

What Other States Can Learn from Louisiana's Ambitious Efforts to Reshape Its Education System



Historically, the state of Louisiana has earned low marks when it comes to K–12 academic achievement. Low kindergarten readiness rates, low national assessment scores, low college attainment rates, and high unemployment rates among high school graduates have defined the state's education system for decades. Since 2012, however, the Louisiana Department of Education has taken bold strides toward making systemic shifts in the state's education system. Some changes—such as restructuring the early childhood education system and graduation requirements for high school students—have been extensive. Others—such as changes to curricula for English language arts (ELA), mathematics, social studies, and science—have been structurally modest but have big implications for teaching and learning. Regardless of their scope and area of focus, all reforms have been designed with one goal in mind: to improve outcomes for all Louisiana public school students.

How Well Are Louisiana's Reforms Working?

Since 2017, researchers from the RAND Corporation have documented and assessed Louisiana's numerous education policy efforts and strategies. Like any complex system attempting vast change, Louisiana school systems, schools, and teacher preparation programs have had both successes and challenges in the early years. This research brief brings together key findings pertaining to the four areas of the state's reform efforts: early childhood education, K–12 academics, K–12 teacher preparation, and graduation pathways to college and work.

The findings may assist Louisiana with its efforts moving forward. They can also inform the plans of other states seeking to bring about similar substantial changes in their education systems, as well as school leaders and educators tasked with undertaking changes that state policies require.

Data Sources

The analysis for this research was based on numerous sources, including school system- and program-level data (e.g., demographic and achievement data); nationally and state-representative teacher survey data; surveys of early childhood education center leaders; and case study interviews and focus groups with more than 200 school system leaders, educators, and other stakeholders.

KEY FINDINGS

- Analyses of Louisiana's early efforts to reshape its education system point to several early successes, remaining challenges, and key lessons that can be shared with other states.
- Early successes include strong support for change throughout the education system, adoption of high-quality curricula, improvements in professional development, improved communication, reduced high school dropout rates, and rising college enrollment rates for high-performing lower-income and minority students.
- Early challenges include implementation issues related to the large scale and scope of new policies, procedures, and expectations, as well as resource inequities and potentially growing achievement gaps.
- Other states seeking to bring about such widespread change should consider careful planning, strong communication strategies, ready-to-go resources and supports, and forward-thinking ways to address potential equity issues before rollout.



Early Childhood Education

Louisiana aimed to improve kindergarten readiness by unifying its complex and fragmented state early childhood education system. To achieve this ambitious vision, the state created a unified quality rating system by which all publicly funded early childhood education centers are held accountable and with which the state can assess progress. Louisiana also has 65 community networks through which lead agencies communicate to early childhood centers and families about state efforts, coordinate classroom observations for the rating system, and coordinate enrollment for publicly funded centers across each network. In addition, the state instituted a new teacher certification requirement to improve provider preparation, initiated efforts related to improving the quality of instructional resources, and increased subsidies for low-income families to receive early childhood education.



Successes and Challenges

The vision was broadly supported.

Most Louisiana early childhood center site leaders and teachers were aware of the state's new requirements and voiced support for the broad quality and accountability goals, including the new rating system for centers and teacher preparation requirements.

State communication reached lead agencies and sites.

The study's findings regarding awareness and support for the state's new policies confirm that state communication is working. Yet some communication links between state and community network lead agencies and individual centers seemed to be stronger than others. All stakeholders are trying creative ways to overcome challenges, including diverse outreach—from emails and newsletters to in-person visits—from lead agencies to centers and advertising to reach parents.

Some stakeholders perceived resources and supports as scarce.

Some early childhood education stakeholders were concerned that reform-related supports and resources provided were not commensurate with the comprehensive scale of the reforms in practice, particularly given the increases in administrative roles and time associated with the new role of lead agencies and new requirements for centers.

New requirements and policies posed challenges.

Several new state policies and processes presented implementation challenges for some, but not most, early childhood education providers. These included a new classroom observation process (CLASS), an Early Childhood Ancillary Certificate for lead teachers, and incentives to adopt high-quality curriculum. Centers serving low-income children (known as Type III centers) especially faced these challenges, which could endanger their ability to serve their students.

K-12 Education

To boost K-12 student learning, the state has built on federal accountability policies to set a higher bar through strong K-12 standards, assessments, and public reporting of school quality metrics. At the same time, Louisiana has taken deliberate steps to incentivize use of standards-aligned, high-quality curricula and provide teacher professional learning opportunities that are aligned with both state content standards and curricula. The Louisiana Department of Education has used robust communication structures to gather information on how these policies are being implemented on the ground in school systems and provide clear information to all stakeholders about what new state reforms require.



