

Reforming
EDUCATION
in Louisiana

A Jobs and Opportunity Agenda
for Louisiana

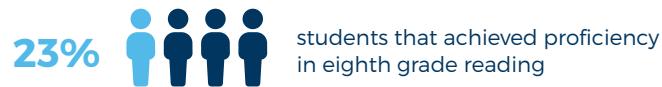


Chris Jacobs, Senior Fellow
Pelican Institute for Public Policy

EDUCATION REFORM IN LOUISIANA

To create a powerful, vibrant economy for the 21st century, Louisiana must also create a vibrant educational system full of well-performing schools. Strong schools will train the next generation of workers in Louisiana businesses, and high-performing school systems can help attract businesses and families to relocate in the state.¹

Unfortunately, however, Louisiana's state test scores lag well below the national averages. In eighth grade reading, the state's most recent test scores lagged behind 41 other states; in eighth grade math, Louisiana's performance ranked below 48 states.² Fewer than one in four (23%) of students achieved proficiency in eighth grade reading; one in six (16%) achieved proficiency in math.³ Only 2% of Louisiana eighth grade students—one in fifty—achieved advanced levels of performance in reading.⁴



As disappointing as these data sound, they actually underestimate the educational gap Louisiana students face compared to their foreign counterparts. The most recent Organizational for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) assessment of developed countries' performance ranked the United States 19th in science, 20th in reading, and 31st in mathematics out of 35 OECD countries surveyed.⁵ With the United States lagging behind many of its international competitors—and Louisiana lagging well behind the national average—Louisiana students face two proverbial strikes against them when it comes to receiving the skills necessary to succeed in the global economy.

But improving Louisiana's educational system does not represent merely an economic imperative—it's a moral one as well. In both math and reading, eighth grade African-American students scored 27 points lower than their white counterparts.⁶ Likewise, the achievement gap between children who qualified for free or reduced-price school lunches and more affluent students has remained constant

1 In addition to his work with the Pelican Institute, the author also serves as a paid consultant to National School Choice Week. However, National School Choice Week does not advocate for any particular policy, and as such had no prior access to, nor editorial control over, this paper's contents, which solely represent the views of the Pelican Institute.

2 U.S. Department of Education, "The Nation's Report Card," 2017 Reading Snapshot Report: Louisiana—Grade 8, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2017/pdf/2018039LA8.pdf>; U.S. Department of Education, "The Nation's Report Card," 2017 Mathematics Snapshot Report: Louisiana—Grade 8, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2017/pdf/2018038LA8.pdf>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Country Note: Key Findings from PISA 2015 for the United States," 2016, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-United-States.pdf>.

6 Department of Education, "Nation's Report Card," 2017 Reading Snapshot and 2017 Mathematics Snapshot.

“
*Louisiana
deserves
better than to
see another
generation
of students
coming from
modest means
struggle
to receive
a quality
education.*

in both eighth grade reading and math for nearly two decades.⁷ The percentage of eighth grade African-American students who achieved advanced levels of performance in reading literally “rounds to zero.”⁸

Louisiana deserves better than to see another generation of students coming from modest means—whether in inner cities or rural areas—struggle to receive a quality education. And the state must ensure its next generation of residents obtain the skills to succeed in business, and become productive citizens in the process. Education reform provides one key way to achieve both objectives.

EMPOWERING PARENTS TO SELECT GREAT SCHOOLS

A plan to reform education should place student needs at its heart. With each child having unique talents, interests, and learning styles, students benefit from a personalized approach that selects the best school and learning platform to meet their individual needs. As both the most knowledgeable and passionate advocates for their children, parents should have the power to make the critically important decisions surrounding the education of their sons and daughters.

Unfortunately, however, some educators view bureaucracy—and not parents and students—as the focal point of the educational system. In response to one attempt to expand school choice within the state, the then-head of the Louisiana Association of Educators said that “If I’m a parent in poverty I have no clue” how to select the right school for children.⁹

This kind of patronizing, paternalistic rhetoric demeans families struggling to make ends meet. Moreover, it illustrates one reason why the education bureaucracy as currently constituted does not provide enough easy-to-compare information regarding schools—because some believe that, even if given reams of data on school performance, parents will make the “wrong” choice for their children.

But in reality, most parents care far more about their children than any school administrator, no matter how well-meaning. They have all the ability necessary to discern the best fit for their children’s unique needs—if only policymakers will give them the opportunity to do so.

Allow Money to Follow the Child:

Every child deserves a high-quality education that best meets his or her unique needs. Unfortunately, many Louisiana children remain trapped in failing schools, with predictable consequences—a cycle of poverty, crime, and lost opportunity. We need to empower all parents—regardless of income or ZIP code—to obtain the best education for their children.

The state Constitution delegates to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) the power to develop an annual funding formula, the Minimum Foundation

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Jeff Adelson, “Teachers Unions Accuse Gov. Bobby Jindal of Misleading and Inflammatory Rhetoric,” New Orleans Times-Picayune January 23, 2012, https://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2012/01/teachers_unions_call_gov_bobby.html.

“
The ESA model allows parents to receive a percentage of funding that the state would have otherwise spent on their child’s education in an account that the family controls.”

Program (MFP).¹⁰ Unfortunately, the Louisiana Supreme Court in 2013 ruled that funding the state’s opportunity scholarship program through the MFP violated the state Constitution.¹¹ Lawmakers have subsequently funded school choice programs through separate annual appropriations.

A constitutional convention proposing fiscal reforms should address the structural flaws that prevent school choice funds from flowing through the MFP appropriation.¹² Ideally, the state would convert the existing MFP into a system of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) through which Louisiana parents can fund their children’s education. ESAs epitomize the mantra that money follows the child—because they quite literally put the education funding in parents’ hands, where families can choose the educational option, or options, that best serve each child’s needs.

