



# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE READY FOR SCHOOL, READY FOR LIFE INITIATIVE IN 2023

Program Partners' Views About Benefits,  
Challenges, and Opportunities

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# OVERVIEW

A robust body of evidence over the past half a century has documented the importance of early childhood experiences for adult outcomes. From maternal prenatal care to early intervention in infancy and toddlerhood, and through high-quality care and educational experiences in the preschool years, support services and programs for families and young children have been shown to improve children's outcomes into the school years and adulthood.

Building on this promising evidence base, the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative in Guilford County, North Carolina, aims to support interconnected programs and services for young children and their families with the goal of having children enter kindergarten ready for learning. Launched in 2018, the initiative aims to strengthen connections among existing programs in Guilford County and provide sustainable and comprehensive support for families and young children through universal screening for strengths and needs, followed by connections to targeted services.

This report describes findings about implementation of the initiative during 2023. After providing a brief overview of the initiative, the report describes findings from interviews and surveys that the MDRC team conducted in 2023 with directors and leaders of programs that serve young children and their families in Guilford County. It focuses on their views of the initiative, including their reasons for participating in it and what they see as the associated benefits and challenges, and their views about their programs' efforts to communicate, collaborate, and coordinate with other programs in the county.

Directors of program partners in the initiative reported being committed to the goals of improving outcomes for families and young children in Guilford County. They also reported willingness to communicate, collaborate, coordinate activities, and align strategies to achieve those goals, and discussed current efforts to do so. At the same time, they expressed concerns about transparency, trust, and duplication of effort in the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative. Program directors reported that greater communication between the initiative's backbone organization and program partners about the initiative's purpose, plans, funding, and governance might nurture and strengthen the community-wide, cross-program effort that the initiative seeks.



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The Authors



## BOX 1

### About This Report

This publication is the first annual one focused on implementation that is planned as part of MDRC’s Readiness of Children for School (ROCS) study in Guilford County, North Carolina. The implementation study is designed to provide a broad view over time of the implementation of the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative and of its Guilford County context—drawing from multiple data sources and reflecting multiple perspectives including families, service providers, initiative partners, and community leaders. Each year through 2029, a publication will feature different aspects of initiative implementation.

The current report draws on information collected from program directors in Guilford County in 2023 about how they viewed the Ready Ready initiative, its implementation, and their participation in it.

A robust body of evidence over the past half a century documents the importance of early childhood experiences for adult outcomes.<sup>1</sup> It shows that support services and programs for families and young children—including home maternal care during the prenatal period, early intervention during infancy and the toddler years, and high-quality care and educational experiences during preschool years—can improve children’s outcomes into the school years and adulthood.

Building on this promising evidence base, the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative in Guilford County, North Carolina, aims to support interconnected programs and services for young children and their families with the goal of having children enter kindergarten ready for learning.

This report describes findings about implementation of the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative (“the Ready Ready initiative”) during 2023. First, the report provides an overview of the Ready Ready initiative and of MDRC’s study of the initiative, called the Guilford Readiness of Children for School (ROCS) study. The remainder of the report describes findings from interviews and surveys that the MDRC team conducted in 2023 with directors and leaders of programs that serve young children and their families in Guilford County. It focuses on their views of the initiative, including their reasons for participating in it and what they see as the associated benefits and challenges, and their views about their programs’ efforts to communicate, collaborate, and coordinate with other programs in the county.

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1. Dearing, Bustamante, Zachrisson, and Vandell (2024); Gray-Lobe, Pathak, and Walters (2023); Duncan and Le Menestrel (2019); Phillips et al. (2017).

## THE READY FOR SCHOOL, READY FOR LIFE INITIATIVE

In 2017, The Duke Endowment chose Guilford County for a regional investment focused on early childhood. At that time, an existing array of programs, providers, workgroups, and funders that focused on prenatal and early childhood support operated in the county. This array included evidence-based programs serving families and young children (such as Nurse-Family Partnership, Family Connects, and Reach Out and Read) as well as public programs such as Early Head Start, the North Carolina Infant-Toddler Program, and Medicaid care management programs serving pregnant people and young children.<sup>2</sup>

The Ready Ready initiative aims to bolster interconnections among existing programs in Guilford County and provide sustainable and comprehensive support for families and young children through universal screening for strengths and needs, followed with connections to targeted services.<sup>3</sup> It identifies six guiding values: being family-centered, inclusive, equity-driven, responsive to evidence, transparent, and collaborative. A backbone organization by the same name (Ready for School, Ready for Life) coordinates the initiative.

Beginning in 2018, the initiative focused on plans across eight components—or streams of work—in three broad areas, listed in Table 1 and described in greater detail in a separate report.<sup>4</sup> These components focus on pregnant people and families with young children up to 3 years old. In 2023, the backbone organization convened community partners to develop and pilot test four strategies for children ages 3 to 5, related to early literacy, social and emotional development, early childhood education, and the transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten.

## THE ROCS IMPLEMENTATION STUDY

The ROCS implementation study is designed to provide a view of the Ready Ready initiative's implementation and its Guilford County context over time, from multiple perspectives, including those of families, service providers, initiative partners, and community leaders.<sup>5</sup> In 2023, the study began collecting both qualitative and quantitative information from interviews and surveys, supplemented with administrative data going back to 2019, with

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2. The names of these care management programs in North Carolina are Care Management for High-Risk Pregnancies (CMHRP) and Care Management for At-Risk Children (CMARC).
  3. Initially called the “Get Ready Guilford Initiative,” in 2022 the backbone organization changed the name to the Ready for School, Ready for Life initiative.
  4. Mattera and Hill (2024).
  5. The ROCS implementation study aims to complement the information collected directly as a part of the Ready Ready initiative. It focuses on aspects either that the initiative is not tracking through existing recordkeeping and reporting (for example, families' satisfaction or perceptions of their needs being met, or collaboration mechanisms among organizations) or that are more appropriate for an external evaluator to collect information about and analyze (for example, topics involving confidential views of program managers or families, or involving mixed-methods analysis at a point in time and over time from multiple data sources).

