


K-12 Education

Louisiana should maintain a strong school accountability system, rigorous K-12 academic standards and a focus on early literacy, while building upon a wide and dynamic array of education choices for students and parents.



Advance K-12 Education Policies that Work

It would come as no surprise to anyone that Louisiana for years has faced significant challenges in education. What many might not realize, though, is the state has been a leader in enacting innovative policies to improve student outcomes and, over the last two decades, Louisiana has seen significant progress.

Louisiana was a pioneer in enacting school accountability measures that helped provide a better understanding of what was really happening in public schools. Among other things, the system made it possible to meaningfully measure student performance; provide early interventions for students who were falling behind; provide more transparency for parents and taxpayers with school and district letter grades; and create incentives for high schools to offer more career choice options for students.

Over the years, Louisiana also created a wide range of choices for parents and students beyond traditional public schools. The state has more than 87,000 students enrolled in public charter schools – the third highest percentage in the country – and strong charter school laws. New Orleans is the only city in the country where all of its schools are charters.

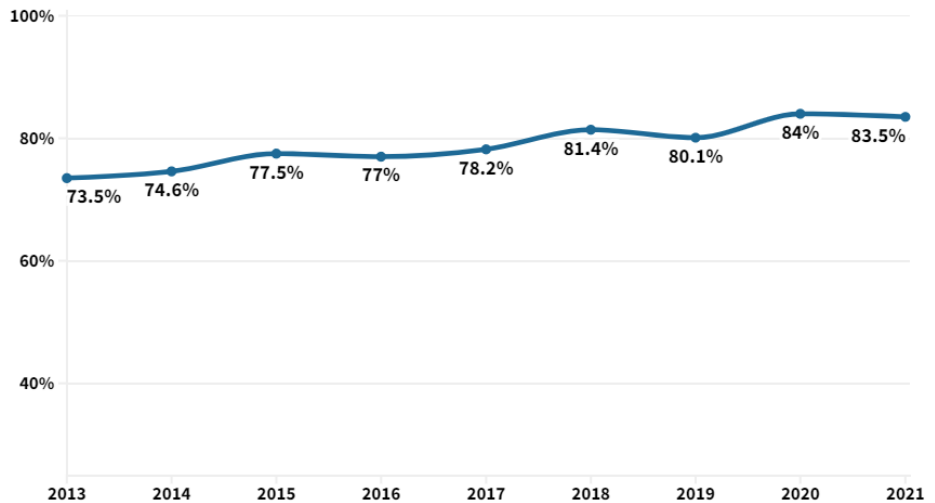
Louisiana also has a modest “voucher” program that awards scholarships to children in low- to moderate-income families to cover tuition costs at participating nonpublic schools. State funding for the program has been stagnant for many years, and it now serves about 6,200 students.

And, through a variety of programs, students now have more choices than ever to access skills training for a postsecondary credential, take highly specialized classes or earn college credit while still in high school. Within this policy environment, the state has seen measurable progress:

- The percentage of fourth-grade students performing at or above “Basic” in English on state LEAP tests has improved from 55% when the school accountability program began in 1999 to 72% just prior to the pandemic. Improvement came while the state raised the bar for achieving that designation multiple times.
- The percentage for fourth-grade math performance similarly grew from 42% to 68% over that same period.

- In recent years the state raised academic standards and expectations, so the goal is no longer to have most students 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 44% pre-COVID. In math it improved from 25% to 34%.

Louisiana High School Graduation Rates



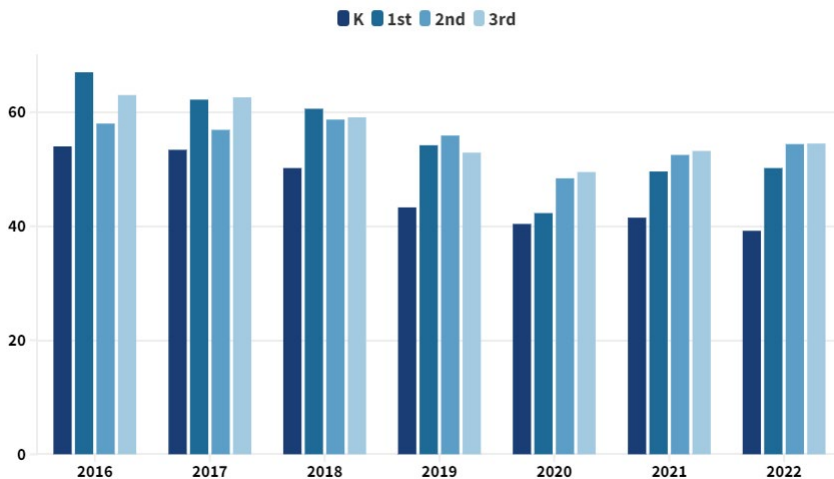
Source: Louisiana Department of Education

- Graduation rates have improved almost every year, with more than 83% of students earning a degree in 2021, up from below 75% a decade ago.
- More than 53% of students are earning college credit or an industry-based credential while still in high school.

Yet, despite the improvements, there are causes for concern. Louisiana still performs poorly on national tests for reading and math, and ACT scores have been on a decline since 2017. On state tests, the rate of improvement has plateaued or even fallen from historic highs. Of particular concern is a recent decline in reading proficiency. In 2016, 63% of third graders were reading at or above grade level. The number fell to 53% by 2019, the year before the COVID-19 outbreak, and below 50% immediately after that.

Literacy Assessment

Percent of Students Reading At or Above Level



Source: Louisiana Department of Education

Perhaps it is no coincidence that during much of this same time Louisiana experienced a shortage of qualified teachers in the classroom. In 2021 enrollment in state education preparation programs was down almost 30% from a decade earlier, and the number of completers was off by close to 500. Statewide, almost 20% of teachers in Louisiana classrooms were uncertified or teaching classes outside their field in 2020. The highest percentages were for science and math teachers.