Successes and Challenges

High-quality curricula were broadly supported.

In general, the data suggest broad support for the new state standards and curriculum recommendations among state administrators, school principals, and teachers. Furthermore, state-representative survey data provide evidence that the state's recommendations are being taken up by school systems and teachers through adoption and use of high-quality curricula.

Standards-related professional learning opportunities were readily available.

Substantially higher percentages of Louisiana ELA and mathematics teachers reported receiving professional development related to state K-12 standards when compared with other teachers in the United States.

Standards-aligned instructional practices were reportedly more widespread in Louisiana relative to other states.

Louisiana ELA teachers reported more-extensive use of standards-aligned practices than teachers nationally. There were no differences in mathematics teachers' reports of their standards-aligned practices in Louisiana compared with the rest of the United States.

High-quality curricula were not yet readily available for all subject areas.

The fast-paced adoption of new science and social studies standards and assessments frustrated some principals and teachers, as high-quality curricula were not readily available to help students meet more-rigorous standards, particularly for science.

Some students may be benefiting from early changes, although achievement gaps may be widening.

There are some early signals that the state's K-12 policy changes may be associated with improved outcomes for higher-income and nonblack and non-Hispanic students. At the same time, initial achievement scores for Louisiana's black and Hispanic students and those receiving free or reduced-price lunches appeared to change very little or even fall slightly. This finding suggests that the achievement gap between vulnerable and nonvulnerable students may be widening.



K-12 Teacher Preparation

To help develop a cadre of future teachers who are prepared to meet the state's ambitious goals, the Louisiana Department of Education established a yearlong residency requirement that places candidates with highly trained mentors and gives them opportunities to develop practical skills. The state also enacted requirements for teacher preparation programs to adopt competency-based curricula to help ensure that candidates develop the necessary knowledge and skills. Other aspects of the state's teacher preparation reforms included partnerships between teacher preparation programs and school systems and program quality indicators to facilitate communication and transparency.

Successes and Challenges

Support for change in teacher preparation was strong.

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.

New requirements and models posed some difficulty.

Teacher training providers have worked to revise their programs to address new state requirements. Provider approaches to these requirements have varied substantially, and some providers have faced challenges in implementing the new requirements. In particular, the shift to a competency-based model from a traditional, credit-driven approach was reportedly challenging for many.

Teacher mentors were sometimes hard to find.

Teacher preparation providers identified some refinements in their mentor training in response to state policies, although providers also identified the scarcity of strong mentors for resident teachers as a key challenge. To address this challenge, the state began offering mentor training to build a cadre of high-quality mentor teachers starting in 2017.

Program rating system development continues.

The Louisiana Department of Education is developing a teacher preparation quality rating system that could increase transparency. This system is being piloted and is likely to be refined as users identify and address limitations in the ratings.

Louisiana's pilot grant program provided a firm foundation for new teacher preparation requirements.

Believe and Prepare, Louisiana's pilot grant program, offered aspiring teachers a fully funded yearlong residency under the guidance of an expert mentor, as well as transition funding for providers to assist programs to transition to a competency-based model. The grants built on existing structures and relationships while enabling further collaborations, which readied school systems and teacher preparation programs to enact changes that would be required by teacher preparation policies in the future.

Graduation Pathways to College and Work

High schools in Louisiana have faced multiple challenges in preparing graduates for college and the workplace. To help students succeed in life beyond school, the state now requires students to choose a “graduation pathway”: either a program to prepare them for four-year college or a career and technical education program to earn

industry-based credentials or begin study at a two-year college. The state also set new graduation requirements. All students must take the ACT college entrance exam (starting with the graduating class of 2013) and fill out financial aid forms for postsecondary education (starting with the graduating class of 2018).

Successes and Challenges

Applications for college financial aid have grown. When the state began requiring all graduating high school students to fill out financial aid forms in 2017–2018, 77.1 percent of Louisiana 12th-graders filled out the forms, the highest state average in the nation. This was made possible through intensive implementation efforts by schools, the Louisiana Office for Student Financial Assistance, and the Louisiana Department of Education.

ACT scores dropped then rose slightly. The requirement for all students to take the ACT was designed to increase college enrollment among students who may not have considered college as an option beyond high school. Louisiana’s ACT scores dropped immediately following the new requirement. However, the scores appear to be rising, potentially due to steps that schools are taking to better prepare their students.

