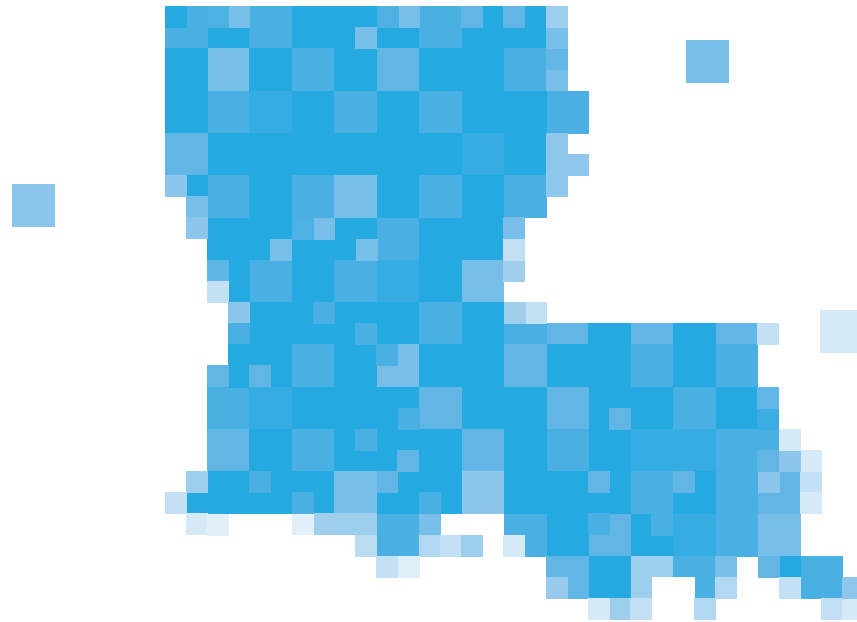


# LOUISIANA VIRTUAL

## Facing the reality of online schooling

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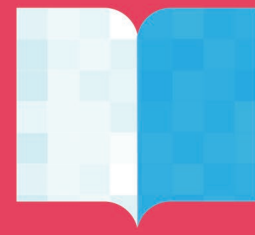
### Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana

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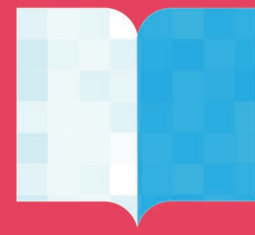
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## Executive Summary



**The future of education arrived before we were quite ready for it. Virtual schooling finds high demand in Louisiana and holds great promise, but its track record looks spotty at best. Its successes are diluted by its setbacks and some of its advantages might be underappreciated, or even unmeasured. Official scrutiny falls unevenly on its providers. The experience is a winner for some students and educators, a downer for others.**

Such is the challenge of synchronizing humans and technology, especially when trying to reinvent traditional educational institutions that are themselves in upheaval. This report by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana (PAR) examines the phenomenon of online learning for K-12 public schools in our state and makes specific, actionable recommendations to prepare us better for the future.

The report's focal point is the two public charter schools that offer K-12 virtual education to students across the state. Their performance and the lessons learned from their decade of operation form the centerpiece of this investigation. Their history shows relatively low school letter grades but also shows constant innovation and efforts to improve student academics and engagement. During the pandemic, traditional public schools statewide made a sudden and massive temporary switch to virtual learning, with the result that Louisiana student test scores sank on average in 2021. This outcome led to a popular narrative that virtual learning was proven to be inferior. But during this time, one of the statewide virtual charter schools showed improvement and the other one outperformed the state average.

This report also considers the proliferation of virtual instruction among local school districts. Almost overnight, the pandemic threw traditional schools into a stress-filled mode of online teaching. As heroic and innovative as many teachers and parents responded under the circumstances, the results generally were seen as inadequate and frustrating for all involved. And yet, local school districts increasingly are finding ways to expand and improve permanent online schools and programs of their own.

**“More and more kids are going to need this option. It’s not a niche thing, it’s a true need.”**

**Michelle Clayton of University View Academy**

That is the paradox we face. The record of performance is troubling, and yet parental and student demand for virtual schooling is intense. Proposals for new statewide online schools are pressing for approval from the state school board while the existing statewide schools are seeking renewal contracts. Enrollments for the statewide schools are limited, as they should be, while local school districts are increasing their virtual offerings at will.

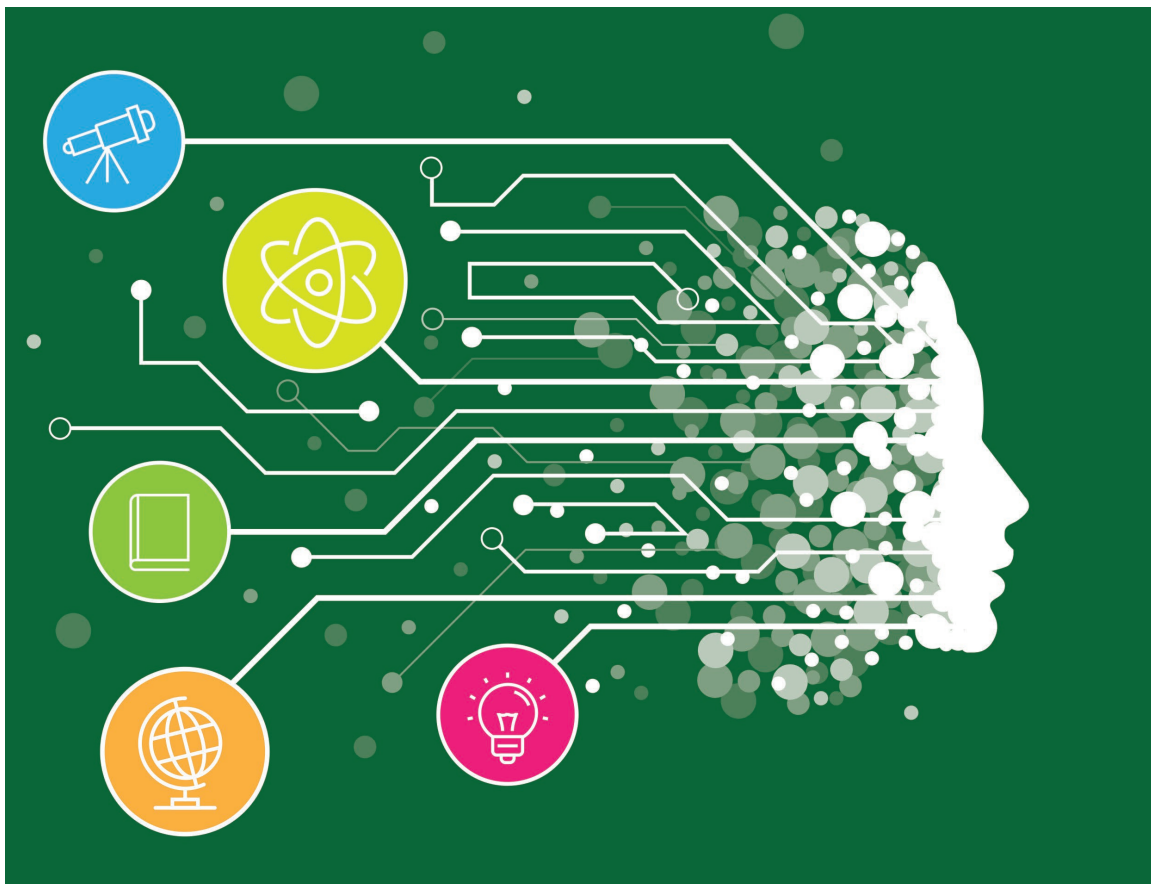
The reality is complex. High schoolers tend to do better on average in a virtual environment than those in elementary school. While virtual schools' LEAP scores lag, their students' ACT scores exceed the state average. Black students in virtual

schooling fall behind the average in some ways and pull ahead in others. For some schools with private backers, profits remain a motive and this factor needs to be monitored. For parents with itinerant lifestyles or children facing special challenges, online schooling might be a godsend or even a last hope.

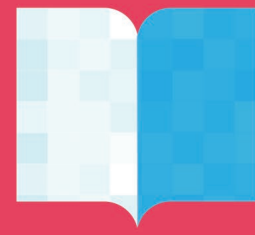
Louisiana is long past the question of whether we should pursue virtual schools. It is now a matter of how we can do it well. It is a matter of whether we are willing to objectively identify, collect and share the meaningful data and information points beyond our traditional means of evaluation, even when that challenges our institutions and assumptions about learning. We have to rethink our methods of oversight. We must provide ourselves a deeper understanding of

transparency. We should plan for disruptions and not just cope with them.

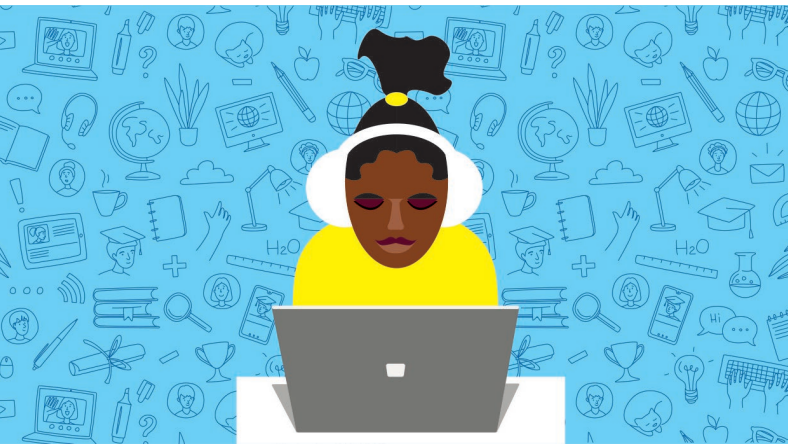
**Louisiana should make legislative, policy and regulatory decisions that amplify the positive aspects of virtual education while mitigating the failures seen nationally and statewide. Virtual education can be improved with targeted interventions and changes to policy and process in lieu of the more punitive or restrictive actions taken by other states in the past. Through this report, PAR has made recommendations specific to the Louisiana context that should ultimately lead to increased transparency, more accurate data on student performance, improved student academic outcomes, and a funding structure that sufficiently covers the costs of operating a virtual school while rewarding student achievement.**



# INTRODUCTION



Technology is part of our daily lives. As Internet service grows faster and more broadly accessible, we communicate on multiple platforms with family, friends and others near and far. It has changed the way we conduct business, with online sales growing each year and more employees working remotely. Many people receive healthcare online, making vital services more accessible to those in rural areas or with limited mobility.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, these connections became not just conveniences but necessary ways to maintain a semblance of normal life and work. Even our youngest children learned to navigate Chromebooks and Zoom to continue their learning virtually at home. This new era of communications and commerce is still advancing and its eventual full impact on the methods and institutions of public education is, for better or worse, uncharted waters. Instant information and a broad selection of opportunities for socializing are presenting provocative new options to the traditional paradigm. Like it or not, online schools and virtual learning are a current reality and a future phenomenon.

