

September 2022 | Infants and Toddlers

New Orleans, LA's Early Childhood Education Millage

After more than six years of building support for early childhood education, advocates in New Orleans won a ballot measure with 61% of the vote in 2022 that will dedicate approximately \$21 million in property tax revenue annually to infant and toddler care.

Summary

In 2022, voters in New Orleans, LA, passed a property tax levy that, along with state matching funds, will provide early childhood education to 2,000 children from low-income households annually. The measure will nearly cut in half the number of infants and toddlers in New Orleans from low-income families without access to quality early care and education. In addition to early learning center seats for children younger than 4 years old, the program will provide child and family support services, coaching and professional development for teachers, and expand the supply of quality early learning centers. In 2017, the campaign initially won a budget allocation from the city council for the City Seats pilot program. However, when campaign leaders brought the issue to the voters in 2020 to create a dedicated funding source for the program, they lost. Through community engagement and on-the-ground organizing the [YES for NOLA Kids](#)

campaign regrouped and put an even more ambitious proposal before the voters in 2022. The campaign won a 5 millage property tax that will raise \$21 million in the first year and will be [doubled by the state's matching fund](#).

City Council Campaign

In 2017, leaders at the Institute for Mental Hygiene decided to relaunch the New Orleans Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which had been dormant for several years. They engaged the United Way of Southeast Louisiana and brought together partners from across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors and tasked them with addressing the problem that two-thirds of New Orleans third graders were not reading at grade level. Children from low-income backgrounds and communities of color were especially falling behind in the earliest years of schooling.¹ The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading identified school

readiness—ensuring children have the social and emotional skills to enter a school setting ready to learn—as a key factor in getting children to read at grade level.

Addressing a child’s needs early in life is critical since 80% of the brain’s development happens in the first three years of a child’s life.² However, at the time, there were more than 10,000 children ages birth to 3 years old from low-income families who could not access affordable early childhood education in the city.³ Child care in New Orleans was—and still is—chronically underfunded. Most providers are small businesses, predominantly run by Black women entrepreneurs who work on razor small profit margins.⁴ They do not have stable funding streams they can use to plan their businesses. Providers often are stuck in a cycle of struggle—many are unable to raise their rates for fear of pricing out families, which forces them to pay their employees low wages, in turn leading to high rates of worker turnover and an unstable situation for children.

[In 2017] “New Orleans became the first locality in the state to fund early childhood education directly with local revenue instead of state or federal revenue.”

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading began by working with community partners to pressure the city council to invest in early childhood education. Leaders from the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading started by educating city council members about what early child care is, why it’s important, who has access to it, who doesn’t have access, and the consequences of having an inadequate system of care. They identified champions on the city council and worked closely with them. Leaders from the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading used the 2017 mayoral election that was happening at the time to draw attention to the issue by organizing a mayoral candidate forum. It was an important opportunity to engage candidates about their plans for investing in young people and get them on the record so the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading could hold them accountable later. City Councilor LaToya Cantrell, who would be elected mayor later that year, committed to creating an Office of Youth and Families that would focus on these early education issues and work with community partners to build access and resources for early childhood education. Once Mayor Cantrell was elected, she made good on her promise.

The mayoral forum became a major turning point in 2017 and created momentum for future investment. Later that year, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading successfully convinced the city council to approve a \$750,000 appropriation for the City Seats program funding child care slots for 50 children. New Orleans became the first locality in the state to fund early childhood education directly with local revenue instead of state or federal revenue.⁵

Over the next two years, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading’s advocacy paid off, as the city council agreed to double its investment in the City Seats program each year, eventually reaching \$3 million and serving 200 children from low-income families. Louisiana State University conducted independent evaluations every year that showed the program provided quality child care.⁶ The successful groundwork laid in establishing and implementing the City Seats pilot program would prove crucial years later during the millage campaign. Voters wouldn’t be asked to believe in a brand new concept. The City Seats program had already been established, had quadrupled in size over three years, and was providing quality early childhood education. Hundreds of families and 22 providers in the program could speak to the success that City Seats was having in their communities and would soon become powerful voices to help persuade voters to expand the program even further.

