



Brandeis University

The Heller School for Social Policy and Management

March 20, 2017

ESSA State Plan Comments

Louisiana Department of Education
1201 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802-5243

Subject: Louisiana and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Public Comments

Dear Louisiana Department of Education,

As a Fellow from the Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy (ICYFP) at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, I write to express support for Louisiana's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan, as well as to make a recommendation. ICYFP's mission is to conduct and disseminate policy relevant research on the well-being, health, and development of children and their families. Analysis of early childhood policies and strategies is one of the primary focal areas of ICYFP's research.

I first want to commend the State of Louisiana for its inclusion of many strong, evidence-based early childhood provisions in its ESSA plan. There are almost 60 mentions of early childhood or preschool, spanning all sections of the plan. Louisiana's attention to early childhood is evident throughout the plan, reflected in the State's summary of challenges and long term goals which span early childhood through secondary education and beyond.

A large and growing body of research asserts the importance of positive early childhood experiences—including high-quality early education and preschool—for later school and life success¹. I therefore write in support of Louisiana's ESSA approach, which acknowledges the importance of exposure to quality early childhood care and education, and more specifically in support of the following aspects of the plan:

- Engagement/input from the Early Childhood Care and Education Advisory Council to LDE/BESE about how to integrate early childhood concerns into the State's ESSA plan.
- Explicit attention to workforce development and increased professionalism for early education workforce, evident in the State's development of subject specific competencies and accompanying classroom support toolboxes for content areas where the State has adopted new standards or made significant developments, which includes early childhood, and inclusion of all teachers, PK-12, in teacher preparation efforts.
- Use of expert "networks" to ensure that LEA plans align with the State's identified focus areas--the first of which is the unification of Child Care, Head Start and Pre-Kindergarten to ensure that all students are ready for Kindergarten.

¹ Phillips, D. A., & Shonkoff, J. P. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. National Academies Press; Yoshikawa et al. (2013). *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education*. Co-commissioned report of The Society for Research in Child Development and the Foundation for Child Development.

- Development of the Early Childhood Performance Profiles (for sites and community networks), and state guidance that directs school systems to utilize the profiles for goal setting and progress monitoring. The structure of the profiles addresses issues of both local-level access (which is the relevant level of access based on the fact that the vast majority of families access care close to home²), and on issues of quality, which is essential since the research tells us that it is exposure to high-quality early childhood programs that matters most for children’s later success³.

I would also like to offer a recommendation for further strengthening the early childhood provisions of Louisiana’s ESSA plan. In connection with the Early Childhood Performance Profile for Community Networks, the State could consider modifying its definitions/measures of equitable access to better align with the research base, and to more fully utilize the very rich, rare, and valuable classroom quality data that is being collected for all publicly funded early care and education program sites.

Equitable Access Definitions/Measures. Based on the draft Community Profile found in the Early Childhood Improving School Readiness 2015-2016 Learning Year Statewide Webinar dated November 9, 2016 (accessed [here](#)), the measure reported under **Equitable Access** is the **“Percent of 4 year olds enrolled”**. We see this as a useful metric to understand overall access levels and we recommend keeping it in the profile for that purpose.

However, for assessing equitable access to the types of programs that can help historically disadvantaged groups of children make the necessary gains to close longstanding achievement gaps, the research suggests that it is access and exposure to high-quality early childhood programs that matters most⁴. As such, for purposes of measuring equitable access we recommend reporting the **“Percent of at risk 4 year olds in high quality Pre-K classrooms”** or **“Percent of at risk 4 year olds enrolled in each of the four program quality categories”** (i.e. percent enrolled in “excellent” programs, percent enrolled in “proficient” programs, percent enrolled in “approaching proficient” programs, and percent enrolled in “unsatisfactory” programs) based on the scores from the CLASS measures used in the site-specific Early Childhood Performance Profiles. The same could be reported for infants/toddlers.

We applaud the State for its commitment to measuring program quality, as evidenced by the collection of CLASS measures for all publicly funded early childhood programs. The State is ahead of the standard of practice in this aspect and is therefore uniquely positioned to create research-based measures of equitable access at the Community Network level using these site-specific quality measures.

Finally, even within Community Networks, racial/ethnic and socioeconomic inequities in access to quality early education and care (and other educational opportunities) can arise. Examining local patterns of access is crucial for early care and education, as the vast majority of families

² Zannoni et al. (2016). *Households’ Geographic Access to Center-based Early Care and Education: Estimates and Methodology from the National Survey of Early Care and Education*. OPRE NSECE Methodology Report.

³ Schweinhart et al. (2005). *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40*. Ypsilanti: High/Scope Press.

⁴ Ibid.

access early education and care close to home⁵. We therefore recommend that the State consider adding even more localized measures of access to quality early education and care, e.g. by elementary school catchment areas.

In sum, to ensure that the Early Childhood Performance Profiles for Community Networks comprehensively assess access and equity for all early learners within a community, we would recommend that the State consider:

- Reporting measures of equitable access that incorporate access to **high-quality** early care and education (that can be created using the CLASS measures from site-specific Early Childhood Performance Profiles).
- Reporting access measures for both the Community Network overall, and for more localized areas within the Community where disparities may lie and be obscured when aggregating results to the Community Network level (e.g. elementary school catchment areas).

In conclusion, we applaud the Louisiana ESSA plan for its strong, evidence-based approach to integrating early childhood concerns, and for its development of the crucial information infrastructure that school systems require to successfully integrate early childhood concerns into their plans. We believe the plan could be even further strengthened in its implementation phase by modifying the definitions and measures of equitable access for at risk children as described in detail above.

Thank you for your attention to and your consideration of these issues.

Sincerely,



Erin Hardy
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⁵ Zanoni et al. (2016). *Households' Geographic Access to Center-based Early Care and Education: Estimates and Methodology from the National Survey of Early Care and Education*. OPRE NSECE Methodology Report.