In 2020, COVID-related school closures necessitated a broad expansion of online schooling in Louisiana and nationwide. Traditional schools created or expanded virtual learning on an emergency basis with the expectation that the situation would be temporary for the most part. Some teachers taught in a hybrid manner, with some students in a classroom and others at home watching and participating in lessons. Teachers and school districts coped and innovated. Louisiana test scores demonstrated that students statewide generally fell behind when their traditional schools temporarily converted to virtual learning. Meanwhile, test scores for the two statewide virtual charter schools in Louisiana either held steady or showed slight improvement. Even as regular class attendance got back underway, the experience of virtual learning had a lasting impact on teachers and districts, who now understand the importance of being prepared to respond to a future emergency. Some districts even created ongoing virtual schools and programs.

In fact, virtual schools have existed in the United States for more than 25 years and on a steady basis in Louisiana since 2011. The first secondary virtual school was opened in 1995 in Eugene, Oregon, to provide supplemental online courses to high school students.<sup>i</sup> Growth accelerated with a federal grant supporting the nationwide expansion of a Massachusetts school district's virtual programming.<sup>ii</sup>

Virtual schools have since grown to encompass supplemental courses along with full academic programs for students in grades K-12. During the 2002-03 school

year, 328,000 students in the United States were enrolled in some type of virtual schooling, and by 2015 at least 5 million students had taken at least one online course. In 2018, full-time virtual schools served approximately 300,000 students in the United States, up 50 percent from the 2011-12 school year.<sup>iii</sup> According to Politico, by 2015, five states required that students take at least one online course to graduate from high school.

The post-high-school environment also plays a role in the expectations for K-12 learning. Courses at most colleges lean heavily on personal computer connections to the Internet, self-paced instruction and class lectures presented both live and recorded online. Universities across the country have established robust programs for fully online course and degree programs. Since 2018 Louisiana State University has grown from a meager provider to 120 online degrees. It has 12,000 online degree students and aims for 30,000. The work environment for many career fields require the conduct of business, meetings, and training through online connections with ever-evolving varieties of software and social media. Exposure to online learning has become a valuable preparatory experience for the world after high school.

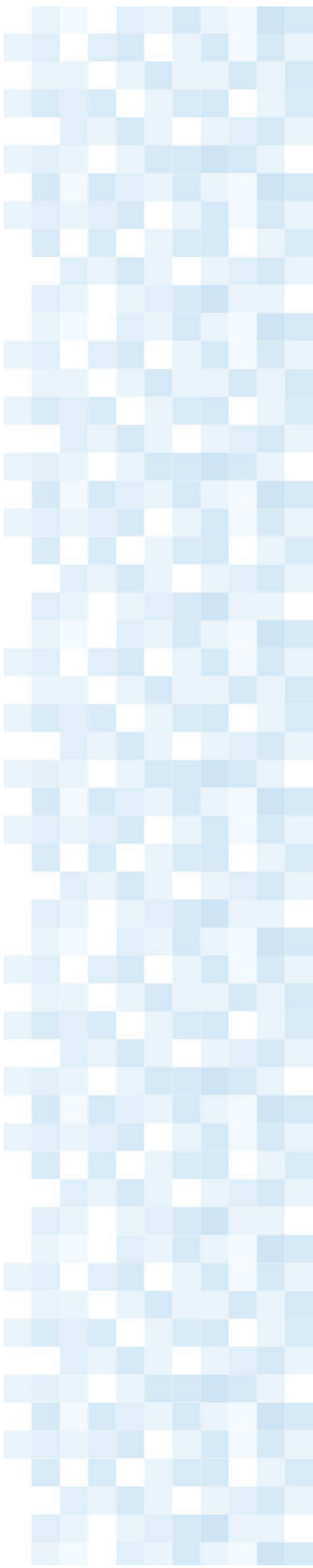
## **The Opportunity and the Problem**

Parental and student demand for virtual schooling is strong in Louisiana. But partly because the virtual schools have shown poor performance scores, the state has enforced limited enrollment. This is the central tension in the discussion of virtual schools in Louisiana. More students want admission to the statewide virtual charter schools than the regulations allow, and

the waiting lists are long. For example, about 3,000 applicants sought eligibility for the 2021 fall semester at a Louisiana virtual charter school with only 1,900 total students. Due to the enrollment cap only 200 could be admitted. Clearly, parental choice is compromised, but the state's pressure and incentives to improve performance are widely regarded as necessary. Eventually, better performance could lead to greater enrollment.

Virtual schools are a compelling option for students in many different circumstances. One of the top reasons parents choose virtual schooling is because their student has struggled with negative experiences or bullying in a traditional school setting. The two Louisiana virtual schools report that this appeal is likely the single most frequent reason parents want their children enrolled. Other students join virtual schools because they are self-motivated and interested in graduating early, they move frequently due to military parents, or are homeschooled students seeking programs recognized by BESE. Some students have health issues or compromised mobility. Some are students in rural areas who want access to advanced courses not offered at their local schools.<sup>iv</sup> However, the rationales behind parental decisions are tracked and reported only informally by the virtual schools and not at all by the state. So, we are missing valuable analysis and perspective that could be provided by practical surveys.

On a broader level, what is generally lacking from the national studies is a clear picture of how and why some students tend to do better in a virtual environment than others. The virtual schools may struggle to meet the needs of non-fluent



## WHAT IS VIRTUAL SCHOOLING?

This PAR report uses the word “virtual” when describing remote learning and online teaching. The term might imply that this type of learning is not real education. However, the term has become ubiquitous and embedded within the institutions and lexicon of the K-12 education field. So, the term is employed here.

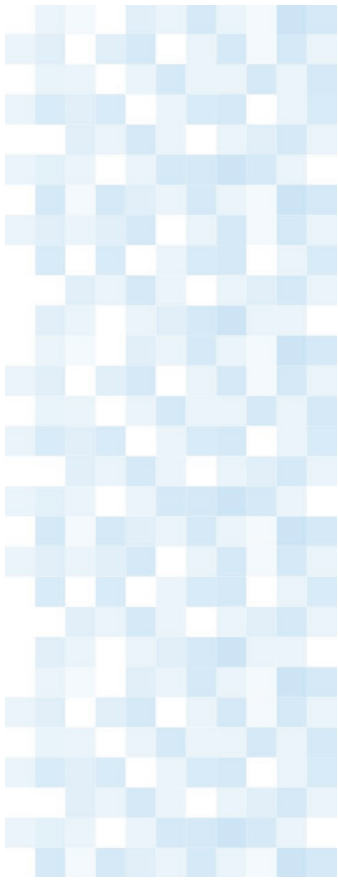
Some definition is in order. Many students in traditional schools take instruction on computers, even in regular classrooms as a supplement to in-person teaching. Dedicated computer classrooms are also common in the public school arena, such as for specialized computer-based courses and self-paced summer-school catch-up programs with teachers on hand for assistance.

Virtual schooling typically refers to formal online teaching outside of a traditional classroom, usually at the student’s home. There is a teacher on the other end, at least for a substantial part of the time. The teacher instruction is often, though not necessarily always, synchronous, meaning a live and real-time online interaction between a teacher and students. This instruction could be offered as partial fulfillment of course requirements or by schools dedicated to full-time learning programs leading toward grade advancement and eventually a diploma.

Local school districts in Louisiana may offer partial or full-blown virtual schooling, with no special regulations or oversight by state authorities. This can be done through the establishment of a BESE-recognized school that can enroll and receive funding for students. Or it can be done via district-run programs where students receive virtual instruction but are, for all BESE and LDOE intents and purposes, tabulated as being enrolled in one of the district’s traditional schools as a designated home base for counting test results and other student accountability measures. This student classification system is significant: Individual schools are subject to state evaluations and metrics that fall under the traditional public-school accountability system but “programs” do not. The districts also can take advantage of online course offerings on a piecemeal basis, to fill gaps when the appropriate teaching skills cannot be found locally or when only a few students would benefit.

Virtual public schools open to students statewide can be operated in Louisiana under a system that classifies them as Type 2 charter schools. Students enroll in these schools for their complete, full-time course work on the appropriate grade level leading toward grade advancement and





high-school graduation. This report highlights the experience and performance of the two such schools in Louisiana, both based in Baton Rouge but serving K-12 students across the state.

The state education board defines these virtual charter schools as “an educational program operated for a minimum of one academic year and covering specified educational learning objectives for the purpose of obtaining a Louisiana-certified diploma, the delivery of such a program being through an electronic medium such that the students are not required to be at a specific location in order receive instruction from a teacher, but instead access instruction remotely through computers and other technology, which may separate the student and teacher by time and space.” The definition also says, “This does not preclude the ability of said program to host face-to-face meetings, including field trips, extracurricular activities, conferences between the student, parents, and teachers, or any such related events.”

Future technological advances could broaden the scope and definition of virtual learning. For purposes of this report, the term will be used broadly to refer to remote or online learning outside of a brick and mortar school building, with an emphasis on the techniques used by virtual charter schools and their students.

English Learners and those with disabilities. Additionally, those students who are struggling in regular brick and mortar schools may continue to fall behind without the close and in-person support of teachers, counselors and interventionists.

## Performance anxiety

Most virtual schools nationwide have demonstrated dismal academic performance over the years. A small number of quality studies are available on the academic performance of students in virtual learning. Early data was promising. A 2004 meta-analysis that looked at academic performance of virtual students between 1999 and 2004 found, “no significant difference in performance between students who participated in online programs and those who were taught in

face-to-face classrooms ... in almost every comparison, students in distance education programs performed as well as students in classroom-based programs.”<sup>v</sup>

As virtual schools expanded their reach, and diversified the type of student they served, recent studies showed the opposite. By 2020, a growing number of studies demonstrated “a negative impact on student achievement when K-12 students move to online formats compared to their usual in-school experience.”

Recent studies and self-reported data have shown, for example:

- Most students in California that attended a virtual school operated by the for-profit Stride K-12 Inc. never graduated from high school.<sup>vi</sup>

- Of the virtual schools with available state ratings, only 48.5 percent were considered acceptable by their state’s governing body for education.<sup>vii</sup>
- While 84 percent of the nation’s youth graduate high school within four years, that number was 50.1 percent for virtual schools overall and 48.5 percent for virtual schools managed by for-profit companies.<sup>viii</sup>

This lagging academic performance is compounded by the operational and financial issues and legal entanglements of some major for-profit operators. Using public data, media reports and official investigations, an NPR report said that virtual schools -- primarily those operated by for-profit companies -- were found to be or suspected of inflating enrollment, fraud and waste. Some schools had student-to-teacher ratios of up to 100 to 1.<sup>ix</sup>

In the wake of COVID-19 school closures, virtual schools nationwide saw their enrollments soar as demand increased. In late 2020, Stride K-12 Inc., a for-profit virtual operator, reported a 57 percent increase in enrollment from the prior year. Connections Academy, another nationwide operator, saw growth of 47 percent. Parental demand for virtual schooling options shows no sign of abating.<sup>x</sup> The virtual school sector could grow as rapidly as policy and governing bodies allow.

## The Louisiana Situation

In Louisiana, students across the state have participated in virtual education in growing numbers, both before and during the pandemic. Virtual services have been provided by traditional public schools and

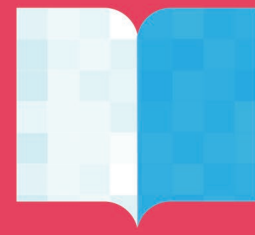
charter schools to offer opportunities for students to take classes unavailable at their home schools, generally at the high school level. Local school systems also operate fully virtual programs that provide all of a student’s education. And two statewide virtual charter schools provide fully virtual programs for students in grades K-12.

