

Early Childhood Education: Critical Needs for Critical Years

Introduction and Context

Louisiana's LA 4 Pre-Kindergarten program began in eleven pilot parishes with the passage of Senate Bill 776 during the 2001 Legislative session. LA 4 is available in participating school districts to all children – at no cost to children eligible for free or reduced lunch services (FRL) and through tuition or local funding for families above this income level. Currently, LA 4 serves approximately 18,000 of the 40,000 “at-risk” children in Louisiana.

The Louisiana LA 4 Pre-Kindergarten initiative has consistently demonstrated high-quality results each year of the existence of the program. High-quality standards such as certified teachers and paraprofessionals, small classroom size, full-day program, research-based curriculum, and high-quality evaluation have resulted in children being more prepared for elementary school.

For accountability purposes, students in this program are administered the Developing Skills Checklist (DSC) – a test given at the beginning and end of the school year to measure progress in language, print and math. The scores of students participating in LA 4 improve from around the 10th national percentile in the pre-test to 50th percentile in the post-test in language and to nearly the 60th percentile in print. In mathematics, students improve from near the 5th percentile nationally to above the 50th percentile after participating in LA 4. This progress in LA 4 exceeds nearly all states.

Research shows that children enrolled in Louisiana's LA 4 program experience continual academic success as they progress through later grades. Kindergarten retention and special education participation rates are lower in the LA 4 group. At this point, there is data on the first three groups of LA 4 students. Follow-up of these first three groups of students on the 4th grade LEAP test shows significant improvement in performance over students who did not participate. This is true despite a higher poverty level in children participating in the early childhood program.

In addition to LA 4, the federally funded Head Start program provides comprehensive early childhood education to over 20,000 “at-risk” three and four year old children in Louisiana. This program combines Pre-K education with a comprehensive health and family education component.

The positive study results of Louisiana's LA 4 and high quality programs in other states prove that high quality Pre-K helps all children prepare for school – especially children at-risk because of poverty. This has led to much discussion about expanding opportunities to more children – including dialogue about increased funding and the development of diverse delivery systems.

School Readiness: What's the Definition?

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) monograph, "Ready to Start: Enduring High-Quality Pre-kindergarteners in SREB States," notes:

"Having a clear definition of (school) readiness, establishing and using school readiness assessments, and then addressing the needs of children who do not meet school readiness indicators are fundamental to educational programs in pre-kindergarten."

"School readiness" describes the capabilities of children, their families, schools, and communities to prepare students for success in kindergarten and beyond. Each component—children, families, schools, and communities—plays an essential role in the development of school readiness.

The Education's Next Horizon Stakeholder Council taskforce on early childhood education recognizes the need to define "school readiness" as a foundation for common understanding with and for early childhood education providers. This definition is the first step in the future development of benchmarks and expectations as well as the creation of a scorecard based on these expectations. These expectations are:

- **Ready Children** prepared socially, personally, physically, and intellectually within the developmental domains in literacy, mathematics, science, history and social science, physical and motor development, and personal and social development.
- **Ready Families** with adults who understand that they are the most important people in the child's life and take responsibility for the child's school readiness through direct, frequent, and positive involvement and interest in the child. Adults recognize their role as the child's first and most important teacher.
- **Ready Schools** that accept all children and provide a seamless transition to a high-quality learning environment by engaging the whole community. A ready school welcomes all children with opportunities to enhance and build confidence in their skills, knowledge, and abilities.
- **Ready Communities** that play a crucial part in supporting families in their role as primary stewards

of children's readiness. Ready communities – including businesses, faith-based organizations, early childhood service providers, community groups, and local governments – work together to support children's school and long term success by providing families affordable access to information, services, high-quality child care, and early learning opportunities.

Education's Next Horizon partnered with the Picard Center for Child Development in conducting a statewide survey on the school-readiness definition. Survey results were sent to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The State Department of Education is currently engaged in the development of a comprehensive literacy plan for Birth to 5-year-olds based on kindergarten readiness. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted a definition for kindergarten readiness in January 2011.

