

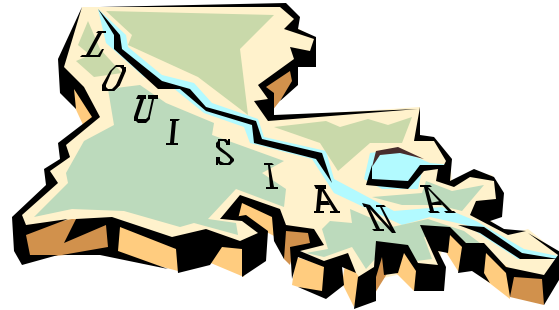
A BEACON IN THE SOUTH LA 4 EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

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How much does Louisiana State Superintendent Cecil Picard believe in the importance of preschool education? He has told the state legislature that he is willing to drop the 12th grade in order to fund universal preschool in Louisiana. For years, Picard has been a strong advocate for preschool education and has spearheaded the effort to create a statewide preschool program for 4-year olds in Louisiana called LA 4. In two short years, LA 4 has produced dramatic results in the lives of thousands of children in Louisiana.

Quality Counts

While there are thousands of preschool programs across the nation, high quality preschool programs are difficult to find. According to a 1998 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development study of early care in nine states, fewer than half of the existing preschools are rated good or excellent. Indicators for a high quality preschool include positive relationships between teachers and children, parent involvement, sufficient materials and toys in the room, small group sizes, qualified staff who are appropriately compensated, and professional development opportunities for staff. The research on preschool education programs such as the Chicago Parent Child Centers and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project illuminates the benefits of a *high quality* preschool education, especially for low-income at-risk children. Longitudinal studies on these programs show that the benefits of a high quality



preschool education reach into the upper grades and into early adulthood. These benefits include decreased grade retention, lower high school drop out rates, and a lower rate of criminal arrests.

Poverty is one of the greatest indicators of student achievement, and Louisiana has one of the highest poverty rates in the nation. Louisiana also has one of the highest dropout rates in the country. For young children growing up in Louisiana, these statistics may pose a threat to school success. A high quality preschool program can give these children a brighter chance of succeeding in school. Valerie Lee and David Burkham, researchers at the University of Michigan, conducted a study on early childhood longitudinal data, and concluded that a well-designed preschool preparation program with academic content targeted towards disadvantaged children can make a significant impact to reduce inequalities in children's cognitive status and social competence as they begin kindergarten.

LA 4 is a state early childhood education program targeted towards at-risk four-year-old children not currently enrolled in publicly funded preschool classes. LA 4 is designed to promote child development through social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth. The program was founded on child development and learning research, including the research of Craig Ramey, a psychologist on faculty at Georgetown University and who is currently a member of the LA 4 evaluation research team. LA 4 emphasizes teaching language, literacy, and math skills. These skills are designed to give students a strong foundation in literacy and math in order to prevent reading difficulties and special education placement in later grades. The pro-



gram also recognizes that students and their families have a variety of needs that can be met through a pre-school program. In order to accommodate working parents, before- and after-school activities are available to all parents of children enrolled in the program. LA 4 offers parenting and vocational classes for parents, special education services, transportation services, health screening, and social service referrals. Recognizing that healthy bodies produce healthy minds, LA 4 targets the growing nationwide epidemic of childhood obesity. Nearly one in three school-age Louisiana children is obese (LSU Ag Center, 2003). The Louisiana State Department of Education has been working with the Pennington Biomedical Center to teach proper dieting and exercise to four year olds in LA 4.

From its inception, LA 4 has been held accountable for producing results. The Louisiana Department of Education contracted the Louisiana State University (LSU) Health Sciences Center and the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) Center for Educational Accountability to evaluate the LA 4 program and to study the longitudinal effects of the program on student performance. The research evaluation team, lead by Craig Ramey, has conducted an analysis of the 2001 pilot year and most recently the 2002-2003 school year. They found dramatic results. The students who entered LA 4 were far behind their peers across the country, but after one year of LA 4, they performed are comparable to the national average for preschool students. In both years, students showed impressive improvements between the pre- and post- tests in math and reading. For the school year 2002-2003, in areas of language, print, and math, the percentage of students scoring in the highest quartile jumped an average 25 percent between the pre- and post- tests. In the same subjects, the percentage of students scoring in the lowest quartile decreased about 65 percent. The short-term gains have clearly been attained. The longitudinal studies in subsequent years will reveal the long-lasting benefits of LA 4 for students as they progress through school.

Teacher quality and ongoing evaluation are two key components to ensure that the quality of services remains high. All teachers in LA 4 are certified in early childhood education, and all staff working with pre-K students must be provided ongoing professional development. The pupil teacher ratio is kept to 10-1 in order to provide individual attention to each student. According to Mary Louise Jones, the head of pre-kindergarten curriculum and standards at the Louisiana Department of Education, Louisiana's pre-kindergarten standards strengthen the program because the LA 4 teachers are teaching to the standards. Jones also stated the developmentally appropriate curriculum is research based, and it improves the quality of instruction. LA 4 evaluators concluded that teacher quality is critical to LA 4's effectiveness. Evaluators conducted site visits to the LA 4 classrooms and found that teaching methods, curriculum, and classroom environments were better quality and more effective than similar prekindergarten classroom in other parts of the country.

