



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA:

FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT



TABLE OF CONTENTS

03

Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

04

Overview of Louisiana’s Early Childhood Education System

05

History of Early Childhood Education in Louisiana

07

Louisiana’s Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education Programs

08

Local Investment in Early Childhood Education

10

The Cost of Early Childhood Education

12

Why Early Childhood Education Matters

15

Endnotes



LOUISIANA POLICY INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN



A successful Louisiana starts with successful children.

WHO WE ARE

The Louisiana Policy Institute for Children is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that is a **source of data, research, and information for policymakers and stakeholders on issues concerning young children in Louisiana.**

WHAT WE DO

The Louisiana Policy Institute for Children seeks to:

1. Inform decision makers through research;
2. Impact the lives of children and families; and
3. Raise awareness about early care and education in Louisiana.

OUR MISSION

Advancing policies to ensure that Louisiana’s young children are ready for success in school and in life.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA: FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT



What is Early Childhood Education?

Early childhood education (ECE) includes educational programs that serve children from birth to age 5, prior to their entry into kindergarten. Research consistently highlights the importance of these early years in shaping a child's development.¹ Over 90% of brain development occurs before age 4, during which time the brain forms over one million new connections per second.² During this time, children rapidly develop across cognitive, behavioral, and physical domains.³ Children's experiences during this period lay the groundwork for future academic achievement, behavior, and overall health, affecting their success in school, the workplace, and within their communities.⁴

Overview of Louisiana's Early Childhood Education System

In Louisiana, families can choose from several types of ECE, ranging from child care to school-based pre-K settings. To support the safety of children and the quality of the education they receive, ECE providers must meet specific licensing and accountability standards, whether funded by local, state, or federal sources. **ECE providers must either be a Type III child care center or an academically approved family child care (FCC) provider to be eligible to participate in public programs.**

ECE providers and educators who receive public funding are assessed annually through the state's accountability system. **The accountability system focuses on instructional quality, distinct from licensing requirements that address health, safety, and staffing standards.** Louisiana utilizes the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a well-established observational tool that measures the quality of teacher-child interactions. Research shows that CLASS scores are linked to better academic and behavioral outcomes for children, validating the tool as an effective measure of classroom quality.⁵ The CLASS assessment includes three key domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. These categories help capture important elements of teacher-child interactions that support children's learning and development. Lead agencies are responsible for ensuring that CLASS observations occur twice per year in publicly funded programs in all toddler and pre-kindergarten classrooms and that teachers receive feedback based on these observations.

CLASS measures quality on a seven-point scale, and scores in each CLASS domain are averaged to produce one overall score and rating for an ECE provider in the Louisiana accountability system.⁶ **Providers receiving a rating of Proficient, High Proficient, or Excellent are considered quality providers.** Providers receiving a low score rating within Approaching Proficient or score Unsatisfactory must participate in the Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) Site Improvement Planning process. A provider scoring Unsatisfactory for two out of any three-year period may have their license revoked.

