



ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOUISIANA STUDENTS

A Guide to Louisiana Education Policies



INTRODUCTION

Louisiana is making progress in education. Public school students are improving their academic achievement and today they have more school and course choices than ever before. More young people are prepared for opportunities after high school, and public schools are making better connections to the demands of our growing economy.

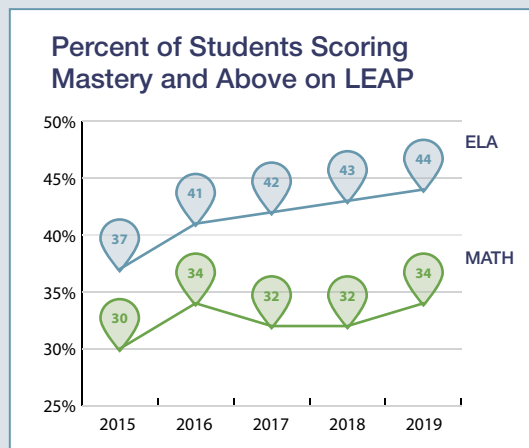
This is good news, and it's the result of two things:

1. Over the last several years, Louisiana has put in place a strong framework of highly-regarded education policies and innovations.
2. The hard work of effective educators and school leaders is paying off.

Unfortunately, many of our school systems across the state still lag behind. To close that gap, we need a sustained effort to keep moving forward while accelerating the pace of our improvement. How do we do that? Five steps are key:

1. Focus and build on recent academic progress.
2. Protect Louisiana's strong framework of policies and practices that are working, including high-quality standards, assessments, and accountability.
3. Ensure quality and access to new or in-demand school and course choices in all regions.
4. Recognize that despite our improvements, we remain behind our peers and must keep making progress.
5. Address lingering issues that continue to hold us back such as early education, reading in the early years, and equity.

Louisiana's education reforms too often get scrutinized in isolation, despite the fact that they are all part of an intentional and connected plan. Together they represent a series of policy changes that our state has been implementing, improving, and building upon for several years. Despite the rhetoric of some, Louisiana's education strategies are working. This guide examines some of those successes and helps explain how our policies fit together to form a comprehensive and carefully considered approach to improving outcomes for all students.



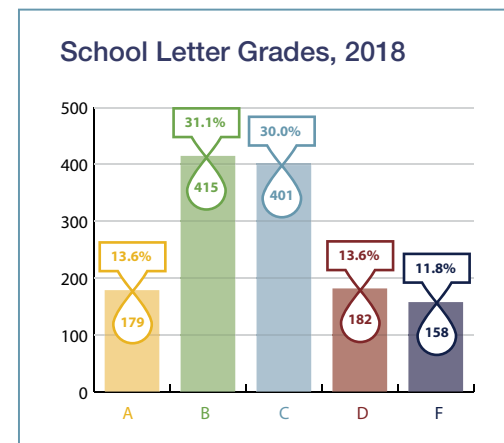
STATE OF THE STATE

What Louisiana Has Accomplished in the Past Decade

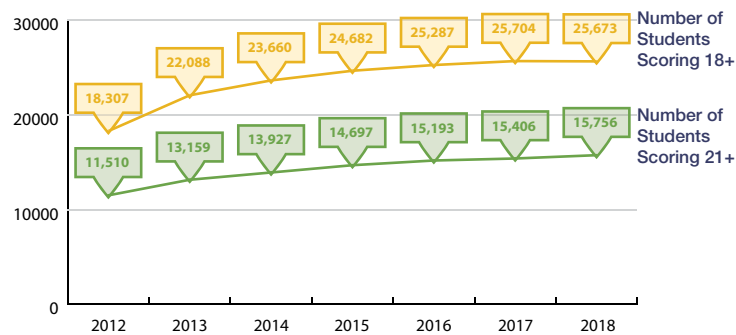
It must be stated at the outset, that despite our many improvements in education policy, Louisiana still ranks low compared to other states on too many indicators including, the National Assessment of Education progress, often referred to as the Nation's Report Card.