**Table 1. The Ready for School, Ready for Life Initiative: Priority Components Focused on Support During the Prenatal Period, Infancy, and Toddlerhood**

Area	Component	Aims and Activities	Examples of Activities
BUILD A SYSTEM OF CARE	Community Navigation	Make available to all families in the county a process for assessing family and child needs at key points from the prenatal period through age 3. Provide guidance about resources that families want and need that will support healthy child development. Offer ongoing support and referrals to services as needed.	Community Navigators at Children's Home Society offer prenatal and postnatal screening and referral services to all families in the county.
	Routes to Ready	Integrate programs to minimize service duplication, increase continuity between services, and reduce burdens on families who seek support.	A working group of programs specifies processes and promising practices for making "warm handoffs" when a family receives services offered by different programs. <sup>a</sup>
	Integrated Data System (IDS)	Enable providers to coordinate service delivery across partners and over time, while also collecting data to improve social services.	The backbone organization convenes a working group to specify principles of data governance, including family-consent processes for providing and sharing data.
	Community Alignment	Increase responsiveness to families by providing up-to-date information about available services and other forms of support, and by identifying gaps between available services and families' needs.	The backbone organization compiles and updates the Agency Finder, a resource directory of programs and organizations in the county that is available to the public and to service providers who can make referrals.
EXPAND AND IMPROVE SERVICES	Expanding access to programs	Increase the number of families programs can serve, including programs with rigorous evidence of effectiveness.	Increased funding for Nurse-Family Partnership, Family Connects, HealthySteps, and Reach Out and Read.
	Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) <sup>b</sup>	Build programs' ability to implement CQI processes, aiming to improve the quality of their services.	Staff members from selected programs receive training and technical assistance on CQI processes.
	Early literacy	Increase knowledge of active reading strategies, time spent reading with children, and access to books for children.	The backbone organization publicizes information on The Basics Guilford, which provides tips to caregivers for connecting with infants and toddlers through five strategies, such as "Read and Discuss Stories."
CHANGE SYSTEMS AND BUILD PUBLIC WILL	Backbone organization (Ready for School, Ready for Life)	Build the backbone organization's ability to continue to support a coordinated system of care for families and young children in Guilford County.	The backbone organization convenes the Guilford Parent Leader Network to engage parent leaders. It also develops and monitors benchmarks for each initiative component.

(continued)

## Table 1 (continued)

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>“Warm handoffs” cover a range of practices from sharing with parents the name of a contact in a different program to telling a different program about the family.

<sup>b</sup>In late 2024, the backbone organization changed the name of this component to “Capacity Building,” with corresponding plans to broaden its emphasis beyond CQI.

plans to continue doing so through 2029. Each year, a published brief or report will focus on different aspects of implementation.

The current report draws on information collected from directors of programs that serve families of young children in Guilford County about how they viewed the Ready Ready initiative, its implementation, and their participation in it. The data sources used in this report are the following:

- Interviews conducted in July and August 2023 by the ROCS study team with 15 directors or leaders of programs located in Guilford County that provide support for families and children from the prenatal period through the toddler years. Interview participants were directors or leaders of programs in the initiative’s Routes to Ready component or of other service providers.
- Surveys fielded in July through September 2023 to directors of programs located in Guilford County. The survey was sent to directors or leaders from 41 programs. Surveyed directors included those who were invited to participate in the interviews described above, as well as leaders of other programs in the county providing services or other forms of support to families and children from the prenatal period through the toddler years. All had participated in the initiative in some way through components of Routes to Ready, program expansion, CQI, or early literacy, all described in Table 1. Of the 41 directors surveyed, 29 (71 percent) answered some or all questions on the survey.

To protect their confidentiality, this report does not list respondents’ names, specific job titles, or programs. Findings reported below refer to “directors of partner programs” or “program directors,” and draw from the information collected in interviews and surveys. These findings should be interpreted with caution given the small number of respondents and the varying levels of programs’ engagement with and knowledge of specific components of the initiative (such as Routes to Ready or CQI); they are not generally representative of all directors of programs that serve young children and families in Guilford County. Still, they provide important insights into the experiences and perceptions of program leaders in the community who have intersected with the Ready Ready initiative in its early stages.

## STUDY FINDINGS: HOW PROGRAM DIRECTORS VIEW THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH THE READY READY INITIATIVE

Directors of partner programs in the Ready Ready initiative indicated that they were familiar with the initiative overall. They viewed the initiative as largely exhibiting its stated values and reported becoming involved in the initiative primarily to support collective efforts in the county and to support the goal of improving outcomes for young children and families. Directors indicated that at the time of the survey and interviews they were already collaborating and communicating in various ways, but their responses showed potential opportunities for coordinating further. They described sharing data with other programs for various reasons and shared concerns about potential barriers to further sharing. Program directors pointed to potential positive effects of initiative activities, while also sharing concerns and questions about its communications, implementation, data sharing, and governance. They shared both advantages to and concerns about participating in the Ready Ready initiative and reflected on the extent to which the core functions assigned to the backbone organization were occurring. Finally, there is some indication that respondents may have had different understandings of the scope and details of the Ready Ready initiative, which suggests their reflections on the initiative may focus on the parts that they had engaged in or that were most salient to them. Thus, further caution is warranted in assuming their perspectives represent those of the full initiative.

The following subsections provide details on these findings.

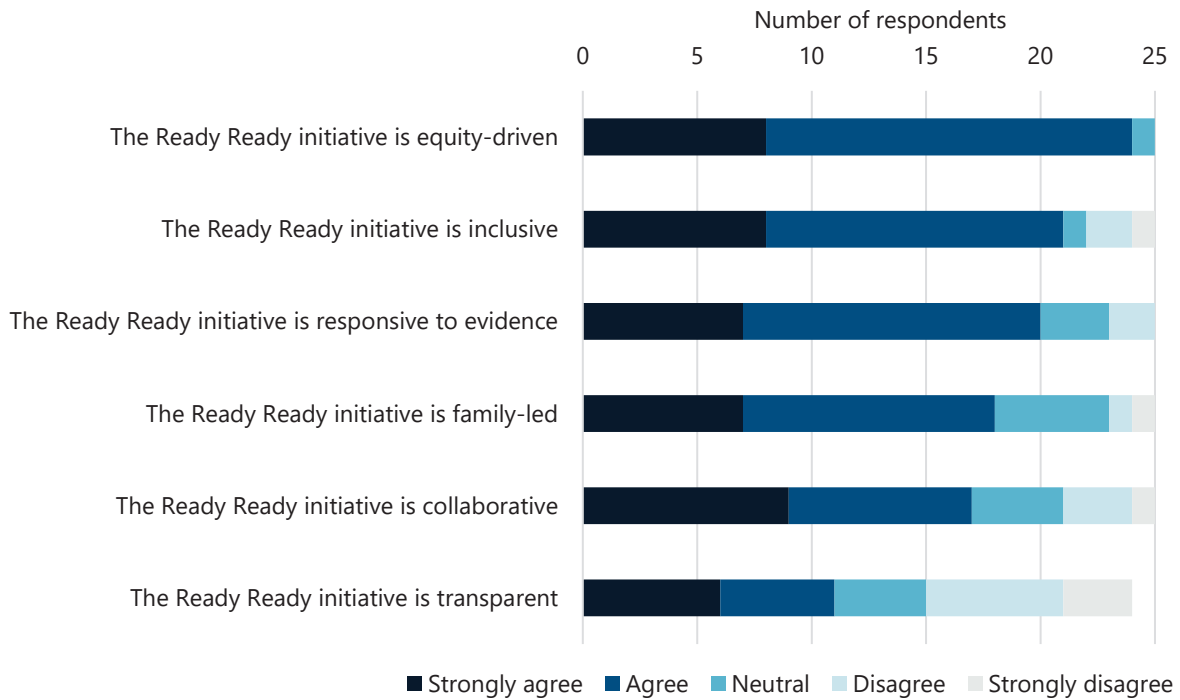
- **Program partners indicated broad familiarity with the Ready Ready initiative and generally viewed the initiative as reflecting its stated values.**