2020 Millage Election

As funding for the City Seats program grew, the city council managed to find room in the budget to fund the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading’s requests. However, due to the need for massive investment in early childhood, piecemeal requests for budget allocations could not be a feasible long-term solution. In partnership with the school district, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading created a working group to research sustainable funding sources to support the City Seats program. The working group identified six potential sustainable funding sources for early childhood education that they deemed feasible. Most required state legislative action to approve with one major exception: a local property tax.

Leaders from the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading also began having conversations with Mayor Cantrell. Several of the city’s tax levies were expiring and her administration proposed including investments in early childhood education as part of a package of three property tax renewals being brought before the voters in December 2020. The mayor’s proposal

would have renewed three property tax levies for infrastructure, libraries, and housing and economic development. The proposed library levy also included a new investment in early childhood education, which would effectively cut part of the library budget to pay for increased funding for the City Seats program. The millage proposal would reallocate funding between infrastructure, the libraries, and the City Seats program and not raise any new taxes. The mayor's office argued the libraries would be able to maintain the same level of service by using reserve funds, an assertion disputed by library advocates. Thinking it was the only chance to secure sustained funding, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading helped launch the Yes for Children's Success PAC to support the early childhood millage.

Many people in the community saw that linking libraries and child care together on the ballot pitted the two services against each other. At the beginning of the millage campaign, early childhood advocates had a broad coalition of groups supporting the ballot initiative because of the support they had built over time. As the opposition to the measure grew stronger, opponents pressured coalition members, arguing they were advocating for cutting the library budget. One by one, community partners began removing their endorsements from the initiative. Many child care providers who volunteered with the millage campaign by holding signs in support of the initiative on the side of the road had people pull over and yell at them for supporting cuts to the libraries. The other issues on the ballot were overshadowing the early childhood question and the campaign was losing control of the public discussion about its issues. The initiative ended

up losing with only 43% of voters supporting the millage and 57% voting against it.

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading took many lessons from the failed initiative that would later influence the 2022 campaign. Many people involved in the 2020 millage campaign had never participated in a political campaign before and gained valuable experience. Instead of relying on the mayor and city council to take the lead designing and advocating for the initiative as they had done in 2020, campaign leaders made sure the 2022 initiative was led by child care providers, teachers, and parents. They also initially believed that since the 2020 initiative was only a renewal of a tax levy and didn't raise taxes, it would be more popular; but the voters showed that it wasn't. In fact, polling later showed that taxpayers would support raising taxes on themselves to fund early childhood education, which helped shape the 2022 millage effort.

2022 Millage Election

Despite the loss, the crucial need for investment in New Orleans remained. Members of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading spent the beginning of 2021 mending relationships with community members and understanding why their community engagement and education efforts had failed. By the summer, they began working on a new millage proposal centered solely on early childhood education. In the fall of 2021, the Campaign for Grade Level-Reading and its partners launched the Ready Kids New Orleans political campaign committee to run a new millage campaign. They also conducted polling showing that



there were strong levels of support in New Orleans for both small and relatively larger tax increases to fund early childhood education. They spent time with community partners and providers to refine the proposal and build support for it. Providers were understandably more hesitant to support the new effort. The Ready Kids New Orleans leaders invited them to help shape the new proposal, ultimately empowering them to support the revived plan. The new proposal would be independently administered through a nonprofit and would include significantly more funding than the first initiative.