In comparing ourselves with other states, there are some key factors to consider. One is that Louisiana has a disproportionately high number of students in private schools, a legacy of our state's long history of religious education. Another is the fact that Louisiana has made it easier for parents to homeschool, with more than 30,000 students in home study or non-public schools not regulated by the state. With few exceptions, none of these students take state standardized tests and their achievement levels are not reflected in either state or national reporting of results.

It's also important to recognize that Louisiana has historically had one of the highest poverty rates in the country. That continues to this day where we rank 50th in the percentage of children in poverty. The link between poverty and low educational achievement is well-established with children living in poverty less likely to be ready for kindergarten and more likely to dropout.



High School Student Performance On The ACT



The question that arises is, what are the policy changes that have resulted in these improvements? Basically, they fall into five major categories:

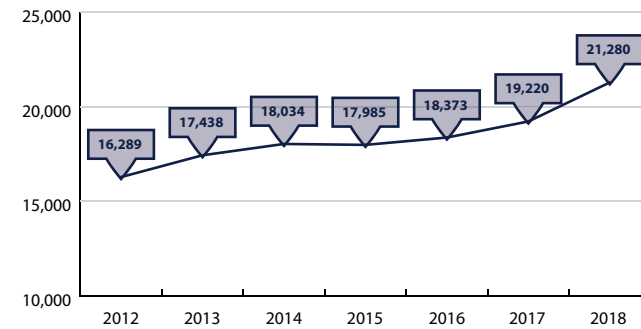
1. Higher academic standards and quality student assessments
2. Strong focus on college and career readiness
3. New initiatives to improve teacher preparation and measure performance
4. A highly-regarded school measurement and accountability system
5. More options for school and course choice

This guide takes a look at each of these policy areas and their impact on public education in Louisiana.

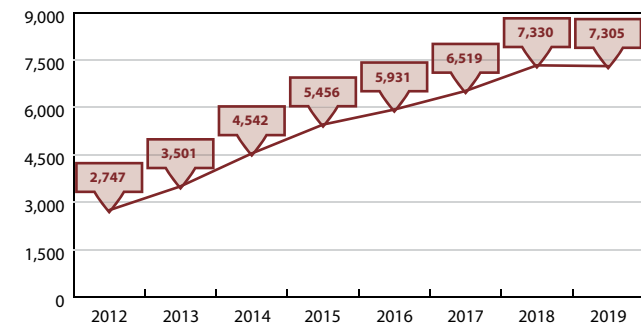
Still, over the last several years Louisiana has taken direct aim at improving the academic performance of all students and we are beginning to see encouraging results.

- Since Louisiana raised its expectations for student achievement beginning in 2015, performance at the “Mastery” level has seen a steady increase.
- In 2018, Louisiana had 112 high-performing, high-poverty schools where school leaders placed a strong emphasis on fostering meaningful relationships with students; engaged in purposeful, intentional and structured interventions; and set high expectations to earn letter grades of A or B.
- ACT scores are generally trending upward, as well as the number of students earning both college-going and college-ready scores.
- For the first time ever, Louisiana’s high school graduation rate is more than 80-percent and our growth far exceeds national trends.
- Record numbers of students are now earning advanced placement credits and more than half of high school seniors in 2018 graduated with college credit or an industry-based credential.
- More than 25,000 Louisiana students – up from 16,000 in 2008 – enrolled in postsecondary education in 2018.
- More students than ever are qualifying for TOPS scholarship awards.

Number of Graduates Eligible for TOPS



Number of Students Earning a Qualifying Score of 3, 4, or 5 on AP tests



OVERVIEW OF KEY STATE EDUCATION POLICIES STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT

Nationally Competitive, High Learning Standards and Assessments

Louisiana has had defined academic standards since the 1990s. Standards represent the knowledge and skills students must master throughout elementary, middle, and high school in order to be college and career ready upon graduation. Until 2011, Louisiana's standards were called Grade Level Expectations. They served the state well for a number of years, but they lacked the rigor seen in other states and because they were unique to Louisiana, it was difficult to benchmark Louisiana students' progress with the rest of the nation.

In 2011, Louisiana began transitioning from the old Grade Level Expectations to higher standards in math and English to better align the state with academic expectations across the country. This culminated in 2016 with the adoption of the Louisiana Student Standards in English Language Arts and Math. They were developed over the course of several months by a group of more than 100 Louisiana educators with

By 2025 schools earning ratings of "A" will average "mastery" performance rather than "basic."

