

Raising the Bar for Student Outcomes in Louisiana

In response to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the Race to the Top (RTTT) program that began in 2009—and more recently the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015—states across the nation have taken a variety of legislative and policy steps to make their schools and teachers more accountable for student learning. One state garnering attention for its recent efforts to improve education quality and outcomes is Louisiana. Some of the reforms put in place in Louisiana are extensive in scope—for example, restructuring the system of authority of early childhood providers, and offering external industry certifications as part of high school diplomas. Other reforms are more structurally modest and are connected with changes in teachers’ work in schools, such as mathematics curriculum reforms.

Historically, Louisiana’s education system has ranked near the bottom nationwide: Low kindergarten readiness rates, national assessment scores, and rates of college enrollment, as well as high unemployment rates among high school graduates, have defined the system for decades. But early evidence suggests that the state’s reform efforts may be helping to reverse this trend: In 2015, state scores on the ACT improved, and Advanced Placement (AP) course completions, high school graduation numbers, and college enrollment have all risen. A recent RAND report has also documented that teachers in Louisiana may now be thinking and teaching in ways that are more aligned with their state standards than are teachers in other states.¹

To date, however, there has been no holistic look at how individual states like Louisiana have implemented federal accountability legislation within the context of their state-specific priorities. Nor has there been documentation of how specific states have undertaken planning and communication processes to build capacity and meet the higher bar set by newer state standards. To address this knowledge gap, RAND researchers examined Louisiana’s efforts to improve student outcomes in the wake of federal accountability legislation. Specifically, they focused on reform strategies put in place by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) after 2012, when a new state superintendent of schools was

Key findings:

- Louisiana education reforms have spanned four key areas of the education spectrum: early childhood education, K–12 academics, teacher preparation, and graduation pathways.
- To pursue these reforms, Louisiana has relied on a range of policy levers, from more conventional ones such as mandates and incentives, to less conventional ones focused on resource alignment and communication across all layers of the education system.
- In each area of Louisiana’s reform efforts, there is a clarity of vision around what constitutes “high-quality” teaching and learning.
- State leaders particularly use communication as a policy lever to gather feedback and promote buy-in among leaders and teachers.
- The Louisiana Department of Education strategically partners with external stakeholders to promote and disseminate the state’s vision.
- Louisiana’s accountability system utilizes indicators of both instructional processes and student outcomes, with an increasing emphasis on outcomes as students get older.

appointed by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). The researchers tracked Louisiana’s use of particular policy levers—including mandates, resource alignment, incentives, and, especially, communication with stakeholders and external partners—to address challenges in four main areas: early childhood education; kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) academics; K–12 teacher preparation; and pathways to graduation and beyond.

Researchers used multiple data sources to document Louisiana’s reform efforts, including interviews with state officials, state policy documentation, observations of regional teacher and leader professional development meetings, and literature about other states’ experiences, as well as Kaufman,

¹ Julia H. Kaufman, Lindsey E. Thompson, and V. Darleen Opfer, *Creating a Coherent System to Support Instruction Aligned with State Standards: Promising Practices of the Louisiana Department of Education*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1613-HCT, 2016, www.rand.org/t/RR1613.

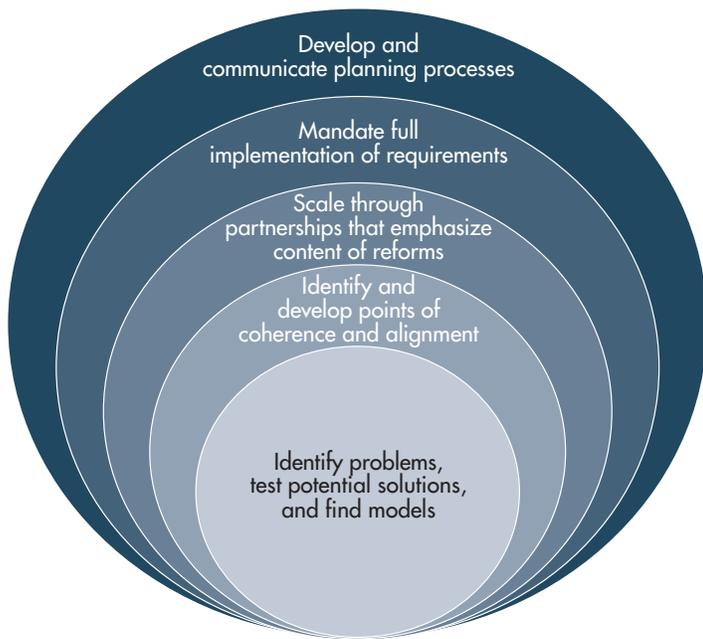
Thompson, and Opfer’s (2016) earlier work on Louisiana’s educational policy, teachers’ knowledge of state standards, and classroom practices.²

This research brief summarizes RAND’s findings about recent education reform efforts in Louisiana, and it describes key themes related to these efforts that may have valuable implications for other states going forward as they examine their respective education policies and practices. These key themes are also reflected in Louisiana’s theory for policy implementation, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

A Shared Vision for High-Quality Early Childhood Education

The overarching goal of Louisiana’s early childhood education (ECE) system is that all children start school ready to learn. Numerous challenges frustrate this goal: unequal access to high-quality ECE programs, variations in quality across the state’s approximately 1,500 publicly funded ECE centers, and a lack of information to guide parents when choosing ECE programs for their children. In response to these challenges, LDOE set forth to build a shared vision of what high-quality ECE programs look like.

