

Early Childhood

Louisiana should expand access to high-quality early care and education programs for all at-risk children in Louisiana from birth through age four.

**Send All
Children to
Kindergarten
Ready to Learn**

Louisiana faces many challenges when it comes to the educational achievement levels of public school studentsⁱ. Much has been done to try to address that issue by raising academic standards, providing for greater accountability, offering additional education choices for parents and focusing on the quality of teachers and school leaders. All of these things have put Louisiana on a path of solid improvement, yet challenges remain. High among these is the fact that only about half of children in Louisiana arrive in kindergarten ready to learn.

This barrier to opportunity is why focusing on the development of children before they reach school age is fundamentally important. Research clearly shows developmental experiences in those early years are a strong determinant of a child's future learning and behavior.

High-quality learning experiences enhance a child's brain development in positive ways, while the lack of those experiences can weaken development with life-long consequences. This issue has a profound impact on working parents. In Louisiana, more than 60% of mothers with infants are in the labor forceⁱⁱ, and two-thirds of children ages birth through five have both parents, or their only available parent, workingⁱⁱⁱ. The quality of care these young children receive helps shape their future success in school and in life.

A child's brain is 90% fully formed by age five, yet only seven percent of economically disadvantaged children birth to age two have access to child care compared to 90% of four-year-olds.

- Louisiana's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission Report, 2019

Access and Availability

Louisiana has been successful at expanding access for its economically disadvantaged four-year-olds through a number of state and federally funded pre-K programs. Today, more than 90% of these four-year-olds can access a publicly funded pre-K slot, and most are of high quality^{iv}.

By contrast, for children under age four in Louisiana, especially economically disadvantaged children, high-quality early care and education is extremely difficult to access. Overall, only 15% of these youth under age four have access to any publicly supported programs^v.

That support is critical because the average cost of infant care in a child care center in Louisiana rivals the cost of college tuition – \$7,540 per year according to the most recent report from the advocacy group [Child Care Aware](#). That amounts to about 17% of median household income in a state^{vi} with the second highest poverty rate^{vii}, where almost 29% of children live in poverty^{viii}.

Translated, that means a family of four at the poverty level, with one infant in child care, would spend about 31% of total income on child care services. Without some level of public assistance, that is an insurmountable obstacle for most of these families and one of the reasons that many of them have turned to unlicensed child care centers that may not meet basic health and safety expectations. The inability to access quality health care impacts not only children and working families, but also the workforce, our businesses and economic development.

Economic Impacts of Child Care

A recent report from the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children highlighted the economic costs to both Louisiana employers and workers caused by this lack of access to child care. The report found, as a result of child care-related issues:

- One in seven parents with a child age four or under had turned down a promotion at work
- Nearly one in five reported leaving full-time employment for part-time work
- Almost half of both men and women reported missing work regularly due to problems with child care
- One in six had quit a job and one in 13 had been fired

The report concluded that inadequate access to child care costs Louisiana employers \$816 million annually due to employee absences and turnover. It pegged the loss to the state at nearly \$84 million in tax revenue due to lost workplace productivity and \$1.1 billion to Louisiana's economy from the spillover effects.

Reforms in Louisiana

In 2012, Louisiana passed Act 3, which made major reforms in early care and childhood education with the goal of improving school-readiness for economically disadvantaged children. Through these reforms, Louisiana has established a unified rating system and higher program standards, while garnering national recognition for the efficiency and accountability of its new system. The state has also promoted a unique one-stop website for parents to identify quality child care providers.

The problem is that it has yet to be adequately funded to ensure quality and access for Louisiana's children under age four. Not only can too few children from birth through age three access a publicly funded child care slot, but only half of the slots that exist for them are rated at a level considered to be of high quality. The amount of reimbursement per child that centers receive under current programs, especially for infants and toddlers, does not support the cost of providing quality care for these younger children.

Earlier this year the state's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission released a report detailing the issues surrounding early education in Louisiana. It found that approximately 173,000 children from economically disadvantaged families need some kind of child care assistance compared to only about 22,000 who currently receive it – 20,000 fewer children than 10 years ago.

That represents a huge gap and it comes with a steep price tag – an additional investment of approximately \$86 million compounded annually over the next decade^{ix}. While that amount might seem staggering,

Louisiana cannot afford to do nothing. Two decades ago, the vast majority of economically disadvantaged four-year-olds in Louisiana had no access to high-quality pre-K programs. With the creation of the state's LA-4 early childhood program, the prioritizing of federal dollars and partnerships with local school districts, Louisiana closed that gap over time to the point where the state now has near universal access to pre-K. Louisiana must begin the process of doing the same with its child care sector.

There is mounting evidence that shows that whatever the state invests in high-quality early education reaps a sizable return^x. Children who participate in these programs are less likely to be held back in school, drop out, require special educational services, develop chronic health problems or enter the criminal justice system. All of those represent clear savings to the state and to society.

The RESET

The data show that, for Louisiana to function as a modern state with a diverse and forward-looking economy, it must raise the educational attainment of our citizens. That means lowering dropout rates, increasing high school graduation rates and ensuring that those who graduate are college and career-ready and transition to jobs with high wages that strengthen our economy. It is difficult to see Louisiana achieving those goals without making it a part of our state mission to broaden access to high-quality early learning for children from birth until the time they start kindergarten^{xi}.

- **Louisiana should undertake a process to expand access to high-quality early childhood care and education for its most disadvantaged children and families particularly from birth to age 3.**
- **Louisiana should commit to appropriating a meaningful level of State General Fund revenue as an investment in working parents and their children**
- **As part of this, the state should support the creation of local governance models to assess the early childhood needs in communities, identify child care centers that are performing well and those that are not, coordinate and leverage all available funding resources and drive improvements in providing quality services for families.**
- **Louisiana should consider early care and education as one of the top priorities for new revenue sources.**
- **Louisiana should conduct a review of existing dedicated funds to determine if they remain a priority or whether they could be redirected to early childhood services through the appropriations process.**

Endnotes

- i National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/math_2017/states/scores/?grade=4
- ii Annie E. Casey Foundation; Kids Count; <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#LA/2/0/char/0>
- iii Louisiana's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission Report: Funding Our Future: Recommendations for Louisiana's Early Learners (January 2019)
- iv Louisiana's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission Report: Funding Our Future: Recommendations for Louisiana's Early Learners (January 2019)
- v Louisiana's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission Report: Funding Our Future: Recommendations for Louisiana's Early Learners (January 2019)
- vi U.S. Census Bureau; Louisiana Household Income (2016): \$43,897.

vii U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey

viii U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey

ix Louisiana's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission Report: Funding Our Future: Recommendations for Louisiana's Early Learners (January 2019)

x The Lifecycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program; Dr. James Heckman; <https://heckmanequation.org/>

xi The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper: Quantifying the Life-Cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program (www.nber.org/papers/w23479.pdf?sy=479)