

# Early Childhood Education

Send All  
Children to  
Kindergarten  
Ready to Learn

Louisiana should expand access to high-quality early care and education programs for all at-risk children in Louisiana from birth through age 4.

Louisiana faces many challenges when it comes to the educational achievement levels of public school students. Much has been done to try to address that by raising academic standards, providing greater accountability, offering additional educational choices for parents and focusing on the quality of teachers and school leaders. These efforts have yielded positive results for students, yet challenges remain. Chief among them: Fewer than half of children in Louisiana arrive in kindergarten meeting critical benchmarks.

Research clearly shows that developmental experiences in the earliest years of a child's life are a strong determinant of future learning and behavior. High-quality early learning opportunities enhance a child's brain development in positive ways, while the lack of those experiences can weaken development with life-long educational and social consequences.

This profoundly impacts working parents searching for child care that is both high-quality and affordable. In Louisiana, more than 60% of mothers with infants are in the labor force, and two-thirds of children from birth through age 5 have both parents, or their only available parent, working. The quality of care these young children receive helps shape their future success in school and life.

Louisiana has been successful at expanding access for economically disadvantaged 4-year-olds through a number of pre-K programs financed with state and federal funds. Today, more than 90% of these 4-year-olds can access a publicly funded pre-K slot, and most are of high quality.

By contrast, for children under age 4 in Louisiana, especially economically disadvantaged children, high-quality early care and education is extremely difficult to access. Only 15% of youngsters under age 4 have access to any publicly supported program.

That support is critical because the average cost of child care in Louisiana is about \$6,900 for a 4-year-old, and \$7,700 for an infant. That amounts to 13% to 14% of median household income for one child in a state with the second-highest poverty rate and where almost a quarter of children live in poverty.

Without some level of public assistance, that is a huge obstacle for many working families and one of the reasons many turn to unlicensed child care providers where quality and basic safety expectations cannot be

measured. The inability to access quality child care impacts not only children and working families, but the workforce, businesses and economic development.

A recent survey of parents with young children conducted by the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children suggested that accessing child care was a major concern for parents and, in many cases, the parents' ability to work was adversely affected because of child care issues.

An earlier report concluded that employee absences, turnover and loss of productivity due to challenges with child care cost Louisiana businesses more than \$800 million annually.

Over the years, Louisiana has made significant policy advancements in early education. Most notable was the passage of Act 3 by lawmakers in 2012. Among other things, it established a unified quality rating system and higher program standards for child care centers. That improved accountability and transparency. But the challenge has been increasing access to higher quality care.

To boost participation, Louisiana has created several initiatives using a combination of state resources and temporary federal dollars. As of October 2022, more than 41,000 children from birth to age 4 were enrolled in publicly-supported early childhood programs outside the federal Head Start program. All of these provide a degree of financial support to assist families with the cost of early education and care.

Louisiana also offers an innovative portfolio of School Readiness Tax Credits for families, child care providers, child care staff and businesses, all providing incentives to boost options for quality care. The state has also begun investing in an Early Childhood Education Fund which offers matching dollars to local entities that expand access to quality early care for children birth through age 3.

Still, overall funding hasn't been sufficient to meet the need. The state's Early Childhood Care and Education Commission estimates Louisiana must spend an additional \$115 million per year compounded over the next decade to provide child care subsidies for about 92,000 more children with the greatest need. While the Legislature has recently appropriated record amounts of both state and non-recurring federal dollars toward early education, it has fallen far short of that target.

Louisiana also lacks any sort of strategic plan for reaching that goal. As a result, new funding requests must be made each year. Because of that, the level of investment varies annually. Early education does receive some dedicated funding from sports wagering, fantasy sports contests and CBD products, but these revenues fall far short of needs.

Expanding access to quality early learning for thousands of children might seem an unreachable goal, but it is worth noting that two decades ago, the vast majority of economically disadvantaged 4-year-olds in Louisiana had no access to high-quality pre-K programs. With the creation of the state's LA 4 early childhood program, the prioritization of federal dollars and implementation of partnerships with local school districts, Louisiana closed that gap to the point where the state now has near universal access to pre-K.

Despite the price tag for full investment in early childhood education, mounting evidence shows whatever Louisiana puts into high-quality early education reaps a significant return. A recent study of outcomes in the LA 4 pre-K program indicated that children who participated in the program performed better on standardized tests, had fewer special education placements and graduated high school at higher rates than children who did not participate in the program.

### LA 4 Program Outcomes Compared to Students With No Pre-K

	Outcome	Impact of LA 4	
<b>Long-Term Education Impact</b>	Ontime Graduation	↑	4.3% higher
	Qualify for TOPS Tech	↑	9.3% higher
	Qualify for TOPS Opportunity	↑	10.7% higher
<b>Academic Achievement</b>	Algebra	↑	12.1% higher
	English 2	↑	7.8% higher
	English 3	-----	No measurable impact
	Geometry	↑	8.4% higher
	Biology	↑	9.3% higher
<b>Students with Special Needs</b>	Special Education Placements	↓	45% lower

Source: Council For A Better Louisiana, Louisiana Department of Education and the Rockhold Family Foundation

National studies also suggest that children who have access to high-quality early learning develop fewer chronic health problems and are less likely to enter the criminal justice system. All of these represent clear savings to the state and society.

The data demonstrates very clearly that for Louisiana to function as a modern state with a diverse and forward-looking economy, it must raise the educational attainment of its citizens. That means lowering dropout rates, increasing high school graduation rates and ensuring that those who graduate are college- and career-ready and transition to jobs with high wages that strengthen the economy.

# The RESET

It is difficult to see Louisiana achieving those goals without making a part of its state mission to broaden access to high-quality early learning for children from birth until the time they start kindergarten. To accomplish this Louisiana should:

- **Commit to appropriating a meaningful level of recurring dollars to expand access to high-quality early childhood care and education, with a focus on birth to age 3.**
- **Encourage local governments to generate money for early care and education through continued state investment in the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund.**
- **Maintain the emphasis on strong accountability, including a transparent rating system, to ensure that families have a wide array of high-quality early education and care offerings.**
- **Review existing dedicated funding and trust fund spending to determine if additional revenues could be used to support broader access to quality early childhood services.**