All program directors responding to the survey indicated a high degree of general familiarity with the Ready Ready initiative.<sup>6</sup> They also viewed the Ready Ready initiative overall as reflecting most of its stated values:<sup>7</sup> A majority of directors agreed that five of the six values—being equity-driven, inclusive, responsive to evidence, collaborative, and family-led—were evident in the initiative, as shown in Figure 1. (In this figure and subsequent ones, darker shades indicate stronger agreement with the corresponding statement.)<sup>8</sup>

Fewer directors who were surveyed agreed that the sixth value—being transparent—was evident. In interviews, about half of the directors described a lack of clarity related to ele-

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6. A survey question “What is your familiarity with the Ready Ready Initiative and its goals?” offered a five-point scale of responses from “Never heard of it” to “Know it well.” Nine of 26 respondents indicated that they “know a fair amount” and the remaining respondents indicated that they “know it well.” Interviews with program directors asked: “How aware are you of the Ready Ready Initiative?”
  7. Ready for School, Ready for Life (n.d.).
  8. In 2024, the initiative updated the name of the value “family-led” to “family-centered.” The 2023 survey used the term “family-led,” as does this report that uses information collected from it.

**Figure 1. Program Directors’ Views About Extent to Which the Ready Ready Initiative Is Exhibiting Its Stated Values**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 25.

The figure shows responses to the question “When thinking about the Ready Ready Initiative, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” The row labels show the statements provided to survey respondents.

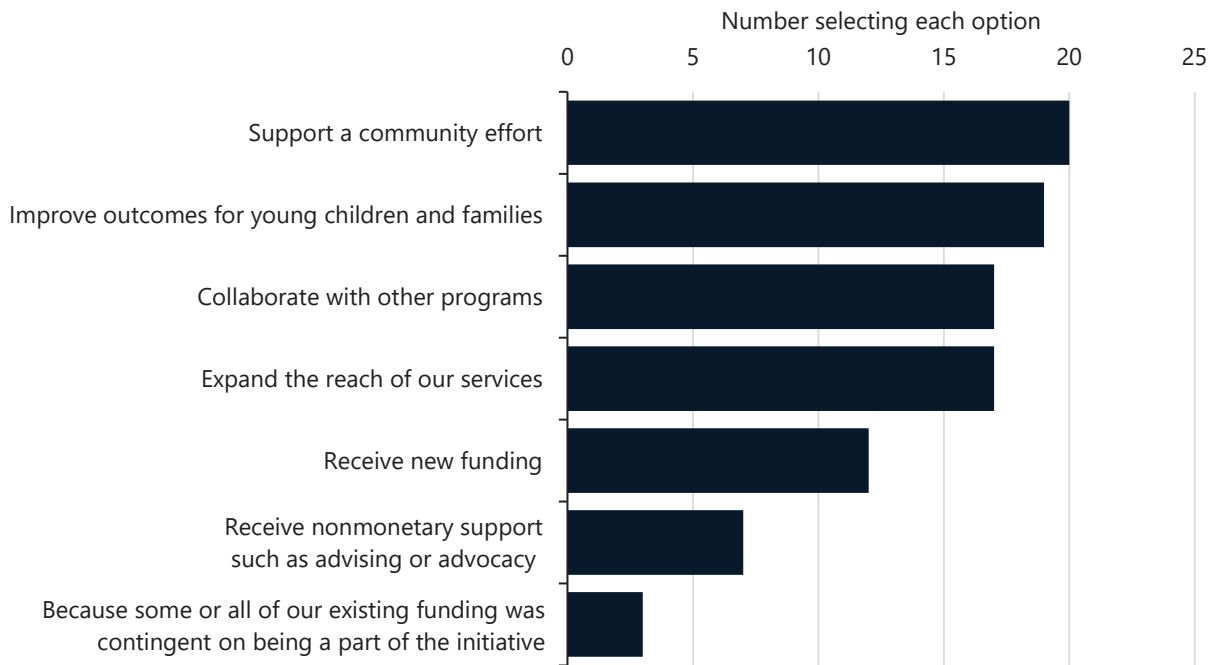
ments of the initiative or a desire for more transparency—for example, for greater transparency about the backbone organization’s staffing and budgets or for more frequent updates about the initiative’s progress and direction.

- **Program partners reported becoming involved in the initiative primarily to support collective efforts in the county and to improve outcomes for young children and families.**

The reasons program partners reported for being involved in the initiative reflected an orientation that aligned with the stated goals of the initiative. As shown in Figure 2, they said they joined the initiative to support a community effort, to improve outcomes for young children and families, and to collaborate with other programs, rather than to benefit their own organizations (that is, for funding or other support).



**Figure 2. Reasons Selected by Program Directors for Becoming Involved in the Ready Ready Initiative**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 26.

Values represent the number of respondents who selected each item following the prompt “For what reasons did [your program] become involved in the Ready Ready initiative?” The row labels show the items provided to survey respondents. Respondents could select multiple items.

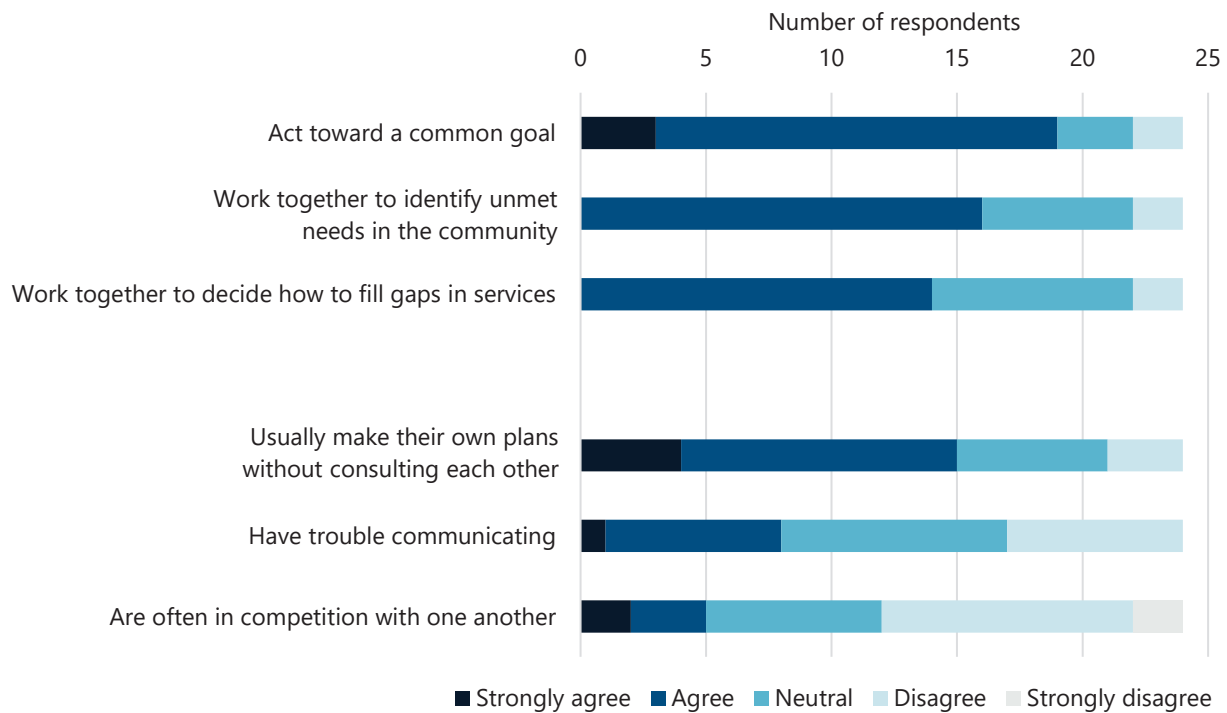
- **Program partners reported already working together in various ways, with opportunities for greater collaboration.**