Louisiana Early Childhood Education Providers

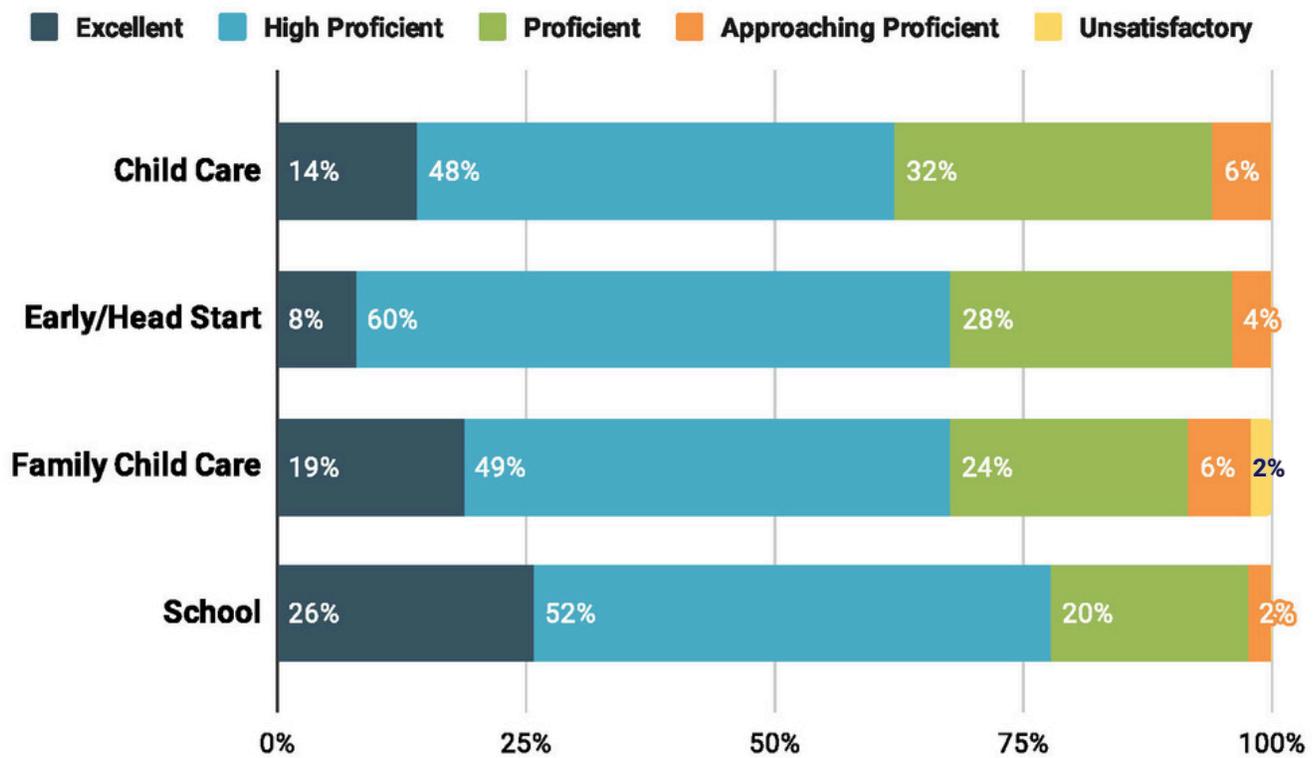
Type I	Type II	Type III	Family Child Care
Operated by religious organization, and only accepts private pay. Not in quality rating system, but is licensed by the state to operate.	Only accepts private pay. May be in Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Not in quality rating system, but is licensed by the state to operate.	Accepts private pay and public funding. In the quality rating system and is licensed by the state to operate.	Program in providers's home for up to six children. If registered, receives inspection. If certified with academic approval, receives licensing inspection, public funding, and participates in quality rating system.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA: FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT



These quality-rated ECE programs also must use a curriculum with children that aligns with the LDOE Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS). **The curriculum is delivered by trained and credentialed early educators, most of whom (over 80%) have at least an early childhood credential, and more than one-third hold a bachelor's or graduate degree.**⁷ Despite being heavily trained and credentialed, most early educators still make less than \$15 per hour. In some regions, most child care workers make less than \$12 per hour.⁸ Additionally, few receive any workplace benefits like medical insurance or retirement benefits.⁹ These constraints on early educators make it difficult for them to remain in the workforce, despite an overwhelming majority of them reporting that they would choose the same career again.¹⁰