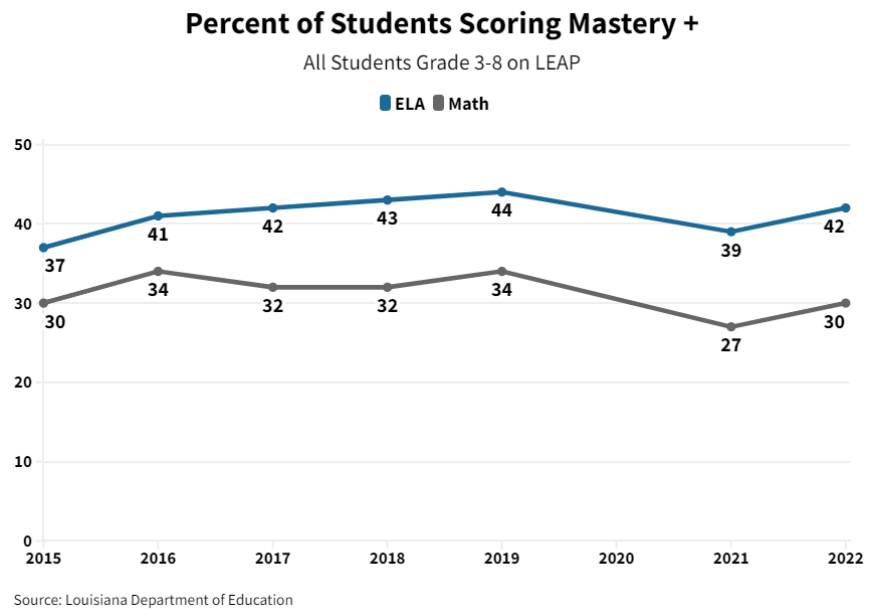
Louisiana has historically had one of the highest poverty rates in the country and among the highest percentages of children living in poverty. That continues to this day, with the state ranking 49th in both categories. This is significant because the link between poverty and low educational achievement is well-established. Children who grow up in economically-disadvantaged households are less likely to be prepared

for kindergarten or school, more likely to have behavioral issues or special needs and at greater risk of dropping out.

Despite the progress the state has made in improving educational outcomes, the challenge of educating all children in Louisiana remains greater than in almost every other state.

That does not mean that poor children cannot succeed in school. Louisiana has many inspiring success stories where schools with high percentages of economically-disadvantaged students are seeing impressive academic results. But in a state where the challenges are greater, Louisiana must do even more to ensure that every child has a chance to succeed.

COVID-19 has created other challenges, but Louisiana seems to have responded to the pandemic better than many states. Scores plummeted as they did everywhere between 2019 and 2021. While they have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, they are trending back in that direction. Ironically, Louisiana's state ranking actually improved significantly in the National Assessment of Education Progress for both fourth and eighth grade reading in 2022. But that was not because of significant improvement in scores, but because other states seem to have experienced greater learning loss during the COVID outbreak.



A troubling finding in the aftermath of the pandemic is that Louisiana, like many states, has lost students from pre-COVID levels. A recent national study suggests almost 20,000 public school students fell off the education map in the state between 2019 and 2022. These are students who have disappeared from school rosters but they are not enrolled in private schools or homeschools and haven't left the state.

Louisiana has always had a problem with excessive truancy, but it seems that COVID-19 and possibly recent hurricanes have exacerbated a situation that already was serious and in need of greater attention. Solutions in education are often difficult to pinpoint, and progress can come at a frustratingly slow pace, but Louisiana can make changes to improve student outcomes and opportunities. Already, state education leaders and the Legislature have enacted new policies to address the declines in early reading proficiency. Initial signs suggest they are having a positive impact.

Louisiana's school accountability system has served students well for many years, but like all policies it should be reviewed and updated as needed. Because of changes over time, it has lost some of its transparency. A prime example is that approximately 41% of Louisiana's elementary and middle schools earn letter grades of A or B, compared to about 70% of high schools. Clearly, an alignment issue needs to be addressed.

At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that to really understand how well a school is performing requires looking at more than just test scores. A school with a D letter grade that is bringing students who are two years behind up to near grade level may actually be doing a much better job than a B school that is merely helping less challenged students get by. The state must do a better job of recognizing the growth in performance students achieve, in addition to their score on standardized tests.

Louisiana should also provide further incentives in its accountability system to offer students postsecondary education opportunities while they are still in high school. Whether it is dual enrollment in a university, Advanced Placement courses, career and technical education or apprenticeships, it is critical that the state connect more students to enhanced education and training opportunities before they graduate from high school.

The RESET

To help improve outcomes and create more opportunities for students, Louisiana should:

- **Strengthen the focus on early literacy as a foundation for long-term academic success.**
- **Improve Louisiana's school and district accountability system to make it more transparent for parents and taxpayers, reflective of true school performance and a stronger catalyst to prepare students for college and career training.**
- **Increase access to opportunities for all students to earn postsecondary credit and credentials while still in high school.**
- **Strengthen efforts to recruit qualified educators into the teaching profession and retain them. This should include raising teacher pay to the Southern regional average and providing a differential pay component in future salary increases to address areas of critical need.**
- **Monitor the expenditure of federal pandemic aid to ensure districts are using a significant share of those dollars to combat COVID-19 learning loss and improve student outcomes.**
- **Develop a strategy to address chronic truancy and absenteeism issues that have worsened since the pandemic and threaten the futures of thousands of Louisiana children.**
- **Continue to offer a wide array of school choice options while providing appropriate accountability and oversight.**