



Louisiana's *Comeback* Agenda



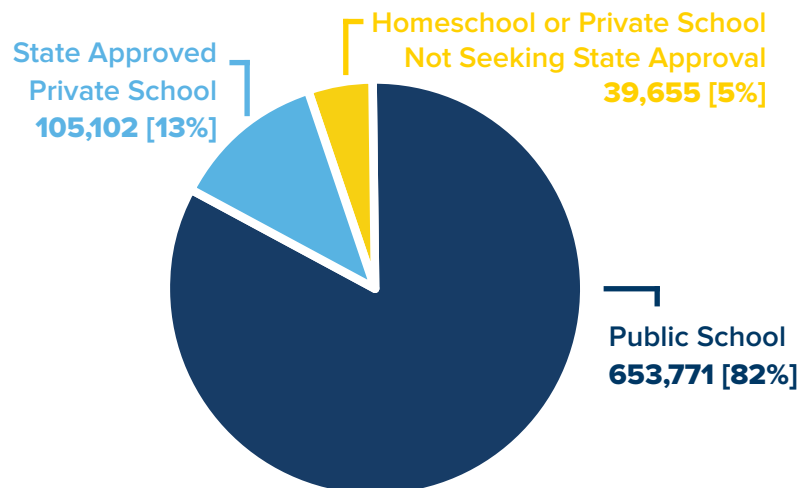
Give Every Kid a School that Fits



In spite of several targeted education reforms that have produced incremental progress, Louisiana remains at the bottom for student achievement nationally.²³ Many parents lack quality educational options for their kids. This not only limits opportunity for individuals, but it constrains Louisiana’s future. For the next generation to find prosperity and for Louisiana to flourish, children must have access to an excellent foundation of education – not just a minimum foundation of education – that allows them to reach their full potential.

Each kid is unique, with different abilities, learning styles, and challenges. What works for one may not work for another, even in a “good” school. Parents understand this better than anyone, and when they have the ability to select the school or educational environment that works best for their child – whether it’s public, private, or homeschool – every kid can excel, every sector of the education system grows, and Louisiana prospers.

Where Louisiana’s Children Attend School | 2022-2023



How Are Louisiana’s Children Educated?

Louisiana is home to about 800,000 school-age children who are served across a variety of educational settings, including traditional public schools, private schools, public charter schools, and home study programs. The vast majority (86 percent) are educated in public schools.²⁴

PROBLEMS

Louisiana traditional public schools, which educate the vast majority of children statewide, remain well below national averages for academic achievement, even with higher per-student funding than other states in the Southeast.²⁵

- Less than 50 percent of kids in kindergarten through third grade scored “on or above benchmark” in reading on the most recent beginning-of-year screener²⁶
- Only 31 percent of Louisiana students scored proficient or above on the 2022 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP).²⁷
- Fewer than 30 percent of Louisiana students in fourth and eighth grades scored at or above proficient levels in reading and math on the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and Louisiana scores remain significantly below the national average.²⁸
- Louisiana’s average ACT composite score for the Class of 2021 dropped for the fifth consecutive year to 18.1, with the lowest scores in English (17.6) and math (17.4). The national average was 19.8 out of a maximum score of 36.²⁹
- Only 42 percent of Louisiana public high school graduates on a university prep pathway go on to college and remain enrolled past their freshman year.³⁰ Out of those graduates who immediately go on to a Louisiana college or university, 41 percent require remediation in math and 25 percent in English.³¹
- Only 6 percent of graduates on a career pathway are earning advanced industry credentials fully aligned with high-demand, high-wage jobs.³²
- Over 40 percent of public schools have been identified as “needing improvement” by the Louisiana Department of Education per the state’s accountability system.³³
- Nationally and in Louisiana, enrollment in teacher preparation programs has been declining, and Louisiana loses about half of the teachers in the first five years of teaching.³⁴

Academic improvement, innovation, and parental choice have been slow to materialize within Louisiana’s public school systems. Most families have few public options beyond their zoned school. Some who have the financial means have left traditional public schools, but private school tuition and homeschooling can be very costly. In a state that routinely ranks among the lowest for personal income,³⁵ many families can’t afford these options. Despite having a few private school choice scholarship programs for certain eligible students and 150 public charter schools, Louisiana is not providing enough educational options. As a result, children are not able to access the educational programs and services that best meet their needs and their opportunity to thrive is diminished.



SOLUTIONS

Given the current state, what should Louisiana's path forward look like for K–12 education?

- 1. Enact educational scholarship accounts.** All children in Louisiana should have access to state education dollars that follow them to the school of their parents' choice, based on what educational program or setting works best for them. Louisiana's current private school choice programs should be converted to or supplemented with a new educational scholarship program³⁶ that gives families sufficient financial resources, a wide array of providers of products and services, and maximum customization to meet their child's educational needs. Arizona, West Virginia, Iowa, and Utah recently enacted the nation's most expansive educational choice programs, giving all parents the ability to access a portion of their tax dollars to fund enrollment at a private school of their choice or educational services from multiple approved providers.