Figure 1. LDOE’s theory of implementation relies heavily on communication as a policy lever to improve outcomes for students



² Julia H. Kaufman, Lindsey E. Thompson, and V. Darleen Opfer, *Creating a Coherent System to Support Instruction Aligned with State Standards: Promising Practices of the Louisiana Department of Education*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1613-HCT, 2016, www.rand.org/t/RR1613.

Table 1. Key State Policy Actions: Early Childhood Education

Action	Policy Lever
Create and require a unified rating system—connected to licensure and funding for all publicly funded centers—to provide information on center quality.	Mandate
Strengthen lead teacher preparation requirements through a new ECE teacher credential.	Mandate
Signal to ECE staff which curricula, formative assessments, and professional development are high-quality and aligned with standards.	Resource alignment
Increase funding for Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) subsidies to increase parity, and encourage diversity in types of centers serving publicly funded children.	Incentive
Provide funding incentives tied to higher quality ratings, teacher training, and curriculum use.	Incentive
Define and require community networks for administration and communication, including coordinated ECE program enrollment for families.	Communications and planning

At the heart of this effort was Louisiana’s 2012 Early Childhood Care and Education Act (“Act 3”), which shifted governance and accountability for all publicly funded ECE programs serving children from birth to age five under a single umbrella. Act 3 and subsequent legislation also mandated the creation of a quality rating system for centers, as well as a system of local ECE networks that provide coordinated enrollment across programs to encourage access to high-quality ECE centers. To further unify Louisiana’s ECE programs, legislation in 2014 moved all ECE center licensing under LDOE, shifting Head Start and state child care program licensing functions over from the Department of Children and Family Services. Additionally, under these new licensing requirements, publicly funded ECE centers must now meet a common set of performance standards.

Key policy actions for ECE are listed in Table 1.

Improving K-12 Academics

Louisiana’s K–12 public schools have faced numerous challenges, including high rates of poverty, low scores on national assessments, and lower spending on education than most other states. To define and set goals for high-quality K–12 student work, Louisiana has turned to federally required and state-mandated K–12 standards and assessments in key content areas, such as English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. According to RAND’s analysis, what sets this effort apart from similar efforts in other states is Louisiana’s commitment to supporting and incentivizing the use of resources and tools that closely align with state standards and assessments.

Table 2. Key State Policy Actions: K–12 Academics

Action	Policy Lever
Use state standards, assessments, and accountability to define and communicate a high bar for what is expected from schools and students.	Mandate
Signal to K–12 educators which instructional materials—including curricula and assessments—are high-quality and which are not.	Resource alignment
Increase the supply of high-quality, curriculum-specific professional development options, and provide clear information about those options.	Resource alignment
Provide funding incentives tied to use of high-quality curricula, professional development, and formative assessments.	Incentive
Create communication structures to gather information and identify champions of this work.	Communications and planning

While Louisiana’s textbook policy does not require the use of any specific curricula, it nonetheless sets forth a process for LDOE to conduct ongoing, rigorous reviews of instructional materials for alignment with state standards, and it grants discounted state contracts for materials that LDOE reviewers have defined as high-quality. LDOE has also reached out to and partnered with educators and other stakeholders across the state. For example, it has involved both publishers and districts in developing curriculum review policies and trying out curricula, and LDOE has enlisted teacher leader advisers from across the state to perform curriculum reviews. LDOE has also worked with vendors and experts to develop and/or recommend formative assessments that are closely aligned with recommended curricula.

Key policy actions for K–12 academics are listed in Table 2.

Preparing Strong K–12 Teachers

Through a state survey and community meetings, teacher preparation program providers and educators outlined several challenges for teacher preparation in Louisiana, including inadequate opportunities for teacher trainees to receive hands-on student teaching experiences and the need for better coordination and collaboration among districts and preparation providers. To address these challenges, the state provided funding for districts to partner with teacher preparation organizations and “test out” inclusion of standards-aligned competencies and yearlong residencies in teacher preparation programs. This work established buy-in and communication routes that provided more support for mandated requirements, which were passed into policy by BESE in 2016. Along with the partnership model that Louisiana aims for all districts and providers to embrace, teacher preparation policies include requirements for a yearlong residency requirement and competency-based curricula.