2024 Performance Ratings of ECE Providers by Type in Louisiana



Source: LDOE 2024 Performance Profiles Data

History of Early Childhood Education in Louisiana

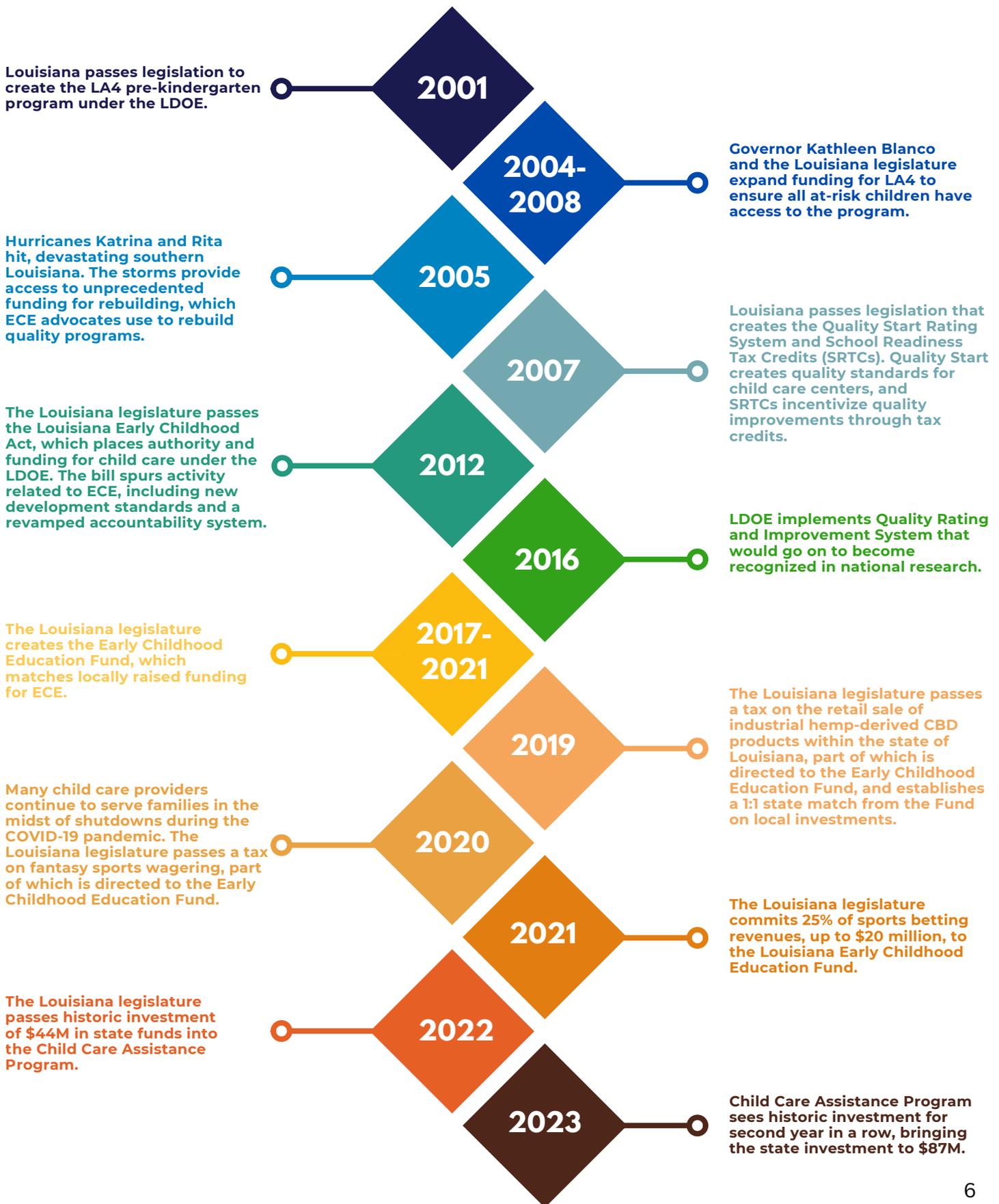
Louisiana's ECE system has gained national attention due to the steady and intentional efforts of advocacy and legislative policy over several decades. A nonpartisan approach to ECE has made this progress possible, with leaders across political parties recognizing its importance.

Each policy decision has had a measurable impact on both access to and the quality of ECE in Louisiana. They have also created a strong foundation for the programs available today, which serve a diverse range of families across the state. Many of these programs specifically support working parents who fuel our economy. Strengthening the ECE system is directly tied to building a more robust economy, as a well-educated workforce begins with a strong early education foundation.

Our early childhood education programs are the backbone of our communities, supporting the essential jobs that drive our economy.



The History of Early Childhood Education in Louisiana



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA: FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT



Louisiana's Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education Programs

Currently, the LDOE, under the guidance of the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), oversees several state and federally funded programs for children under age 5.

Among the various programs administered by the LDOE, some are fully funded by the federal government, such as Head Start and Title I, while others are state funded, including the Non-Public School Early Childhood Development (NSECD) program. The state's two largest programs, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and LA 4, are funded through a combination of both state and federal resources. **Four of the state's programs specifically target 4-year-olds, while the remainder support a broader age range of children under age 5.** Regardless of the funding sources, all of these programs are subject to the state's ECE accountability system and have defined eligibility criteria to ensure resources are allocated efficiently.

