

COVID-19: EDUCATION'S DEFINING MOMENT

A road map to increasing school choice
in Louisiana in the midst of COVID-19



LOUISIANA SCHOOL OPTIONS

Across Louisiana, parents have two overwhelming concerns on their minds when discussing the return to school: **student safety** and the **intellectual cost of delaying school reopening**. If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything it's that our state's leaders must act boldly—and quickly—to disrupt the status quo and bring much greater flexibility in options for Louisiana families.

Families should have the opportunity to choose the school that best fits their student's needs. This has long been true, but it's become abundantly clear and urgent in these unprecedented times.

Louisiana is known around the country as one of the leaders in education reform, particularly when it comes to school choice initiatives. Parents currently have access to several avenues to build their child a personalized education journey by offering a myriad of education options:



Charter Schools

These independently-run, publicly-funded schools currently serve around 70,000 students in Louisiana and are free to be more innovative while being held accountable for improved student achievement. Charters must also comply with high academic, financial, and organizational standards.



Course Choice

Adding customization to education, course choice provides state funding for supplemental courses offered to students who 1) attend public schools with a grade of "C," "D," or "F," 2) attend public schools that do not offer the course in question, or 3) receive voucher scholarships. Students who attend schools with a grade of "A" or "B," attend private schools, or are homeschooled can participate, but at their own expense. Though the first of its kind in the country, the Louisiana Course Choice program fills an important curricular need. The program provides a wide array of courses—some conducted online, some face-to-face—that fill unmet needs.



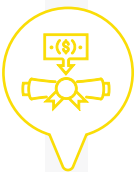
Home Study

Hailed as one of the oldest forms of education, Louisiana families typically provide this independent education through a Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) approved home study program. Parents are solely responsible for deciding the curriculum and providing instruction, but unfortunately, Louisiana does not provide funding or resources for these programs.



Scholarship Program

The Louisiana Scholarship Program enables parents to send their students to a nonpublic school of their choice. Eligible students must have a family income that does not exceed 250% of the federal poverty line and must be either entering kindergarten or enrolled in a public school with a C, D, or F letter grade. Unfortunately, due to state restrictions on participating schools, seats are limited. To add, due to competing fiscal pressures in the state budget the non-MFP funded program forces the scholarship program to turn away eligible students.



Tuition Donation Credit Program

This program empowers Louisiana families with the financial resources to choose the school that best prepares their child for college and careers. Students apply directly to School Tuition Organizations for scholarships, and upon receiving the scholarship, they then apply directly to the nonpublic school of their choice for enrollment.



Private Schools

Tens of thousands of Louisiana families pay tuition to enroll their kids in nonpublic schools. Students may attend these privately-run and privately-funded schools approved by BESE. Graduates from approved private schools are eligible for TOPS, a state-funded college scholarship program.



Parent Petition (Recovery School District)

In 2012, Louisiana enacted a parent petition law (La. R.S. 17:10.5), which enables parents to transfer their children's consistently low-performing school to the Recovery School District (RSD). RSD is a statewide school district that works with charter operators and other educational organizations to transform academically struggling schools into high-performing schools.



THE TIME IS NOW TO EXPAND SCHOOL CHOICE IN LOUISIANA

While Louisiana has a solid foundation of school choice options, there is still much room for both immediate and long-term improvement. COVID-19 has exposed both liabilities and opportunities for Louisiana to better deliver education and provide parents with options to best fit their children's needs, especially during this emergency.

The following are suggested policy changes that will ultimately drive innovation, provide greater options for Louisiana families, and create a 21st Century education system that allows every student—regardless of zip code or family income – to have access to great education outcomes.





Implement Emergency Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

Traditional ESAs allow parents to receive a deposit of public education funds into government-authorized savings accounts with restricted, but multiple, uses.