Creation of Diverse Delivery System

A diverse delivery system in early childhood education is a system of school based and other Pre-K programs (Head Start, child care, and faith-based centers) working together to provide high quality pre-kindergarten services to all three and four year old children in a community. These systems create opportunity by increasing access and providing high quality choices for families.

LA 4 is a high quality Pre-K program, but it is offered almost exclusively in public school sites. By contrast, many states are building and expanding their Pre-K programs through a "mixed delivery model," offering publicly funded Pre-K in private child care or Head Start settings. Across the nation, over 30% of all publicly funded Pre-K children are in private child care settings. This mixed delivery concept for providing Pre-K is getting greater attention in Louisiana because of the following potential advantages:

- Provides families a choice of quality programs in a variety of locations and settings.
- Builds on strengths of different components – the academic strength of LA 4 and the health and family education component of Head Start.
- Brings disparate programs together into a more comprehensive system of early education.

- Increases capacity by opening more classrooms to serve more children.
- Saves taxpayers' dollars by using existing facilities thereby reducing start-up expenses.

A Louisiana Birth-to-Five model that has gained national recognition is the Mahalia Jackson Early Childhood and Family Learning Center in New Orleans. The Mahalia Jackson Center provides top level birth-to-five early education, complemented by many services for children and their families, all under one roof. Services include adult education, job training and placement, teen parenting, prenatal care, medical, nutrition, fitness and other health services, social services including WIC and nutrition assistance, and a public library branch.

The concept of promoting diverse delivery systems is also contained within Senate Bill 286. This provides for school district commitment to partnering with community providers with 10% of any additional state revenues provided for LA 4. This collaboration will only be applicable to partnerships with private child care providers or Head Start Centers with a four star rating working toward a five star rating in the Quality Start Child Care Rating System (as outlined by the Department of Children and Family Services (see www.qrs.louisiana.com)). The number of stars required for the collaboration with school districts is outlined in the "LA 4 Guidelines and Implementation Handbook" available at <http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/saa/1874.html>.

Research Findings and Policy Implications

- 1) **Research Findings:** Four-year-old at-risk children who participate in the LA 4 pre-kindergarten program continue to show significant gains in the academic areas of Language, Print, and Math year after year.

Policy Implications: Louisiana should continue to deliver high-quality pre-kindergarten and school readiness initiatives for all at-risk four-year-olds – including the implementation of the LA 4 high-quality components across all funding types including LA 4, Title I, 8(g), Locally Funded, the Non-public Schools Early Childhood Development Program, Head Start, Even Start, the Educational Excellence Fund, and the Rural Educational Achievement Program. It can be expected that at-risk

students who are exposed to the high-quality LA 4 program will score higher in English/Language Arts (ELA), Math, Science, and Social Studies on iLEAP and LEAP achievement tests.

- 2) **Research Findings:** The LA 4 program significantly reduces the number of students placed in special education and reduces grade retention.

Policy Implications: This gives Louisiana an opportunity to reduce placements in special education and reduce grade retention by increasing the participation of students in LA 4 type programs. The reduction in special education placement and grade retention will free-up dollars within the Minimum Fund Program (MFP) to implement an aggressive intervention program for those students performing poorly at midyear. This could include spending on reading coaches and interventionists to support the Ensuring Literacy for All Initiative.

Future Implications

As evidenced by this report, the seven years of longitudinal data concerning the LA 4 program continue to support the importance of this program's positive impact on Louisiana's youngest students. These results, supported by research on brain development, epitomize Louisiana's dedication to ensuring its children are school ready. An effort to maintain and increase investment in early childhood education will continue to yield lasting benefits for Louisiana's citizens and remains a priority of policymakers and community leaders in the state.

As Louisiana continues to expand the effort to provide quality early childhood education, key questions that guide this effort are:

- Does Louisiana have the political will to support the continued expansion of the LA 4 initiative to more students?
- Can we agree on a common definition of school readiness to guide the development of early childhood education efforts for all providers?
- Is diverse delivery a viable option to expand quality early childhood education efforts in Louisiana?
- What Birth-to-Five initiatives deserve investment by Louisiana to create a level playing field for children born into poverty?