Should multiple private school choice programs remain in place that do not wholly meet families' educational costs, particularly for low-income families, lawmakers should remove current restrictions that prevent students from being served by multiple programs and allow families to "stack" them up to the total educational cost or the average public school per-student allocation, whichever is lowest.

A growing body of research,³⁷³⁸ shows that private school choice programs not only benefit recipients, but also public school systems. This is the case in both rural and urban communities and when examining overall funding and academic performance.

- 2. Protect educational freedom.** Nearly 40,000 children across Louisiana are being educated in home study programs or private schools that opt not to seek state approval. These have been the fastest growing forms of education for Louisiana families over the past several years, in large part due to the freedom parents have to choose and customize their child's educational program free from government regulation. Many of these families have chosen to partner through co-ops, learning pods, and microschools, and some have created hybrid models where kids receive some educational services at home and others at private schools.

State lawmakers should be extremely cautious in enacting policies that regulate these forms of education, placing additional restrictions and reporting requirements on families that educate their kids without the use of tax dollars. They should also ensure that local public school systems do not make withdrawing from public schools a burdensome, intimidating process for parents and children, and that local ordinances don't subject families to onerous requirements when opening non-traditional private schools.

- 3. Restore charter school autonomy.** Louisiana first authorized public charter schools in 1995 to be innovative, autonomous, and free from laws and regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Over the last 25 years, however, the charter school application process has become overly bureaucratic and burdensome. The list of laws and regulations from which charters are not exempt has grown significantly, to the point that charter schools seem to be losing what made them different and innovative in the first place.

Decisions to authorize new charter schools remain overly focused on the relative impact to local traditional public schools instead of the possible benefits for students. Ongoing monitoring and renewal of charter schools also involves comparisons to local public schools instead of measuring the extent to which students are learning and having their needs met. A better process would consider a combination of data on student achievement, academic progress, and re-enrollment of students year after year as the strongest indicator of parental satisfaction.

Lawmakers and members of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education should further streamline the charter school application and authorization process, exempt charter schools from requirements that have accumulated over the years, require a higher threshold of votes for enacting new requirements, and focus ongoing monitoring and renewal decisions more on student outcomes and parental satisfaction than on comparative measures.

- 4. Improve quality assurance for public schools where kids are assigned.** Many families have no choice but to send their children to the local public school to which they're assigned. That makes it even more important to ensure these schools serve students well. This isn't an excuse for overregulation (and there is indeed overregulation in public schools that needs to be addressed), but it underscores the need for strong measurements and reporting of student learning, interventions for underperformance, and transparency for families.

The state accountability and rating system for public schools should be easy for parents, educators, and citizens to understand. It should ensure that students are building strong literacy and numeracy skills early on; focus on proficiency and academic growth in core subjects; and equip both college- and workforce-bound students with the knowledge and skills they need to seamlessly and successfully transition to the next stage of life without the need for remediation. High schools should develop strong partnerships with local colleges and employers to help students earn college credit, earn valued industry credentials, and practice and refine skills that will help them thrive as adults in an increasingly demanding economy.

The K–12 school and district accountability system and many high school offerings are not aligned with these goals. Correcting this must be a priority for state leaders in the new term.



5. Improve teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. Louisiana must make teaching a desirable profession once again. State education agencies, including K-12 and higher education, should partner with local school systems to recruit bright students into teaching in their high school and early college years. They should also streamline processes for seasoned professionals and entrepreneurs to transition to K-12 education and serve Louisiana’s children. Modeled after what Tennessee has begun, Louisiana’s leaders should create a teaching apprenticeship program that allows these individuals to obtain a degree and teaching certification at no cost, earning a living wage and serving our schools as they progress through the program that leverages sustainable federal and workforce funds.

The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Regents must also ensure that, as a condition of approval, teacher preparation programs effectively train all new teachers to be classroom-ready and that they can guide all students to achieve academic growth. For this to happen, employing school systems must prioritize making teachers’ salaries competitive and reward high performance, offer attractive benefits, provide new teachers with experienced mentors and support, and maintain school cultures focused on excellence and teamwork. Schools must also be open to innovation, embrace new ways of teaching and learning, leverage technology, and redefine relationships with teachers as professionals and educational entrepreneurs, ensuring that today’s schools and classrooms are relevant and exciting for both teachers and students.

6. Ensure transparency for parents and taxpayers. Education is one of the state’s largest expenditures, consisting of billions of dollars provided to local school systems each year. Parents of school children and the public deserve to know how these funds are or are not being spent to address students’ biggest learning needs. Lawmakers should require public schools to make this information accessible online through an interactive financial portal, just as it has done for other vital state-funded services.³⁹ As the Lafayette Parish School System has demonstrated,⁴⁰ this kind of transparency is possible and promotes responsibility, trust, and parental and community engagement.

Enacting these solutions will enable every Louisiana child to receive a great education that will enable them and Louisiana to thrive.



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