To learn more about the extent of communication, coordination, and collaboration among programs in Guilford County, the survey asked a series of questions about broad strategy alignment and the coordination of work, as well as more detailed questions about coordination in different areas. These responses provide a snapshot of collaborative activities in the early stages of Ready Ready initiative implementation.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of overall strategy alignment, as shown in Figure 3, 19 of 24 respondents (79 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that programs in the county providing services for pregnant

9. Because planning for the initiative started in 2018, and survey data were collected from a small sample of program directors in 2023, it is not possible to disentangle whether the levels of coordination and related activities they report were influenced by the initiative, or whether the reported coordination levels would have been evident without the Ready Ready initiative.

**Figure 3. Program Directors' Views About Whether Organizations in the County Are Aligning on Strategy**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 24.

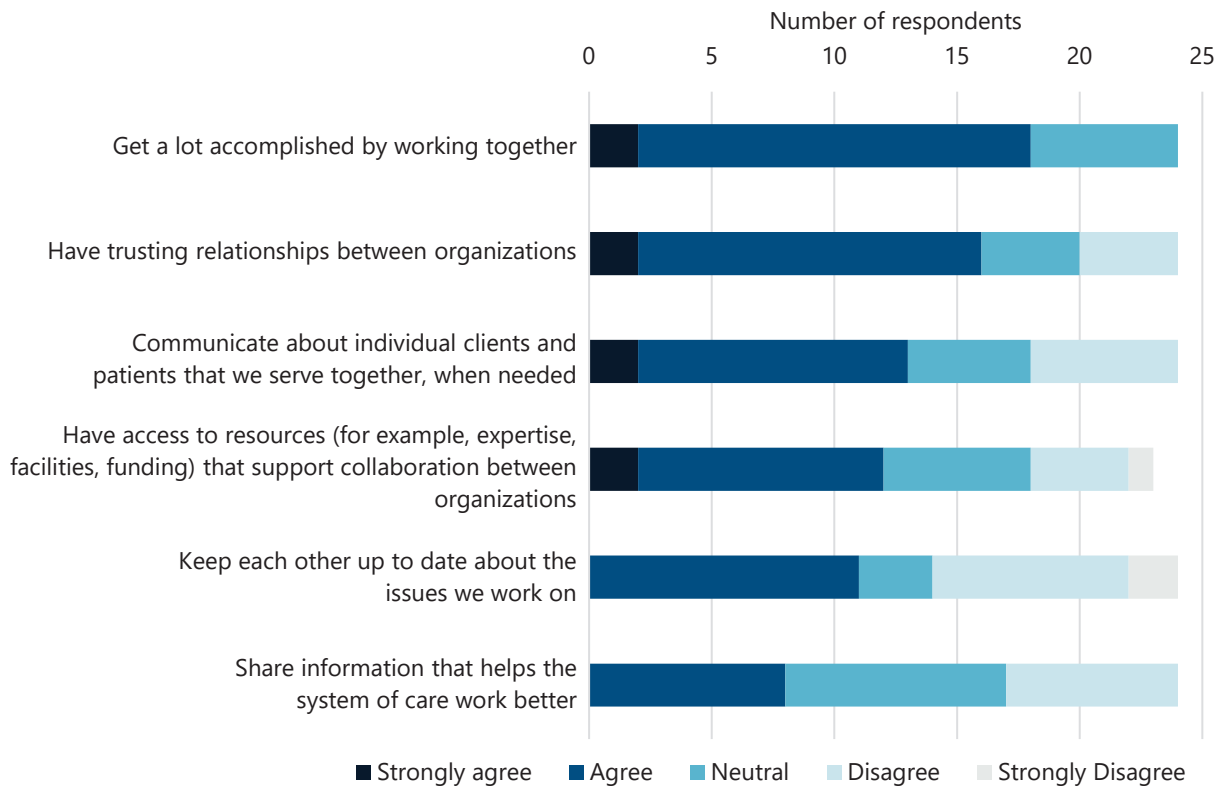
Response items adapted from the “Aligning Strategy” scale in Brewster, Tan, and Yuan (2019).

Respondents indicated the extent of their agreement to each statement following the question “Overall, the programs and organizations that provide services for pregnant people, young children, and families in Guilford County. . .” The row labels show the statements provided to survey respondents.

people, young children, and families acted toward a common goal. Over half also agreed that programs worked together to identify unmet needs and decide how to fill gaps in services. Yet over half indicated that programs usually made their own plans without consulting each other; and while half of respondents indicated that programs were not often in competition, communication challenges were evident.

As shown in Figure 4, responses to a separate, related set of survey questions on coordinating current work reveal something similar: While a large portion of respondents expressed agreement with an overarching idea (in this case, that the programs can get a lot accomplished by working together), they described less coordination and communication in response to more specific questions (for example, about sharing information that makes the system of care work better).

