

EARLY CHILD CARE and EDUCATION

Parents are children's primary caretakers, nurturers and teachers, yet 68% of parents in Louisiana rely on some form of child care to be able to work and provide for their families. Seventy-eight percent of children under the age of 5 are being cared for outside of the home at least part of the day. There are a variety of options for parents including: center-based care, family-child day care homes, friend and neighbor care, in-home providers, and pre-school programs for 4-year-olds. Whatever option parents choose, the importance of quality child care and its influence on early childhood development and learning is critical.



Research tells us that quality child care can help close the growing economic and academic gaps between children from low-income families and those from more affluent backgrounds. While important for all children, quality child care is essential in providing the social-emotional development and enriching learning experiences that are so often lacking for children from the lowest socio-economic groups who often enter school academically disadvantaged. Gaps in learning and development before school entry are responsible for up to half of school failure. From an economic view point, high-quality child care, like the earned income tax credit, is one of the proven strategies for overcoming poverty for children.

Child care is also one of the most important industries in Louisiana. As an industry, child care employs 22,644 people. In terms of gross receipts, child care generates over \$650 million and has a return of \$1.72 for every \$1 spent by consumers. In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it is apparent that building communities requires child care options for parents to be able to work and for businesses to operate. As Louisiana recovers from the devastation of the hurricanes, we have the opportunity to rebuild our child care infrastructure with a focus on quality to support a healthy social and economic future for our state.

A Quality Rating System (QRS) for child care is the answer to many of our greatest concerns about insuring quality in the child care sector. Louisiana is among the first 20 states to implement a QRS. Parents will have a guide to assist them in choosing quality child care. This system, which is voluntary in Louisiana, was developed over many months with a 37-member steering committee comprised of stakeholders from around the state. The QRS will award child care centers star ratings based upon certain criteria, including staff qualifications, program standards, administrative practices, and family and community involvement.

Louisiana's
licensing
standards for
child care were
ranked **51st** out
of **52** licensing
entities by the
National
Association of
Child Care
Resource and
Referral
Agencies

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Among the incentives that will support this new QRS are the School Readiness Tax Credits passed by the legislature in 2007. The School Readiness Tax Credits are a comprehensive tax policy with benefits to families, child care providers, child care teachers, and employers through state tax credits tied to the quality of the child care setting as determined by the QRS.

Thousands of children in Louisiana are cared for in family-child day care homes, a home where the provider cares for six or fewer children. Just how many children are cared for in this setting is difficult to quantify because such homes are not licensed in Louisiana.

Louisiana's LA 4 pre-K program is recognized nationally as being among the best in the nation. LA 4 is proving that high quality pre-K programs can make a difference for 4-year-olds in assuring that they can succeed regardless of their backgrounds. There is clear recognition of the importance of early childhood among the public at large with many groups, such as CABL and Blueprint Louisiana, calling for universal pre-K for 4-year-olds.

Universal pre-K has several policy implications for child care. The child care sector can play an important role in assuring that all 4-year-olds have access to the highest quality pre-K experience. Universal pre-K and other expansions of early education should include schools partnering with child care centers—particularly with those centers that are participating in QRS. Child care centers can offer the facilities as well as the wrap around services needed by young children in a full-day program. This can be most cost effective by allowing schools to expand their programs without adding new facilities.

Policy implications for the future to strengthen early care and education should include:

- encourage child care centers to strive for quality through the new QRS by offering incentives for child care staff to continue their education and remain in the child care sector
- strengthen licensure regulations currently under review to encourage greater quality, health and safety standards in centers
- provide the state funding required to draw down all federal funds available to support child care
- mandate that all family-child day care homes be licensed and regulated to insure they meet basic health and safety standards
- give family-child day care homes the opportunity to participate in QRS, as well as the tax credit incentives

For additional information please go to www.lapartnership.org.

Child care and its economic impact have been overlooked in Louisiana, despite its critical importance to our children, families and communities