First developed in Arizona in 2011, ESAs have expanded into half a dozen states.¹³ The model allows parents to receive a percentage of funding that the state would have otherwise spent on their child’s education in an account that the family controls. Parents can spend ESA funds on any number of qualified educational expenses, including but not limited to school tuition and fees, books, private tutoring, online courses, and homeschooling expenses.

Because parents can use ESA funds for any combination of educational expenses, the account gives them flexibility that other school choice models cannot provide. While parents of special needs children have found ESAs particularly useful in managing the many expenses for children with disabilities, the accounts will benefit parents and students across the board.

Until Louisiana achieves an all-ESA funding model, the state can and should expand several existing programs to put a greater share of education funding—and thus choice—in the hands of parents. Improving these programs will help to extend educational opportunity to all children.

Expand Voucher Scholarships:

Since 2012, the Louisiana Scholarship Program has provided scholarship vouchers to children in low-income families, enabling them to attend the schools of their choice.¹⁴ The program provides scholarships “equal to the amount allocated per pupil as provided in” the constitutional MFP formula, including both state and local allocations.¹⁵ Because the program caps scholarship amounts at the actual cost of tuition, the program does not increase per pupil spending, and in many cases reduces it.

The Louisiana scholarship program has demonstrated results, in both achievement and satisfaction. The most recent survey of scholarship recipient families found 93.3% of parents satisfied or very satisfied with their children’s schools, and 95% happy with their children’s academic performance.¹⁶ Data demonstrate the reason for parents’

10 Article VIII, Section 13 of the Louisiana Constitution of 1974.

11 Louisiana Federation of Teachers v. Louisiana, 118 So. 3d 1033 (2013).

12 In conjunction with the reforms proposed in this series of policy papers, the Pelican Institute has called for a constitutional convention focused on fiscal responsibility, to consider budget-related changes to the state’s foundational document. For more information, see <https://pelicaninstitute.org/constitutional-reform/>.

13 EdChoice, “School Choice in America Dashboard,” <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america/>.

14 EdChoice, “Louisiana Scholarship Program,” <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/louisiana-scholarship-program/>.

15 Title 17, Section 4016(A) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

16 Louisiana Federation for Children, “Louisiana Scholarship Program: Parental Satisfaction Results,” May 2018, <https://louisiana4children.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2017-18-Parental-Satisfaction-Survey-Summary-3.pdf>.

satisfaction: In its first five years, the percentage of scholarship recipients proficient in third-grade English rose 20 points, and the percentage proficient in third-grade math rose by 28 points.¹⁷

Scholarship Recipient Families



Because scholarship recipients have shown such impressive results, policymakers should take several measures to expand access to this successful program. First, as explained above, a court ruling currently prohibits lawmakers from funding scholarships out of the constitutionally-protected MFP allocation, meaning that the program requires its own special appropriation. Unfortunately, competing fiscal pressures have limited the size of that special appropriation—and forced the scholarship program to turn away eligible students. The Legislature should work to amend the MFP provisions in the state Constitution to allow for school choice initiatives, including but not limited to the scholarship program, to come directly from MFP funding.

Second, to qualify for the scholarship program, a child must come from a family with income below 250% of the federal poverty level and have attended a public school graded “C,” “D,” or “F” the year before.¹⁸ However, given that the statutory definition means that scholarship participants receive no more than the average amount of per pupil funding, and in many cases less than the statewide per-pupil average, such limits seem unwise. Louisiana should eliminate the requirement that a child have attended a low-ranking public school and should expand the program to all families, perhaps reducing the voucher amount for upper income students if needed to save money.

Finally, lawmakers should consider lifting restrictions on schools participating in the scholarship program. Under current law, schools accepting scholarship recipients may not impose any admission criteria.¹⁹ The Legislature should examine whether to allow schools to impose minimal admissions criteria, for instance by requiring a student to attain grade-level performance, or agree to a grade-level demotion. Otherwise, schools may admit students several grade levels behind, with no ability to remediate them.

Provide Extra Help for Children with Disabilities:

Since 2011, Louisiana’s School Choice Program for Students with Exceptionalities has

¹⁷ Data from the Louisiana Department of Education, as cited in America Next, “K-12 Education Reform: A Roadmap,” February 2015. <http://americanext.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/America-Next-K-12-Education-Reform.pdf>.

¹⁸ Title 17, Section 4013(2) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

¹⁹ Title 17, Section 4022(2) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

enabled children with disabilities to attend the school of their choice.²⁰ While the program does not cap eligibility based on family income, other restrictions limit its effectiveness. Several modifications would make the program more accessible for special needs children and their parents.

First, the Legislature included a provision that limits access for parents in rural areas. Specifically, the program only applies in “parish[es] having a population in excess of 190,000 persons according to the most recent” federal census.²¹ This restriction limits access for families in smaller and more rural parishes—cash-strapped areas least likely to have proper facilities to care for special needs children. Rather than maintaining this arbitrary requirement—which may force parents to move to another parish, so that their child can more easily receive the care they need—the Legislature should repeal it, to allow all special needs children to access this important program.

Second, the statute provides that the scholarship voucher “shall be equivalent to 50% of the per pupil allocation of state funds to the city, parish, or other local public school district” where the student resides, up to the amount of tuition charged by the school.²² However, this formula creates multiple inequities:

“
...when it
comes to
school choice,
Louisiana
law actually
discriminates
against
children with
disabilities.”

1. Basing the formula strictly upon state funds excludes any funds the parish or school district itself would have contributed towards the child’s education.
2. Basing the formula upon average per pupil funding ignores the fact that children with special needs cost more, and in many cases significantly more, than the average school pupil.
3. Even if the voucher funded half of the total (i.e., state and local) spending for an average special needs child, paying the other half of that total could cost parents thousands, if not tens of thousands, of dollars annually.