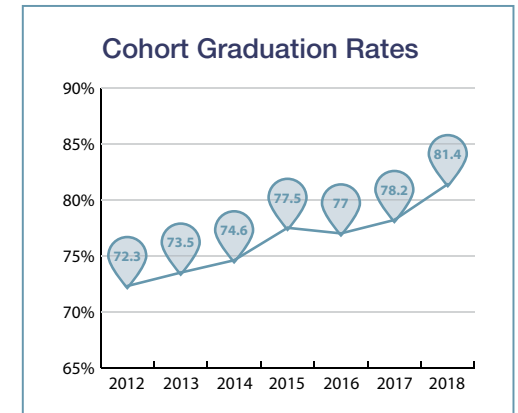
input from teachers, university representatives, business leaders, and parents from across the state. An online website for citizen feedback recorded more than 30,000 comments. New, more modern, science standards were adopted in 2017 through a similar process. Though these standards are unique to Louisiana, they are comparable with other states and represent a level of rigor that ensures students have the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and career.

In order to align the state's standardized assessments with the new standards, Louisiana has shifted from its previous LEAP tests to a new set of assessments for Grades 3-8 in math and English called LEAP 2025. Students in high school are assessed using End-of-Course Tests developed by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and

assessments that are part of the ACT series. As part of this, Louisiana is one of 18 states that require all high school students to take the ACT. The cost for the tests is borne by the state, and besides saving students money, it also improves equity by allowing every student, regardless of economic background, access to the test and the opportunity to determine their next steps toward postsecondary education.

Frequency of Testing

In 2017 the legislatively created Commission on Assessment Review and Use in Public Schools undertook a thorough review of how standardized testing is used in Louisiana. It pointed out that state-level tests are required by both state and federal law and concluded that "Assessments are necessary to provide useful information about student achievement levels and how students perform relative to their peers across the state and nationally."



Information provided also showed that the vast majority of standardized testing occurs because of requirements at the local level and that the LDOE has taken significant steps to reduce the amount of state-level testing. Currently, in grades 3-10 the state requires students to take only one test per year in each of four subject areas accounting for less than two-percent of yearly instructional time. For example, as a result of these efforts, 3rd-5th grade students who spent five hours on state-level math tests in 2014 now spend less than four hours.

Local Choice for Curricula and Textbooks

BESE and the Louisiana legislature have made clear that choices about curricula such as textbooks, workbooks, online materials, etc. rest entirely with local school districts. There are no state mandates. The LDOE has assisted districts by identifying curricula and textbooks that are aligned to the state's academic standards and providing incentives for districts to adopt the highest quality materials and resources.

Expanded Access to Rigorous Courses and Assessments

Louisiana's requirement that all high school students participate in the ACT series of assessments has resulted in record numbers of students qualifying for TOPS and many more economically-disadvantaged students learning they are college ready. In addition, the state has expanded access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual enrollment for students. As a result, more students than ever before are graduating high school with college credits. This transition from high school to college has been further enhanced by requiring students to complete the FAFSA which is the form that helps them determine their eligibility for financial aid. In 2018, Louisiana had the highest percentage of FAFSA completions in the country.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Louisiana was on the cutting edge of developing groundbreaking education policies in the late 1990s when it became one of the first states in the country to adopt a school accountability system. Since its inception, it has been a model of what a quality accountability system looks like. Today, federal law requires all states to provide a way to hold schools accountable for results.

But what is a school accountability system? In its most basic form, it's the way the state holds schools responsible for improving the academic performance of all students. Prior to the advent of these systems, we had no objective measurement of how our students were performing, expectations of what they should know, and no goals for improving student achievement.

Louisiana's school accountability system does four important things for its schools:

1. It gives an objective view to parents and stakeholders of how a school is performing.
2. It informs the public of how well their tax dollars are being used to achieve the outcomes we desire.
3. It sets expectations for improvement.
4. And, it helps identify where interventions might be needed for students and schools who are struggling.



School Performance Based on Outcomes

BESE's primary role in accountability is to support school districts by focusing on school performance that is based on student outcomes. This includes performance on annual state assessments, AP participation, graduation rates, and credit accumulation. This approach emphasizes to schools and school districts what really matters – how effectively they are serving students.

