



# LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

*Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions*

*John White, Louisiana State Superintendent of Education*

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Chairman Harkin, Senator Alexander, members of the committee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Louisiana's story reflects both the opportunities and the challenges in providing families access to quality early childhood care and education. A choice among quality early childhood options, especially for the most disadvantaged, while not a panacea for all challenges, is among the most effective tools we have for preparing children and parents alike for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we must update our old ways to meet with this reality.

Our state knows its fair share of challenges. Two thirds of the 700,000 public school students in Louisiana receive federally subsidized lunches. Thirty-one percent of Louisiana's children live in poverty.

Louisianans know, however, that for our state's prosperity, and for the rights of our people to partake of the American dream, we cannot let these challenges pre-determine our children's destinies. We have committed to making our education system one that offers opportunity to the next generation, and the results are encouraging. Louisiana students graduate at a rate 12 percent higher than just a decade ago. New Orleans, once the lowest performing school district in our state, now tops the state's average high school graduation rate and, among African-Americans, tops the national average. In 2013 nearly 4,000 more Louisiana seniors than in 2012 achieved a college-going ACT score. And last year, Louisiana was the fastest growing state in the nation in Advanced Placement participation and test passage.

Part of the reason for this progress is Louisiana's creation of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, the "LA4" public school program and the Nonpublic Early Childhood Development Program (NSECD) private school program. Through a mix of state and federal funds, LA4 and NSECD have served more than 100,000 4-year old children since their inceptions. A University of

*Louisiana Believes.*

Louisiana study recently validated that low-income students participating in these programs have shown significant, positive results through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in not just literacy rates but also rates of student retention and special education referral.

Often the debate over investing in early childhood education comes down to study against study, each claiming an absolute truth about the effectiveness of an initiative that spans hundreds of thousands of young lives in disparate settings. I think – and our state proves – that it's time we get beyond this debate. Early education can be life changing for low-income children when it is done well, and when quality is sustained in the grades that follow. Done poorly, like anything else, its effects are limited. But done well, it is a potent arrow in the quivers of those fighting the effects of inequality and poverty.

It is therefore our responsibility, at the state and federal level, both to ensure that those options exist for families, and to ensure that those we support with taxpayer dollars meet a minimum bar of quality.

In Louisiana, we believe promoting quality schooling starts with fostering an environment in which quality thrives: high expectations for student achievement and progress; parents who are able to choose the school option best suited for their children; and knowledgeable, skilled teachers who continue to learn and grow throughout their careers. We also know that if we are to offer quality choices accessible to all parents who seek them, we need simple, accessible enrollment processes and coordinated planning across often disconnected funding streams.

Government should be modest in its ambitions to influence the choices of parents and teachers, but government plays an important role in assuring these basic conditions for quality and for access.

The greatest barrier to achieving these conditions – no less than financial resources themselves – is the fragmentation of our country's early childhood education system. Consider that LA4, for all of its successes, serves fewer than 40 percent of low-income four-year olds in Louisiana. Districts use Title I and state constitutional funds to provide another 25 percent of four-year olds with pre-kindergarten education. Head Start likewise serves 20 percent of four-year olds. Publicly funded child care centers and publicly funded NSECD private schools serve another ten percent. A final five percent of four-year olds are not enrolled in any program.

Amidst this collage of education providers, governance structures, and funding streams are multiple definitions of a minimum standard of classroom quality and multiple sets of regulations determining how classrooms operate, including those imposed by the federal government through Head Start, which I will address toward the end of my testimony. Teachers' own educational backgrounds vary significantly; some programs require not even a high school degree, others full certification. Professional development is a fact of life in some, nearly unheard of in others. And in almost every case, there is no requirement to coordinate

the number of seats offered or the process by which parents choose to enroll. While one center could have a mile-long waiting list, another nearby center could be enrolling families at only half of its capacity and never have access to families whose children are waiting at home for a waitlist elsewhere to clear.

This fragmentation affects not only access but also quality. In Louisiana, we assess every kindergartner at the start of the school year for basic literacy skills. In spite of great progress, today 46 percent of kindergartners start the year requiring “intensive support” in literacy, the lowest score possible. Tracking those kindergarten numbers back to four-year old settings shows that we have wide disparities in the extent to which centers are equipping children with fundamental literacy skills.

Much as we have a challenge of fragmented access, we have an even greater challenge of fragmented effectiveness. That’s not the fault of any one program or group. And it is not uncommon among states. But it is solvable, starting with ending the fragmentation that has characterized early childhood education governance for decades.

In early 2012, our state set out to do just that. That year Governor Bobby Jindal signed into law Act 3, passed unanimously by both houses of our state’s legislature, calling on our state board of elementary and secondary education to take two steps.