The divergent statutory definitions mean that Louisiana caps vouchers for children with disabilities at far lower levels than vouchers for children without special needs. Put another way, when it comes to school choice, Louisiana law actually discriminates against children with disabilities. Lawmakers should end this discrimination by ensuring that at a bare minimum the state provides scholarships as generous as those provided to other students under the Louisiana Scholarship Program.

Strengthen Public Charter Schools:

Louisiana’s 156 charter schools educate about 80,000 children each year.²³ In Louisiana, charter schools take several different forms. Some new and converted charter schools received their authorization through local school boards, whereas some new and converted schools receive their authorization through the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.²⁴

Regardless of the specifics of their governing structure, charters contain many factors in common. As independent public schools exempt from many local school board requirements, charters can innovate to improve educational outcomes. The combination of autonomy—giving principals and teachers the freedom to innovate—and

20 EdChoice, “Louisiana School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities,” <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/louisiana-school-choice-program-for-certain-students-with-exceptionalities/>.

21 Title 17, Section 4031(B)(1) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

22 Title 17, Section 4031(C)(1) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

23 Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, “About Charter Schools,” <https://lacharterschools.org/about-charter-schools/>.

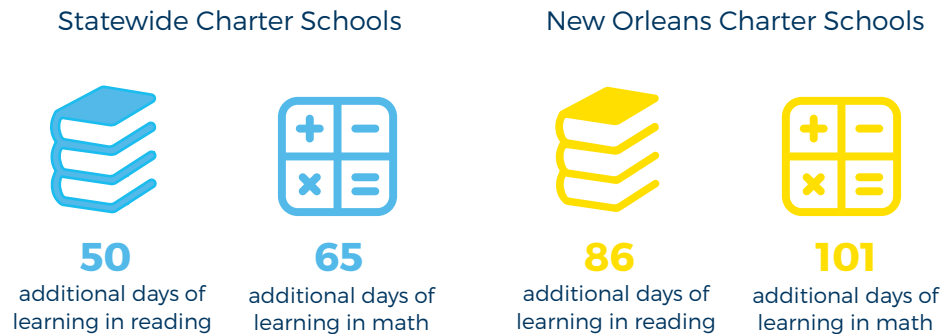
24 Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Louisiana Charter Schools At-a-Glance,” <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/schools/charter-schools>.

accountability—holding school administrators responsible for student outcomes, up to and including school closure if performance remains low—gives charters their unique spirit.

Hurricane Katrina led to the swift conversion of many New Orleans-based schools into charter schools. Three months after the hurricane, the Legislature transferred most New Orleans schools into the care of the Recovery School District, which ultimately converted most of them into charter schools.²⁵ The transformation led to a marked improvement in performance:

A 2013 Stanford University study found that statewide, charter school students received the equivalent of 50 additional days of learning in reading, and 65 additional days of learning in math. New Orleans schools had an even more impressive improvement—charter school attendees there received an average of 86 additional days of learning in reading, and 101 days, or nearly five school months, of math per academic year.²⁶

- Whereas prior to Hurricane Katrina, 74% of Recovery School District elementary students, and 94% of high school students, attended failing schools, by 2014 those percentages had plummeted to 8% and 19%, respectively.²⁷
- The percentage of Recovery School District enrollees in New Orleans achieving at least basic levels of proficiency more than doubled, from 28% in 2008 to 57% in 2014.²⁸
- The percentage of African-American students in New Orleans achieving at least basic levels of proficiency went from 32%—below the state average—in 2005 to 59%—above the state average—in 2014.²⁹



The transformation led by the Recovery School District proved so successful that in 2017, the Orleans Parish School Board voted to convert its last four traditional public schools to charter status.³⁰ Beginning this fall, Orleans Parish will have an virtually all its schools run by charter organizations—a first for an American city.³¹

25 Act 35 of the First Extraordinary Session of 2005.
 26 Center for Research on Education Outcomes, "Charter School Performance in Louisiana," August 8, 2013, http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/la_report_2013_7_26_2013_final.pdf.
 27 Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Recovery School District Fact Sheet," <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/katrina/final-louisiana-believes-v8-recovery-school-district.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.
 28 Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Recovery School District 2014 Annual Report," <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/katrina/2014-rsd-annual-report-print-version.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.
 29 Ibid.
 30 David Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools: Creating a 21st Century Education System* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), Excerpt from Introduction, <http://reinventingschools.the74million.org/excerpt/introduction/>
 31 Della Hasselle, "After McDonogh 35 Vote, New Orleans Will Be First in U.S. Without Traditionally-Run Public Schools," *The Advocate* December 20, 2018, https://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/education/article_9e7c55fc-0471-11e9-8c4c-e3f94b3162f1.html.

The experience of the Recovery School District in and around New Orleans has engendered broad support for charter schools in Louisiana. However, because other states have passed new charter school laws since Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana's ranking among state charter school laws has dropped in recent years. For instance, in 2018 the state dropped from 9th to 12th in national rankings of state charter school laws issued by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.³² Topics the Alliance proposed as areas for potential improvement in Louisiana—notably, equitable access to facilities and funding—provide helpful suggestions to policymakers.

Several policy changes would expand the reach of the charter school model, make schools function more smoothly, and ensure equal access for charters when compared to traditional public schools. First, lawmakers should ensure that charter schools have access to empty and under-utilized facilities. Louisiana law requires school boards to “make available to chartering groups any vacant school facilities or any facility slated to be vacant.”³³ While this language sounds permissive, districts can easily avoid turning over blighted property by claiming they have a plan for the school. Moreover, the facility shortfall creates a “chicken-and-egg” dilemma, whereby local leaders do not even bother to create a chartering group, because they know they will lack a building to open a new school. To solve these problems, Louisiana should strengthen and enforce state laws, so charter schools can obtain empty and under-utilized facilities.