In the pilot program and 2002-03 school years, LA 4 received a 5.7 rating out of a total possible of 7 on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Scale (ECERS-R), an instrument used to determined quality early childhood programs. This compares positively to other early childhood programs—for example, Head Start received a 4.9 and the Georgia Pre-K program received a 4.6 rating. Ramey stated that Louisiana's pre-kindergarten program is in the top tier of state preschool programs in the nation. When asked about what makes LA 4 a quality program, Picard replied, "the bottom line is that it is research based, held to high standards, and places a certified teacher in every classroom."

As part of the evaluation, a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted with the teachers and administrated from the LA 4 program. The administrators and teachers at the LA 4 pilot project expressed that the strengths of the program were the high quality program guidelines, preparation of the children for kindergarten, improvement in children's social skills, and early identification of learning challenges. Administrators and teachers also stated that LA 4 could be strengthened further by increasing training opportunities for teachers and increased parent involvement. As the LA 4 program seeks to expand, recruiting qualified staff may be a challenge. Certified teachers are critical to keeping the high quality of the teaching staff. Nationally, there is a critical shortage of early childhood education teachers, and Louisiana will need a strong pool of candidates in order to continue and to expand LA 4 with a highly qualified teacher in every classroom.

The Pre-Kindergarten System in the State

Although LA 4 is administered by the Louisiana Department of Education, Picard envisions an early childhood education system where Head Start, LA 4, and other early childhood programs work in collaboration. Currently, the LA 4 program must collaborate with all other governmentally funded providers of early childhood education, including Head Start, that serve children residing within the school district. The staff from the early childhood programs meet to discuss common issues and to coordinate programs to ensure that a high quality pre-school program is available to the maximum number of children.

Picard sees the current changes underway in the Federal Head Start Program as a perfect opportunity to make LA 4, Head Start, and other early care and education a seamless system in his state. He has stated that Louisiana would work in consortium with Arkansas and Mississippi to target the Delta area that borders all three states, an area that has persistent poverty and a sluggish economy. Currently, very few school districts in the Louisiana Delta take part in LA 4, and the consortium would work towards increasing interest and participation in a high quality preschool program.

LA 4 Numbers

In 2001, LA 4 began with the participation of 11 out of Louisiana's 66 school systems. In the 2003-2004 school year, 19 school systems participated. LA 4 is free for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, but students who do not qualify for assistance may be required to pay tuition to attend the program. In the 2002-2003 school year, over 90% of the children enrolled in LA 4 qualified for free or reduced lunch. LA 4 is reaching the children who are most at-risk of school failure, but there are still thousands of Louisiana four-year olds who need to be served. LA 4 currently serves 4,700 children, but there are 500 children on the waiting list for LA 4 and thousands of at-risk children are still not enrolled in a pre-K program. Picard and LA 4 supporters seek to expand the preschool program to meet the needs of all at-risk children.

The hopes of expanding LA 4 were almost dashed during this year's budget appropriations. With the state in a fiscal crisis, even effective programs like LA 4 were not safe from budget cuts. The program is primarily funded through the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Act, however TANF funds can be re-allocated to other state assistance programs. LA 4 was in serious danger of losing funding, but the support of key legislators, and unexpected restoration of federal



assistance dollars provided full funding to LA 4. In fact, LA 4 received an additional \$9 million over the previous year to expand the pre-K program. Over the last two years, funding for LA 4 has increased from \$15 million to \$39 million. In a poll conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), only three states, Illinois, Louisiana, and New Jersey, increased spending levels for preschool, despite serious budget shortfalls.

Although LA 4 expanded this year, the state education department expects to have just \$21 million for all discretionary programs, including LA 4. This would result in a severe cutback of the pre-K programs. Picard has already begun to recruit preschool advocates in the future leadership of Louisiana. So far, all seven major candidates who are running for governor this year have publicly stated they are committed to making early childhood care and education a top priority and they share the vision for universal preschool access. These seven candidates are committed to at least maintaining funding of LA 4's budget at \$40 million. Three of the seven candidates have even proposed to count pre-K students in the school funding formula, a move that could potentially provide \$120 million per year to LA4.

"The goal of LA 4 is to create universal access that is free for everyone with no distinction between students" Picard stated. A truly universal pre-kindergarten program may be just a matter of time in Louisiana. LA 4 continues to make a positive impact on the four year olds in Louisiana and is a shining example of a high quality preschool program that works. Time will tell if LA 4 will have a lasting impact on its students, but already, LA 4 has made great strides to bridge the achievement gap for its youngest citizens.

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