In addition to these formats, nearly all local school systems and non-virtual charter schools provided some form of virtual or distance learning options for students during the school closures of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to State Superintendent Dr. Cade Brumley, these options are growing significantly across the state in the wake of COVID-19 closures and the needs identified during the 2020-21 school year.

**“We all know we have a lot of work to do – It’s not in the land of good enough.”**

**Michelle Clayton of University View Academy**

Given this increase in the use of virtual modalities for education, it is in the best interest of the state -- including the Louisiana Legislature, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and Department of Education, parents and students -- to ensure that virtual education services are meeting their mission: to achieve a comparable or better degree of academic success as we expect of brick and mortar schools.



## Local School Systems

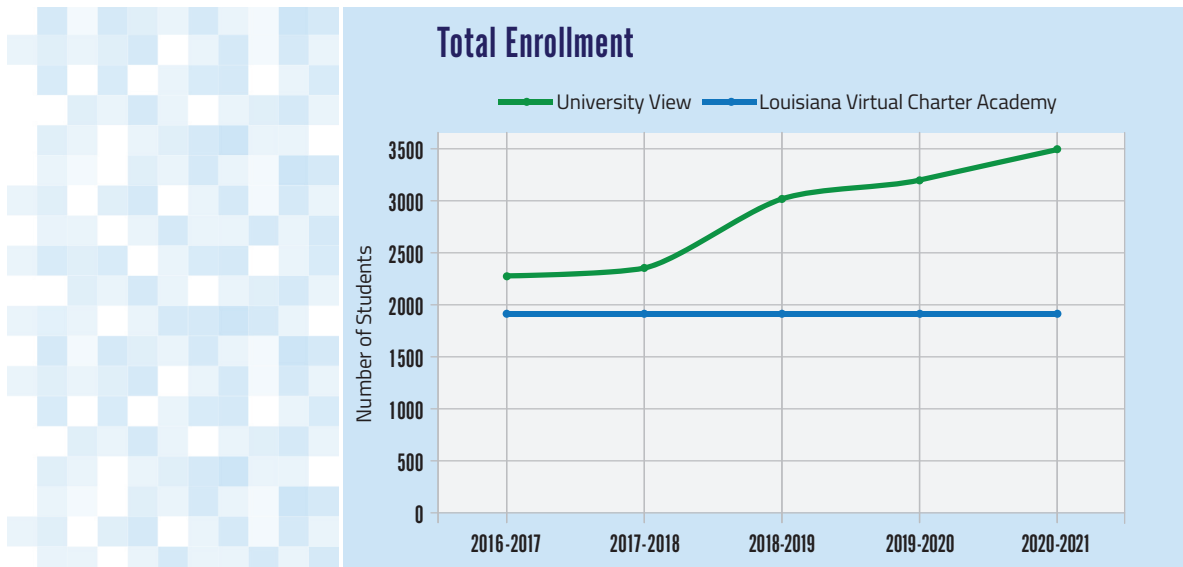
Local school systems have significant autonomy to provide education services in the way they best see fit for their students. This is done primarily in brick and mortar schools. However, school districts have increasingly relied on virtual services to educate students with disciplinary concerns, health needs or those that have experienced bullying or other negative experiences in their neighborhood school. Districts also have gone virtual to provide access to high-school courses they are unable to offer normally because experienced faculty are not available or too few students would benefit from the course offering. This use of virtual programming for high-school courses has been particularly important as Louisiana has increasingly focused on career readiness and student achievement of credentials before high school graduation.

Louisiana's local school systems can approach full-time virtual learning in two ways. They can open a new school,

recognized by the state education board as such, and provide virtual services through that school. Students can be enrolled in the school, which would be subject to the same accountability provisions as all other public schools. The oldest virtual school operated by a local school district in Louisiana is the Virtual Academy of Lafourche, which opened in 2012 and served nearly 500 students in 2020-21. One of the newest is EBR Virtual Academy, expanding from about 30 high-school students in the 2020-21 year to a Fall 2021 opening with several hundred students in grades K-12. The East Baton Rouge Parish School System ramped up the school's size to help deal with the increased parental demand for virtual schooling during a resurging pandemic. Its ambitious plans immediately ran into staffing shortages and other start-up problems.

However, some local school systems have been choosing a second method. They open virtual programs that are not recognized





as schools or as any officially recognized structure by the state education board or department. For example, school systems may start programs that operate virtually and serve expelled students, serve as temporary placements, or for other reasons.

to the accountability provisions that BESE-recognized public schools are measured by. The students are accountable, but the local virtual school or program is not. For this reason, it is unclear the extent to which students statewide are receiving full or part time virtual education and how those students are performing academically.

**“For parents, some choose virtual because of lifestyle. For some, it’s their last chance.”**

**Dr. Kelli Peterson, education scholar**

The education department does not collect data on these local programs or independently measure how students enrolled in them are performing as a group. Often, these students’ test scores are applied to a designated brick-and-mortar school – such as the one the student previously attended – only for purposes of tracking student performance. The virtual school or program itself is not categorized by the state as a separate entity and is not subject

### Statewide Virtual Charter Schools

Louisiana’s pair of statewide virtual schools are Type 2 charter schools. Charter schools are public schools created by local districts or BESE to provide innovative, independent institutions of learning. Type 2 charters are authorized specifically by BESE and may serve students statewide. While the local operators of both Louisiana statewide virtual schools are non-profit organizations, one of the charters contracts for services with Stride K-12 Inc., the largest for-profit virtual school provider in the nation.

Virtual charter schools, like all charter schools, are largely regulated by BESE Bulletin 126 “Charter Schools”, which is based on the requirements established by the Louisiana Legislature.<sup>xi</sup> The virtual

schools are subject to nearly all of the same laws, policies, and procedures as all other charter schools authorized by BESE. But the virtual schools have additional requirements to ensure access to disadvantaged populations, including providing technology and Internet access directly to students that are economically disadvantaged.

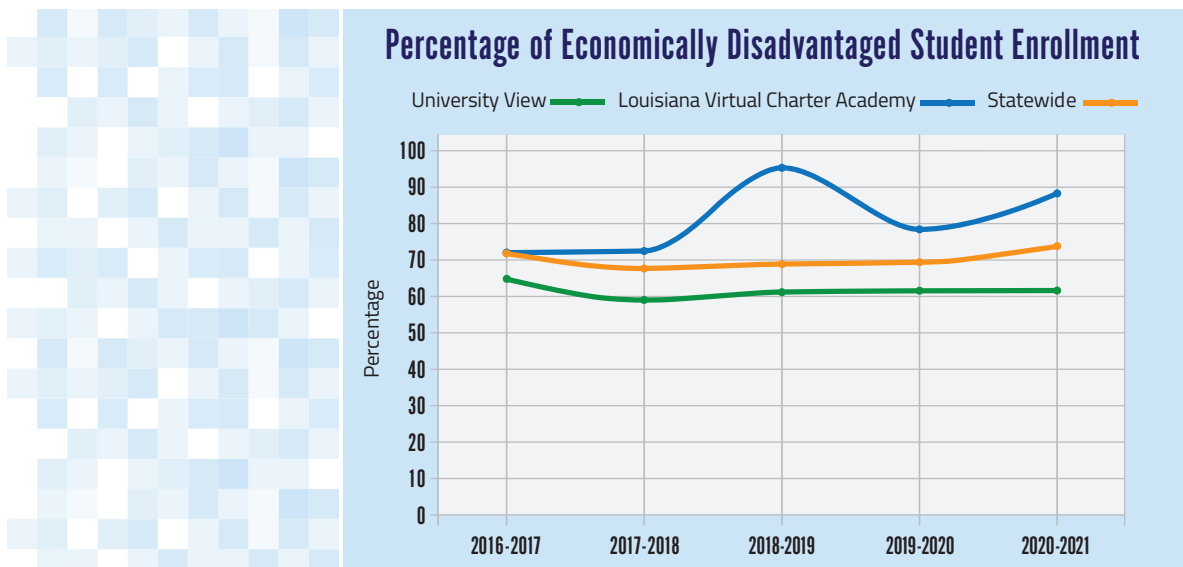
Virtual charter schools do differ from other charter schools in some ways. They receive 10 percent less money than the usual local portion allotted by the state funding formula for public schools, including charter schools. Known as the Minimum Foundation Program, this state funding system supports all other charter schools and traditional districts at a higher rate. The lower rate provided to virtual charter schools was decided by BESE under the belief that providing an education virtually was less costly than in-person given the lack of operational considerations such as building maintenance and bussing. A 2019 law and related BESE policy also require virtual charter schools to regularly submit plans for attendance and addressing truant and disengaged students. Additionally, the application

process for a new virtual charter school requires that the applicant provide a plan for opportunities for in-person instruction for all students along with a plan to provide in-person instruction for struggling students at least 20 percent of the time.

## High Demand

Enrollment at the two Louisiana virtual schools altogether grew by 5.6% from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021, according to the state education department. Their enrollment could have grown more but they are both subject to enrollment caps imposed by their charter agreements with the state.

The schools report that significant numbers of new applications were submitted for the 2021-2022 school year. At University View Academy -- a virtual school with about 3,500 students -- 960 new fully completed applications were submitted. Up to 164 of those students can receive a placement under the enrollment cap, leaving a wait list of about 800. The Louisiana Virtual Charter Academy, which has close to 2,000 students, turned away about 3,000 applications because



of ineligibility and the enrollment cap. In the past, BESE allowed for changes in one of the schools' state contracts to offer higher enrollments because the school met expansion requirements and also in response to the 2016 floods in the Baton Rouge region. However, the current caps have been in place for some time.

Louisiana's virtual charter schools have not been immune to the struggles of virtual schools nationally, though parental demand

continues to grow. They have suffered from low academic performance, struggled at times with high levels of non-attendance and truancy, and have sometimes operated with large student-teacher ratios. This information is available due to the strong and comprehensive regulatory processes that govern the operation of a Type 2 charter school. Yet, the two schools have continually been adjusting to try to improve. Let's take a closer look in the next chapter.





## PAR's Analysis and Resources

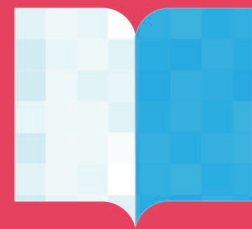
In this report, PAR focuses primarily on the Type 2 charter virtual schools: Louisiana Virtual Charter Academy (LAVCA) and University View Academy (UVA). The analysis included student demographics, academic model, and performance across accountability metrics in academics, and operational and financial areas. PAR researchers benefited from the availability of data and information on these schools mandated for collection by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). In the near future, BESE might be considering two or three new virtual schools as charter applicants, if they meet the eligibility guidelines.

PAR outlines and analyzes the challenges and successes that virtual charter schools in Louisiana have experienced from the perspective of the objective data and the experiences and opinions of informed sources. Policy recommendations propose ways that virtual charter school performance and operations can be addressed by school and government officials. Additionally, given the lack of information available about local school systems' virtual schooling, PAR makes recommendations that address the need for transparency on enrollment and performance of students enrolled in these programs.