The Legislature should also put charter schools on the same financial footing as other public schools with regard to borrowing. Traditional public schools regularly issue tax exempt bonds to finance improvements and expansions. However, the state Bond Commission has shown a great hesitation to allow charter schools to do the same, even though charter school bonds, unlike bonds issued by local public schools, carry no risk for the taxpayer.³⁴ Charter schools should receive the same flexibility to issue tax exempt bonds as other public schools.

Finally, Louisiana law should allow charter schools to reflect the community as a whole. State law requires that charter schools reflect the public school population—not the population of the entire community. Specifically, new charter schools must ensure that their percentages of economically disadvantaged and special needs students equal at least 85% of the same percentages “in the local public school districts from which the charter school enrolls its students.”³⁵

In parishes with high private school enrollment, traditional public schools consist largely of economically disadvantaged students. The statutory requirement that charter schools mirror the public school population—as opposed to the community as a whole—extends that de facto segregation to charter schools. As a result, many middle class families cannot receive the benefits that a charter school education can provide—because if charter schools admit too many middle class children, they could lose their charters.

Given that charter schools admit almost all students by random lottery, the Legislature should eliminate the restriction that created this quota system. Rather than

“
Rather than
limiting
access...
policymakers
should look
to establish
more charter
schools if
demand
exceeds
existing
supply.”

32 Todd Ziebarth and Louann Bierlien Palmer, Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Public Charter School Laws, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, January 2018, https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018-02/07c_rd2_model_law_ranking_report_0.pdf.

33 Title 17, Section 3982(B)(1) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

34 Mark Ballard, “Bond Commission Holds Off on Building Charter Schools,” The Advocate July 18, 2014, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/politics/article_b33ccc8a-480b-5919-85ca-a1410d1ee1f9.html.

35 Title 17, Section 3991(B)(1)(a)(i) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

limiting access based on arbitrary if well-intentioned criteria, policymakers should instead look to establish more charter schools if demand exceeds existing supply.

Expand Course Choice:

In 2012, the Legislature as part of a series of comprehensive education reforms created the state Course Choice program.³⁶ The program provides state funding for supplemental courses offered to students who 1) attend public schools with a grade of “C,” “D,” or “F,” 2) attend public schools that do not offer the course in question, or 3) receive voucher scholarships.³⁷ Students who attend schools with a grade of “A” or “B,” attend private schools, or are home schooled can participate, but at their own expense.³⁸

Though the first of its kind in the country, the Louisiana Course Choice program fills an important curricular need.³⁹ The program provides a wide array of courses—some conducted online, some face-to-face—that fill unmet needs. For instance, students in a district that lacks foreign language teachers can still access that content through the Course Choice program. Particularly in rural areas with fewer course offerings, or for talented students seeking additional enrichment, the Course Choice program can provide access to Advanced Placement and other similar classes—even in the smallest parish.

In a few short years, Course Choice has grown over twentyfold, with enrollment rising from 2,196 in 2013-14 to 47,056 in 2016-17.⁴⁰ While the Legislature has increased funding for the Course Choice program, it should also work to expand access to this innovative model.⁴¹ Given the program’s success to date, more students should have the ability to enroll in Course Choice classes free of charge.

CREATING AND MAINTAINING GREAT SCHOOLS

Providing choice to parents will only succeed if parents have a selection of quality educational options for their children. Parents would benefit from accurate, meaningful information about those options. Moreover, schools themselves should have the tools necessary to improve their educational performance.

Provide Meaningful Performance Data:

Louisiana law requires the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to “develop a letter grade system reflective of school and district performance.”⁴² BESE has implemented a system that evaluates schools based on the traditional A-F letter grade system.

As part of its efforts to improve schools, as required under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act approved in 2015, BESE created new grading standards.⁴³ The new grades, released in November based upon data from the 2017-18 academic year, saw a reduction in the percentage of “A” rated schools—from 20% of all schools to

³⁶ Act 2 of the Regular Session of 2012.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, as codified at Title 17, Section 4002.3(2) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, as codified at Title 17, Section 4002.3(3) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

³⁹ Erik Robelen, “Louisiana’s ‘Course Choice’ Program Gets Underway,” *Education Week* August 27, 2013, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/08/28/02courses_ep.h33.html.

⁴⁰ Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Supplemental Course Academy Fact Sheet,” https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives_course-choice.pdf?sfvrsn=5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Title 17, Section 10.1(F) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

⁴³ Every Student Succeeds Act, Public Law 114-95; Will Sentell, “Tougher Grading System for Louisiana Schools Worry Educators Their Institutions Won’t Meet Standards,” *The Advocate* September 24, 2017, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_6a15a50c-0a5e-11e7-9f98-9797fe23bfe1.html.