Table 3. Key State Policy Actions: Teacher Preparation

Action	Policy Lever
Codify a vision for high-quality teacher preparation that includes clear requirements and accountability structures for teacher preparation programs.	Mandate
Incentivize early adoption of the state’s vision for high-quality teacher preparation through district-teacher preparation program partnership funding.	Resource alignment
Create communication structures to gather information and identify champions for this work.	Communications and planning

Key policy actions for K–12 teacher preparation are listed in Table 3.

To Graduation and Beyond

Louisiana’s high school students face a number of challenges to a successful transition to college and the workplace. For example, in the past decade, Louisiana has consistently ranked 47th in the nation in terms of the percentage of residents with two- and four-year college degrees. Louisiana has identified three goals to improve the graduation pathways of its students—improving career readiness, improving college readiness, and creating more options for postsecondary education finance. To achieve its goals, the state has relied heavily on mandates that all students pursue a pathway to college or an industry-based certificate, that students complete necessary applications for postsecondary education financing while in high school, and that seniors take the ACT.

At the same time, the state has sought to hold schools accountable for results through indicators and public data. LDOE has also relied on partnerships with colleges and industry to support both the development and scaling of career and college pathways, and LDOE has done considerable work to communicate processes by which partners and stakeholders can implement the policies that LDOE has put in place.

Key policy actions for graduation pathways are listed in Table 4.

Takeaways for Other States and for Future Research

A number of cross-cutting themes emerged from RAND’s examination of the key actions that Louisiana has taken in the wake of NCLB and RTTT. These themes may have implications for other states as they embark on reforming their own policies and practices, as well as for RAND’s ongoing research on both policy implementation and outcomes across Louisiana. To this end, researchers highlight the importance of the following:

Table 4. Key State Policy Actions: Graduation Pathways

Action	Policy Lever
Require all high school students to pursue a pathway to an industry-based certificate, postsecondary enrollment, or both.	Mandate
Implement graduation requirements that facilitate links with college and technical school admission and financial aid.	Mandate
Provide public data to hold Louisiana school accountable on performance related to college and career readiness, valuing both tracks equally.	Mandate
Create course pathways that lead to high-quality industry credentials and preparation for certain college majors.	Resource alignment
Enable Louisiana teachers to have the industry credentials needed to implement the state's Jump Start Pathways program.	Resource alignment
Curate and fund access to quality external courses and credential opportunities.	Incentive
Draw on industry and higher education partners to select and create high school course pathways, based on regional workforce needs.	Communications and planning

- clarity of vision around “high-quality” teaching and learning
- close adherence to an intended theory of implementation, apart from federal mandates
- close involvement with educators to gather feedback and promote buy-in
- partnerships with external stakeholders to provide information and support scale
- coherence and alignment among mandates, incentives, and resources
- promotion of equity through incentives and resources
- quality ratings for both processes and outcomes, with an increasing emphasis on outcomes as students get older.

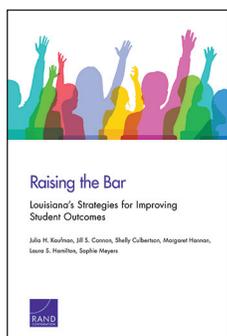
Researchers also identified several implementation challenges that Louisiana faced and that may be relevant to other states going forward:

- Equity issues are intertwined with the capacity of ECE centers, schools, and collaborative networks to undertake state reforms.
- While educator preparation places a strong emphasis on practical experience, the effectiveness of this approach has yet to be determined.
- Louisiana’s tradition of local control may have both benefits and drawbacks. Ensuring that local education agencies have autonomy and influence over policies and practices related to education may help promote widespread support for the state’s efforts, and may also facilitate local experimentation with different approaches, yet this type of decentralization could also lead to uneven implementation and has the potential to exacerbate inequities.

Conclusion

Louisiana has seen growth in several important student outcomes in recent years, and on average Louisiana teachers report higher levels of standards implementation than do teachers in other states. Despite these areas of success, however, the state continues to face significant challenges, particularly related to equity of educational opportunities and outcomes. In short, Louisiana is grappling with many of the same challenges that are confronting states across the United States, and its experiences offer an example of how one state has addressed these.

It is too early to know whether Louisiana’s reform strategies will achieve their intended goals. This research provides examples of various actions and policy levers other states could use to support their own education improvements. However, which specific actions and levers other states turn to could depend on a variety of factors related to state goals and context, including areas where the state might have more or less authority over policy and how much reform has already taken place. Nonetheless, this research can provide states with examples of possibilities based on Louisiana’s work. States can then reflect on what those possibilities might imply for their own policymaking, while also considering the mechanisms through which Louisiana is addressing its ambitious goals.



This brief describes work done in RAND Education and documented in *Raising the Bar: Louisiana's Strategies for Improving Student Outcomes*, by Julia H. Kaufman, Jill S. Cannon, Shelly Culbertson, Margaret Hannan, Laura S. Hamilton, and Sophie Meyers, RR-2303-BRAF, 2018 (www.rand.org/t/RR2303). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB10024. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2018

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