Raising Student Expectations

As part of this, public education in Louisiana is in the midst of a gradual transition in the definition of what it means for a student to be proficient in a subject area. In the past, performance at the “Basic” level was enough for a student to be considered proficient, but over time the state realized that too many high school graduates were still underprepared when they entered college. To address this, BESE has chosen to raise what it means to be proficient over the course of the next several years. By 2025, the state will define grade-level proficiency at the “Mastery” level rather than “Basic.” This more rigorous level of performance is more reflective of the knowledge and skills students actually need to succeed in school and beyond.

BESE is doing this over a period of time to support educators in meeting this new, higher standard. It is an ambitious goal and one that cannot be achieved overnight, but it is a reasonable timeline that gives our schools, teachers, and students a great opportunity to succeed.

Letter Grades and Report Cards

Over a number of years, BESE and the LDOE have worked together to create a system of letter grades that are designed to accurately and easily report every school's performance to parents and the public. They can be easily accessed on the Louisiana School Finder which allows anyone the ability to see the annual “school report card” for every public school and publicly subsidized early childhood center in the state. Each public school receives points based on their overall performance and those points are used to assign a letter grade to the school based on an A-F grading scale.

The report cards provide parents and stakeholders both accountability and transparency in a form that's easy to understand and access. Besides the overall letter grade, the report cards include information about student progress, how well the school prepares students for college and career, the strength of the teacher workforce, and the performance of different demographic groups, such as economically disadvantaged and students of color.

The LDOE also assigns each school district in the state a letter grade. It too is based on a variety of performance criteria, including student performance on assessments, student progress, dropouts, and graduation rates. The current average of all district letter grades gives Louisiana an overall grade of B.

Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed by Congress in 2015, schools and districts are required to report data on the performance of various groups of students. These include economically disadvantaged students, children of color, and students with special needs. The performance of these groups of students is also taken into account in Louisiana's accountability system.

SCHOOL CHOICE

Charter Schools

Louisiana has the third-highest percentage of students enrolled in charter schools in the nation. At 11-percent, that's nearly twice the national average and translates into more than 80,000 students attending more than 150 charter schools. In New Orleans every student is enrolled in charter schools, the only major city in the country with that distinction.

Charter schools are independent public schools most often operated by a nonprofit, citizen board that oversees their work. State law grants them more autonomy allowing them to try innovative approaches and make their own decisions on things such as staffing and curriculum development. At the same time, they are held to a higher standard than other schools, have stringent performance and financial oversight, and operate on time-limited contracts that can be rescinded if the schools are not performing at agreed upon levels.

Like any school, charter schools vary in quality. But a 2018 study by the national Education Research Alliance found that the change from traditional schools to charter schools in New Orleans has resulted in significant increases in student performance, graduation rates, and college enrollment.

Scholarships

In two stages over the last several years, state lawmakers approved legislation that provides families whose children attend schools rated a C, D, or F with the option to attend private schools. The number of parents expressing interest in this program continues to grow though the open slots available for students remains somewhat limited. Currently, the program serves about 7,000 students in more than 120 schools. When both state and local revenues are considered, the program actually saves taxpayer dollars. In recent years, funding for the scholarship program has been stagnant.

Course Choice

In recent years BESE has significantly expanded course choice options for high school students across the state. It comes in a number of forms. One is dual enrollment which allows students to take college-level courses while still in high school. That program has grown consistently over time with more than 30,000 students per year now participating. A similar program is called Jump Start. It targets students who are seeking a career diploma in a technical field and one of its requirements is that every student earn an Industry-Based Credential before graduating.

In addition, students now have increased access to specialized and advanced courses that might not otherwise be available in their school districts because of limited resources, as well as more opportunities to take advanced placement courses for college credit. All these initiatives are aimed at providing students with better connections to college or careers.



TEACHER PREPARATION

It is no secret that great teachers spur students to higher levels of achievement, so the better we prepare our incoming teachers for the classroom while they are still in college, the better their chances for success.