The new millage campaign also focused on new constituencies to expand the coalition. The campaign leaders hired a campaign manager, Tyronne Walker, who was critical in bringing new groups into the movement and targeting key constituencies. Walker is a native of New Orleans and already had significant political campaign experience and strong ties to community groups. His well-established relationships with people in local government also proved critical in securing necessary institutional support that was important to the business and more affluent communities. Additionally, the millage campaign proactively reached out to groups they thought could oppose the measure to counter any organized opposition.

Campaign leaders made a concerted effort to reach out to large employers and popular business leaders to win their support and preempt potential pushback. Bill Hammack, partner at Link Restaurant Group and chairperson of the millage campaign, led the efforts to reach out to the business community. During the pandemic, many business leaders had seen how critical child care is to the economy, particularly when early child care centers shut down. The millage campaign won the support of many prominent business leaders including the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region and the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, helping to dissuade any well-funded anti-tax opposition from emerging. The campaign also gained credibility by making the effort bipartisan by winning an endorsement from the Greater New Orleans Republicans PAC.

As new city councilors were elected, the millage campaign worked to educate them on the challenges facing early childhood education. Both city councilors and business leaders often were convinced to support the initiative when advocates framed messaging around the high return on investment that early education would provide. Ultimately, all seven city

Learn More

Check out our other resources for additional information about the Yes for NOLA Kids campaign, Louisiana's state matching fund for early childhood care and education, and voter-approved children's funds:

- ["Meet the Team Behind New Orleans, LA's New Children's Fund"](#)
- [*A Perfect Match for Child Care*](#)
- [*Prioritizing Our Future: How Cities and States Dedicate Funds for Early Care and Education*](#)
- [*Funding Our Kids 101: Voter-Approved Children's Funds*](#)
- [*The A-Zs of Creating a Voter-Approved Children's Fund*](#)
- A map of [voter-approved children's funds](#) across the country

council members supported the early education millage. The campaign also developed a legal document called a cooperative endeavor agreement that outlined how the program would be administered and the role the school district would play. The document was approved by the school board and the city council and helped build confidence in the millage proposal among voters, business leaders, and people in the media.

At the time, crime was a major issue in the city. The campaign engaged with criminal justice organizing groups to persuade them to endorse the movement by showing how quality early education helps interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Instead of focusing on arguments framed around how child care would provide a return on investments (as they did with city councilors and the business community), campaign leaders pivoted to arguments focused on workforce issues, the gender wage gap, and racial inequities. District Attorney Jason Williams also helped show how early child care could address criminal justice issues and was one of the initiative's loudest and most ardent supporters. (Williams previously served on the city council, where he championed the initial investments in the City Seats program.) By tailoring the campaign's messaging based on an individual's values and priorities, campaign leaders built a broad coalition of supporters. The initiative received endorsements from

dozens of community groups, policy organizations, service providers, city councilors, state and federal legislators, and the mayor.

Campaign polling showed that mothers, teachers, and minority women small business owners were the groups the public trusted most on the issue. Consequently, the campaign leaders focused on mobilizing these groups to become lead spokespeople and messengers of the initiative. Parents who had children in the City Seats program already provided a strong base of support. The campaign used orientation video calls, advocacy boot camps, and volunteer trainings to mobilize parents and providers to take an active role in the campaign. Parents and providers held phone banking sessions, knocked on doors, waved signs, and reached out to their personal networks. Women minority small business-owners running child care centers highlighted that it was their businesses that would benefit from the millage, not the government itself, which helped gain traction with African American and women constituencies. Parents, teachers, and providers could tell their own experiences and struggles with the underfunded child care sector and were a powerful voice in convincing voters to support the millage campaign.

“On April 30, 2022 ... the Early Education Property Tax Measure **passed** overwhelmingly 61% to 39%.”