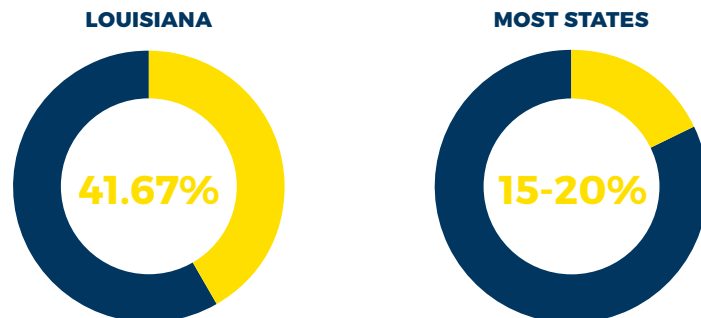
13%—while the percentage of “F” rated schools rose from 8% to 12%.⁴⁴ As part of the transition, the Legislature last year required that BESE publish results for the 2017-18 academic year under both the “new” and “old” letter grading systems, “to facilitate easy comparison.”⁴⁵

Data on state accountability systems published by the Education Commission of the States allow policymakers to compare the criteria included in Louisiana’s grading system with those employed by other states.⁴⁶ Based upon those data, Louisiana:

- Along with 32 other states, utilizes a college and/or career readiness measure;
- Along with 20 other states, utilizes a science proficiency/progress measure;
- Along with eight other states, uses a social studies proficiency/progress measure;
- Along with 46 other states in elementary and middle school, and 19 other states in high school, uses growth as an accountability indicator, which in Louisiana also includes English language proficiency and progress;
- Unlike 35 other states, does not use a chronic absenteeism/attendance measure, although Louisiana does take dropouts into account in evaluating middle schools;
- Unlike nine other states, does not use a school climate/culture measure; and
- Unlike six other states, does not use an art access/participation or well-rounded education measure.⁴⁷

The omission of the chronic absenteeism and school climate measures in the new grading system appear designed to promote a more rigorous evaluation of Louisiana schools, as institutions could more easily attempt to “game” these metrics. However, compared to other states, Louisiana’s new grading system places an above-average emphasis on graduation rates when evaluating high schools. Whereas some states use graduation rates to determine only 15 or 20% of a high school’s ranking, in Louisiana graduation rates count for 41.67% of a high school’s score—nearly five times the weighting given to career readiness, which comprises 8.33% of the overall grade.⁴⁸

How much graduation rate determines a high school’s ranking



44 Will Sentell, “Amid New Rigor, Louisiana’s A-Rated Public Schools Are Falling, and Those with F’s on the Rise: Here’s Why,” *The Advocate* November 8, 2018, https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/education/article_4d1306fe-e2d2-11e8-bd06-cbcdb019790c.html.

45 Act 522 of the Regular Session of 2018.

46 Education Commission of the States, “50 State Comparison: States’ School Accountability Systems,” May 31, 2018, <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-states-school-accountability-systems/>.

47 *Ibid.*; Education Commission of the States, “Accountability and Reporting: ESSA Plans,” May 2018, <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbQuest5E?rep=SA172>.

48 *Ibid.*

Schools and parents will obviously require time to adjust to the new grading system. However, the state should continue working to explain the system to parents—and provide the data behind the rankings, so that parents can judge for themselves about the criteria most important to them.⁴⁹ Policymakers should pay particular attention to the weighting disparity for high schools with respect to graduation rates vis-à-vis college and career readiness. Ideally, an increase in graduation rates over time would see the reduction or elimination of this measure for school assessment, and an increase in the weighting given to career preparatory efforts. BESE could also consider publicizing teacher-related metrics—such as teacher attendance and performance—on its website, and/or incorporating these into the school assessment formula.

Reform Teacher Tenure:

Data from multiple states suggest that teacher performance remains bogged down by twin obstacles: Ineffective performance metrics and state tenure laws. While recent education reform efforts have tried to improve teacher evaluation, they have not always succeeded. For instance, evaluation “reform” efforts in Florida, Tennessee, and Michigan still resulted in 97-98% of teachers receiving an effective rating.⁵⁰

“
The ease and speed with which many teachers receive tenure creates myriad problems within the educational system.”

However, even when states and administrators have established effective evaluation measures, tenure laws can prevent the removal of ineffective teachers. A seminal 2009 study found that, in addition to nearly all (99%) of teachers receiving satisfactory ratings, tenure had become a perfunctory grant—but one difficult to reverse. More than two in five (41%) of administrators said they had never failed to renew a teacher in the last year of his or her probationary period—making a grant of tenure virtually automatic—while half of districts studied had failed to dismiss a single tenured teacher within the prior five years.⁵¹

The ease and speed with which many teachers receive tenure creates myriad problems within the educational system. Most states still grant tenure after only three years, despite literature suggesting that distinguishing effective from ineffective teachers takes more than three years to determine.⁵² School districts may end up granting tenure to teachers who ultimately prove ineffective, and may move them into administrative roles to remove them from the classroom—at the cost of increased central office bureaucracy.

Louisiana attempted to change the culture within education by tackling both facets of the teacher performance problem. In 2010, the Legislature made major changes to the teacher evaluation model.⁵³ Most notably, the reforms introduced the concept of “value-added assessment” to teacher evaluations, and specified that “50% of such [teacher] evaluations shall be based on evidence of growth in student achievement using” that model.⁵⁴ Though the change proved controversial among teachers’ unions, it followed a common-sense principle that most parents could easily understand: Base teacher evaluations upon whether the students in the classroom learn course material.

49 A new website developed by BESE, www.louisianaschools.com, contains much of the information regarding the scores developed for the 2017-18 academic year, the first under the “new” grading system.

50 Frederick Hess, “The Missing Half of School Reform,” National Affairs Fall 2013, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-missing-half-of-school-reform>.

51 Daniel Weisberg, et al., “The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness,” The New Teacher Project, June 8, 2009, https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TheWidgetEffect_2nd_ed.pdf.

52 Educational Commission of the States, “Teacher Tenure: Requirements for Earning Non-probationary Status,” May 2014, [http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRTL?rep=TT01:Communities for Teaching Excellence, “Earned, Not Given: Transforming Teacher Tenure,” May 2012, http://studentsmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/SM_Earned-Not-Given-Transforming-Teacher-Tenure_05.23.12.pdf](http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRTL?rep=TT01:Communities+for+Teaching+Excellence,+Earned,+Not+Given:+Transforming+Teacher+Tenure,+May+2012,+http://studentsmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/SM_Earned-Not-Given-Transforming-Teacher-Tenure_05.23.12.pdf).