While we believe universal ESAs would benefit our state, we acknowledge this would take quite some time and political power to implement, including amending the state constitution. This should happen; however, in the meantime, Governor Edwards and BESE should direct the Governor's discretionary CARES Act dollars, in addition to any other education-specific federal aid, directly into the hands of parents, following the lead of Florida, South Carolina, and Oklahoma. These funds can cover private school tuition and fees, online learning programs, private tutoring, dual enrollment costs, career and technical education, and other approved customized learning services and materials.



Encourage Micro/Pod Schools

Micro/Pod schools are gaining popularity across the country and are now seen as solutions to the COVID-19 education crisis. These are smaller schools (ranging from around 10 to a few dozen students) containing a variety of age groups that learn together in a single classroom.

In Micro-schools, teachers act more as guides than lecturers. They also heavily emphasize digital and project-based learning, leading to a highly personalized education. Louisiana parents currently have the power to do this by grouping together home school or virtual learning students. Unfortunately, the state does not allow for public funds to follow such students to this learning option, leaving parents to foot the bill despite the taxes they already pay for public education. The Louisiana Department of Education should issue guidance on effectively creating micro schools for parents to take advantage of immediately. This would also solve the emerging workforce issue that is arising from schools remaining closed. Gov. Edwards and BESE would also be wise to allocate future federal COVID-19 education aid, through emergency ESAs, directly to parents to offset the cost of these innovative programs.



Expand Choice in Rural and Suburban Areas

Louisiana's choice system has proven a game changer for parents and students who have the opportunity to participate. Unfortunately, not all Louisianans have the option to choose a school that best fits their needs. In many rural and suburban areas, there are only one or two options for education – traditional public schools or private schools that do not participate in the scholarship program. Parents who can't afford the luxury of a private school education are left with no other realistic option. In addition, virtual learning innovations in rural Louisiana can only go as far as the infrastructure will take it. Like many states across the nation, Louisiana has struggled in its transition to blended learning. A major contributor to the difficulty is the thousands of students across our state that are largely in rural areas that lack access to internet connectivity. **The following are ways Louisiana legislature can give parents more choice in rural areas:**

- **increase seats for the scholarship program through reducing restrictions on schools**
- **update education laws that would encourage high-performing traditional schools to convert to independent charters in these areas**
- **focus on opportunities to increase connectivity in rural and suburban areas by identifying and eliminating the barriers standing in the way of connectivity**



Expand Virtual Charter Schools

Just as the internet has changed the way Americans shop, connect, work, and stay updated, it is also changing the landscape of education. Virtual charter schools provide students with online courses of study taught by licensed teachers. These schools have proven exceptional at filling wide gaps wrought by the COVID-19 shutdowns. For Louisiana parents hoping to keep their children socializing and engaging with their peers, virtual charters' high-quality curricula can also be used in the micro/pod schools setting. **Combining the micro/pod school concept with the virtual charter school curricula would allow students to socialize with their peers while receiving a high-quality education.** Through the Legislature expanding existing charter laws and BESE revising charter policies, Louisiana can attract more virtual charters and connect students from anywhere in the state. **This could serve as the foundation for innovative education delivery models that can be utilized both in and out of a pandemic shutdown.**

SEIZING THE MOMENT: NOW IS THE TIME TO ACT!

For years, Louisiana has been a national leader in innovation and school reform. But, there is still much to do to provide all parents and students the opportunity to choose their education path. The core problems we face are simple and straightforward: **we are failing to provide adequate options for our students**, particularly those in rural and suburban areas, to succeed and, in turn, **we aren't equipping our future workforce with the skills and training necessary to compete**. Furthermore, government bureaucrats and union officials often prevent parents from selecting the best educational options for their children. COVID-19 has only made the impacts of these issues more apparent.

Throughout our state's history, we've responded to adversity with innovation and reform while seizing opportunities to make our state better than it was before. Much like Hurricane Katrina, **COVID-19 is now offering Louisiana a new opportunity to change how we can deliver education for the better**. By implementing these solutions, we can work toward ensuring every child has access to a high-quality education of their choosing and provide a level playing field for students of all backgrounds to succeed.

This isn't just a near-term need or an economic imperative. It's a moral necessity, and the time to act is now.





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