Components of this report are based on research of the performance of both Type 2 virtual charter schools against the regulatory framework established by statute, BESE and LDOE, and a review of the schools' historical data on student population, financial, academic and operational performance. Data on performance are provided through the 2020-21 year as available. Appendix A and Appendix B outline the laws, policies, and LDOE procedures that the virtual Type 2 charter schools in Louisiana are subject to, along with their academic, organizational, and financial performance over the years. Given that these schools are charter schools, additional regulations apply and those can also be found in Appendix A. Additionally, interviews were conducted with stakeholders including school operators, an elected member of BESE, and the current and former state superintendents.

PAR's lead consultant on this project is Laura Hawkins, Chief of Strategic Advancement at New Schools for New Orleans. She formerly served in the Louisiana Department of Education as Interim Assistant Superintendent for District Planning and Portfolio and as Chief of Staff for the Office of School Improvement. She is a former Chief of Staff at the Louisiana Recovery School District and a Research Manager at the Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University.

## PART II: LOUISIANA'S STATEWIDE VIRTUAL SCHOOLS



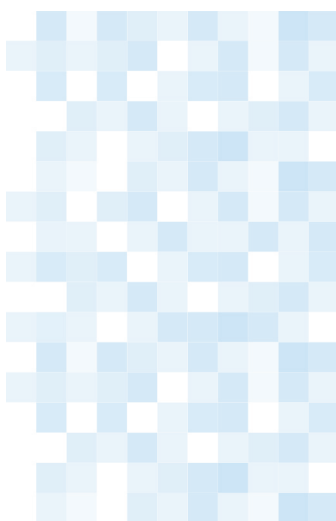
### University View Academy

University View Academy (UVA) was authorized by BESE to open and serve students statewide for the 2011-12 school year, one of two new virtual charter schools authorized that year. Initially, the non-profit charter board (Foundation for Louisiana Students) contracted with a national for-profit company called Connections Academy to manage the school, which at the time was called Louisiana Connections Academy. That relationship ended after a few years when the charter school board desired further control over the academic direction of the school.<sup>xii</sup> Currently, all core staff are employees of University View's board and not any outside management agency.

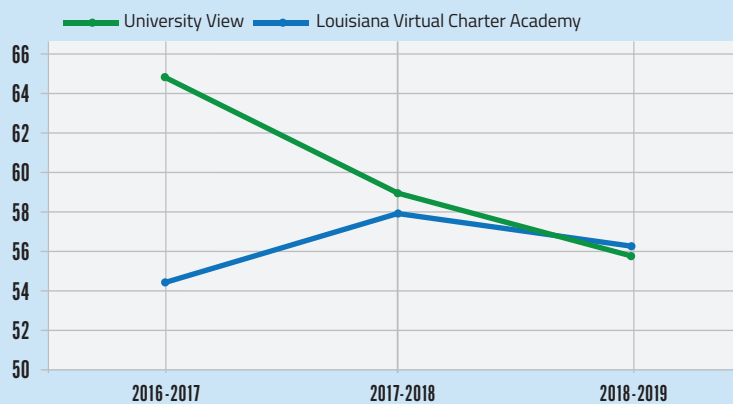
University View was granted a six-year renewal of its contract with the state in 2015. BESE must make a decision in the fall or winter of 2021 to determine whether the school will receive a new contract to operate beyond the 2021-22 school year. More information about this process and its requirements can be found in Appendix A.

UVA provides technology to all enrolled families including the necessary hardware and Internet connectivity. During the 2020-21 school year, students received synchronous instruction (instruction in real time from live teachers done online) from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. every day. During the 2021-22 school year, students will move to three hours per day, four days per week of synchronous learning in core academic subjects (math, English Language Arts, science, and social studies). Afternoons are dedicated to independent study for students who are on grade level and small group instruction for struggling students.

Student progress is monitored with a weekly review. Attendance is assessed every week to provide maximum flexibility for students to complete their work. Students with habitual non-attendance are subject to a process approved by BESE that includes an escalating intervention starting with calls and letters to the family. The student is dropped from the school's rolls after four weeks of no contact. UVA has stated that disengagement has fallen to 3% of student



### School Performance Score





enrollment during the most recent school year, down from a range of 10% to 15% in prior years.

UVA uses its own online platform to deliver what the LDOE currently refers to as Tier 1 curricular content to students. Tier 1 curricula is that which is rated by LDOE as being most closely aligned to state standards and therefore most effective for student learning. Implementation of Tier 1 curricula was a difficult one for the virtual schools because of the technical and instructional modifications that had to be made to existing online educational systems. UVA worked with its teachers to adapt existing Tier 1 curriculum to tailor it to its platform. UVA modified its own proprietary platform to meet the Louisiana standards.

approximately 70% of parents say they enroll because they or their children have had a negative experience at a traditional school. For 2021-22, UVA received 960 new applicants, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but will only be able to accept 164 due to the enrollment caps imposed by BESE in their charter contracts. UVA will have a wait list of nearly 800, equivalent to about 22% of its enrollment.

## Louisiana Virtual Charter Academy

Louisiana Virtual Charter Academy (LAVCA) was also authorized to open in 2011-12 as one of the two new virtual charter schools serving students statewide. The non-profit board that received the charter, Community School for Apprenticeship Learning Inc. (CSAL), contracts with the national for-profit company Stride K-12 Inc. to provide academic and other services to the school. Nearly all school employees are employed by CSAL and not by the management company. CSAL also operates two brick and mortar schools in Baton Rouge: Madison Preparatory Academy and Community School for Apprenticeship Learning. LAVCA's most recent contract renewal was in 2018 for a three-year term. Like UVA, they also will be considered this year by BESE for a renewal of their charter.

The 2018 decision made by BESE to renew the charter for LAVCA was made although the school did not meet the academic requirements for renewal as outlined in Bulletin 126. BESE can vote to override its policies as long as doing so does not violate state statute. Charter schools in their second term are required to have a Letter Grade of a C for renewal;

**“Elementary education is tactile. As you get older you become a more independent learner.”**

### Dr. Kelli Peterson, education scholar

UVA Superintendent Michelle Clayton describes similarities between UVA and brick and mortar schools. UVA uses a Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) with Amazon bucks. It maintains staffing similar to traditional schools, including a 20:1 student-teacher ratio and full teacher teaming in the early grades. UVA recently purchased a building that will be used for in-person clubs, activities and social events for students.

Parents choose UVA for multiple reasons. Although these choices are not formally surveyed by the state, UVA reports that

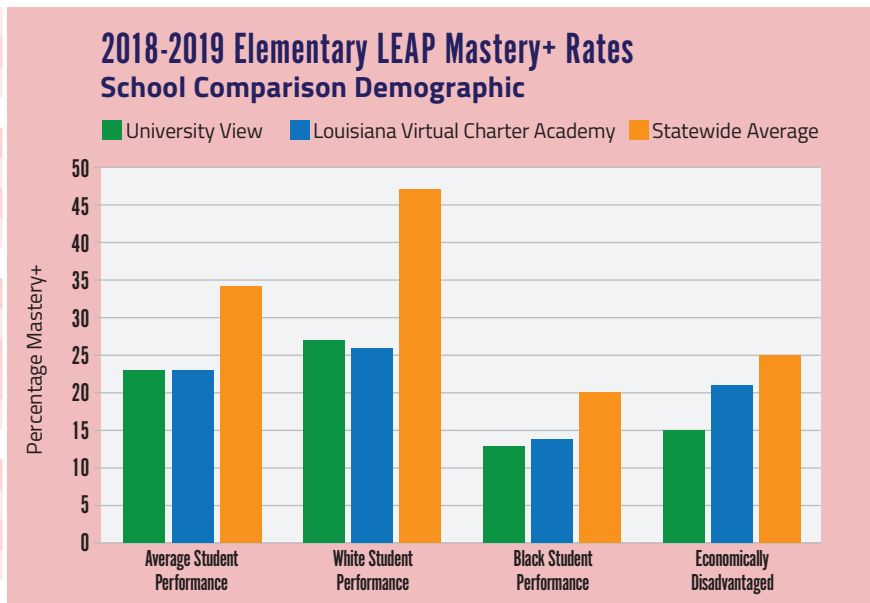
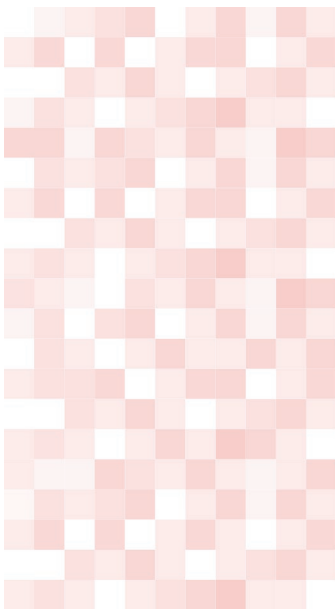
LAVCA's Letter Grade was a D. This renewal was contingent on LAVCA taking certain actions to address issues with academic performance, student retention and truancy before any future renewal decisions would be made. This included:

1. Hiring eight additional staff members, whose role is to re-engage students that are truant or otherwise disengaged, by the 2019-20 school year;
2. By 2019-20, requiring two days per week of in-person time for all students in grades 3-5 who are not yet proficient via the establishment of six statewide centers and providing transportation to those centers;
3. Offering five Jump Start career pathways for the 2019-20 school year and hiring a staff member to build and implement a multi-year statewide Jump Start plan by January 2020; and
4. Implementing Tier 1 curricula for all grades by the 2020-21 school year.

LAVCA loans technology to all enrolled families including the necessary hardware

and Internet connectivity on an as-needed basis, typically tied to family income. During the 2020-21 school year, students in grades kindergarten through fifth received three classes of synchronous instruction four days each week. For students in middle and high school, synchronous learning is provided four days per week for between four and six classes as needed. When not in synchronous learning classes, students are expected to spend time on the online platform completing their learning plan. Fridays are used as days for catching up on work from earlier in the week or for outings and field trips.

Student progress is monitored on a real-time basis. LAVCA's platform allows teachers to monitor daily use, unlike systems used by districts routinely or specifically during the pandemic, such as Google Classroom. Additionally, participation is counted on a daily basis and students are expected to log in to the platform every day. Attendance is measured using a combination of daily log-ins, progress and mastery of the content. Like University View, LAVCA follows a plan approved by BESE





## LOUISIANA'S ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

This report refers to various components of Louisiana's accountability system, which is established in law and which is regulated through BESE Bulletin 111. More detailed information is included in Appendix A.

Common terms and components of the Louisiana School Accountability System referenced in this report include the following.

### 1. LEAP 2025 and Achievement Levels

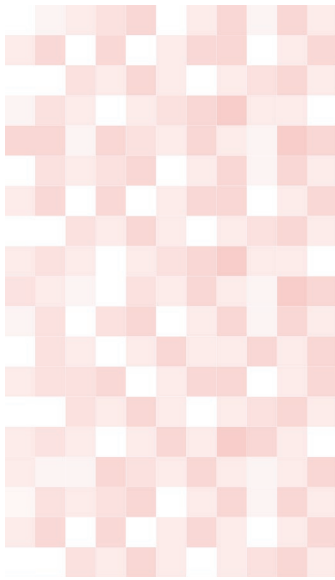
Annually, students in grades 3 through high school take grade or subject-appropriate standardized tests, the entirety of which are referred to as LEAP 2025. Students in grades 3 through 8 take a test in four core subjects each year: English Language Arts, math, science, and social studies. In high school, students are tested in certain core subjects at the completion of the course, including subjects such as Algebra I and Biology.

