

CABL Briefing

A Spotlight on Leading Issues

Developing the Minds of the Very Young . . . Why It's So Important to Louisiana's Future

Early Childhood Education Works.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been an explosion of exciting brain research showing that children ages 3 to 5 absorb many cognitive skills, underscoring the importance of early education and developmental experiences. This is not just daycare, but rigorous, developmentally appropriate programs for young children. Many recent studies have verified the effectiveness of these programs with results that include:

- Improved language skills
- Higher cognitive performance
- Higher reading and math scores
- Reduced need for special education
- Fewer grade failures
- Higher levels of formal education

Children Living in Poverty Clearly Benefit.

The cycle of poverty can often be termed the cycle of school failure. One of the highest correlations to academic failure is poverty. Educators report that often children living in poverty start school with little vocabulary (sometimes as few as 100 words) and low cognitive skills. Not all, but some of these children also suffer from poor health and nutrition, physical abuse or neglect. Less educated parents often lack skills to help their children in school, and thus the cycle continues.

FACT: Louisiana has the 2nd highest percentage of adults and children living in poverty in the U.S. Poverty is defined by the federal government as a family of four with an annual income of \$18,810 or less.

Not only do rigorous early childhood programs have the potential to raise individuals out of poverty through later academic success and better paying jobs, but they also save public funds. Studies show that there is a reduced need in later years for remediation in school, publicly funded medical treatment, and incarceration – programs much more expensive than educating four-year-olds.

Ignorance and Poverty Continue in Louisiana.

While the South continues to slowly close the gap in poverty rates with the rest of the nation, Louisiana's rate has not declined much. In 2004, Louisiana's poverty rate was 46% higher than that of the nation and ranked 49th -- not much different than 1980.

In addition, there are disturbing signs that the issues surrounding poverty and schooling in Louisiana will go on well into the future:

- 30% of children live in poverty vs. 18% in the US (2004).
- 49.2% of babies are born to unwed mothers vs. 35.7% in the US (2004) – and it's been rising.
- 15% of the births in Louisiana were to teenage mothers vs. 10% in the US (2003).

The families behind these statistics face tremendous economic challenges, often times perpetuating poverty conditions. Why these social problems continue to the degree that they



"Poor children who attend intensive preschool classes are more likely to graduate from high school than poor children who have not participated in such programs."

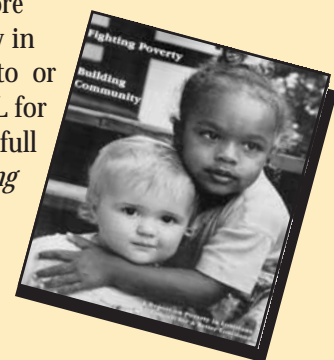
"Researchers tracked 1,500 children from Chicago beginning in 1985, at age 5, until age 20, and concluded that early childhood programs could pay dividends long after children had learned to read."

- The New York Times

do in our state requires a long and complicated answer.

But one thing is clear, **significant rates of poverty are a fact of life, for the foreseeable future in our state. The question before us is: for how long?**

Investing in the cognitive and academic development of very young children, ages 2-4, can begin to reverse negative social conditions, improve quality of life for many citizens and reduce government dependency and costs. The consequences of poverty impact the very fabric of our lives. For more about poverty in Louisiana go to or contact CABL for a copy of our full report *Fighting Poverty, Building Community*.



LA-4 Preschool Initiative.

Some parishes in Louisiana actually do offer some early childhood programs. But even though many of these programs are valued, local school districts face hard choices between educating 4-year olds and fully funding the needs of kids in grades K-12.

FACT: Each year about 40-45% of Louisiana public kindergarten students come from poverty or near-poverty conditions.

Ever-increasing pressure from Louisiana's **School Accountability System** to increase academic performance, combined with hard evidence that low-income kids reap the most long-term gains from quality preschool, created a convergence in public policy debate five years ago – with a state senator, the Superintendent of Education and CABL leading the way.

In 2001, these efforts resulted in a high-quality, extended-day program for “at-risk” 4-year-olds in Louisiana, called the LA-4 Preschool Initiative. It has a number of quality standards and requires that teachers be certified. For parents making the transition from welfare to work, the full-day LA-4 programs truly offer a win-win situation.

Significant Results Achieved By LA 4.

Since 2002, the independent evaluations of the LA 4 program have shown tremendous gains on pre- and post-tests for at-risk kids. As the chart below indicates, the program is achieving results for these children even beyond those programs offered by other states that have

received national recognition for their pre-K offerings.

For a summary

evaluation report go to: <http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/uploads/8359.doc>

LA 4 is not offered in every parish – it is voluntary because local school systems have to provide transportation and

learning centers. There are other potential factors that hinder efforts to succeed with all 4-year old at-risk kids in Louisiana: failure to expand federal and state funding, parents not enrolling children, lack of care for the children ages birth to 4, lack of certified teachers, and lack of high quality standards for other pre-K programs offered by private or nonprofit providers. Despite these challenges, CABL supports state efforts to bring more at-risk children into quality early childhood programs. There is one thing we know for certain: Louisiana's educational progress and overall economic recovery and vitality is tied to reaching these children early.