For example, CCAP, Louisiana's second largest early childhood program, aims to make quality child care more accessible and affordable for in-need families. To qualify for CCAP, families must meet specific criteria: (1) the parent must be a U.S. citizen; (2) the parent must be employed or enrolled in school; and (3) the family's income must fall within the program's established limits of up to 85% of state median income based on family size, and **families are required to undergo redetermination every 12 months to ensure continued eligibility.**

Together, these programs represent close to \$600 million in combined state and federal funding, serving approximately 57,000 children in publicly funded early learning programs across Louisiana.

Publicly Funded Early Childhood Education Programs in Louisiana

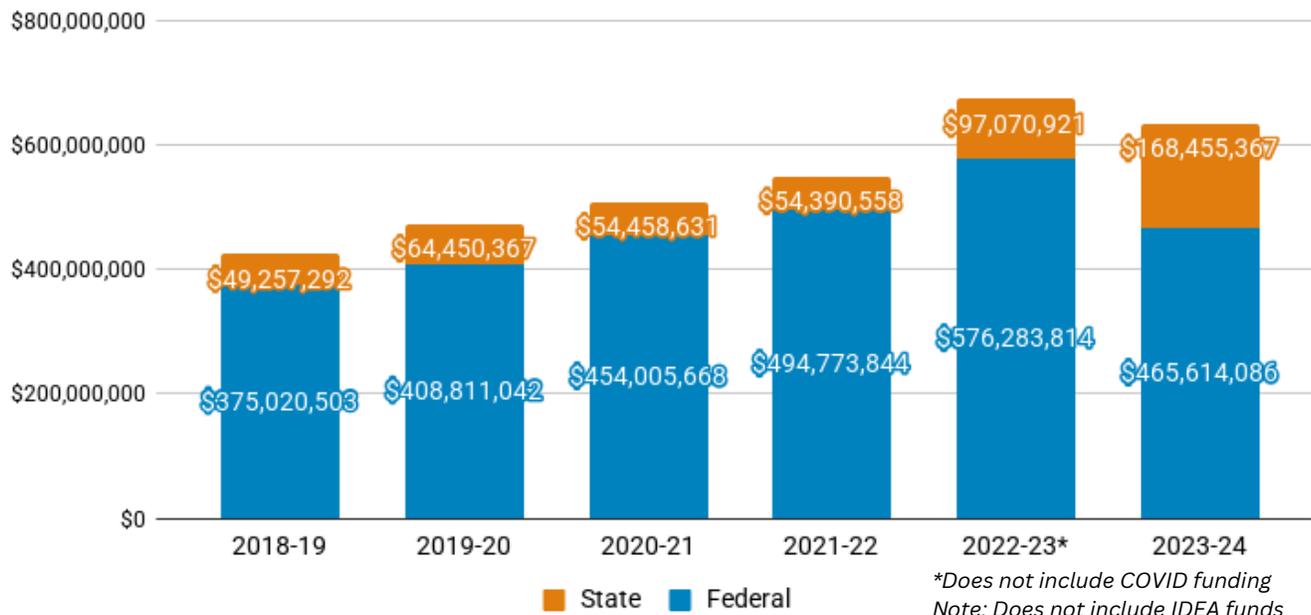
Enrollment and Funding

Program	Infants	Ones	Twos	Threes	Fours	FY 24-25 Totals	FY 24-25 State Funding	FY 24-25 Federal Funding
CCAP	1,052	2,825	3,780	4,148	2,555	14,360	\$78.5 M	\$150 M CCDBG
Head Start	364	966	1,455	7,225	3,660	13,670	\$0	\$220.8 M <small>*Funding for 2023-2024. Head Start allocation for 2024-2025 is not yet available.</small>
LA 4	-	-	-	-	16,840	16,840	\$75.6 M	\$19.9 M TANF
NSECD	-	-	-	481	886	1,367	\$7.8 M	\$0
8(g)	-	-	-	-	1,489	1,489	\$7.1 M	\$0
Title 1	-	-	-	32	3,591	3,623	\$0	\$36.3 M
ECE Fund	160	298	466	497	-	1,421	<i>The state's ECE Fund matches local fundraising 1:1 to increase child care access for birth-3-year-olds. It has 5 dedicated funding streams from various tax revenues.</i>	
Other Funding Sources	224	287	412	658	2,335	3,916	<i>Combination of smaller state and federal funding sources, often that flow straight to local school districts. LDOE does not currently track the specific amount for these funding sources.</i>	
Total Served	1,800	4,376	6,113	13,041	31,356	56,686	\$169 M	\$427M
Estimated Unserved	32,964	30,388	28,651	21,463	2,609	116,075	\$596M	

