each Team will bring its own uniqueness to the process and will serve best when it responds appropriately to the many variables of its community.

Because Community-District Teams are most effective when they are long-lasting, suggestions to promote **Sustainability** are provided. This section addresses the need for member buy-in, who the key stakeholders are, and recruitment efforts of the Team. Readers who are interested in conducting self-assessments of their Community-District Team will find questions related to **Assessing the Pathway**.

In the **Taking Action** section, **Key Strategies** for success are listed. These strategies most often resulted from conversations with successful Community-District Team members and are provided as suggestions for others who seek ways to address the Pathway. In an effort to prepare readers for working in their settings, we have listed some **Issues, Challenges, Barriers** that they are likely to face in the process, as well as suggestions for **Strategies for Overcoming the Challenges**. Finally, a **Ready Schools in Action** example is given, where applicable, to inspire Teams to achieve the goals they have set out to accomplish. The Appendices contain lists of **Resources** for further reference.

For more resources see Appendix A, Resources for Getting Started at the end of the Toolkit.

Now What?

▸ Build momentum and success. Beginning with Pathways that are already emerging in your schools and community helps jumpstart progress and garner support;

▸ Target strategies that build on current practices or efforts already showing success in achieving common goals;

▸ Introduce Ready Schools language to school and district improvement planning processes so that personnel see the Initiative as a way to achieve common goals rather than as one more thing to do;

▸ Identify the strengths and successes of each of the partners and share them between and among the Team members, participating organizations, and the larger community to energize support; and

▸ Take every opportunity to share the successes of the Community-District Team at meetings of business and civic organizations, faith-based organizations, agency boards, and school and district events. Helping community leaders understand the benefit to the community and the lasting effects of a strong Ready Schools Initiative builds broad support and commitment.