







What is Public Policy and What is its Connection to the Budget?

The Governor, the Legislature and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education have the joint responsibility of setting public policy for the children of Louisiana. Public policy for children includes courses of action, regulatory measures, laws, and funding priorities to address their needs.

Ideally, public policy will be a principled guide to address the needs of children and ensure they mature into productive citizens. It should identify a need and direct resources to meet the need in a way that will assure the desired outcome. Good public policy will provide for investments in evidence-based programs that have been shown, through studies, to provide desired results and deliver a real return on investment.

The executive budget is the primary public policy document for the state. Laws and resolutions that identify needs and responses will not be effective if funding is not provided.

As elected officials, the children of Louisiana are your constituents. The future of Louisiana requires elected officials to make children their top priority to guarantee a vibrant Louisiana in the future.

The term, Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), originated in the medical community in the 1990s. An EBP is the current best practice that has been subjected to strong scientific research and interpreted using a very narrow set of methodological criteria. Since the 1990s, the EBP concept has been adopted in many other fields, including child and family services.

LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN Early Care and Education

Parents are their child's first teacher. Studies confirm that nurturing caregiving in the first three years of life impacts academic achievement and social relationships during childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. Between conception and age four, a child's brain sees remarkable growth. The brain doubles in size in the first year and by age four, a child's brain has reached 90% of its adult volume. What infants and toddlers experience in these early years determines the quality of their brain architecture and either builds a sturdy or a fragile foundation for future learning, health, and overall wellbeing.

Nearly 70% of Louisiana's children age 5 and under have both or their only parent in the workforce and are regularly cared for in a setting outside the home for some part of the day. Parents must rely on child care to be able to work and provide for their families.

Child Care Options for Parents

- Child care centers, now referred to as Early Learning Centers: These are private for-profit or nonprofit businesses, including Head Start and Early Head Start, that provide care for 7 or more unrelated children, are licensed and have regular oversight visits required by law. There are over 1500 licensed early learning centers in our state.
- Small Child Centers, commonly called "family child care homes": Small home-based businesses which provide care for six or fewer unrelated children. These businesses are not licensed and do not have any oversight unless they receive state or federal funds. Louisiana is one of only eight (8) states that does not license small child care businesses. Nationwide, about 15% of children are cared for in these settings. Estimates for such care in Louisiana are difficult to quantify due to the lack of licensure.
- Pre-kindergarten programs for 4-year old children: These programs are offered on public or non-public school campuses and at a few of the early learning

- centers. Licensing is not required for PreK programs serving 4-year olds that are located in schools. Many states offer PreK programs in Early Learning Centers, however in Louisiana, less than 1% of public PreK programs are offered in these centers compared to 30% nationally.
- Other child care options include church-run programs, such as Mother's Day Out programs that operate less than 24 hours per week, and preschool programs. Inhome caregivers, such as nannies, typically provide care in the child's home and can care for 6 or fewer unrelated children. Both care settings are exempt from licensure and have no oversight.

Child care is expensive and it is not unusual for parents to be forced to choose multiple care options, or a patchwork of care, as they try to balance work and/or school hours together with financial limitations. Several studies show that families budget for child care just as they do for housing or food expenses. In fact, quality child care for infants and toddlers might cost a young family as much as private school or college tuition. Many families must choose between paying the high cost of child care, giving up a job or leaving school.

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Effective Early Childhood Programs

On a favorable note, Louisiana was recently recognized for its focus on early childhood education and was ranked 4th in the nation in the 2015 Quality Counts report from the *Education Week*. Prekindergarten programs for 4-year

old children began in the early 1990's and in 2001, the full-day (6 hour) LA4 program was established by law. Today this program, now known as the Cecil J. Picard LA4 Early Childhood Program, serves more than 16,000 4-year old children from disadvantaged families. In December 2014, Louisiana was one of 18 states awarded funding from the federal Preschool Development Grant Program to expand PreK services for eligible children. Our state applied for \$32 million and was awarded over \$2.4 million for the initial year. Continuation of the program will be dependent on available federal funding and progress toward goals.

In 2007, Louisiana was the 15th state in the nation to develop a Quality Start Child Care Rating and Improvement System for child care centers and today, almost half of the licensed early learning centers participate in this voluntary system. To support early learning centers in reaching higher quality, such as having more highly trained teachers, the state enacted a comprehensive and nationally recognized set of school readiness tax credits. These credits are available to parents, teachers, businesses and centers committed to improvement and serving at-risk children and families.