Students can score one of five achievement levels on each subject-area test: Unsatisfactory, Approaching Basic, Basic, Mastery and Advanced. Students scoring Mastery or Advanced are considered to have mastered the grade-level content, be "on grade level" and prepared for the following grade. The state's goal is for all students to be at Mastery or above by 2025.

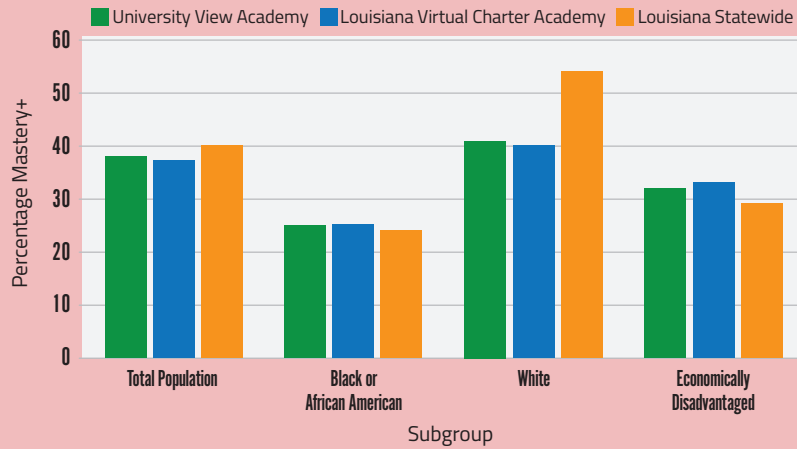
### 2. School Performance Scores and Letter Grades

LDOE uses LEAP 2025 data, in addition to other components such as graduation rates and scores on the ACT, to calculate a School Performance Score (SPS) for each school annually. The SPS dictates school Letter Grades, according to the table below. They are also used to make decisions regarding whether schools require intervention under the state's ESSA plan and whether or not charter schools can receive an extension or renewal of their contracts.

Letter Grade	SPS required through 2021	SPS required through 2024	SPS required in 2025 and beyond
A	90.0 – 150.0	95.0 – 150.0	100 – 150
B	75.0 – 89.9	80.0 – 94.9	85.0 – 99.9
C	60.0 – 74.9	65.0 – 79.9	70.0 – 84.9
D	50.0 – 59.9	50.0 – 64.9	50 – 69.9
F	0 – 49.9	0 – 49.9	0 – 49.9



## 2018-2019 High School LEAP 2025 Mastery+ Rates School Comparison by Demographic



that includes an escalating intervention process which can result in the dropping of the student from the school's rolls after four weeks of no contact.

LAVCA uses an online technology platform owned by Stride K-12. Until the 2019-20 school year, LAVCA used curriculum also developed by Stride K-12. However, as part of the contract renewal, BESE required the school to implement Tier 1 curricula for ELA and Math no later than the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. LAVCA, in partnership with Stride K-12, has modified and submitted its curriculum for approval as Tier 1 by the state education department. As this review moves through that lengthy process, the school has adapted third party Tier 1 products to be used on its platform.

Head of School Danielle Scott said the process to adapt the content for their platform and for teachers to implement it has been challenging.<sup>xiii</sup> Scott said the school's new truancy work has been a particular success this last year. Regional truancy staff have built productive relationships with local parish authorities that have allowed them to

address truancy faster and more effectively.

According to LAVCA, parents choose their school for multiple reasons, but they seem to mirror the reasons that parents select UVA. The majority of LAVCA's students had experienced bullying or other problems in their previous local school. Other common reasons include health conditions that keep a student homebound or parents who frequently travel for their jobs. LAVCA received initial applications for about 3,000 new students this year, most likely due to COVID, but was able to accept only about 200 due to the enrollment cap.

## Enrollment and Parent Demand

University View's enrollment grew by more than 50% from 2016 to 2020. In 2016, the school served 2,275 students, expanding to 3,495 by the recently ended 2020-21 school year. This was possible due to multiple contract amendments approved by BESE allowing the school to raise the cap on enrollment. UVA's enrollment increased about 5% for Fall 2021. LAVCA's enrollment has remained consistent at around 1,900 since 2014.

The parent demand for virtual options statewide cannot currently be filled by the two Type 2 virtual charter schools, which provide strictly full-time education at home for K-12 students. Some of these families, along with others who have not applied to UVA or LAVCA, will likely be served by the increasing number of virtual options on the district level, making the need for data and transparency about these local schools and programs a priority.

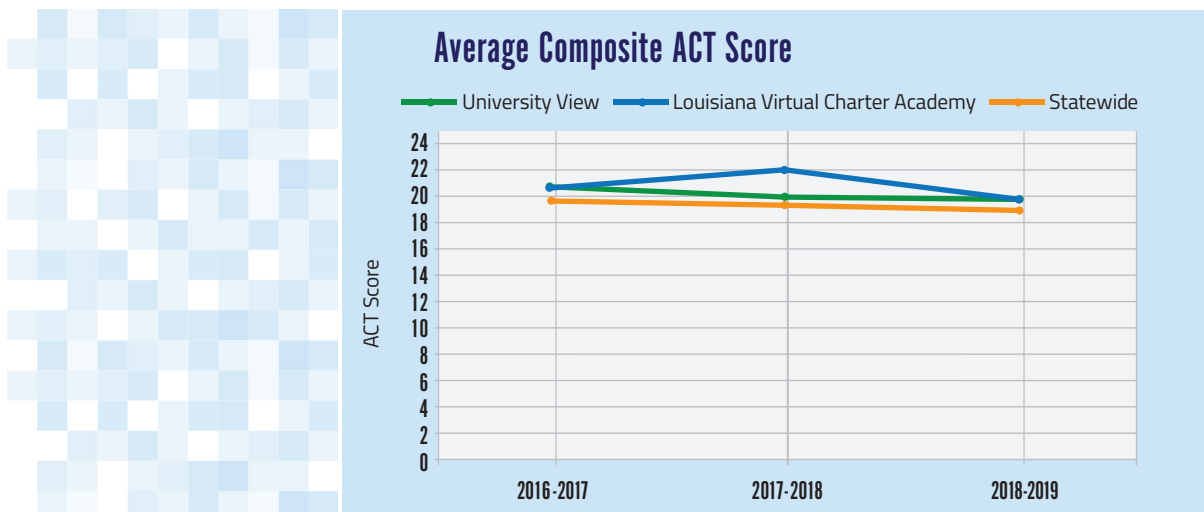
## Pre-Pandemic Academic Performance

Overall, UVA’s academic performance remained stable, with letter grades of a C, until the greatest expansion in enrollment between the 2017-18 and 2018-19 years when it fell to a D. Since opening, LAVCA has consistently received a letter grade of a D with a steady decline in School Performance Scores over the years. However, looking at the data on academic performance at both virtual charter schools, the consideration of different metrics in isolation paints a picture of schools that are successful with some students in some grades while failing to meet standards with others.

Both schools performed poorly with elementary-level students, with Black students performing significantly worse than Whites. Both UVA’s and LAVCA’s LEAP Mastery rates at the elementary level in 2018-19, the most recent year for which data is available, were 23%, well below the state average of 34%. Black elementary students at LAVCA achieved Mastery at only 13% while at UVA the rate was 14%, compared to a statewide rate of 20%.

LEAP Mastery at the high school level, however, shows greater success with student performance, particularly among Black students. Both virtual charters’ LEAP Mastery for high school students was much closer to the statewide mastery level. Black high school students at both UVA and LAVCA achieved slightly higher Mastery levels than the state. Both schools also did better than the state with economically disadvantaged high school students.

ACT averages have been consistently higher at the statewide virtual schools. UVA’s average was 19.5 in 2018-19 compared to 18.7 statewide in the same year. LAVCA’s ACT average was even better at 20.8 in 2018-19.

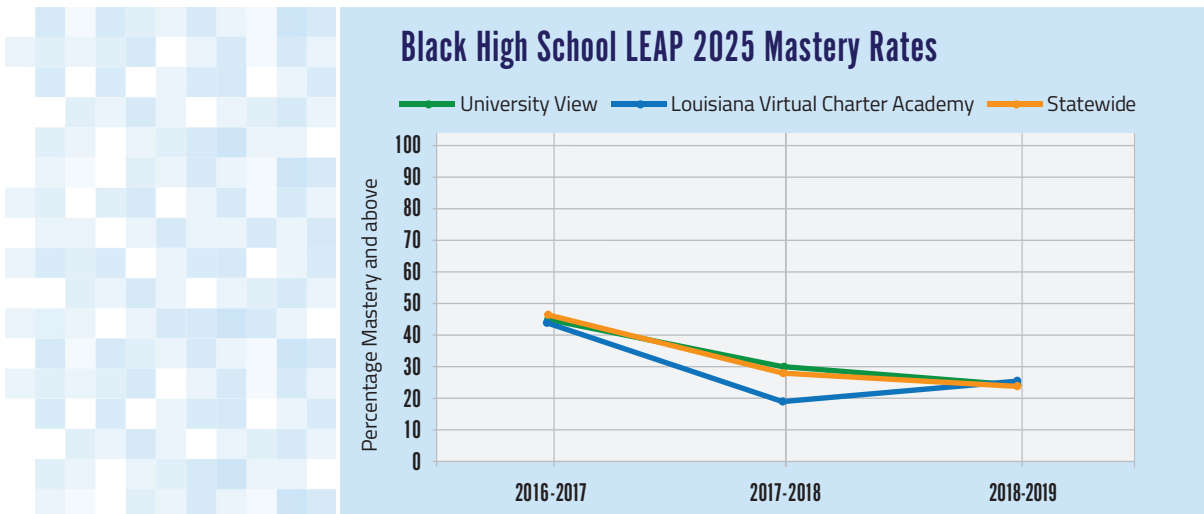


Despite better performance on LEAP and ACT, both schools prior to the pandemic had low cohort graduation rates, which represents the percentage of students graduating high school within four years. UVA's cohort graduation remains significantly below average (49.7% for the class of 2019, compared to 80.1% in the most recent average statewide data available), as does LAVCA's (48.6% in for the class of 2019). However, the most recent data for the class of 2020 show improvements for both LAVCA (52%, a 3-point increase) and UVA (66.3%, a remarkable increase of 17 points) while the state improved to 84%.

A low cohort graduation rate does not mean that a lot of virtual school students are dropping out. The students may be taking longer to advance through the grade levels for a variety of reasons. According to interviews with virtual school providers, their population of students is often transient and generally enters a virtual school already behind their high school cohort and lacking the number of Carnegie units they should have earned by that point in their career. This appears to be evident in the data. The disparities in the data across

different measures of student performance for high school students, along with the overall low performance of elementary students, may lead to School Performance Scores and Letter Grades that do not accurately reflect how well the schools are serving students at different grade levels or measure the true impact that these schools are having on students who enter behind their peers.

BESE, in conjunction with LDOE, should either implement an alternate accountability structure, at least in some areas of performance, given these disparities in the data, or report data publicly in a way that more accurately and transparently represents school performance across different metrics. LAVCA has submitted a letter to the head of the LDOE's Accountability commission requesting that considerations be made in developing a virtual school accountability system and in the calculation of School Performance Scores for these schools. Those considerations include: the definition of student mobility in the VAM calculation, student progress toward graduation, high school graduation rate, and achievement and growth percentages. Each of these



points should be considered as options, not to flatter the virtual schools, but to arrive at a clearer and more data-supported outlook on what works and doesn't work with online learning, and for whom.