College enrollment rose for lower-income and minority students scoring high on the ACT. While the study’s data do not support a causal analysis, researchers found that in parallel with the ACT requirement, the numbers of minority students and lower-income students who scored in the top quartile of ACT scores and then enrolled in college approximately doubled between 2011 and 2016, as shown in the figure.

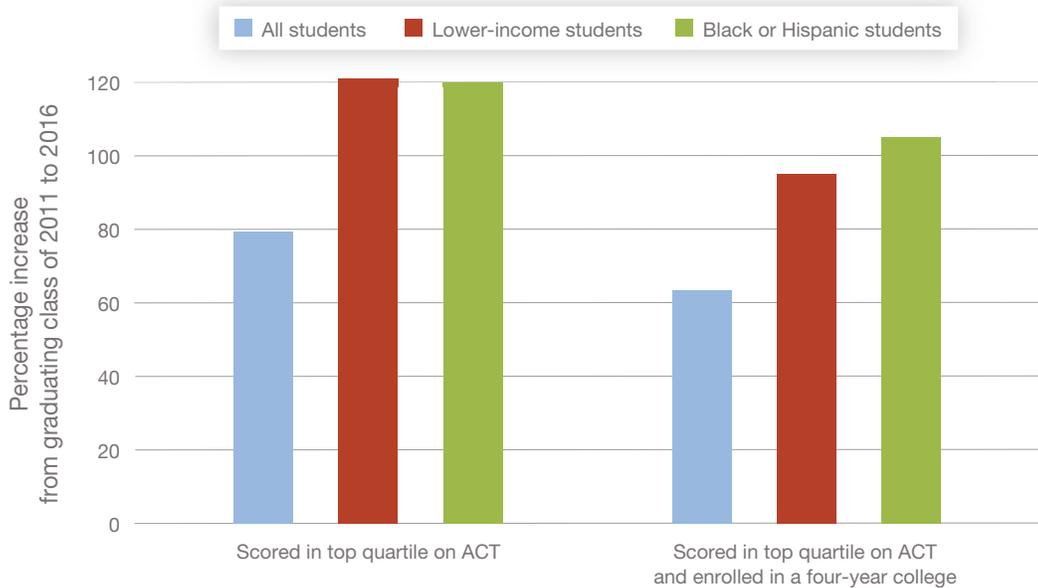
Louisiana high school students obtained many industry-based credentials—but more alignment with the regional labor market is needed. Over 20 percent of high school students graduated from the career pathway program by the 2017–2018 school year. In 2017–2018, students obtained about 100,000 industry-based credentials. However, only about 1 percent of these were in fields rated highest by the state as leading to high-wage, high-demand jobs.

High school dropout rates declined. It is still too early to assess the full effects of the new graduation pathways, but recent graduation rates provide an early positive signal. Graduation rates increased from 76 percent in 2014 to 78 percent in 2017. Although the data are not sufficient to show a cause-and-effect relationship, some students and teachers in case study schools suggested that the career and technical education pathway option had prevented some students from dropping out.

Graduation pathway policies placed additional demands on professional school counselors. Putting new graduation requirements in place required professional school counselors to shepherd students through pathway decisions and planning for college and careers in new ways. This called for additional counseling capacity at the school level to ensure that students had enough time with professional school counselors.

New pathways mean new challenges. The college and career readiness trajectories substantially changed high school education in the state. It is not surprising that some challenges remain. These include a new demand for Advanced Placement English and mathematics courses, stigma against career pathways, and complex and demanding requirements for career pathway credential examinations. It is also difficult for some students to shift from one pathway to another after 10th grade and still fulfill new graduation requirements.

The numbers of lower-income and black or Hispanic students who scored well on the ACT and then enrolled in a four-year college approximately doubled between 2011 and 2016



How Do the Early Findings Add Up?

It is too early to understand the full effects of Louisiana’s education policy changes or to offer conclusive statements. Having the same state superintendent and many state officials in place for more than seven years has enabled Louisiana to stay on track with its reform vision and efforts. However, many state strategies highlighted here have just begun to take hold in school systems, such as adoption of high-quality curricula, new accountability systems for teacher preparation, and new college and career course pathways. It may thus be another several years before these strategies trickle down into the classroom and lead to real change in teaching and learning. Furthermore, data from this study do not establish a causal relationship between any outcomes and state policies, and data from case study school systems do not represent all school system contexts across Louisiana.