The LA Early Childhood Education Act of 2012 (Act 3) and subsequent legislation transferred the oversight of all early childhood programs to the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE), with governance by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). This change was driven by the goal to ensure children enter kindergarten healthy, and, ready to succeed. LDE provided statistics in 2012 showing just over half of Louisiana's children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Act 3 proposes to unify the fragmented early childhood system by aligning standards and requirements across all early learning programs. Key changes focus on early childhood programs which receive state or federal funds and includes the use of a new accountability system that will give a report card with a letter grade for early learning centers instead of the current starrating. Another law is now requiring local networks to develop coordinated enrollment processes, again for publicly funded programs, with the intention of ensuring greater coordination and expanded access to high quality programs.

Public Funding Challenges

The challenge is funding. Over the last five years, the Child Care Assistance Program, the major source of funding for low-income infants and toddlers, has been reduced by almost 60%. Equally disheartening, the number of children served by the program has dropped from almost 40,000 in 2009 to approximately 15,000 today. These children, whose parents are working in low-wage jobs and/or continuing their education, need child care subsidies to remain employed or continue their education.

Louisiana's nationally recognized LA4 program, at one point funded 100% with state monies, has been sustained with a patchwork of funding over the years, including hurricane relief monies and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Funding per child for preK has reduced by more than 10% since 2008.

A resolution (HCR61) of the 2014 Legislative session called for the development of a statewide model for funding and equitable distribution of public funds for children birth to five. The LDE developed a sophisticated model (www.louisianabelieves.com) that calculates the funding necessary to upgrade availability of quality care for children birth through three years, creates equity between PreK and kindergarten programs and increases access to publicly funded PreK. Early estimates show about \$80,000,000 in state funds will be needed in order to accomplish the new requirements set out in Act 3. Ready Louisiana, a coalition of over 30 businesses, advocacy organizations, early care professionals and interested citizens, is advocating for increased state investment in early childhood education.

Louisiana faces significant budget constraints; yet, it is critical to invest in early childhood. Access to high-quality, affordable child care must become a priority of economic development in order to help working families successfully balance the demands of work and family.

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Dr. James J. Heckman, Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, a Nobel Memorial Prize winner in economics, and an expert in the economics of human development, has shown that there are great economic gains to be had by investing in early childhood and is quoted frequently as saying that "there are few investments with a greater rate of return than early care and education".

Policy Recommendations – Early Care and Education

Policy recommendations to strengthen early care and education include:

- Increase state investment for early childhood education, with particular focus on increased funding for infants and toddlers (6 weeks through 3 years of age), to help Early Learning Centers implement the increased requirements of Act 3 of 2012. Without adequate funding, centers may choose not to participate in the new system and access to care for low-income families could diminish.
- Require legislative oversight on the transfer of early education programs including the Federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) from DCFS to LDE to ensure that *more* children have access to affordable, high quality child care and that changes in licensing provides safe, quality care for all children, not only those in publicly funded programs.
- Monitor the developing Act 3 program and network report cards to ensure that they reflect program accountability, opportunity for quality improvement, collaboration among early childhood stakeholders and community engagement.
- Establish a waiting list for child care assistance which accurately captures the number of low-income working parents in need of child care. Current policies require that parents work or attend school at least 30 hours in order to qualify. There is no similar requirement for parents whose children participate in the PreK/LA4 program. At a minimum, it is recommended the threshold for work or education hours be no more than 25 hours per week. A waiting list would also capture parental need for extended hours of care, such as weekends and nighttime.
- Mandate that small home-based child care businesses be licensed and regulated to ensure they meet basic health and safety standards.

- Enact criminal penalties for illegal operation of a child care business. Current law allows for civil penalties of \$1000 per day but fines have rarely, if ever, been assessed.
- Ensure continuation of the long-established network of Child Care Resource and Referral organizations in Louisiana. These community organizations provided local leadership in the implementation of the early quality childcare initiatives, including Quality Start and have been integral partners in the recent *Act 3 Early Childhood Community Network Pilots*. Other publicly funded programs such as those in the public schools and Head Start have a system of support for professional development and technical assistance. The resource and referral agencies serve in this capacity for Early Learning Centers that receive public funds and also connect families with child care options.
- Ensure that Early Learning Centers continue to have mental health consultations as a critical socialemotional support for our youngest children and their teachers.
- Develop ways of providing consistent, predictable funding to Early Learning Centers, such as offering PreK programs in those centers that offer high quality care.
- Require kindergarten attendance to be mandatory.
 Current law requires that school systems offer
 kindergarten. However, the age at which a child must
 be enrolled in school is seven (7) years old. Laws <u>must</u>
 reflect what is now universally known about early
 learning and brain development.
- Develop a family engagement plan, similar to the Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework, to ensure parents are recognized as the key partner in a child's education. Studies show that the earlier parents are engaged in their child's education, the more powerful the effects.