**Figure 4. Program Directors' Views on the Extent to Which Programs in the County Are Coordinating Current Work**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

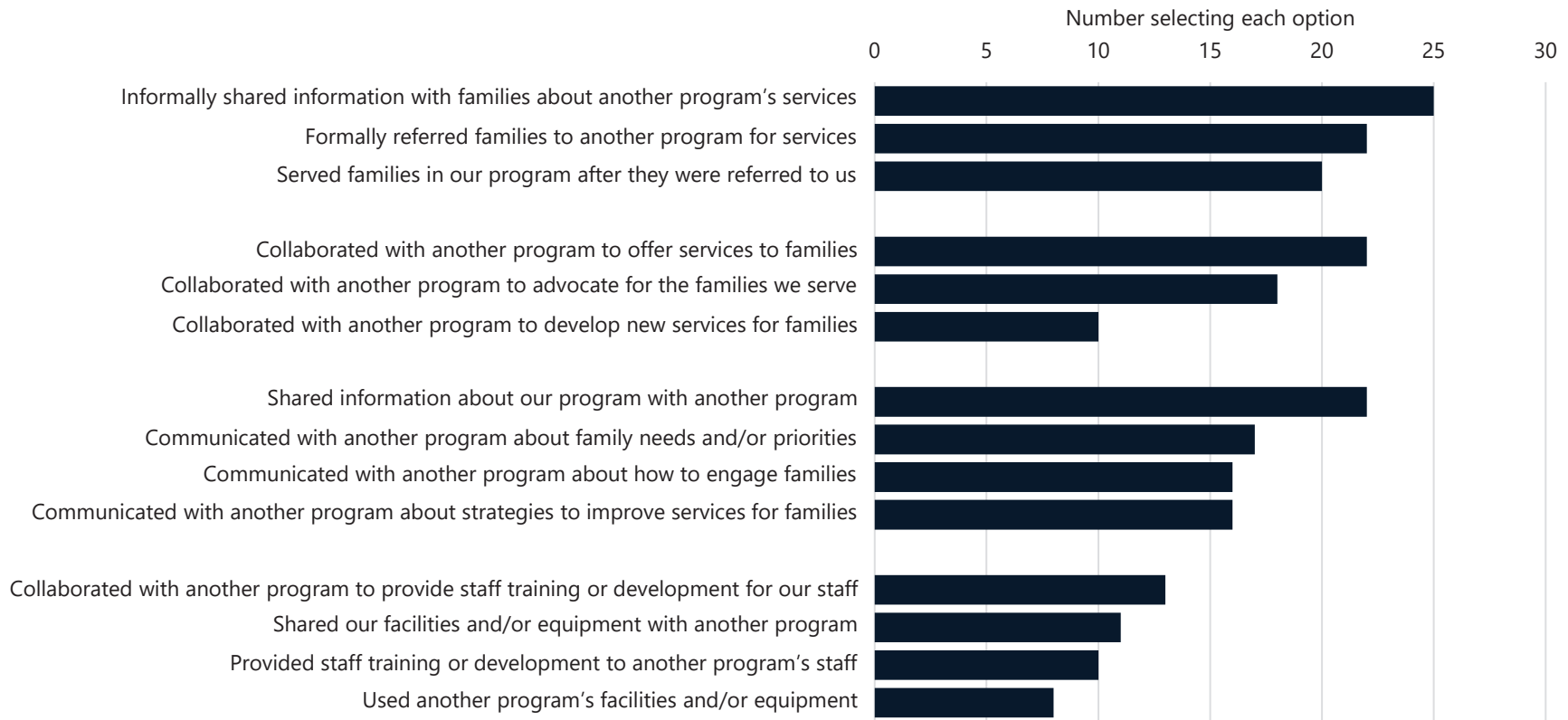
NOTES: Number of respondents = 24.

Response items adapted from the “Coordinating Current Work” scale in Brewster, Tan, and Yuan (2019).

Respondents indicated the extent of their agreement to each statement following the question “Overall, the programs and organizations that provide services for pregnant people, young children, and families in Guilford County. . .” The row labels show the statements provided to survey respondents.

To reveal the extent of programs’ interactions related to more specific activities, a set of survey questions asked respondents to reflect on the previous 12-month period and indicate which types of collaboration, coordination, and communication activities they had engaged in with other programs. These activities included services or activities that directly involved families (shown in the first panel of Figure 5), collaboration and communication with other programs for more general service planning (the two middle panels), and sharing or coordinating on physical resources or staff training (the last panel). While their responses vary somewhat within each broad category, overall the respondents reported relatively higher levels of coordination in direct services with families, and relatively lower levels in sharing or coordinating physical resources and staff training across programs.

**Figure 5. Extent to Which Programs Collaborate and Communicate with Other Programs on Specific Activities**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

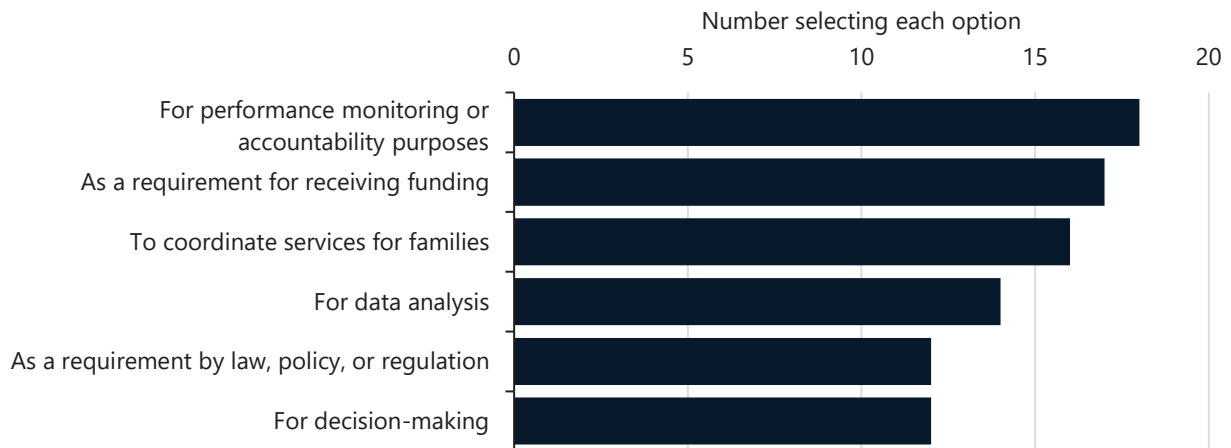
NOTES: Number of respondents = 27.

Values represent the number of respondents who selected each item following the prompt “During the past 12 months, how has [your program] worked with other programs or organizations in Guilford County?” The row labels show the items provided to survey respondents. Respondents could select multiple items.

- **Data sharing is occurring among some partner programs, but barriers to sharing remain.**

As described in Table 1, data sharing through Routes to Ready and the Integrated Data System are primary components of the Ready Ready initiative. As Figure 6 shows, at least half of directors surveyed in 2023 indicated that their programs were sharing data with other programs in the county for purposes such as monitoring performance, meeting funding requirements, and coordinating services for families. The survey did not delve into how long programs had been sharing data, the types of data they shared, or the processes they used to share data. For example, it did not ask about whether they shared individual-level data or summary data, the specific data fields or variables shared, the frequency with which data were shared, or the technology or processes for sharing and storing data securely. These kinds of questions will be explored in subsequent research.

