

2023 COUNCIL CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN JEFFERSON PARISH



Jefferson Ready Start Network is a coalition of partners who are working to increase access to high-quality, comprehensive early childhood education for children birth to 5 in Jefferson Parish. Our children, our workforce and our economy depend on it. We asked all candidates for council to answer questions on this important issue. Below are the responses received to date.

WHAT IS YOUR PLAN TO INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN IN JEFFERSON PARISH?

BOHANNAN: According to the NHSA, major barriers include transportation, housing instability, parents being unaware of the benefits of ECE and/or how to receive aid. Using community partners like Jefferson Ready Start, JEFFCAP, EHS and many others, we can educate parents on not just benefits, but programs. We need to lean on state legislators for additional funding and support and continue to fight with the federal government for program funding. Locally, I intend to offer a program that will be a private/public partnership providing transportation (door to door) at a low cost for working families. Primarily, I plan to be a partner in the effort to increase ECE as it continues to grow and change.

BOURGEOIS: I would participate in Jefferson Ready Start partnerships among early childhood education providers, major employers and workforce development groups to expand the presence of high-quality, affordable child care options for working caregivers. Consider repurposing parish buildings as early learning /adult learning centers where parents can come and learn workforce skills with child care provided. Adults prep for entry into the workforce and children get the care and education to prep them for kindergarten.

HYERS: Redress and reestablish a "Republican form" of government and thusly dilute the concentration of governing power so that each community can invest and benefit from the representative influence required to see the broadening of access we so desperately deserve and have paid for. The disenfranchised Jefferson Parish delegation to our state government has resulted in millions of our tax dollars being redistributed to other parishes or left on the table.

IMPASTATO: I am fully supportive of access to early childhood education. Jefferson Ready Start is currently in direct competition with the parish's Head Start program. As such, I would suggest a full-scale comparative analysis between the parish's Head Start program and Jefferson Ready Start to make sure that these two programs are not duplicating services so all children in need are adequately served. It is important that we do not have two half-funded programs.

LEE: Access to quality early care and education for children in our community is limited due to barriers associated with costs, capacity and limited availability of funded seats. To increase the availability of these resources, I will work with the Jefferson Community Action Programs (JEFFCAP) to build awareness and increase utilization of the JEFFCAP Head Start Birth to Five Program. Additionally, leveraging resources and grant opportunities to close the gap between those who attend and wish to attend. Further, I will continue the work that I've already accomplished in this area. As a council member, I secured three \$25,000 CEA investments with the Jefferson Parish Public School System for the Jefferson Ready Start Early Childhood Education program in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

LILJEBERG: I would help develop a plan to create a sustainable funding source for our youngest learners. I would bring a variety of stakeholders to the table to identify what options exist to create funding for children birth to 3 years old.

RIZZUTO: I know that the current council has contributed to this program, and I will continue to fund this program at the highest level I can.

SHEPHERD: Increase funding.

TEMPLET: Currently, the best use of funding for economically disadvantaged children is to take advantage of the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund which provides a dollar-to-dollar match. Local funding would then provide double the impact. As I've done in the past 4 years, I would continue to contribute my economic development funding to this important cause. I am open to exploring different avenues on how best to take advantage of the dollar-to-dollar match, including additional Parish funding and utilizing my strong relationships with our state and federal delegation to

lobby for more funding. I would also utilize my relationships with private businesses who could provide additional funding for the dollar-to-dollar match.

VAN VRANCKEN: Several years ago, Councilman Walker put together a coalition of the Jefferson Parish Council members to each dedicate some funding to early childhood education. Our funding provided several additional 'seats' for children to benefit from these programs. The following year, we increased the amount of funding provided to allow for even more children to benefit. Long term, Jefferson Parish Council funding will not be enough to solve this issue. We will need to advocate for a permanent source(s) of funding. While I have not yet had the opportunity to delve into this issue fully, I certainly have the desire! In my family, we have three toddlers right now. I see each blossoming because they are getting the educational exposure to support their development. I want that success for all children in our community.