First was the creation of a statewide early childhood network, bringing child care, Head Start, publicly funded private pre-schools, and public school pre-kindergartens under one system of enrollment, minimum academic standards, and teacher preparation. Next, and equally important, the legislature called on the state board to itself take on the governance of all programs involved in the fragmented collage and to assume responsibility for licensing organizations of all types that provide publicly funded early childhood services. Act 3 called for both mandates to be fully implemented across every parish in Louisiana by the 2015-2016 school year.

In implementing Act 3, we realized early two humbling but important lessons. First, each program’s funding levels, teacher qualification requirements, and academic standards were tightly bound together. We could not bring one up to a minimum standard without addressing the others. Next, the complexity of changing these interconnected policies was compounded by the diversity of local settings in which the policies played out: from the urban streets of New Orleans and Shreveport to the distant woods and bayous of our rural parishes.

The statewide network, we determined, would actually have to be comprised of dozens of local networks. And it would take multiple years to navigate the maze of funding, staffing, and academic requirements, bringing each to a consistent, minimum standard.

We decided that year to start by calling on the most committed among our communities to develop pilot networks of local providers around a set of core principles: unified enrollment and access for families; minimum academic and developmental standards, birth through five, with shared measurement of child development to guide the way; and a basic standard of teacher effectiveness with equal access to professional development for teachers in all program types. Each network was to include local school systems, local Head Start grantees, and multiple child care providers and private schools. We identified a local organization – a school system or a non-profit organization, most typically – to coordinate the network, and we began to develop the core functions of an Early Childhood Network, place by place. As we learned how it worked on the ground, we reasoned, we would return to the legislature and state board to make statewide policy on issues of funding, certification, and licensure.

Seventeen of our 69 school systems were selected to participate in this first round of pilots. Another fifteen are scheduled to join this spring. In the time since they have started, the networks have instituted shared academic and developmental expectations in every classroom involved. They use the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment to define developmental expectations and progress. They also use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) evaluation of child-teacher interaction to improve professional practice and to establish a shared language among professionals teaching in different programs. As a result, teachers in child care and Head Start programs are starting to regularly observe and be observed by teachers in private and public pre-kindergartens.

Likewise, the networks have taken responsibility for identifying the number children ages zero to five who are eligible for publicly funded education in their parishes, a large and important gap in such a fragmented system. This year they will collaborate in their admissions processes, offering parents unified applications to all programs, along with coordinated outreach efforts. In their second year, networks will go further, identifying enrollment targets for every school and center and operating a fully unified enrollment process. This means that parents will have clear, comparable information in making choices and, rather than driving from center to center hoping for a spot, will be able to rank all choices in one application. Coordination will enhance parental choice.

At the state level, we are able to learn from the networks prior to crafting statewide policy. Act 3 allows for a rolling policy making process where the state works directly with practitioners to implement, and then returns to the state board and the legislature to make policy once we feel comfortable our conclusions are validated by work in the field.

While it has long been our vision to establish a higher minimum standard for the education backgrounds of our educators, for example, we knew early on that this would come at a cost and would have to accompany a change in funding. But we did not know then, for example, whether the fragmented system was offering too many unused seats or offered too few seats given the number of families eligible. Only after working with our pilot regions have we been able to create cost and revenue models

indicating the funds needed for every child to have a teacher with at least an associate's or bachelor's degree. We can now set in motion changes to early childhood funding that would come into effect on the same timeline as would changes in teacher certification requirements. Likewise, in the year to come we plan to codify in law this coordinated local governance structure, giving diverse providers a voice in local enrollment plans. And we will establish licensure standards that incorporate a center's ability to promote child development and kindergarten readiness. These steps are aimed at gradually closing the gaps of our state's fragmented early childhood system so that we can offer parents a choice of providers and a guarantee of a minimum standard of quality.

The federal government should maintain a modest role in this process. But it can assist states greatly in two ways. Congress can first support the growth of state-run programs that foster parental choice, minimum standards for teacher preparation, minimum quality expectations, and accountability when taking the public dollar. Second, Congress can address governance of the federal government's greatest contribution to the fragmentation, Head Start. While we are thrilled at the restoration of Head Start funding in the most recently passed budget, and while we appreciate greatly the contributions of Louisiana's Head Start providers, that \$120 million of federal funding annually skirts state-level input in Louisiana virtually institutionalizes fragmentation and guarantees incoherence in access and quality for parents, teachers, and children alike. States that adopt strategies rooted in quality and access, eliminating redundancies, making all programs accessible to parents, and defining a minimum standard of quality, should have the opportunity to be Head Start grantees, to bring family eligibility and center operating requirements into line with expectations across the state's network, and to maximize Head Start dollars for families choosing such programs. In doing this, you will send a strong signal that families and taxpayers need not only greater access to early learning programs but also a rational basis for choosing among those programs and a faith that government funding comes with a basic expectation of quality.

I thank you once again, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the opportunity to discuss these important issues, and I look forward to answering whatever questions you might have for me.