Source: LDOE 2024 Early Care and Education Advisory Council Annual Report



Federal and State Funding for ECE Programs in Louisiana



Source: Louisiana Early Childhood System Integration Budget, FY 2019-2024

While the state has made significant strides in increasing its financial contribution to ECE, it is important to recognize that the federal government remains the primary source of funding for many of these initiatives – **federal sources accounted for nearly 75% of the total funding for ECE programs in Louisiana in 2023-2024**. As Louisiana continues to expand access to early education, the balance of state and federal funding will be a critical factor in ensuring sustainable support for families who are in need.

Local Investment in Early Childhood Education

Local communities across Louisiana have increasingly recognized the importance of investing in ECE programs, particularly for the most underserved age group of infants and toddlers. Over the past few years, local governments and philanthropic organizations have raised millions of dollars and leveraged additional resources through the Early Childhood Education Fund (ECE Fund) to expand access to quality early education.

Established in 2017, **the ECE Fund provides a dollar-for-dollar state match for local investments for ECE seats**. With a significant majority of the state's in-need 4-year-olds already being served by various publicly funded programs, the focus has shifted to addressing the gap in services for children from birth to age 3. Fiscal year 2022-2023 marked the first year in which local communities successfully raised eligible funds for the state match. In just three years, investments grew from four localities receiving a match to 13.

To support the rapid growth of local investment, the Louisiana legislature has passed several dedicated funding streams for the ECE Fund, now generating approximately \$18 million annually. These innovative funding strategies – at both the local and state levels – **have positioned Louisiana as a leader in developing sustainable financing for ECE**.



Early Childhood Education Fund Revenue Source and Amounts

Revenue Source	FY 24-25 Revenue
Sports Betting <i>25% of sports betting tax revenues, up to \$20 million.</i>	\$16,308,051.99
Fantasy Sports Wagering <i>A portion of the revenue from an 8% tax.</i>	\$114,088.15
Hemp-Derived CBD Products <i>A portion of the revenue from a 3% tax.</i>	\$910,521.05
New Orleans Pelicans License Plate <i>50% of NBA Pelicans specialty license plate revenues.</i>	\$2,723.96
Land-Based Casinos <i>Up to \$3.6M per year if state tax revenue from casino exceeds \$65M.</i>	<i>FY 24-25 amount to be determined. FY 23-24 amount was \$332,993.39</i>
Interest Earnings	\$860,769
Total Revenues	\$18,196,154.15

Source: Louisiana Department of Treasury

The funds raised through local efforts are reinvested directly back into the communities from which they were generated, expanding affordable access to quality ECE for families in need. **For Fiscal Year 2024-2025, the state matched more than \$30 million in local contributions, a testament to the local commitment to improving access to early education.**

However, local efforts to raise funds have expanded so successfully that the revenue generated by the ECE Fund is insufficient to cover the state’s portion of the match in future years. A large one-time investment into the fund of \$40 million in 2023 by the legislature has kept the Fund afloat.

Without additional legislative allocations, the state will be unable to meet its full match requirement, potentially as early as the next fiscal year. **If the legislature does not allocate the necessary funds, thousands of children who rely on these programs will lose their early education seat.** This would put parents in the difficult position of potentially having to quit their jobs to care for their children, undermining both workforce stability and economic progress.