Louisiana is at the forefront of this work through an innovative teacher residency program. With this approach, aspiring teachers in most of the state's 27 teacher preparation programs will spend one year of their studies teaching in the classroom under the mentorship of an experienced teacher learning real-world practices. The move was prompted by surveys of incoming teachers which found about half said they were unprepared for what it took to manage their classrooms. In the past, student teaching involved roughly one semester.

Louisiana's "Believe and Prepare," offered aspiring teachers a fully funded yearlong residency under the guidance of an expert mentor. Both program providers and school system staff voiced optimism about and support for the state's new residency requirements and their potential impact on teacher candidate quality.

What Other States Can Learn from Louisiana's Ambitious Efforts to Reshape Its Education System – RAND, June 2019

CLOSING CURRENT POLICY GAPS

Despite our advances in improving the quality of public education in Louisiana, challenges remain. While it's clear that we should continue our path forward, there are also some key policy gaps we must seek to address.



EARLY EDUCATION

Louisiana has done a good job of implementing policies to improve the quality of early education. We now have near universal access to quality pre-k programs for economically disadvantaged four-year-olds. However, significant gaps remain for children birth to age three. Louisiana must continue to invest in programs that provide working families access to quality child care programs that provide rich, early education experiences. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all of our children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

GRADE LEVEL READING

One of the growing understandings in the field of education is that when children are unable to read at grade level by third grade, it is increasingly difficult for them to catch up. By fourth grade, instruction moves from teaching the skills of reading to more of a focus on understanding and comprehension. For children who fall behind at this critical time, there are consequences that can last throughout their schooling and into life. Louisiana must continue to focus on ways to ensure that students can read with proficiency by third grade.

IMPLEMENTATION

Despite strong policies at the state level, their success depends on effective implementation at the local level. Because school districts vary in their ability and willingness to adapt to policy changes, the state must continue to support and incentivize the implementation of effective practices and policies. Without this, many students will not receive the benefits that these policies promise.

EQUITY

Louisiana has put in place a widely-praised plan to improve equity in our public schools. Overall, students in Louisiana are showing academic improvement; however, there remain pronounced achievement gaps for historically-disadvantaged students. This is true not only in terms of student performance, but also in access to college credit courses.

The LDOE has developed a student improvement plan that has a strong focus on improving outcomes and access to educational opportunities for these groups of students. In 2019 they identified 276 schools in need of comprehensive intervention, and an additional 220 schools requiring interventions because of consistent low performance of various groups of historically-disadvantaged students. All of these districts are now required to submit improvement plans to address the issues these schools are facing. Districts should implement these plans with fidelity and use the additional federal funding that is available to do things such as improve curricula and provide strong professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators.



LOOKING FORWARD

As we examine our education policies and the successes they have fostered, it is important to remember that Louisiana is not alone. Other states are making progress, too, and global competition continues to increase. That means that if we are to remain competitive, enjoy a good quality of life in our communities, and offer wide economic opportunities to our children and grandchildren, our education system must continue to improve in the years ahead. We cannot slow down.

To do that, we must build on our accomplishments and address our gaps.

More specifically that means:

- Protecting and maintaining current education policies that are working
- Insisting on rigorous academic standards and high-quality assessments
- Demanding a strong accountability system
- Empowering effective teachers and leaders, and
- Building high-quality, in-demand school and course choices that will propel our students into a prosperous future.

While challenges remain, the encouraging news is that Louisiana has developed strategies that are showing progress and policies that have become models that other states seek to replicate. Today, we are beginning to see the results of this work. A recent report by RAND highlights Louisiana's "ambitious" education policy changes and the lessons other states can learn from our experiences. But it cautions that implementation takes time and the bigger outcomes we seek may not be evident for a few more years as the policy changes have an opportunity to take a strong hold in Louisiana classrooms.

The message is clear: To succeed we must give these policies the time and support to be fully implemented – making improvements and adjustments as needed – with the single goal of improving educational opportunities for every student in Louisiana.

MORE INFORMATION

CABL is partnering with the Public Affairs Research Council and the Committee of 100 for Economic Development on a special policy initiative called RESET Louisiana's Future. It includes a focus on education in general, and specific policy briefings dealing with early childhood education, other K-12 policies, and improving college and career readiness. Those briefings can be found at www.reset-louisiana.com.



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