53 Act 54 of the Regular Session of 2010.

54 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 3902(B)(5) and Title 17, Section 3997(D)(2) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

Two years later, as part of a broader package of educational reforms, the Legislature went further, to modify teacher tenure.⁵⁵ The law made major changes to the educational status quo:

It explicitly stated that superintendents and principals must “make all employment-related decisions based upon performance, effectiveness, and qualifications... In no case shall seniority or tenure be used as the primary criterion” when making hiring and assignment decisions, or when considering reductions in force.⁵⁶

- It established that effectiveness—as determined by state evaluations—demand, and experience would determine salary schedules, with no one factor accounting for more than half of the salary formula.⁵⁷
- It stated that “no teacher or administrator who is rated ‘ineffective’” under the state evaluation program “shall receive a higher salary in the year following the evaluation than he received in the year of the evaluation.”⁵⁸
- For new teachers, it limited tenure to those teachers rated “highly effective” for five years within a six year period.⁵⁹
- It stated that “a tenured teacher who receives a performance rating of ‘ineffective’” under the state evaluation system “shall immediately lose his tenure and all rights related thereto.”⁶⁰

These changes effectively made the majority of new teachers “at-will” employees, and allowed administrators more easily to remove existing teachers rated “ineffective” according to the new state standards.

A recent analysis of the impact of the Louisiana reforms found that the laws led to increased teacher turnover—but quite possibly turnover of a beneficial nature. In general, voluntary teacher exit rates increased by 1.5 percentage points in the years immediately following the laws’ passage, with effects greatest amongst already-tenured teachers, and the most experienced teachers eligible for full retirement.⁶¹ However, one data point in particular stands out:

The increase in teacher exits was highest in schools with the lowest standardized test scores. Schools with a letter grade of “F” on the state report card saw exits increase from 7.4% to 9.4% (a 27% increase), while “A”-rated schools saw no change.⁶²

Unfortunately, the analysis did not allow researchers to determine whether or not the teachers who chose to depart were judged more or less effective than those who remained. However, if Louisiana’s reforms to teacher evaluation and tenure led to an increase in departures of long-standing faculty members from failing schools, some might view that development as ultimately a beneficial outcome for Louisiana students.

55 Act 1 of the Regular Session of 2012.

56 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 81(A)(6) and Title 17, Section 81.4(B) and (C) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

57 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 418(B)(1) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

58 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 418(B)(2) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

59 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 441(A)(1)(b) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

60 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 441(C) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

61 Katharine Strunk, Nathan Barrett, and Jane Arnold Lincove, “When Tenure Ends: Teacher Turnover in Response to Policy Changes in Louisiana.” Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, February 22, 2017, https://educationresearchalliancencola.org/files/publications/ERA-1702-Policy-Brief-Tenure_170804_162141.pdf.

62 Ibid.

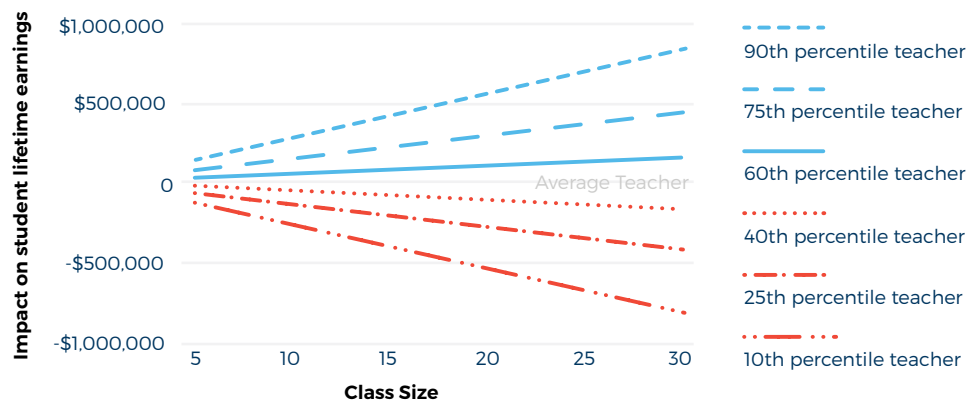
Reform Teacher Pay:

Movements across the country, including in Louisiana, have called for raising teacher pay. Some proposals would seek to provide across-the-board increases in salary of a few hundred to perhaps a few thousand dollars.⁶³

However, these types of initiatives ignore the academic literature, which shows a large distinction between effective and ineffective teachers. For instance, Stanford University economist Eric Hanushek has concluded that, compared to a teacher at the median (i.e., 50th percentile) level of performance, a teacher in the top sixth of instructors will increase a single student's lifetime earnings by \$20,000. Conversely, a teacher in the bottom sixth of instructors will decrease a single student's lifetime earnings by \$20,000 when compared to a median-level teacher.⁶⁴ Multiplied over a classroom of 20-30 pupils, a single teacher can add, or subtract, literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in student earnings over the course of just one year.

Effective Teachers Raise Students' Earnings

Annual Impact of Teacher Quality on the Lifetime Incomes of a Class of Students*



*Compared to an average teacher

Source: www.educationnext.org/valuing-teachers/

“
policymakers
should...
reform the
entire teacher
pay structure,
so that it
handsomely
rewards
the highest-
performing
educators.”

While well-intentioned, proposals to give across-the-board increases miss the mark, by failing to delineate the teachers that do, and do not, add value to their students. They would dull the incentives Louisiana created in 2012, by making effectiveness a criterion for pay increases, and blocking raises for teachers rated “ineffective.”