An example of this challenge is the West Ascension Early Learning Center in Donaldsonville, Ascension Parish. With support from CF Industries and in partnership with Nicholls State University, the center now serves more than 50 children, 80% of whom are residents of Donaldsonville and one-fourth of whom have parents employed in the town. Despite this progress, the center’s waitlist for infant and toddler care exceeds 100 families, underscoring the ongoing demand for early education seats for children under age 3.



The Cost of Early Childhood Education

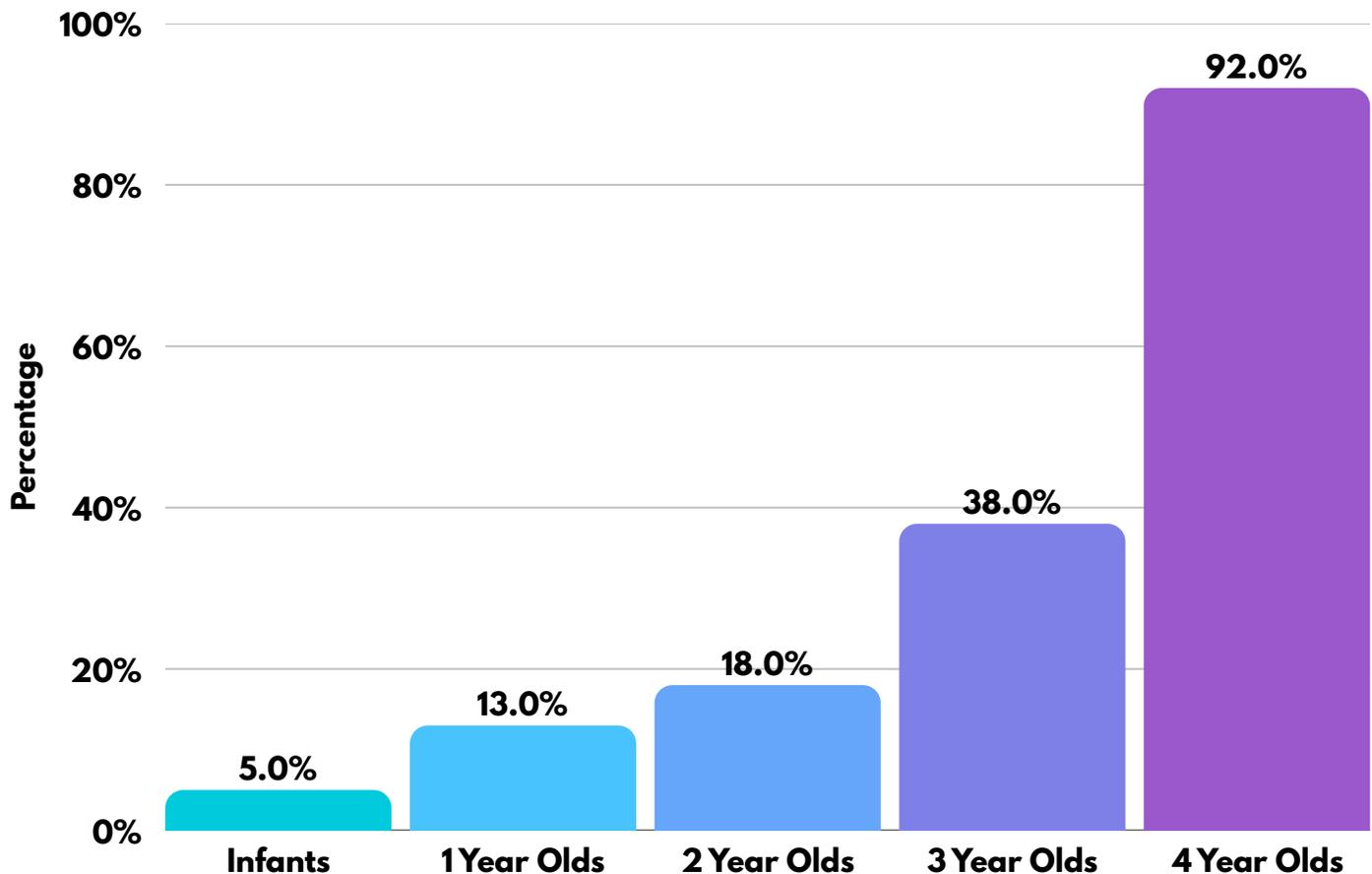
Access to affordable child care is a critical issue for many working families in Louisiana. **Despite a combined state and federal contribution of nearly \$600 million to various ECE programs, only 18% of in-need children under age 3 are currently being served.**¹¹ This gap highlights a significant disparity in access to child care for Louisiana families who need it the most.