Additionally, BESE currently requires that all newly applying charter schools must commit to using curricula aligned to state standards in order to be approved to open. This requirement should remain in place and should not be modified or watered down for virtual schools wishing to use their own or a management company's curricula. BESE should mandate this for all virtual charter schools upon renewal of their charter. Raising student academic performance on the LEAP means using materials that teach the state standards that are being tested.

## Attendance and Truancy

UVA reports attendance rates comparable to statewide averages and much lower truancy rates than the state average. LAVCA reports nearly perfect attendance rates and truancy rates of zero. It's unclear whether these rates might be due to reporting differences because of how virtual schools may handle truancy or the relationships they have with official truancy officers. Despite the data reported by the state department of education, truancy and disengagement were frequently raised as concerns by the statewide schools in the years prior to the pandemic. By their nature, virtual schools require something other than checking physical attendance every day or every class period in school. The schools felt that state law and BESE policy did not address their unique situation, exacerbating disengagement and worsening the problem. In fact, truancy was such a concern that one of the

requirements for LAVCA's contract renewal mandated the hiring of additional staff to address the issue.

During PAR's interviews with the school leadership of UVA and LAVCA, they communicated that there had been a significant improvement in truancy and engagement over the last two years. LAVCA's additional staff built meaningful relationships with truancy and child welfare officers statewide which the school viewed as a particular success and planned to maintain as a practice.



Additionally, a new state law and BESE policy require that Type 2 charters submit plans to BESE for approval on their attendance and truancy policies. These plans include steps that schools can take when students are disengaged for long periods of time that help with the negative accountability impacts that can occur when these students remain on virtual schools' rolls despite their non-attendance. BESE should

go beyond the existing rules for Type 2s to set requirements for all virtual schools and programs, including those operated by local school systems, to track and address truancy and to ensure that students and parents are being served and held accountable by their local child welfare and truancy officers and court systems.

## Student-to-Teacher Ratios and Class Sizes

At UVA, 72.7% of classes had an average class size of fewer than 33 students per teacher, according to the most recent available data from 2018-19. Approximately 46% of students were in classes with 20 or fewer students per teacher. These percentages are similar to those found in brick and mortar schools. However, at LAVCA, 58% of classes had class sizes of more than 33 students per teacher. Approximately 38% of students were in classes with 20 or fewer students per teacher.

Across the two statewide virtual schools and within schools among different grades, there are vastly different class sizes reported. BESE should establish policy that creates maximum class sizes and student-teacher ratios for all virtual settings that are similar to those found in brick and mortar schools with some variance allowed for the nature of virtual instruction, grade levels and subjects, and the differing ways that schools might structure their classroom teacher teams. For example, a kindergarten teacher might have a much smaller number of students they teach and at that grade there should be a smaller student-to-teacher ratio. By comparison, a high-school chemistry teacher responsible for a single subject might have a larger overall student-to-teacher ratio but both grades would

have class sizes that ensure that all students can receive the attention they need to succeed. These requirements, and data on the schools' ratios and class sizes, should be made easily available to parents and the general public.

## Financial Operations

According to the Charter Performance Compact, UVA met needed financial performance requirements in all but the last year available. In that year, UVA's fund balance was below the requirement due to the recent purchase of property. LAVCA met needed financial performance requirements in all recent years. Overall, the school reported that it spent only \$43 per pupil on central office overhead compared to UVA's amount of \$889 and the state average of \$1,617. But this is not an apples-to-apples comparison. This low figure by LAVCA is affected by how payments to the management company Stride K-12 are being reported. LAVCA counts only seven staff members in its central office, whereas the bulk of personnel are covered under its contract with Stride.

Interestingly, LAVCA reported that more than 95% of MFP dollars were expended on instruction, vastly exceeding the statewide requirement of 70% and district and charter averages which hover around 70%. Again, this could be due to how the organization categorizes its spending on central office costs versus how it considers its payments to the private company Stride K-12.

These virtual schools provide full-day educational services to students in grades K-12, as do traditional public schools. They receive 90 percent of the local portion of MFP funding per student that is provided to all other charter and district schools.



This is because it is assumed that the cost of educating a student virtually is less than in a brick and mortar school.

## Virtual education during the pandemic

The state education department released the results of the LEAP tests that students took in the spring of 2021. These results were highly anticipated because of concerns that students had fallen behind in their progress due to the disruptions of the pandemic. Large numbers of schools had temporarily switched to online learning in the past year, either part-time or full-time, with a variety of instruction methods and technical access.

The average percent of students scoring Mastery and above statewide declined by 4 percentage points. While this decrease was not as significant a decline as many expected, it lowered the percentage of students on grade-level statewide to only 30%. LDOE noted in its release that students who learned in-person “significantly out-performed” those who learned remotely.

The statewide virtual charter schools did not experience this significant drop in scores. LAVCA saw an overall decline of 1 percentage point from 25% Mastery overall to 24%. UVA, on the other hand, saw an overall 5 percentage point increase, with 30% of students achieving Mastery, the same as the state average.

Both LAVCA (20.8) and UVA’s (19.5) Class of 2020 had higher average ACT scores than the state at large (18.7), keeping on trend with the 2019 scores. On-time graduation rates continue to lag the state, especially at LAVCA, where, for example, fewer than 40% of Black students graduate with their cohort.

The latest data underscore PAR’s recommendations. Louisiana’s virtual

charter schools continue to need stringent oversight, though LDOE and BESE should consider the ways in which these schools may serve a different population than traditional schools and what that could mean for their accountability metrics. More urgently, however, is the need to develop regulations and oversight measures for the virtual programs and schools that are being operated newly by local school districts. Students who received more of their instruction virtually during the pandemic via programs operated by districts performed worse on LEAP than students who were learning in-person for the majority of the time.

The decline in test scores could partly be due to interruptions in students’ lives that were caused by the pandemic and unrelated to how they received their education. Also, the traditional schools faced unique challenges with their lack of experience and preparation in conducting virtual learning as a primary instructional method. As we continue to expand virtual education across the state, in response to either parent demand or on-going emergencies like COVID-19, action on the part of LDOE and BESE is paramount to ensuring that students are receiving a comparable or better quality of instruction and availability of opportunities as students attending brick and mortar campuses.

### 2020-2021 School Performance Data All grades and Subjects % Scoring Mastery and Above

	2019	2021
State	34%	30%
LAVCA	25%	24%
UVA	25%	30%

The state did not provide subgroup data by school this year. At the state level, black students fell 5 points from 20% to 15%. ED students fell 4 points from 25% to 21%.

**Elementary (Grades 3-8)  
All Subjects Scoring Mastery and Above**

	2019	2021
State	34%	29%
LAVCA	23%	23%
UVA	23%	28%

The state did not provide Mastery+ numbers for all high-school tests in a comparable way as elementary scores were released. Without the number of testers, we cannot calculate this. However, given the

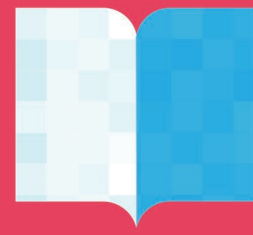
similarity in the overall numbers and the numbers for grades 3-8, it can be assumed that high-school students saw similar movement in scores.

**ACT**

	2019	2020
State	18.9	18.7
LAVCA	19.7	20.8
UVA	18.9	19.5

**Cohort Graduation Rate, Class of 2020**

	All Students	Black Students	ED Students
State	84%	81%	79.7%
LAVCA	52%	39.4%	46.7%
UVA	66.3%	64.3%	64.2%



**Most states have generally responded to problems with virtual schooling by limiting the number of virtual schools allowed in the state, putting a short-term moratorium on new schools, closing schools for poor performance, and attempting to recoup what they believe were misspent funds.<sup>xiv</sup> There has been less emphasis by policy-makers on driving improvement in existing virtual schools and programs through changes to policy and law and in better data and analytics, despite knowing that virtual schooling is bound to be a permanent fixture of the American education landscape.**

According to State Superintendent Dr. Cade Brumley, an increasing number of district school systems are developing a range of virtual options for students. Districts are operating and developing a greater variety of programming in addition to increasing the number of placements available. The local districts are demonstrating that there is an important place in Louisiana for virtual programs and schools to address student needs in response to the parent demand.

However, there is no current requirement for BESE or LDOE to collect information specifically on the performance of the local virtual schools or programs. While student scores and performance are tracked, the information is not reported on a virtual program basis by the districts. This reporting gap is quite different from the statewide virtual charter schools, which are meticulously measured.

Additionally, no framework exists for the approval or regulation of local virtual schools by BESE in the same way that, for

example, alternative schools and programs are regulated. Dr. Brumley noted that LDOE is not yet working on a plan for collecting this information or considering any further oversight or regulations.

## Oversight

PAR proposes that BESE, in conjunction with LDOE, develop policies and procedures that:

- Define what a virtual program and school are at the local district level;
- Require the reporting of data components at least annually to include information on enrollment, including special education and economically disadvantaged status and race along with the reason for virtual placement (i.e., parent choice, disciplinary action, etc.);
- Include the provision of data such that LDOE can separate the academic performance of students in virtual programs from those in brick and mortar schools;
- Define the minimum required provision of technology for students along with the minimum hours that educational services will be provided and;
- Based on this data, develop policies to identify and hold accountable locally operated virtual schools and programs for student performance.

## Transparency and Costs

There is currently a lack of transparency and understanding about what it actually costs to educate a student virtually, how virtual charter schools are spending the state and local funding they receive, and the extent to which for-profit management companies or administrative personnel

make up these costs. BESE, in conjunction with LDOE, should:

- Adopt a funding model for these schools that incentivizes improved performance. Transparency measures should shed light on the amount of money channeling to the national virtual education corporations. Other states have implemented funding models based on the academic performance of students, including graduation completion, or upon the cost basis of educating the student using the school's academic model. The funding model should take into consideration any in-person requirements that BESE makes on virtual charter schools.
- Develop policy with provisions that require standards of reporting which better differentiate funding provided to management companies and administrative personnel versus that spent locally on instructing students. In essence, the state currently is trying to use a traditional 20th Century school funding analysis on a 21st Century virtual school financing system.

## Increasing the Educational Impact

In addition to the policy recommendations above, PAR recommends that together, BESE and LDOE take the following actions:

- Analyze the academic performance of each type of student (grade, any special needs, reason for being enrolled, etc.) and determine which type of students are succeeding or struggling most in these schools. Officials could then establish a required number of in-person hours for struggling students, or all students, as necessary to improve or maintain academic performance at an

acceptable level. This approach is being required for newly applying virtual charter schools but this requirement should be expanded to encompass all full-time virtual schools or programs;

- Require that all virtual programs and schools offer additional services and opportunities outside of basic instruction. This can include services related to student health such as mental health counseling, additional academic services such as college and career counseling or internships and work experience, along with enrichment opportunities including sports, clubs, dances, or other opportunities for students to gather outside of the online classroom context; and



- The LDOE's primary focus over the past five years has been to work with schools and districts toward adopting curricula that align to state standards, providing professional development on that curriculum and aligning internal assessments to it. Students who master this curriculum are mastering the state standards that they will be tested on during LEAP 2025 testing. Given the anticipated move of additional students to full or partial virtual settings in coming years through the growth of these opportunities in local school systems, LDOE should ensure that there are sufficient options for state

standards-aligned curricula that can be readily implemented on online platforms. Additionally, it should ensure that preferred professional development and assessment providers in its vendor guides are offering products and training that consider the needs of online providers.