Rather than providing comparatively meager increases to all teachers, policymakers should instead reform the entire teacher pay structure, so that it handsomely rewards the highest-performing educators. One proposal would create a new class of “master teachers,” based on value-added assessments, and pay these teachers salaries of over \$100,000 annually—funded in part by modest increases in class sizes.⁶⁵ These types

63 For instance, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards has proposed a \$1,000 pay increase for teachers, and a \$500 pay increase for support workers, effective this fall. See Julia O'Donoghue, “John Bel Edwards' Top Priority? Giving Teachers a Raise,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune* September 19, 2018, https://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2018/09/john_bel_edwards_teachers_pay.html.

64 Erik Hanushek, “Valuing Teachers,” *Education Next* Summer 2011, <http://educationnext.org/valuing-teachers/>.

65 Matthew Ladner, et al., *New Millennium Schools: Delivering Six-Figure Teacher Salaries in Return for Outstanding Student Learning Gains*, Goldwater Institute, April 2009.

of policies to reward high-performing teachers would attract new entrants to the profession in a way that could transform education. Moreover, by linking salaries to value-added performance, this approach would ensure that additional dollars spent on teacher pay equate to results.

Transform Traditional Public Schools:

The success of the charter school model in New Orleans, as measured by the increased test scores of students in the Recovery School District, echoes that of other charter school experiments. In city after city—from the nation’s capital of Washington, DC to Denver to Camden, New Jersey—students in charter schools have outperformed their traditional public school counterparts.⁶⁶ The development raises an obvious question: Why should only certain “lucky” families chosen to attend these schools receive the benefits of a charter education?

In his work *Reinventing America’s Schools*, author David Osborne suggests a path to transplant the charter school culture throughout the education community. Rather than focusing on labels—particularly because charter school laws vary from state to state—Osborne emphasizes function: “What matters is not whether we call them charter schools or district schools or ‘innovation schools’ or ‘pilot schools,’ but the rules that govern their operation.”⁶⁷

Osborne emphasizes two cultural components—autonomy and accountability—that charter schools exhibit but most traditional public schools lack:

Do [schools] have the autonomy they need to design a school model that works for the children they must educate? Are they free to hire the best teachers and fire the worst?...Do schools experience enough accountability—including the threat of closure if they fail—to create a sense of urgency among their employees? And when they close, are they replaced by better schools? If the answer to these questions is yes, the system will be self-renewing: Its schools will constantly improve and evolve.⁶⁸

When coupled with other concepts discussed in this paper—namely, choice and competition among various educational options for parents—Osborne believes that autonomy and accountability will allow for a more vibrant and innovative culture within schools and school systems.

As they work to continue the education transformation in Louisiana, policymakers should consider ways to expand both autonomy and accountability in traditional public schools—giving teachers and principals more freedom and flexibility to manage their schools and classrooms, and providing clear consequences for schools that consistently fail to meet expectations.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

Truly effective schools must provide curricular programs of relevance to students. A school with outstanding teachers and outcomes will not serve students well if it does not provide them with the skills necessary to succeed in the future—whether in college, a career, the military, or some combination.

Education reform must ensure that schools provide the training that students will need

⁶⁶ Osborne, *Reinventing America’s Schools*, Excerpt from Introduction.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

in a 21st century economy. It should also lead to a well-educated citizenry prepared to take on the civic responsibilities that come with our participatory democracy.

Promote High-Quality Career and Technical Options:

Despite the robust job market in most areas of the country, many firms have reported difficulty finding qualified workers.⁶⁹ This mismatch of businesses who cannot find employees to meet their specific needs hinders economic growth, and limits potential gains in productivity and efficiency.

In many cases, businesses and associations in vocational trades have set their own standards and established curricula, to ensure that individuals graduating from those courses will meet potential employers' professional standards. To give some examples, the Associated Builders and Contractors and American Welding Association offer training programs, while the American Society of Mechanical Engineers offers online materials and podcasts.⁷⁰

While these programs fill an unmet need for training, they also result in unnecessary duplication for school-aged students. In some cases, the skills students receive in high school vocational training classes do not match the skills taught in courses run by the trade associations themselves. Upon graduation, students may end up having to take the same course over again, so they can learn the "correct" techniques and standards used by professionals in the industry.

Thankfully, Louisiana lawmakers recognized the inefficiencies surrounding course training, and acted to modernize school curricular offerings. In 2014, the Legislature authorized creation of the Jump Start program.⁷¹ The legislation also provided for the creation of a career diploma track in all public schools, given "equal status and recognition" as a regular diploma.⁷²

Perhaps most importantly, the 2014 law eradicated the artificial boundaries between school vocational training programs and businesses who hire the graduates of those programs. The law requires students to "complete...workplace-based learning experiences" to receive a Jump Start credential.⁷³ By allowing participants to complete on-the-job training as part of their regular schooling, Jump Start programs can result in students graduating with a certification in their chosen field—and a fast track to quality, high-paying jobs immediately upon entering the workforce. Jump Start also requires close coordination between a curriculum's vocational and academic components. Schools must review their course offerings every year "in partnership with local business and industry leaders, local economic development agencies, and postsecondary education leaders."⁷⁴ These changes will hopefully ensure that schools' vocational training programs remain responsive to the needs of employers, such that the two develop long-standing partnerships to ensure the next generation of workers receive the skills they need to succeed.

The Jump Start program rolled out over a four-year transition, with full implementation completed during the last academic year (2017-18). Even during the transition,

69 Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Beige Book, January 17, 2018, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/beigebook201801.htm>.

70 See for instance <http://www.abc.org/Education-Training/Craft-Training-Apprenticeship>, <https://app.aws.org/certification/docs/pricelist.pdf>, and http://php.aist.org/ela/training_series.htm.