The ultimate goal of a successful ECE system is to provide parents with the ability to choose the child care arrangement that best suits their family's needs. However, the reality for many Louisiana families is far different. As of June 2025, at least 3,129 working parents and 4,465 children are eligible for CCAP but cannot access it due to a years-long waitlist.¹²

The statewide waitlist exacerbates the reality that for many Louisiana families, child care costs are a significant financial challenge, often competing with other essential household expenses like utilities, food, and clothing. In fact, **for families with children under age 5, child care can exceed \$15,000 a year per child, making it one of the most expensive items in their budget.** Unlike saving for a child's college education, which many families plan for over 18 years, there is little to no financial preparation for the steep costs of ECE programs.¹³ When families are unable to access public assistance, they must bear the full cost of child care themselves, which for many is financially unfeasible. In LPIC's 2024 survey of parents, nearly 60% of parents reported struggling to pay for basic household expenses, highlighting how difficult it can be to balance the high cost of child care with other necessary spending.¹⁴

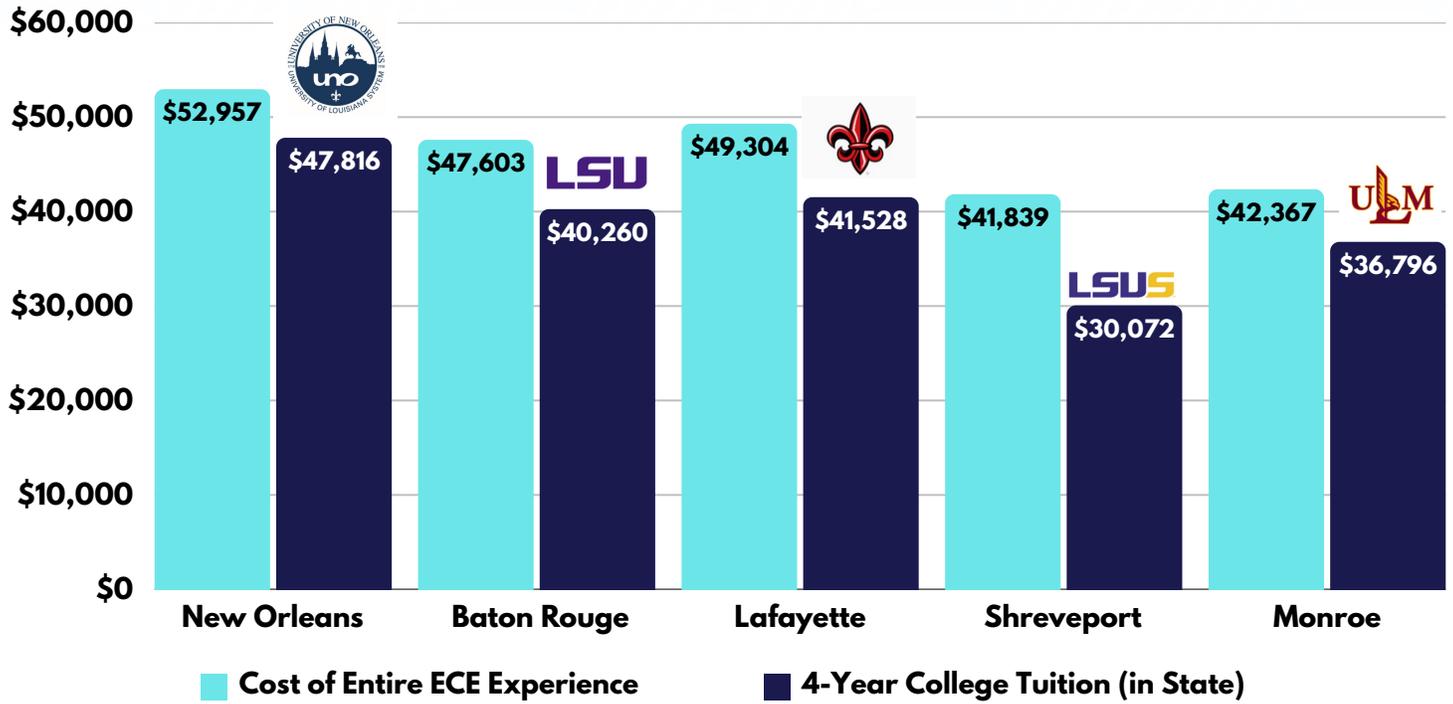
Percentage of In-Need Children Served by Age in Louisiana