WALKER: I will continue to do the work I've focused on over the past 3+ years. In addition, I plan to assemble a roundtable of major parish stakeholders to come up with a plan to fund ECE for years to come.

HOW WILL YOU HELP JEFFERSON PARISH BUSINESSES ENSURE THEIR EMPLOYEES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN HAVE RELIABLE, QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR THEIR CHILDREN?

BOHANNAN: I believe businesses have a responsibility to their employees just as the employees do to the business. They are truly partners, each relying on the other's success. At my office, with few exceptions, I employ parents. I understand that this means my employees require some reasonable flexibility. Promoting other businesses to allow flexibility and encouraging them to be creative in their employment of parents is key. This may mean changing employees' workday by an hour or [providing] an unusual lunch hour so that you can accommodate their child care and ECE needs. Working with your employees to ensure their family's success will lead to longer-term employment and happier employees.

BOURGEOIS: Support efforts of employers to establish on-site child development centers to provide convenient access for employees to high-quality child care. Workplace day care can improve employee morale and lower absenteeism and turnover leading to lower company costs.

HYERS: With an abundance of child care/education providers available, it seems to me the key would be to make these providers more aware of the funding available and provide the assistance required to qualify for said funding. Millions of Jefferson Parish tax dollars were spent to other parishes simply because those we've empowered lacked the enlightenment required to exercise the control needed to retrieve them.

IMPASTATO: I fully support increasing funding for early childhood education to proactively recruit more and better teachers. I believe we need to consolidate programs to maximize resources. It may be that the Jefferson Ready Start program is the best solution, but we need to document that prior to dedicating resources. If that is the case, I fully support dedicating as many resources as possible.

LEE: I believe that the best way to ensure that employees with young children have reliable, quality early care and education for their children is to incentivize the business community within our jurisdiction to offer services and flexibility, along with working with JEFFCAP to identify grant opportunities that will increase the availability of publicly funded seats. Further, in my capacity as councilmember, I will directly engage the business community to identify opportunities for the installation of early childhood education services in their communities.

LILJEBERG: There is a clear lack of supply as it relates to high-quality early care and education. I would help identify options to create more high-quality options, such as public-private partnerships to help ensure Jefferson Parish businesses thrive. In order for Jefferson Parish to continue to thrive, we need comprehensive infrastructure to support new development.

RIZZUTO: I will work with the council to implement a marketing plan to work with some of our Jefferson Parish private businesses to help raise funds to help increase the amount of money we can contribute.

SHEPHERD: Offset cost.

TEMPLET: I believe Jefferson Parish needs to partner with JRSN and local business organizations to provide education to the business community and general public on the economic impact of the lack of access to quality early childhood care. This not only affects our current businesses but also our ability to attract new businesses to Jefferson Parish. I will work to ensure our working families have the support and funding they need from the local, state and federal government. This can be done through additional Parish funding and advocating at the state and federal levels. Additionally, I would encourage businesses to consider private donations to take advantage of the state's dollar-to-dollar match. I will also work to gain the public's buy-in of this important issue so that we can support our workforce of today and tomorrow.

VAN VRANCKEN: I would like to empower more businesses to take an active role in the solution. InclusivCare, for example, can lead the way in demonstrating how a business can create an early child care space that solves the problem for its employees and also offers opportunity to the community at large. COVID made InclusivCare appreciate that its health care workers could not work if their children did not have a place to go. So the business, focused on health care for all, set out to establish and build Little Ivy Prep Early Learning Center at InclusivCare. What a wonderful model of a company solving the issue for its employees. It can serve as a model for others. Government has turned to public-private partnerships to do things better and more efficiently. I would like to explore P3 scenarios to successfully tackle this community challenge.

WALKER: I will continue to find ways to support the Jefferson Ready Start Network by using available funds to create seats.