71 Act 643 of the Regular Session of 2014.

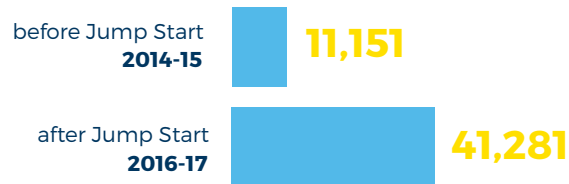
72 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 183.1(D) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

73 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 183.3(B)(2)(f) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

74 Ibid., as codified at Title 17, Section 183.3(A)(2)(b) of the Louisiana Revised Statutes.

the program nearly quadrupled the number of students earning a national or state industry-based credential in three years, from 11,151 in 2014-15 to 41,281 in 2016-17.⁷⁵

Number of students earning a national or state industry-based credential in three years



“
a post-
industrial,
information-
based world
suggests
the need
for a more
personalized
approach [to
education].”

The Jump Start partnership model that serves as the basis of Louisiana’s revamped vocational offerings should do much to close the skills and training gap many employers currently face. However, Jump Start can succeed only to the extent that it provides skills and certifications for in-demand careers. The state Workforce Investment Council must compile accurate, high-quality data about workforce demand, to ensure that Jump Start’s industry-based certifications align with the needs of Louisiana’s economy—both now and in the future.

Competency-Based Education:

In recent years, some states have begun introducing competency-based assessment as part of their educational systems. In many ways, this method—also called mastery-based education or proficiency-based education—provides a complement to school choice initiatives.

Whereas school choice looks to provide more personalized schooling options, competency-based education seeks to personalize a student’s curricular progression based upon his or her learning style and advancement. Currently, most high schools and colleges operate their instructional programs based upon the Carnegie unit—a measurement linked to the amount of time a student spends in the classroom (e.g., “credit hours”). Under this system, developed at the beginning of the last century, students advance from grade to grade in large part based on the number of hours of instruction received.

While the Carnegie unit system may have worked well for an industrial era at the beginning of the 20th century, a post-industrial, information-based world suggests the need for a more personalized approach. Competency-based education advances students when they have mastered the relevant material—not before or after.⁷⁶ It should allow gifted students to advance more swiftly, while providing students struggling with course subject matter more focused attention to gain competency.

A transition to competency-based education requires buy-in from teachers, districts, and other stakeholders to re-think the way schools have traditionally taught students.

⁷⁵ Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Jump Start Fact Sheet,” https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives_jump-start.pdf?sfvrsn=5.

⁷⁶ Karla Phillips and Carri Schneider, “Policy, Pilots, and the Path to Competency-Based Education: A Tale of Three States,” ExcelinEd Policy Brief, September 2016, <https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.Policy.PilotsAndThePathToCBETaleOfThreeStates.Sep2016.pdf>.

Even though New Hampshire officially abolished the Carnegie unit in 2005, requiring districts to establish their own competencies for their curricula, some “schools have remained tethered to time-based practices such as end-of-unit summative assessments and fixed, whole-class pacing. Students at these schools still move through material as a class, rather than at a flexible pace based on their individual mastery. Consequently, they still stand to accumulate gaps in learning that the state’s competency-based policies were intended to prevent.”⁷⁷

While completing a transition to competency-based education requires time and effort, many states have begun the process. Ten states have developed pilot programs for competency-based education, and a further 19 have innovation programs that allow for flexibility in curricular offerings.⁷⁸ These programs can help states examine the policy changes—for instance, providing flexibility from time-based curricula, and modifying assessment and accountability regimes to reflect competency-based education—needed to deploy this new model successfully.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, Louisiana has yet to join the majority of states that have adopted an innovation model and/or a pilot program in competency-based education. The Legislature should remedy this omission by exploring, authorizing, and funding the creation of such a pilot program. The development of a state pilot initiative would allow Louisiana educators to learn more about competency-based education, and assess the policy and curricular changes needed to make the program successful on a statewide basis.

HELPING THE NEXT GENERATION SUCCEED

Thankfully, schools have begun the process of transforming the educational system in Louisiana. The creation of the Recovery School District, robust growth in charter education, school choice initiatives, and tenure reform have started to pay dividends, as measured in both parental satisfaction and student achievement.

However, the state has much more work ahead of itself—particularly given that Louisiana began with a poorer track record than most other states. Many students, particularly in rural and suburban areas, do not have easy access to school choice options. Charter schools in some cases remain closed to middle-class families. And the curricular model in the state remains fixed to a platform developed around the same time as the Model T.

Louisiana’s children deserve the best future possible—but to achieve that brighter future, they must receive the best education possible. That brighter future requires an expansion of school choice to all Louisiana families, a transformation of traditional public schools, and an increased focus on quality educational outcomes—so that students will have the competencies and skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century economy.

Building the best future possible requires the best of each of us. Louisiana should continue the work it has started, and complete the transformation of its educational system.

⁷⁷ Julia Freeland Fisher, “New Hampshire’s Journey toward Competency-Based Education,” *Education Next* February 1, 2015, <https://www.educationnext.org/new-hampshires-journey-toward-competency-based-education/>.

⁷⁸ Karla Phillips and Erin Lockett, “The Path to Personalized Learning: The Next Chapter in the Tale of Three States,” *ExcelinEd* Policy Brief, October 2017, <https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.ThePathToPersonalizedLearningTheNextChapterInTheTaleofThreeStates.Oct2017.pdf>, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Education Counsel, “Policy, Pilots, and the Path to Competency-Based Education: A National Landscape,” *ExcelinEd* Policy Brief, Spring 2017, <https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEd.PolicyPilotsAndThePathToCBENationalLandscape.Spring2017.pdf>.



Pelican Institute for Public Policy
400 Poydras Street • Suite 900 • New Orleans, LA 70130

504-500-0506
info@pelicaninstitute.org
pelicaninstitute.org