**Figure 6. Purposes for Sharing Data with Other Programs over the Past 12 Months**



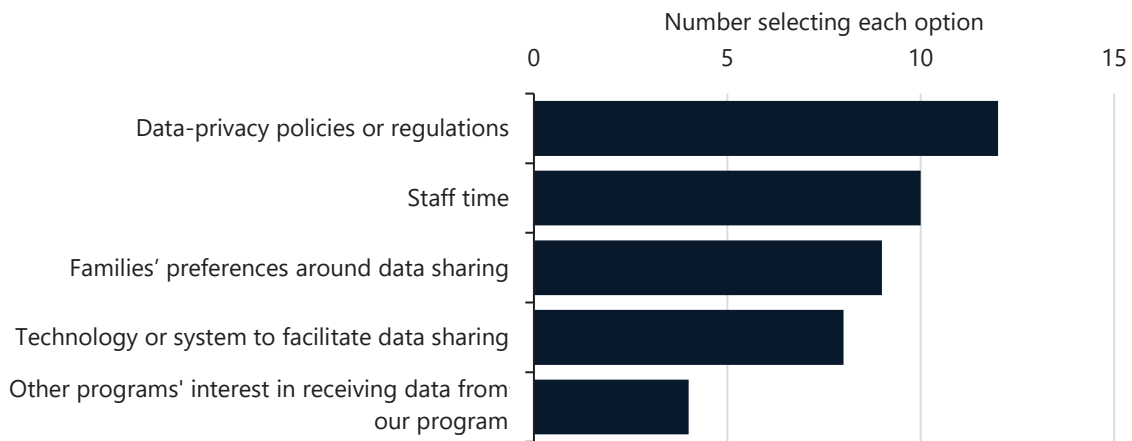
SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 24.

Values represent the number of respondents who selected each item following the prompt “In the past 12 months, has [your program] shared data about families with other programs or organizations operating in Guilford County?” The row labels show the items provided to survey respondents. Respondents could select multiple items.

When asked specifically about potential barriers to sharing data with other programs, half of respondents pointed to data-privacy policies and regulations, as shown in Figure 7. Fewer than half pointed to other barriers such as staff time, families’ preferences about data sharing, and technology needed to share data. Notably, respondents did not express concerns about potential negative effects on their own program from sharing data. In interviews, a few directors raised concerns related to data sharing, including concerns related to burdening staff members, to data privacy, or to how focusing on data may deemphasize personal connection in work with families.

**Figure 7. Barriers to Sharing Data Identified by Program Directors**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 24.

Values represent the number of respondents who selected each item following the prompt “What are the barriers to sharing data with other programs or organizations about families that [your program] serves?” The row labels show the items provided to survey respondents. Respondents could select multiple items.

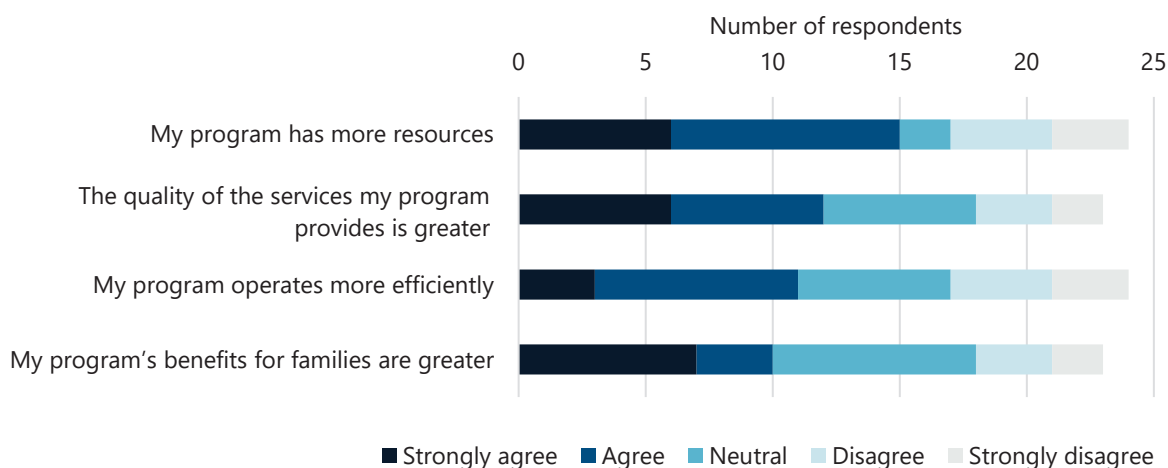
- **Program partners pointed to both benefits and challenges of participating in the Ready Ready initiative.**

In both surveys and interviews, program directors shared mixed views about the effects of participating in the Ready Ready initiative on their programs and on their own jobs. As shown in Figure 8, a majority of the directors who responded to the survey indicated that their programs had more resources as a result of participating in the initiative. But they were roughly evenly split about whether participating in the initiative was resulting in their programs providing higher-quality services, operating more efficiently, or producing greater benefits for families.

Information from interviews provides further insight into the initiative’s potential benefits. During interviews, most directors mentioned that the Ready Ready initiative either had already benefited families and organizations in the community, or that it was likely to in the future. Examples included increasing participant referrals to partner programs through Community Navigation, expanding programs’ lists of available resources and services that they can refer families to, promoting collaboration across programs, providing professional development opportunities for program staff members, and highlighting parents’ voices through the Guilford Parent Leader Network.

A little more than half the directors who were interviewed also mentioned concerns about issues they were already experiencing, or that they anticipated arising in the future. Examples

**Figure 8. Program Directors' Views About Extent to Which Participating in the Ready Ready Initiative Affected Their Programs**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 24.

The figure shows extent of agreement with the question “Over the past 12 months, because [your program] participates in the Ready Ready Initiative. . .” The row labels show the prompts provided to survey respondents.

of current issues included confusion and frustration expressed by both families and programs that arose from initiative-promoted processes and procedures that duplicated existing efforts, perceived competition between programs for funding, and burdens on program staff members. One potential future issue raised was that of sustaining program involvement in the initiative over time due to resource constraints such as limited funding and staff availability, and the increased burden participation placed on staff members. Survey data provide some evidence about directors’ own job burdens: Half of survey respondents indicated that their job responsibilities were greater as a result of the initiative, and 10 of 23 (43 percent) indicated that the time they spent on documentation was greater.