AS AN ELECTED COUNCIL MEMBER, WOULD YOU SUPPORT A PLAN TO INCREASE FUNDING THROUGH PUBLIC DOLLARS TO ADVANCE THIS INITIATIVE AND HELP ACCESS MORE STATE MATCHING FUNDS?

BOHANNAN: As an elected council member, I will carefully consider any proposal for the betterment of our children, as I know it leads to a betterment of our community across the board. I am aware that there are many causes and necessities we will face when allocating funds and that there is a limit on what portion can be used at our discretion. I commit that I understand the importance of ECE and will support and protect it as best I can. Having not seen the plan or knowing the budget, it is premature to say my position concretely, but I will support a plan to increase funding if, overall, it is feasible and not to the detriment of my district. Having built the first and only inclusion park in the state for children and adults on the spectrum, and having a sister who has been a public school teacher for over 20 years, I am dedicated to our children and will always fight for what is best for them.

BOURGEOIS: Yes, I would support programs to increase early childhood funding but would have to bring together all stakeholders, research the opportunities for grants, HeadStart, JPS and look at District Improvement funds.

HYERS: Absolutely! I would insist that as a 'council', we ensure that every tax dollar we send to the state is retrieved to benefit from this effort. We, the people of Jefferson Parish, just have to figure it out!

IMPASTATO: My actions as a district councilmember have shown my willingness to fund this initiative along with my colleagues using our district funds to do so. Unfortunately, Councilman Walker takes all the credit for this allocation of funds when in fact it has been a collaborative effort from the start. I believe in a team approach and will continue to work with all councilmembers to make this a high priority and to make sure the funding and resources are available to meet the needs of our economically disadvantaged children to get the support and resources needed to help them succeed.

LEE: As someone who is passionate about education and access to early childhood education, I would absolutely support a collaborative plan to increase funding through public dollars and matching funds to advance the Jefferson Ready Start Network. The development of high-quality early childhood education programs is a critical need of our community, for both families and businesses. During my time as councilman, I've secured over a million dollars to various educational projects and initiatives to support the development of our educational opportunities in Jefferson Parish. By utilizing our legislative delegation, I am confident that the amount of funding can be increased.

LILJEBERG: Yes. The Early Care and Education Fund put in place by the state is an asset upon which we must capitalize. We must bring business, government and philanthropists together to support our youngest Jefferson Parish learners.

RIZZUTO: This program is one of the strong points on my agenda. I am completely open to increasing the amount of money we can contribute along with working with my colleagues to help raise funds through the public sector.

SHEPHERD: Yes.

TEMPLET: As a state certified foster family for over 20 years, my wife and I recognize the importance of a child's development during the critical ages of birth to age 5. Not only is education important for a child's development but also can affect our economy, crime rates and recidivism. As an elected official, I have continued to educate myself on the importance it has to our children, families and economy. I would not only support additional public funding to advance this initiative, but also provide education and awareness about these issues. I believe additional public awareness is critical in providing sustainable funding for the future. I will partner with JRSN to be a strong advocate of its plan to diversify funding, improve program quality and increase access.

VAN VRANCKEN: Yes. I am a firm believer in common sense solutions and creative ways to stretch local dollars. I have successfully and aggressively sought and secured grants to build out our shoreline at Bucktown Harbor, multiplying every \$1 local dollar into as many as \$4. Similarly, Jefferson Parish is able to afford more public works projects by consistently finding opportunities where state or federal funds pay for the bulk of the project with a 20% local parish match. So YES, where there is an opportunity to draw down on more state matching funds with a dollar-for-dollar match by bringing local dollars to the table, then that is a good deal for our local government and the children of Jefferson Parish!

WALKER: Yes - I would like to continue contributing available dollars from the council or otherwise, but it needs to make sense within the parish budget. I also think the investment of private dollars may be able to go a very long way toward what we're trying to accomplish on this front.