

# Access to early childhood education vital to future success, but it costs <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Toddlers pretend to cook imaginary food on a wooden toy stove in one part of the room, while others sit at tiny tables and learn how to use scissors and trace letters. Some wear dress-up clothes or hold toy friends as they listen to their teachers, making eye contact and watching their mouths move as they speak.

These are critical moments in a child's development — when they exercise motor skills, learn to regulate emotions and add to their vocabularies. It's also an everyday occurrence in a high-quality early childhood care setting.

There, it's the norm, but many young kids in Louisiana are missing out on these key skills, with limited access to affordable preschool and child care.

Louisiana's population of children from birth to 4 — when 90% of brain development occurs — topped 301,000 in 2019, and 28% of them live below the federal poverty level, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

"Growing up in poverty is one of the greatest threats to healthy child development," according to the Foundation. "Poverty and financial stress can impede children's cognitive development and their ability to learn. It can contribute to behavioral, social and emotional problems and poor health."

But only about one-fifth of those children are being served in publicly funded early childhood care and education centers. About 20,000 of the 97,000 Louisiana kids birth to 5 living in poverty were enrolled in state-funded pre-K in 2019-20, according to the State of Preschool 2020 report from The National Institute for Early Education Research.

The Louisiana Department of Education puts that number much higher, estimating there were 173,000 children birth to 3 who are "economically in need" living in Louisiana in 2020. The larger figure seems to be a result of more broad economic criteria.

Most of those students were in Head Start centers across Louisiana — 17,254 kids ages 3 and 4 in 2019. For families who meet the income requirements, the federally funded program provides free learning and development services and has been shown to lead to better academic and lifetime outcomes, such as finishing high school and earning higher wages.

## 'First line of defense'

Kelly Rogers has felt the impact of Head Start most of her life. She started as a student at a Head Start center in Crowley when she was 3 years old and would grow up to enroll her own son at the same center when he turned 3.

His second year at the center, Rogers was hired as a teacher's assistant and went back to finish college and move up the ranks, becoming a teacher, site supervisor and now the education/disabilities specialist. It's her 26th year with the Acadia Parish program.

As a teacher, Rogers would emphasize self-esteem and problem-solving, skills she knew they would need for the world in addition to letters and numbers. At one point or another she told all of her pre-schoolers they were her favorite, guarding and loving them as her own while they were in her care.

"I would tell parents, 'From 8 o'clock to 2 o'clock, they're my babies,'" said Rogers, who now works in the Head Start Central Office. "That was the type of teacher I was."

That's what researchers say high-quality early childhood care is — helping children to develop those academic and social skills in a safe and healthy environment. It could be a teacher who notices the early signs of an ear infection, a disability or abuse and can respond accordingly, getting the child and family connected to critical resources.

"The first line of defense is the teacher," Rogers said. "For children with disabilities, I want to make sure we catch it at the Head Start level. If we do, I've seen some kids who don't even need services by first grade."

The environment is an important piece of the puzzle, according to Susan Nelson, executive director of the Louisiana Partnership for Children and Families. The advocacy group focuses on auxiliary issues and needs that also go into a child's well-being.

"Are (children) in healthy environments or stressful? Are they getting the food they need to grow? All of those pieces have an incredible impact on what a kid is going to learn when they show up in kindergarten," Nelson explained.

Being in a healthy and structured learning environment helps make that eventual transition to kindergarten easier, too, Acadia Parish Head Start Director Latanya Evans said.

"Any type of structured learning is important at a very young age," Evans said. "They're like sponges. The more you involve kids, challenge their little brains, the better the outcomes in the long-term."

Acadia Parish serves nearly 400 students in its four Head Start centers, located in Crowley, Rayne, Church Point and Estherwood. The school system also offers pre-K for 4-year-olds with 22 total classes (440 seats) at public schools across the district.

'An extremely under-funded system'

Louisiana ranks 27th based on spending per pre-schooler, spending \$4,539 per child enrolled in pre-K, according to The National Institute for Early Education Research. Total state preschool spending in 2019-20 was \$92,837,799.

Nationally, the U.S. spent \$10.37 billion in local and federal dollars to provide early care and education to 1.64 million children in 2019-20. But experts say that isn't enough, evidenced by the large number of kids still without access.

All-reported spending, which includes local and federal dollars, to the extent states can report them, was \$10.37 billion. All-reported spending per child was \$6,329.

States enrolled more than 1.64 million children state-funded preschool, including almost 1.37 million 4-year-olds, which is just over one-third of all 4-year-olds in the country. Enrollment of 3-year-olds was just 251,843 which is 6.3% of 3-year-olds

The research group estimates that an additional \$10.5 billion is needed to fully fund the more than 1.64 million current preschool seats to raise quality, pay teachers adequately, and provide full-day programs.

Almost \$1.5 billion in additional funding also would be needed to raise the quality of existing Head Start seats and convert them to full-day, which provides more instructional time while also allowing more parents to enter the workforce.

"The United States has an extremely under-funded system of providing services to preschool-age children," reads the State of Preschool report.

Like so many other things, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problem in the three significant ways, according to researchers: many states are struggling to maintain even current low levels of funding;

many more children missed out on early care and education experiences while programs were closed during the pandemic; and

many more families are now experiencing financial hardship.

The COVID-19 pandemic also made access to high quality preschool more difficult, worsening inequality in education.

"The current fragmented and underfunded early care and education system creates highly unequal experiences in early childhood, exacerbating disparities, denying equal opportunities to all children, and resulting in an underproductive future for our children and country," according to a report from The Hamilton Project, an economic policy initiative within the Brookings Institution.

To create access for all those in need would take an investment of about \$80 million a year for 10 years, said Libbie Sonnier, executive director of the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children.

"We haven't made that kind of investment in the state," Sonnier said.

'Glimmers of hope'

But investments are being made.

The Louisiana Legislature invested nearly \$20 million in early childhood in 2020 and sustained that investment in 2021, the largest state investment in early childhood in a decade, according to the Louisiana Early Childhood Care and Education Commission.

"That's good, but there's a long way to go," Sonnier said.

There also are parishes and cities working toward investing local money — like New Orleans City Council's \$1.5 million budget allocation for early childhood education in 2019, which Sonnier gave as an example.

Then there's the Ready Louisiana Coalition, a statewide coalition of more than 100 businesses, advocacy organizations, early care and education professionals, parents and citizens seeking increased investment in early care and education in Louisiana.

And there's more expected to come, as the Louisiana Legislature passed bills this summer to allocate 50% of revenues from the NBA Pelicans license plate and 25% of sports betting revenues (up to \$20 million) to the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund.

Sonnier called these efforts "glimmers of hope."

"You can't help but have hope that we're going to get this right," Sonnier said. "We just have to stay the course."

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** early childhood education <sup>[4]</sup>

child development <sup>[5]</sup>

child poverty <sup>[6]</sup>

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**Source URL (modified on 3 Nov 2021):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/11/access-early-childhood-education-vital-future-success-it-costs>

#### Links

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