Despite these limitations, these early findings highlight important evidence regarding buy-in and support for an ambitious set of state policies, as well as positive outcomes in a number of areas that Louisiana can continue to foster. This study also revealed some challenges, some of which the state is already addressing, and others that can be attended to in the near future in order to promote positive change and reach state education policy goals.

The findings from this study may be useful to education policymakers in other states that are seeking to make systemic changes to their public education systems from early childhood to high school and beyond. On the next page are four lessons learned based on the Louisiana case that other state policymakers may wish to consider as they plan their own efforts to promote success for children and youth.

State Education System Policy Changes: Lessons from Louisiana

Large-scale systemic education reforms can be welcomed by stakeholders.

In each of the four major areas of Louisiana’s work, the state proposed major changes to traditional ways of doing business:

- large-scale work to unify a fragmented early childhood education system
- shifts to the quality of K–12 curricula for mathematics, ELA, science, and social studies across all Louisiana classrooms
- fundamental changes to teacher preparation programs
- new career pathways for students.

One major takeaway from this work is that—despite the huge shifts represented by state policies—the majority of leaders and teachers the research team surveyed and interviewed supported what the state was doing. While the voices captured across Louisiana do not represent everyone in the state, these findings emphasize that major change to education systems can be broadly supported.

Multipronged communication strategies that elevate voices of educators may be key to creating buy-in for state policies.

Systemic change requires strong communication that promotes awareness and collaboration. Early on, Louisiana education policymakers highlighted the need to streamline and improve communication across all stakeholder groups, from higher education partners and employers to school system staff, and to create programs to support and elevate teachers as leaders in their school systems. Communication strategies were likely related to the high degree of buy-in and support the research team observed among stakeholders.

Make sure most high-quality resources are available before hitting “play.”

By setting a higher bar for teaching and learning, Louisiana is asking much more of all stakeholders within the education system. To meet that higher bar, teachers need high-quality curricula and instructional materials, and schools need greater administrative and counseling capacity to enact what is required. This study provides strong evidence that schools will take up high-quality resources that are provided to them. But it also illustrates frustrations and unintended consequences that can emerge when education providers do not have the resources and capacity they need. These data thus suggest that states take a forward-looking role in identifying high-quality resources and do regular needs assessments to make sure they understand what capacities and resources are lacking.

Anticipate equity challenges and plan accordingly.

Importantly, Louisiana’s ACT policies may have led to increases in the numbers of minority and low-income students who enrolled in college. At the same time, student achievement gaps based on income level, race, and ethnicity initially widened in Louisiana at tested grade levels after the bulk of K–12 policy changes took effect, and Louisiana’s new early childhood policies placed additional demands on centers serving low-income children (i.e., those receiving public subsidies). These findings suggest that even the best-intended changes will not affect everyone equally, and they may present particular challenges for centers and school systems serving at-risk students, which may be starting out with fewer resources and less capacity to make changes. Thus, gaps in achievement or support that existed before the change are likely to linger or even worsen without careful attention. States considering similar changes should keep potential equity issues front and center during the planning stages of reforms and be ready to adjust practices or provide new supports as needed.

This brief describes work funded by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and done in RAND Education and Labor. The work is documented in four publications: *Raising the Bar for Early Childhood Education: Early Signals on How Louisiana’s Education Policy Strategies Are Working for Early Childhood Providers and Community Networks*, by Jill S. Cannon, Sophie Meyers, and Julia H. Kaufman, RR-2303/1-BRAF, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR2303z1); *Raising the Bar for K–12 Academics: Early Signals on How Louisiana’s Education Policy Strategies Are Working for Schools, Teachers, and Students*, by Julia H. Kaufman, Elizabeth D. Steiner, and Matthew D. Baird, RR-2303/2-BRAF, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR2303z2); *Raising the Bar for Teacher Preparation: Early Signals on How Louisiana’s Education Policy Strategies Are Working Across the State*, by Maggie Q. Hannan, Laura S. Hamilton, and Julia H. Kaufman, RR-2303/3-BRAF, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/RR2303z3); and *Raising the Bar for Graduation Pathways to College and Work: Early Signals on How Louisiana’s Education Policy Strategies Are Affecting College and Career Readiness*, by Shelly Culbertson, Matthew D. Baird, Sophie Meyers, and Julia H. Kaufman, RR-2303/4-BRAF, 2019 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR2303z4). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB10072. 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. © Copyright 2019 RAND

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