As the election date approached, the Yes for NOLA Kids campaign focused all its efforts on outreach. The campaign largely concentrated on two major constituencies—chronic voters and low-income communities. The election would likely have a low turnout since it was in April and the early childhood initiative was the only item on the ballot. The lower turnout numbers meant that chronic voters, who tend to be older, whiter, and wealthier, would make up a significant portion of voters on election day. The millage campaign also used creative get-out-the-vote efforts to increase turnout from low-income communities who would be most impacted by

increased investment in early childhood. For example, the campaign arranged for a rally bus to take voters from a local child care center to a polling location during early voting. The campaign used social media, digital advertisements, mailers, radio advertisements, door-to-door canvassing, and phone banking to get out its message.

On April 30, 2022, the years of hard work paid off, as the Early Education Property Tax Measure passed overwhelmingly 61% to 39%. The millage will raise \$21 million annually over the next 20 years, significantly increasing the number of toddlers and infants from low-income families with quality child care. Additionally, New Orleans secured matching state funding. In 2017, the state of Louisiana established the [Early Childhood Education Fund](#) to incentivize localities to invest in programs for children from birth to age 3. In 2021, when the state legalized sports betting, it allocated some of the new revenue to the existing Early Childhood Education Fund. The state match will double the investment in New Orleans to over \$40 million a year and provide access to high-quality early education for a total of 2,000 children from low-income families.

Lessons Learned

Lay the Groundwork

- Building community trust doesn't happen overnight! The United Way and Institute for Mental Hygiene began bringing together community partners in 2016 and worked for over six years to educate their community about the importance of early childhood education.
- Small early victories can provide a blueprint for the future. In 2017, the New Orleans Campaign for Grade-Level Reading won a \$750,000 investment from the city council for the City Seats program to provide child care slots to children from low-income families. Although the original investment was relatively small, the program had a well-established spending plan and accountability measures that allowed it to quickly scale up over time.

Build a Broad Coalition

- Don't forget the importance of grassroots organizing. Build your base by drawing from the people who truly appreciate child care, and focus on mobilizing these voters on election day.
- Tailor your campaign messages to the values

and priorities of the individuals or groups you are targeting. The New Orleans millage campaign used different framing for different groups to build the broadest coalition possible, which included parents, children, providers, elected leaders, business leaders, school board members, and others.

- Winning the business community's support can play an important role in limiting opposition and helping to fund the campaign.

Never Give Up!

- Failure may be a step on the path to success! The loss in 2020 provided important campaigning experience and taught the coalition many valuable lessons that would be critical to achieving even greater success in 2022.

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- Jillian Delos Reyes, director of education and youth initiatives of the United Way of Southeast Louisiana and campaign manager of the New Orleans Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.

Featured photos provided by the Yes for NOLA Kids campaign.

Endnotes

- ¹ New Orleans Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, *Community Solutions Action Plan Executive Summary* (New Orleans: Author, 2017), <https://www.unitedwaysela.org/sites/unitedwaysela.org/files/NOLA-GLR-CSAP-FINAL--Executive-Summary.pdf>.
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- ³ Jeff Adelson, "New Orleans City Council Calls for Spending 6-Figure Amount on Early Childhood Education," *nola.com*, November 1, 2017, https://www.nola.com/news/article_cced2b15-c819-5273-a77a-719cbea07e1c.html.
- ⁴ Mark Swartz, "New Orleans Coalition Pushes for Child Care Measure with Multigenerational Effect," *Early Learning Nation*, April 21, 2022, <https://earlylearningnation.com/2022/04/new-orleans-coalition-pushes-for-child-care-measure-with-multigenerational-effect/>.
- ⁵ Rebecca Mowbray, Stephen Stuart, and Susie Dudis, *New Orleans Early Childhood Education Tax*, April 30, 2022 (New Orleans: Bureau of Governmental Research, 2022), <https://www.bgr.org/report-index/bgr-reviews-early-childhood-education-tax-proposal-in-new-orleans/>.
- ⁶ Agenda for Children, *2020-2021 City Seats Program* (New Orleans: Louisiana State University, 2021), <https://agendaforchildren.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CS-2020-2021-Highlights-1page.pdf>.

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