- **Program partners indicated that broad functions of the backbone organization are being carried out, but that there are areas for improvement.**

The Ready Ready initiative’s backbone organization—a nonprofit organization by the same name, Ready for School, Ready for Life—guides and supports the initiative as a whole. Such backbone organizations are core parts of collective-impact efforts like the Ready Ready initiative:

The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why [collaboration] fails. The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participating organizations who can plan, manage, and support the initiative through

ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly.<sup>10</sup>

Backbone organizations typically have six broad functions: (1) guiding vision and strategy, (2) mobilizing resources, (3) building community engagement, (4) establishing shared measurement practices, (5) supporting aligned activities across programs in the initiative, and (6) advancing policy.<sup>11</sup> Roughly 60 percent to 80 percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements reflecting aspects of the first four functions, as shown in Figure 9. For example, the first panel of Figure 9 shows three statements related to the initiative’s vision and strategy. Twenty of 25 respondents (80 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative makes it a priority to include multiple perspectives when setting goals, and that the initiative’s plans to improve the lives of families are well defined. Fewer (15 of 24), but a majority at 63 percent, agreed that the initiative helps unify programs around the same goals to improve the lives of families. Responses shown in the next three panels of Figure 9—for mobilizing resources, building community engagement, and establishing shared measurement practices—show similar levels of agreement.

Responses related to the backbone function of “supporting aligned activities across programs in the initiative” exhibit a different pattern. Examples of the types of specific activities in this function include “coordinat[ing] and facilitat[ing] partners’ continuous communication and collaboration, “recruit[ing] and conven[ing] partners and key external stakeholders, and “seek[ing] out opportunities for alignment with other efforts.”<sup>12</sup> The survey did not ask directly about these activities or the backbone organization’s role in them, but did ask about whether participating programs are committed participants in the initiative, and whether there is trust across programs in the initiative. Both are expected to be positively correlated with activities such as effective communication, collaboration, alignment, and coordination. Mirroring results in earlier sections of Figure 9, 16 of 23 respondents (70 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that programs that are part of the initiative are committed participants in it. Yet notably fewer (10 of 24, or 42 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that there is trust across programs in the initiative. Similar responses are evident for a more global question: 12 of 24 respondents (50 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the initiative provides the backbone infrastructure needed to help improve the lives of families. The lower agreement levels on these two statements point to potential areas of improvement for the backbone organization’s efforts.

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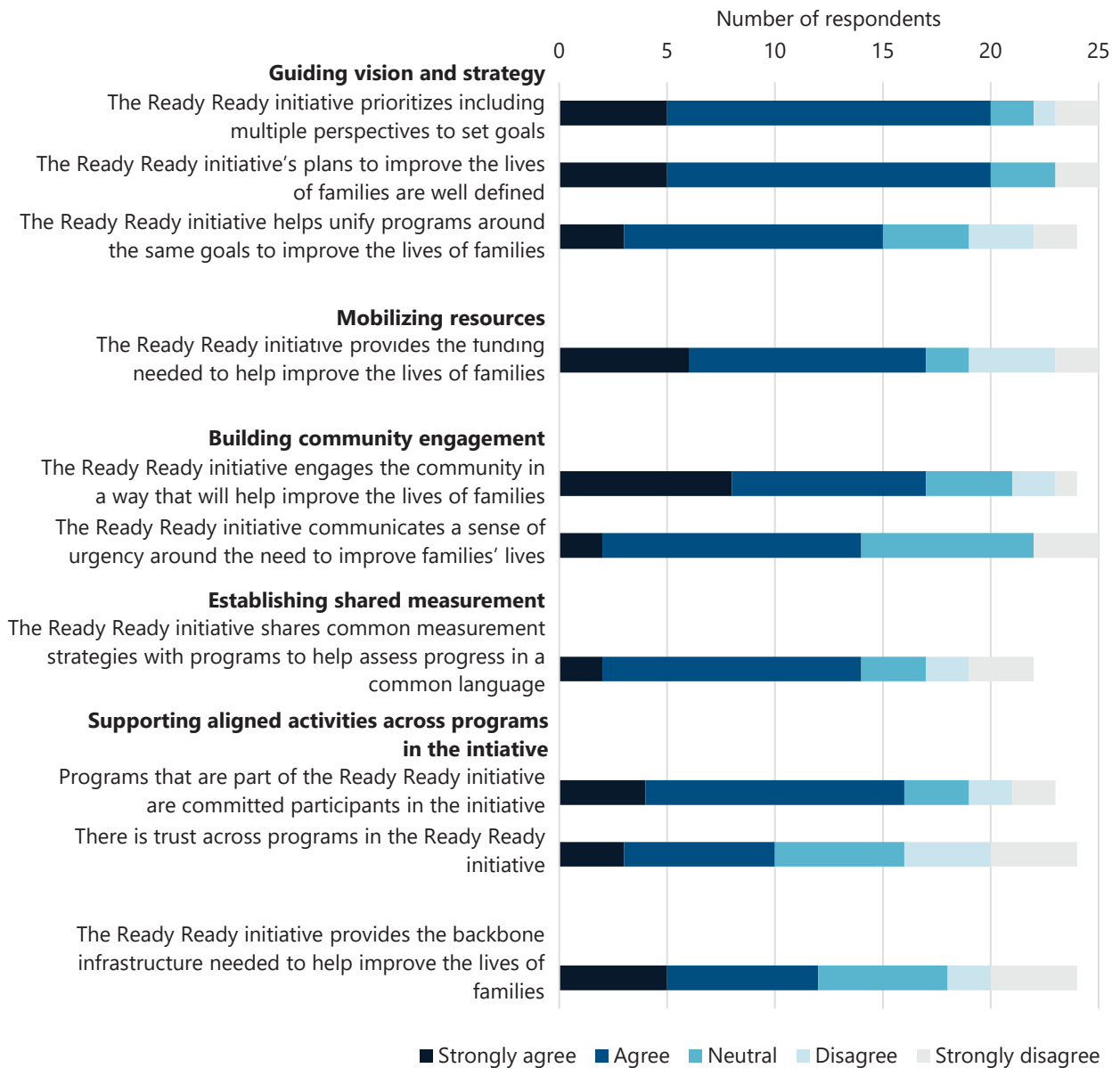
10. Kania and Kramer (2011).

11. Collective Impact Forum and FSG (2017). Survey questions did not capture respondents’ views regarding the last function listed, “advancing policy.” Future ROCS data collection will reflect this function.

12. Collective Impact Forum and FSG (2017).



**Figure 9. Program Directors’ Views About Extent to Which Backbone Functions Are Being Carried Out, by Function**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 25.

The figure shows responses to the question “When thinking about the Ready Ready initiative, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” The row labels show the statements provided to survey respondents. The statements are grouped together by their relation to core backbone functions, labeled in bold.

- **Program partners may not all understand the scope and specifics of the Ready Ready initiative the same way.**

The earlier sections of this report describe interview and survey respondents' views about various aspects of the initiative. Additional data collected indicate that respondents may understand the scope and specifics of the initiative differently. If respondents have different understandings of what, exactly, the Ready Ready initiative encompasses—or even if their understandings are the same but certain aspects of it are more salient than others to them when responding to questions about the initiative overall—then broad statements about the initiative should be interpreted with additional caution, even more than that occasioned by the small number of respondents, as different directors may be reflecting on different parts they are familiar with.