- As all or nearly all local school districts develop virtual schools and programs as permanent fixtures of their educational offerings, LDOE should coordinate opportunities for districts to learn from each other and to share resources and best practices. There is no need for each district to reinvent the wheel or for small districts to struggle due to lack of resources, expertise, or economies of scale. The legal framework already exists for students to enroll across districts with the consent of both districts. This should be considered as an opportunity for larger or more experienced districts to develop schools and programs that can serve a regional population as needed.

## Preparing for Disruptions

Disasters, whether they be pandemics, hurricanes or flooding, can throw lives and organizations into chaos. These emergencies also disrupt the normal operations of school districts. Many schools have addressed disruptions to traditional learning by turning to online teaching to try to keep students from falling behind. Moving students to an online or hybrid model is no easy feat and many schools were not prepared when schools were initially closed in March 2020. Districts were in survival mode. The new goal should not just be to provide online education during times of disruption, but to provide a quality form of that type of education.

Whereas the statewide virtual charter schools can grow over time to accommodate

more demand, they should not be viewed as the ready answer to a sudden emergency. The statewide virtual schools cannot, and should not, try to handle a huge emergency influx of students disrupted or displaced out of their traditional schools. They would not have the teacher and staff capacity overnight to do a high-quality job for a large enrollment increase. Effective online teaching requires training and special resources. (As we have seen, the East Baton Rouge School District had significant staffing problems when it suddenly tried to expand its virtual school.)

When the pandemic struck, the statewide virtual charter schools already had dealt with the problems and pitfalls of setting up online education. Recent efforts to improve the education experience at those schools now seem to be bearing fruit with higher test scores and graduation rates. In many ways, these schools are ahead of the virtual learning curve compared to their traditional brick and mortar counterparts. As such, they should serve as a lesson and resource for the state Department of Education and local school districts who seek to advance their online programs. Critics will say the statewide virtual schools should not be imitated because of their below-average performance, but these online schools weathered the pandemic with better educational progress than regular schools on average.

The LDOE and school districts could look to the statewide virtual charters for assistance and insights related to teacher training, online platforms, student engagement and success stories for students in special situations. The state education department also should consider providing online platforms and the appropriate training infrastructure for local schools and

districts that want or need to rely more on virtual teaching, especially in emergencies. Unfortunately, the new normal seems to be one of regular disruptions. Louisiana schools need to upgrade from coping with that reality to planning for that reality.

## Best Practices

Think tanks and professional organizations have also proposed changes to tighten oversight and increase accountability for virtual schools. Toward this end, here are some examples.

The Center for Reinventing Public Education at Stanford University in 2015<sup>xv</sup> recommended:

- Collection and reporting of additional data specific to virtual schools that may be indicative of why disengagement is so high;
- Experimentation in funding, such as a completion-based model;
- The elimination of open-enrollment requirements and establishment of criteria for students that are linked to success in a virtual environment; and
- Development of a complete and robust legal framework specifically for online charter schools.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers in 2016<sup>xvi</sup> recommended:

- Studying the development of student enrollment criteria that are more likely to lead to success and requiring these schools to operate as something other than charter schools if enrollment criteria seem necessary.
- Establishment and accountability for virtual-specific goals in addition to the

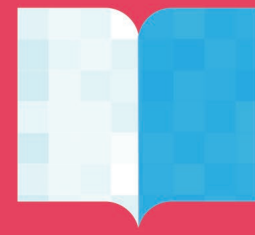
goals held for all charter schools. This could include student attendance and engagement, truancy, attrition, finances, and operations. Closure decisions should be based on goals outlined in charter contracts.

- Requiring virtual operators to justify their costs and developing a funding model based on actual costs. In the meantime, authorizers should use a performance-based funding model.

## Summary

Given the extensive parental demand for virtual options in Louisiana, and the demonstration by the pandemic and storms that we must be prepared to provide virtual services to all students at a moment's notice, Louisiana must make legislative, policy and regulatory decisions that amplify the positive aspects of virtual education while mitigating the failures seen nationally and statewide. The state should take steps to prevent poor performance as local programs grow and statewide charter schools continue to exist.

**PAR foresees that virtual education in Louisiana will continue to expand and can be improved with more targeted interventions and changes to policy and process in lieu of the more punitive or restrictive actions taken by other states in the past. Through this report, PAR has made recommendations specific to the Louisiana context that should ultimately lead to increased transparency, more accurate data on student performance, improved student academic performance, and a funding structure that sufficiently covers the costs of operating a virtual school while rewarding student achievement.**



## Appendix A: Charter School Authorization and Accountability in Louisiana

### 1. Charter Schools in Louisiana

#### a. History of charter authorization

The Louisiana Legislature first passed a law in 1995 allowing for the authorization of charter schools in Louisiana.<sup>xvii</sup>

The purpose of the law remains, “to authorize experimentation by city and parish school boards by authorizing the creation of innovative kinds of independent public schools for students.”

City and parish school boards, along with the Board of Elementary and

Secondary Education (BESE) are the only entities in the state that can authorize a charter school to open. All charter school authorizers must operate a comprehensive process for accepting, evaluating, and approving new charter schools. The first charter school in Louisiana opened in 1996 in Jefferson Parish.<sup>xviii</sup>

Statute allows only non-profit entities registered in the state of Louisiana, with board members residing in the community where the school is located, to open a charter school. However, those non-profit entities can, and sometimes do, contract with national for-profit

Charter Type	Authorizer	Additional Information
Type 1	Local School Board	<b>Type 1 charter schools</b> are new charter schools authorized by local school boards that are not conversions of existing district-run schools. Type 1 schools are part of the local district’s LEA and receive their federal funding and some services through the district.
Type 2	BESE	<b>Type 2 charter schools</b> are schools authorized by BESE either on appeal (because their application has been rejected by their local school board) or directly, in the case of underperforming districts. Type 2 schools are LEAs and receive federal funding directly. They can enroll students statewide or other enrollment zones as established in their charter contracts.
Type 3	Local School Board	<b>Type 3 schools</b> are charter schools that result from the conversion of a district-run public school. They are authorized by the local school board and are part of their LEA, which means they receive federal funding and some services through the district.
Type 4	BESE	<b>Type 4 charter schools</b> are authorized by BESE upon application of a local school board to operate a charter itself. In this scenario, the school remains a part of the local district’s LEA and employees remain employed by the local school district.
Type 5	BESE	<b>Type 5 charter schools</b> are schools authorized by BESE after they have been transferred to the Recovery School District (RSD) for persistent low performance. Type 5 schools remain their own LEAs. They must remain in the RSD for at least five years before they can be considered for return to the local school board.
Type 5B	BESE	<b>Type 5B schools</b> are former Type 5 schools that have returned to the local school board’s oversight. Currently, the only Type 5B schools in Louisiana are in Orleans Parish. These schools can choose to remain their own LEA or can join the local school board’s LEA.

organizations to run all or most of the school's functions. These schools often adopt the national organization's curriculum and academic model.

**b. Types of charters**

Louisiana law provides for six types of charter schools. The charter school types are described in the table below. Charters of different types are held to many of the same laws and policies, though there are differences for schools authorized by local school boards. For most charter types, the primary difference is their authorizer (BESE or the local school board) and whether or not they are their own local education agency (LEA). LEAs receive all of their funding directly from the state, including federal funds. They have most of the rights and responsibilities of local school districts.

**c. Policy and legal flexibility offered to charters**

Charter schools are independent public schools. They are tuition free and are funded similarly to schools within local districts. Charter schools, both in Louisiana and nationally, are afforded additional autonomies and are not subject to all of the same legal and policy requirements as traditional public schools. For example, Louisiana charter school law includes a provision that charters are exempt from, "all rules and regulations of the state board and those of any local school board that are applicable to public schools and to public school officers and employees"<sup>xix</sup> with the exception of a list of statutes focused largely on student safety and rights. Most importantly, all charter schools are required

to participate in the state's accountability system.

In exchange for this flexibility, charter schools must regularly meet the performance standards set by their authorizers to remain open. Charter school operators receive a contract to operate a school for an initial four years and must meet requirements for an additional year, what is called the extension process. After the extension and the fifth year of operation, a charter school authorizer may choose not to renew an operator's contract or to offer a new contract of between three and ten years. A school that fails to meet fiscal standards, violates the law, or commits a material violation of their charter contract may have that contract revoked at any point during their operation with a majority vote of the board that authorized the school.

**d. Enrollment, Admissions, Attendance, and Student Population**

There is an area of law and policy that outlines specific requirements for charter schools around how they admit and enroll children, and requirements related to the population of students they must serve. Charter schools must enroll any student living in the area it serves according to a lottery process and without regard to the student's academic performance or need for special education services. A school can have admissions requirements that are "consistent with the roles, scope, and mission" of the school but cannot include requirements that consider a student's race, religion, gender, ethnicity, national origin, or score on



an IQ test. A small number of schools authorized prior to 2012 may have academic performance related enrollment requirements. However, no new charter schools in Louisiana can be authorized that use academic performance as an entrance requirement.

Louisiana law requires the attendance of students “in regularly assigned classes during regular school hours established by the school board and shall assure that such child is not habitually tardy.” Following this attendance law is required by all charter schools statewide, regardless of their authorizer. “Regular school hours” and “regularly assigned classes” is not defined further in the law. In the case of virtual schools, they must annually submit their attendance policy to LDOE for approval. These policies are required to include how attendance is measured (i.e. expectations regarding class participation, time spent online, or completion of assignments), how attendance is recorded and enforced, and how the school orients parents and students to these requirements.<sup>xx</sup>

In the case of district run schools, the local superintendent is required to appoint a supervisor of child welfare and attendance, part of whose role is to “Investigating cases of non-enrollment and unexcused absences from school of all children within the compulsory school attendance age.” Students who are habitually absent or tardy, including those that fail to show up to school after enrolling, are required to be reported to local family or juvenile courts in the parish in which they reside. Child welfare officers typically have strong relationships with juvenile

and family court officers and work closely with them to address truancy. For Type 2 charter schools, this may mean developing these relationships across a number of parishes based on where their students reside.

Additionally, the Legislature, in an attempt to ensure that charter schools were serving students that are similar to their communities, included additional provisions in the law that set requirements for charter schools on the enrollment of economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities. With some exceptions for schools that serve military families and those parishes under desegregation orders, among other things, “the percentage of the total number of students enrolled in the charter school based on the October first student membership who are economically disadvantaged and students with exceptionalities as defined in the statute, not including gifted and talented, shall be equal to not less than eighty-five percent of the average percentage of students enrolled in the local public school districts” with those same characteristics. Each year, the Louisiana Department of Education releases a report with this data and it is up to authorizers to take action to ensure that schools are meeting these requirements.

## 2. Academic, Organizational, and Financial Policy

### a. Louisiana’s Accountability System and Academic Expectations for Charter Schools

Louisiana has a robust accountability system, grounded in federal and state law. While BESE has required standardized tests for many years, the

precursor to the current accountability system evolved after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB). NCLB required testing for students in certain grades and for the results of those tests to be made public for the entire student population and for traditionally underserved student groups such as English Learners, racial minorities, students in special education, and those from low income families. Schools that failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) were eligible for interventions up to and including takeover by the state, to be closed, turned into charter schools, or significantly turn them around using other strategies.<sup>xxi</sup>

In 2015, Congress reauthorized the Johnson-era Elementary and Secondary Education Act, revising or eliminating many of the provisions required under NCLB. The new law, The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to develop their own plans for school testing and accountability.<sup>xxii</sup> Louisiana’s ESSA plan<sup>xxiii</sup> was accepted by the U.S. Department of Education and later incorporated into BESE policy in December 2017. The ESSA plan updated the accountability system to more clearly identify schools in need of intervention based on their performance with all students or student

groups and to provide LDOE support, including additional federal funds, to those schools.

Louisiana’s ESSA plan maintained the state’s system of providing schools with annual School Performance Scores (SPS) and Letter Grades. Changes were made to the calculation of the SPS to include measures of student growth. Additionally, the plan provided for a gradual increase in standards such that between plan implementation and the 2024-25 school years, letter grades of A, B, and C would require increasingly higher performance to attain.

Charter schools are subject to the accountability provisions in the ESSA plan and are held to the same academic performance standards as district-operated schools. They receive an SPS and a Letter Grade annually using the same calculation as all other public schools and this information is published alongside all other schools. They, too, can be identified as being in need of intervention and are eligible for the same supports and funding provided by LDOE to other schools.

**b. The Charter School Performance Compact**

In addition to being held to the academic standards in the state accountability system, charter schools authorized by BESE, such as the ones

Letter Grade	SPS required through 2021	SPS required through 2024	SPS required in 2025 and beyond
A	90.0 – 150.0	95.0 – 150.0	100 – 150
B	75.0 – 89.9	80.0 – 94.9	85.0 – 99.9
C	60.0 - 74.9	65.0 – 79.9	70.0 – 84.9
D	50.0 – 59.9	50.0 – 64.9	50 – 69.9
F	0 – 49.9	0 – 49.9	0 – 49.9

discussed in this report, are expected to meet further standards to remain in good standing and to be considered for a renewal of their contract. The Charter School Performance Compact (CSPC), which is approved by BESE,<sup>xxiv</sup> makes clear the academic, organizational, and financial metrics that charter schools are assessed on annually. The CSPC additionally explains how LDOE will intervene when a school is not meeting a standard. This can include anything from the receipt of a Letter of Concern all the way to the revocation of the charter in the most serious instances. The document is updated periodically to reflect feedback from charter schools along with its own efficacy in assessing performance.

The CSPC contains a template of the Annual Review that each school

receives. The Annual Review reports on academic, organizational, and financial performance. Schools are scored as Meeting All Expectations, Meeting Most Expectations, or Not Meeting Expectations based on their review and their financial and organizational performance can impact the length of their renewal contract. Below are the measures considered in the annual review.

**c. The Renewal and Extension Process**

During the last year of their contract with the authorizer, each charter school must go through the extension process (for new charters in their 4th year) or the renewal process (for charters in their 5th year and beyond). Through this process, the charter authorizer assesses the school’s performance and makes a decision to either

<b>Academic</b>	School Performance Score
<b>Organizational</b>	Economically Disadvantaged and Students with Disabilities Enrollment
	Re-enrollment of Students
	Suspensions
	Timely Evaluations of Students with Disabilities
	IEP Compliance for Students with Disabilities
	Percentage of Students with Disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment
	Academic Performance of Student Subgroups
	Compliance with non-discrimination laws related to admissions, discipline, attendance, and truancy
	Compliance with laws related to service provision for Students with Disabilities and English Learners
	Board adherence to state laws on governance and compliance
	No violation of ethics laws
	No evidence of violation of other contract provisions
<b>Financial</b>	No intentional violation of testing procedures
	LDOE Fiscal Risk Assessment category
	Performance on Annual External Audit
	Federal and state funds are used in a legal and fiscally responsible way

terminate the relationship with the operator, closing the school, or offering a new contract for between three and ten years.<sup>xxv</sup>

Below are the requirements that LDOE uses to make recommendations to BESE on the renewal or extension of Type 2, 4, and 5 charter schools. In the fall before BESE makes its decisions, which usually come in December of each year, LDOE compiles current and historical data on each school. Based on that data, LDOE makes a recommendation to BESE on whether the school should be closed or remain open and the length of the contract for schools that are remaining open.

Ultimately, BESE is the decision maker and is not required to follow the Department’s proposal. They make take into consideration additional information such as parent demand, the availability of higher performing schools nearby, or other extenuating circumstances. Additionally, BESE may condition extension or renewal on additional requirements beyond what is mandated for all schools in law, policy, and the charter contract.

Given the unique circumstances of the 2020-21 school year, BESE may choose to make renewal and extension decisions, or take other accountability actions, that do not align to this policy.

Extension/Renewal Type	Minimum Academic Requirements
Extension or 1st Renewal	“D” or higher letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term
Extension or 1st Renewal, Turnaround School Only	“D” or higher letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term OR “F” letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term with a Progress Index equivalent to an A
2nd or Subsequent Renewal	<p>“C” or higher letter grade OR</p> <p>“D” letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term and “C” letter grades for more than half of the letter grades earned during the charter term and the final letter grade earned for the charter’s prior term OR</p> <p>“D” letter grade in the most recent year of the contract term and Progress Indices equivalent to an A for more than half of the Progress Indices earned during the charter’s current contract term and the final Progress Index earned for the charter’s prior term.</p>

Current Letter Grade	Minimum Term Length	Potential Additional Years	
		(Based on Organizational and Financial Performance Over Current Term)	
A	6 Years	“Does Not Meet Expectations” in any year	No additional years
		“Meets All” and/or “Meets Most” Expectations all years	≤2 Years
		“Meets All Expectations” all years	≤4 Years
B	5 Years	“Does Not Meet Expectations” in any year	No additional years
		“Meets All” and/or “Meets Most” Expectations all years	≤1 Year
		“Meets All Expectations” all years	≤2 Years
C	4 Years	No additional years	
D, F or no letter grade	3 Years	No additional years	

## Appendix B: Data on UVA and LAVCA

### University View Academy

Year	Total Enrollment	Percent Economically Disadvantaged	Percent Special Education	Percent Black
2016-17	2,275	64.4%	9.4%	17.89%
2017-18	2,368	58.74%	10.6%	19.09%
2018-19	3,019	60.88%	11.4%	28.32%
2019-20	3,209	61.20%	12.1%	27.30%
2020-21	3,495	61.32%	12.4%	27.55%

Year	Letter Grade	School Performance Score	Grades 3-8 LEAP Mastery Rate -All Subjects	High School LEAP Mastery Rate – All Subjects	Cohort Graduation Rate	ACT Average
2016-17	C	64.9	30%	60%	43%	20.7
2017-18	C	59	26%	57%	40%	19.9
2018-19	D	55.8	31%	43%	50%	19.7
2019-20	D	N/A	23%	38%	66%	19.5

Year	Attendance Rate	Truancy Rate
2016-17	99.6%	2%
2017-18	99.9%	N/R
2018-19	99.2%	0%
2019-20	98.6%	5.47%

	Financial Rating	FRA category	Notices of Concern or Breach	Major audit findings	Met 70% MFP Requirement
2017-18	Meets all expectations	No action	None	None	79.23%
2018-19	Meets all expectations	No action	None	None	80.15%
2019-20	Does not meet expectations	Dialogue	None	None	Not Available Yet

	Met SWD requirement	Met ED requirement	Org rating	Reenrollment (goal of 80%)	Notices of Concern or Breach	Ethics Complaints
2017-18	Expectation met	Did not meet	Meets most expectations	74.6%	None	None found
2018-19	Expectation met	Did not meet	Does not meet expectations	69.80%	NOB related to discriminatory admissions	None found
2019-20	Expectation met	Did not meet	Meets most expectations	71.00%	None	None found

## LAVCA

Year	Total Enrollment	Percent Economically Disadvantaged	Percent Special Education	Percent Black
2016-17	1,913	71.82%	11.0%	23.05%
2017-18	1,908	72.22%	12.4%	23.79%
2018-19	1,917	94.84%	13.4%	25.98%
2019-20	1,920	78.07%	14.7%	27.76%
2020-21	1,920	88.02%	14.1%	34.79%

Year	Letter Grade	School Performance Score	Grades 3-8 LEAP Mastery Rate -All Subjects	High School LEAP Mastery Rate – All Subjects	Cohort Graduation Rate	ACT Average
2016-17	D	54.4	24%	66%	50%	20.6
2017-18	D	57.9	21%	61%	37%	22
2018-19	D	55.8	22%	35%	49%	19.7
2019-20	D	N/A	23%	37%	52%	20.8

Year	Attendance Rate	Truancy Rate
2016-17	89.7%	75%
2017-18	98.9%	10.01%
2018-19	99.3%	5.32%
2019-20	99.9%	0%

	Financial Rating	FRA category	Notices of Concern or Breach	Major audit findings	Met 70% MFP Requirement
2017-18	Meets all expectations	Monitor	None	No more than one material finding	97.4%
2018-19	Meets all expectations	No action	None	None	96.92%
2019-20	Meets all expectations	No action	None	None	Not Available Yet

	Met SWD requirement	Met ED requirement	Org rating	Reenrollment (goal of 80%)	Notices of Concern or Breach	Ethics Complaints
2017-18	Expectation met	Expectation met	Meets all expectations	70.60%	None	None found
2018-19	Expectation met	Expectation met	Meets most expectations	69.80%	None	None found
2019-20	Expectation met	Expectation met	Meets all expectations	78.80%	None	None found

## Statewide Data

Year	Total Enrollment	Percent Economically Disadvantaged	Percent Special Education	Percent Black
2016-17	723,554	71.3%	12.2%	43.44%
2017-18	722,666	67.39%	12.5%	43.60%
2018-19	719,215	68.55%	12.9%	43.23%
2019-20	719,812	69.07%	13.3%	42.59%
2020-21	699,625	73.51%	13.2%	42.39%

Year	Letter Grade	School Performance Score	Grades 3-8 LEAP Mastery Rate -All Subjects	High School LEAP Mastery Rate – All Subjects	Cohort Graduation Rate	ACT Average
2016-17	N/A	N/A	62%	33%	78%	19.6
2017-18	N/A	N/A	61%	31%	81%	19.3
2018-19	N/A	N/A	44%	34%	80%	18.9
2019-20	N/A	N/A	40%	40%	84%	18.7

Year	Attendance Rate	Truancy Rate
2016-17	94.1%	32.9%
2017-18	94.3%	47.8%
2018-19	94.4%	36.5%
2019-20	94.4%	28.19%

## Acknowledgements

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana wishes to thank the many people who contributed time and input to this report. We are especially grateful to the primary interviewees: Dr. Cade Brumley, Superintendent of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE); Dr. Kelli Peterson, an education scholar formerly with LDOE; Sandy Holloway, President of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education; Dr. Michelle Clayton, Superintendent of University View Academy; Danielle Scott, MEd, Head of School for Louisiana Virtual Charter Academy; John White, EdD, former Superintendent of LDOE; and Caroline Roemer, Executive Director of the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools. We appreciate the data collection expertise of the LDOE staff.

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