

The LA4 Longitudinal High School Outcomes Study



A Project of the Council for A Better Louisiana

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In 2001, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 1146 which created the Cecil J. Picard LA 4 Early Childhood Program. Its goal was to provide widespread access to high-quality early childhood education for children from economically-disadvantaged households.

In 2013, the research team released a report tracking the performance of students who enrolled in the program from the first cohort in 2002 through their completion of eighth grade. They were compared with students entering kindergarten in the same schools who did not receive any form of public Pre-K or Head Start. The results of their studies showed that LA 4 students had improved outcomes that were statistically significant in a variety of measurements.

Although decades of research showed that high-quality preschool education could have a significant impact on school readiness and student achievement in the earlier years, less was known about the long-term impact. This new effort seeks to add to that body of understanding about the benefits of early education on students through high school.

Introduction

The LA 4 Longitudinal High School Outcomes Study was developed through a partnership with the Council for A Better Louisiana, the Louisiana Department of Education, and the Rockhold Family Foundation. Through this collaboration we were able to access new data from the first three cohorts of LA 4 preschoolers and analyze their outcomes through high school. Those cohorts were enrolled from fall of 2002 through fall of 2004 and included 42,599 economically-disadvantaged students, a much larger pool than typically seen in other studies.

This report reviews earlier findings on LA 4 student outcomes from elementary and middle school and provides new information on student performance through high school. It compares them with students from economically-disadvantaged families who entered kindergarten in the same schools and years as the LA 4 study sample and did not receive any form of publicly-funded Pre-K.

Key Findings: LA 4 Students Compared to Economically Disadvantaged Students without Public Pre-K

- LA 4 children arrived at kindergarten with significantly higher levels of school readiness.
- LA 4 children consistently outperformed other children on statewide education tests at 4th and 8th grade and also in high school (with one exception in which the groups were the same).
- LA 4 children were approximately 45% less likely to be placed into special education programs.
- LA 4 students earned higher ACT scores, and more were eligible for all levels of the TOPS scholarship program.
- Eighty-eight percent of the LA 4 children graduated from high school, a rate that exceeds the state average graduation rate.
- All students, regardless of race or gender, showed these long-term benefits associated with participation in LA 4.

Figure 1: Graduation rates for the first three cohorts in the LA 4 Longitudinal Study

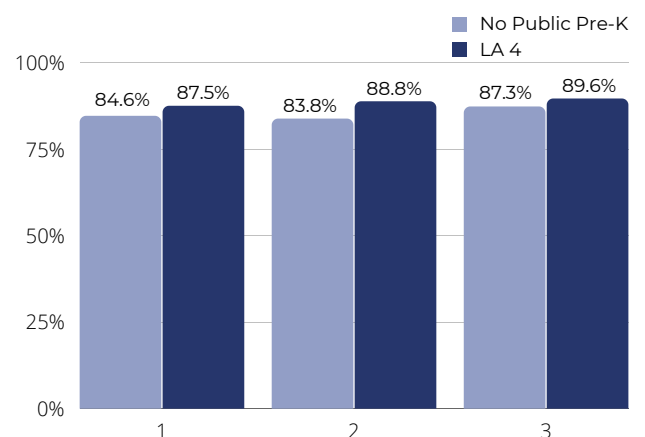


Table 1: LA 4 program outcomes compared to students with no Pre-K

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

Additional Considerations

- This study shows improved educational outcomes associated with just a single year of high-quality Pre-K education for four-year-olds. Because of the rapid pace of brain development in children birth to age three, there are reasons to believe that additional exposure to high-quality learning experiences at younger ages can yield even greater results.
- The findings around special education are important because reduced referrals to these programs show meaningful benefits for students, but can also result in significant cost savings for local school districts.
- It should be noted that the evidence makes very clear that high-quality Pre-K provides students a stronger educational foundation than they would otherwise have and that this additional early year of instruction and learning appears to improve their school performance through high school. It does not, however, mean that students do not also need continued high-quality instruction and targeted interventions from the early years through middle school and high school.
- This study suggests that quality early childhood education can contribute a positive impact on high school graduation rates and from that one might infer continuation to postsecondary education and the workforce. If our goal is to increase educational attainment in our state and improve the quality of our workforce, this study suggests quality early learning experiences can play a significant role in achieving this goal.

Summary

The LA 4 Longitudinal High School Outcomes Study provides the first-ever set of findings that a statewide public Pre-K program can help promote long-term benefits in terms of significantly higher academic achievement, lower retention rates, higher ACT scores, higher graduation rates, and substantially reduced rates of special education placement even 12 years after entering kindergarten.

It shows that the positive effects that are often identified in the early grades after Pre-K participation can also be found across a broad spectrum of measures through high school. While the effect sizes were generally modest, the extension of benefits through high school graduation is notable.

In addition, these findings support the conclusion that students from economically-disadvantaged families of all races can measurably benefit from high-quality, full-day Pre-K participation.

Because economically-disadvantaged children in the LA 4 program still performed lower than statewide averages on most academic achievement tests, this study suggests that a single year of quality Pre-K education is not enough to prepare children to achieve levels of performance on par with students from higher-income families.

Other research indicates that high-quality early education interventions that begin in the first three years of life are likely to yield even greater benefits in terms of educational outcomes, postsecondary benefits, higher earnings, and greater workforce participation. For this reason, meaningful investment in early care and education should be a top policy priority for the future of our state.