As noted in an earlier section, survey respondents reported general familiarity with the Ready Ready initiative. Yet the initiative is expansive, comprising many components, organizations, programs, funders, and interest holders. To explore whether respondents shared a similar understanding of the initiative's scope, components, and activities, a write-in survey question asked respondents to list the programs and organizations that they considered to be part of the initiative. Further guidance asked that respondents not consult other documents or records, emphasizing, "We're interested in your own understanding of the initiative."

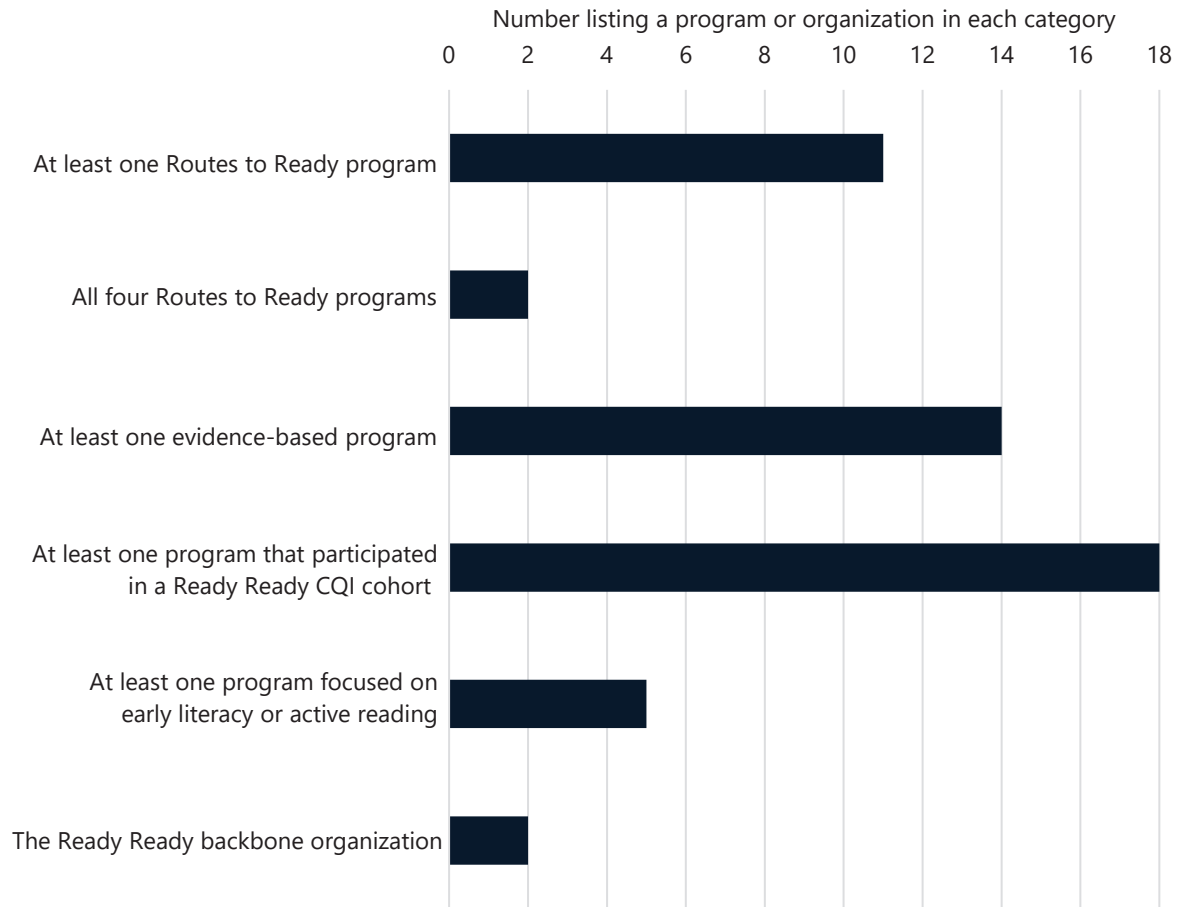
Twenty-one of the 25 survey participants provided a response to this question. Respondents listed 58 unique programs or organizations, with an average of 6 programs per respondent. Figure 10 shows the number of respondents who listed programs that are part of the initiative components, listed in the same order that they appear in Table 1. For example, 11 respondents (52 percent) listed at least one Routes to Ready program partner, but just 2 (10 percent) listed all four Routes to Ready programs. Respondents most frequently mentioned programs in the program-expansion or CQI components (14 and 18 mentions, respectively), which may reflect the relatively larger number of programs sent the survey that took part in CQI activities.<sup>13</sup> Few respondents listed early literacy programs or the backbone organization, and no respondents listed Community Navigation, Community Alignment, or the Integrated Data System. Because Community Alignment and the Integrated Data System are initiative components that are not "programs or organizations" specified in the survey prompt, it is not surprising that these components were not mentioned. Notably, respondents listed funders, technical assistance providers, consultants, or researchers more often than some programs or organizations that are part of the initiative components.

These survey findings should be interpreted with caution. The number of respondents was small, the survey question's wording probably affected responses (for example, respondents may have known about the Agency Finder or Integrated Data System, but did not list them because the question prompt asked about "programs or organizations"), and survey fatigue

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13. Three of the 21 respondents listed only Ready Ready CQI program partners.

**Figure 10. Program Directors’ Listing of Programs Involved in the Ready Ready Initiative, by Initiative Component**



SOURCE: MDRC survey of program directors in Guilford County, NC, 2023.

NOTES: Number of respondents = 21.

Results in figure tabulated from responses to the question: “Please take a few moments to list any other programs or organizations that, to the best of your understanding, are involved with the Ready Ready initiative in some way. In responding to this question, please just list the programs and organizations that come to your mind that you consider to be involved in the initiative. Do not consult other documents or records. We’re interested in your own understanding of the initiative.”

or time constraints may have led respondents to list fewer programs than they knew were part of the initiative.

Still, these responses provide some limited evidence that the initiative’s scope, components, and participants are not widely understood, even among directors of programs that are known to be participating in early stages of the Ready Ready initiative. Information gleaned from interviews provides further insights: As noted earlier, about half of the interviewed directors described a lack of clarity about the initiative or a desire for more transparency.

The sentiments expressed included general uncertainty about the initiative and a lack of clarity regarding its direction and intent, and about partner programs' roles and decision-making responsibilities.

## **SUMMARY**

Drawing on data collected through interviews and surveys with directors of program partners in the Ready Ready initiative in 2023, the analysis described here finds that directors of program partners reported being committed to the goals of improving outcomes for families and young children in Guilford County. They also reported willingness to communicate, collaborate, coordinate activities, and align strategies to achieve those goals, and discussed current efforts to do so. At the same time, they expressed concerns about transparency, trust, and duplication of effort. Program directors reported that greater communication between the backbone organization and program partners about the initiative's purpose, plans, funding, and governance might nurture and strengthen the community-wide, cross-program effort that the initiative seeks.

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# ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles.