RESET ⏻
LOUISIANA'S FUTURE

K-12

Louisiana should maintain a strong school accountability system, rigorous K-12 academic standards and high-quality assessments and continue to build upon a wide and dynamic array of education choices for students and parents.

Advance K-12 Education Policies that Work

When it comes to innovative state education policy, Louisiana is, in many respects, a national leader. Louisiana was one of the first states to develop a statewide school accountability system, and *Education Week* has recognized it as one of the best in the country.

The steps the state has taken to coordinate early care and education, provide a quality rating system for child care facilities, and transparently make information available to parents have received national attention. The state education improvement plan for closing equity gaps required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has been recognized as one of the nation's best[i].

Education Choices in Louisiana

Louisiana also has a wide range of choices for parents and students beyond traditional public schools. The state has more than 80,000 students enrolled in public charter schools[ii] – the third highest percentage in the country – and strong charter school laws[iii]. New Orleans is one of the few cities in the country where virtually all schools are charters.

Another 7,000 students are enrolled in approved private schools through the Louisiana Scholarship Program[iv], though demand continues to out-pace the number of spots available. Through a variety of programs, students now have more choices than ever to access skills training for a postsecondary credential, highly specialized classes, or earn college credit while still in high school.

Proven Progress

Louisiana's changing policy environment is showing progress for our children:

- The percentage of fourth grade students performing at or above "Basic" in English on Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) tests has improved from 55% when the state school accountability program began in 1999 to 73% today[v]. Math scores have improved from 42% to 68% over that same period. The percentage for fourth grade math grew from 42% to 68% over that same period[vi].

- In recent years the state has raised academic standards and expectations of students so that the goal is no longer to have most kids scoring "Basic" on the LEAP tests, but instead at the higher level of "Mastery." Since 2014, the percentage of students scoring "Mastery" and above in English has risen from 28% to 43%. Math scores have improved from 25% to 32%[vii].

- Despite a dip last year, ACT scores have been on the rise with more students than ever eligible for some level of TOPS scholarships[viii].

- High school graduation rates have reached historic highs with more than 81% of students earning a degree, up from about 61% ten years ago[ix].

- More than 40% of students are earning college credit or an industry-based credential while still in high school with a record number of graduates enrolled in postsecondary education in 2017[x].

The data are clear — students are making progress across any number of measurements, which is driven by two decades of statewide policies that are seen as some of the strongest in the nation. Louisiana must continue this trajectory and accelerate it where possible.

Challenges Remain

Yet, despite the many improvements, Louisiana still ranks low compared to other states on far too many education indicators. On the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, Louisiana stands near the bottom in terms of student performance[xi]. On both national tests and statewide LEAP tests, many students are having particular difficulties with math. And graduation rates, while improving, are still low compared to the rest of the region. The state is doing better, but still has much more to do[xii].

> **Despite progress, the challenges in educating children in Louisiana remain greater than in almost every other state.**

There is a contrast that should be understood between progress and rankings. One is that Louisiana has a disproportionately high number of students in private schools, a legacy of the state's long history of religious education. Another is that Louisiana has also greatly empowered parents to homeschool, with more than 30,000 students in approved home study or non-public schools not regulated by the state. With few exceptions, none of these students take the state LEAP test or the NAEP test, and their achievement levels are not reflected in either state or national reporting of results.

It is also important to recognize that Louisiana has historically had one of the highest poverty rates in the country and is among states with the highest percentage of children living in poverty. That continues to this day, where the state ranks 49th and 50th, respectively[xiii].

The link between poverty and low educational achievement is well-established. Children who grow up in poverty are less likely to be ready for kindergarten or school, more likely to have behavioral issues or special needs, and are at greater risk of dropping out[xiv]. Louisiana has made significant progress in improving educational outcomes, and the state has, in fact, reduced the rate of poverty, but has not moved the needle on poverty rankings. That means that despite the progress, the challenges in educating children in Louisiana remain greater than in almost every other state.

Louisiana has many inspiring success stories where schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students are seeing academic results that defy the odds[xv]. But a state with greater challenges must do more to move up in national rankings.

Reasons for Encouragement

There is reason for hope. The federal ESSA specifically directs states to focus education improvement plans on equity and raising the achievement levels of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs. That includes increased transparency to ensure school districts are focusing on improvement for all students, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The fact that Louisiana's ESSA plan has been singled out as a model for the rest of the country and one with tremendous promise indicates the state is on track to both address the challenges faced with poverty and overcome them.

At the same time there are some key choice options that Louisiana must build upon, particularly in high school, to help move more students into postsecondary education.

Advanced Placement

Louisiana has made great strides in the number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses which offer them the opportunity to take rigorous courses while still in high school and also earn college credit. During the 2012-13 school year, just over 6,600 students enrolled in AP classes compared to the 20,000 or so who take them now. Almost 40% pass the courses and earn the credit, but that is a number that must continue to grow[xvi].

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment allows high school students to take college-level courses in which they receive credit on both their high school and college transcripts for the same course. Dual enrollment has also seen a marked increase in recent years from just over 9,000 students participating in 2009 to more than 30,000 students today[xvii].

And yet, for many students, obstacles remain. Both access to classes and the costs associated with them vary widely from district to district. There is also an equity gap, as African-American participation is far below that of white students.

Jump Start

Jump Start is another program with great promise. It provides a pathway to a career diploma for students preparing to attend a community or technical college or move directly into a career. It requires students to take classes and earn an Industry-Based Credential (IBC) while still in high school as a requirement for graduation. Enrollment has grown to about 9,500 students per year[xviii].

Despite significant successes, there have been challenges. Recent analysis has shown that while more and more high school students are earning IBCs, in most cases they are not aligned with the higher-quality jobs available in their regions. In many cases this appears to be because school districts are not offering courses for the more in-demand credentials. The state Department of Education has undertaken an update of Jump Start in an effort to make it more meaningful for students and employers[xix].

It is important that policy makers continue to focus on programs like these and others. Research shows that dual enrollment and other postsecondary experiences in high school lead to higher college enrollment,

retention and graduation rates[xx] and better prepare students for the workplace and careers. And yet, less than half of Louisiana high school seniors are taking a full course load in their final year even though school districts receive their full Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) funding.

Protect Strong Policies

Given Louisiana's historically low educational attainment rates, increasing opportunities for students to advance themselves with postsecondary education or training, or work-based learning experiences should be a state priority.

All of these initiatives represent the latest chapter in an ongoing movement that began 20 years ago to improve educational outcomes for our children and provide greater opportunities for them to pursue dreams and be successful in life. The sad news is that despite our successes, there have been continued efforts to attack forward-looking policies in favor of a status quo, which lacks accountability and makes excuses for a lack of progress. That is not in the best interests of Louisiana students or families.

The RESET

Louisiana should protect education policies that are working, make changes when needed and continue to build the system for the future.

- **Louisiana should stay on track with the policies that have improved student achievement, provided more education options, and established an accountability system that is easy for parents and taxpayers to understand and access. Continuing good policies that work will help the education system move forward.**

- **Louisiana should hold school districts accountable for implementing the local education plans required by the Every Student Succeeds Act for driving improvements in low-performing schools and those with identified groups of low-performing students. This includes providing teachers with high-quality curricula and strong professional development.**

- **Louisiana should adopt an overall state framework and strategy focusing on the transition from high school to postsecondary education that addresses both access and equity.**

- **Louisiana should include a minimum level of access to dual enrollment and other credit-earning courses that make them available uniformly to all students.**

- **Louisiana should continue efforts to restructure the Jump Start program to better align it with regional workforce needs and high demand, high wage occupations.**

Endnotes

i   Collaborative for Student Success; https://checkstateplans.org/states/louisiana/

ii   Ballotpedia; https://ballotpedia.org/Charter_school_statistics_for_all_50_states

iii   National Alliance for Public Charter Schools; Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Public Charter School Laws (January 2018). https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-02/07c_rd2_model_law_ranking_report_0.pdf

iv   Louisiana Department of Education; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives_scholarship-schools.pdf?sfvrsn=5

v   Louisiana Department of Education; LEAP results; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/elementary-and-middle-school-performance

vi   Louisiana Department of Education; LEAP results; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/elementary-and-middle-school-performance

vii   Louisiana Department of Education; Statewide Results; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/louisiana-believes/statewide-results-one-pager.pdf?sfvrsn=6

viii   Louisiana Department of Education; Statewide Results; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/louisiana-believes/statewide-results-one-pager.pdf?sfvrsn=6

ix   Louisiana Department of Education; Statewide Results; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/louisiana-believes/statewide-results-one-pager.pdf?sfvrsn=6

x   Louisiana Department of Education; Statewide Results; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/louisiana-believes/statewide-results-one-pager.pdf?sfvrsn=6

xi   National Assessment of Education Progress; https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=&sfj=NP&st=MN&year=2017R3

xii   U.S. Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics; ED Data Express; http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/index.cfm

xiii   U.S. Census Bureau; Income and Poverty in the U.S. (2017); https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty.html

xiv   Engle and Black: The Effect of Poverty on Children Development and Educational Outcomes; https://nyaspubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1196/annals.1425.023

xv   Council for A Better Louisiana; CABLWire: A New School Year Reminds Us That Every Child Can Learn (August 23, 2018) https://mailchi.mp/ca3208f21903/cablwire-new-school-year-reminds-us-that-every-child-can-learn

xvi   Louisiana Department of Education; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/high-school-performance

xvii   Data provided by the Louisiana Board of Regents.

xviii   Louisiana Department of Education; Jump Start 2.0: Draft Blueprint; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/jump-start/2019-jump-start-2-0-blueprint.pdf

xix   Data provided by the Louisiana Department of Education

xx   Louisiana Department of Education; Louisiana's High School Planning Guidebook: A Path to Prosperity for Every Student; https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/course-choice/high-school-planning-guidebook.pdf?sfvrsn=1fbd831f_42