Louisiana only serves approximately 18% of in-need children aged 0-3, leaving 100,000 unserved.



Source: Louisiana Department of Education

Cost of Child Care Compared to In-State College Tuition



Source: 2023 Louisiana Child Care Market Rate Survey, LDOE

Working families that make above the federal poverty level, but still struggle to afford household expenses are known as ALICE, or Asset Limited Income Constrained, Employed. Nearly a third of Louisiana families qualify as an ALICE household.¹⁵ United For Alice, a research coalition of United Ways for the ALICE population across the nation, estimates that Louisiana families with two adults and two children must make \$54,096 to afford basic expenses like food and shelter (nearly double the federal poverty level for this household type at \$31,200), and that is before any child care costs or setting aside any savings.¹⁶ For that same family of four to move from a survival household budget – making just enough to get by and survive – to one of stability that allows for putting away savings or buying a home, the annual household income would need to be almost \$85,000, before any child care costs.¹⁷

Comparing Household Budgets with Child Care Costs

Family of 4 - 2 working parents, 1 infant, and 1 preschooler

	65% State Median Income	85% State Median Income	90% State Median Income
Annual Income	\$56,508	\$73,896	\$78,242
Survival Budget	-\$54,096	-\$54,096	-\$54,096
Child Care Costs	\$0 (No CCAP Co-Pay)	-\$4,434 (CCAP Co-pay)	-\$27,649 (Out of Pocket)
Household Net	\$2,412	\$15,366	-\$3,503

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA: FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT



To further illustrate the issue, the income eligibility cap for CCAP is set at 85% of the state's median income. Families with income at or below 65% of the state median income receive full child care assistance. Families earning between 66% and 85% of the state median income contribute a portion of the cost on a sliding scale. For a family of four in Louisiana, 85% of the state median income is approximately \$74,000. However, families who earn just \$1 more than 85% of the state median income are no longer eligible for any child care assistance, requiring them to cover the full cost of child care entirely out of pocket. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that earning slightly above the eligibility threshold does not necessarily mean families can afford the high cost of child care. In fact, for many, it actually puts their budget at a deficit, as seen in the previous table.

An annual statewide parent poll provides further insight into the challenges faced by families across Louisiana. One of the most significant issues identified is the "assistance cliff" – where families just above the eligibility threshold are left without support, creating a disincentive for parents to pursue higher education, take on better-paying jobs, or accept promotions.¹⁸ This disincentive has a ripple effect, impacting both family financial stability and the broader economy.

Addressing these barriers to child care access is crucial for fostering a more sustainable ECE system in Louisiana. Expanding access to affordable child care will not only support the well-being of children, but also empower working parents to achieve greater economic mobility, thereby strengthening the state's workforce and economy.

Why Early Childhood Education Matters

The lack of high-quality, affordable early childhood education has a compounding negative impact on both the short-term and long-term workforce in Louisiana. This makes ECE an essential investment for the state's economic growth and stability. **Early childhood education not only prepares children for success in school and life, but also fuels the broader economy by enabling parents to participate fully in the workforce and contributes to the development of a competitive, skilled labor force for the future.**

In the short term, when parents lack reliable and affordable child care options, they face challenges that can disrupt their ability to work. Parents may arrive late, leave early, miss work altogether, or even quit their jobs. A statewide parent survey found that parents missed five work days on average in the last three months due to child care issues.¹⁹ These child care disruptions come at a significant cost to the state economy – \$1.3 billion each year, according to the Blanco Public Policy Center at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.²⁰ Increasing access to affordable, high-quality child care would have an immediate positive impact on workforce participation, improve families' financial stability, and create a stronger, more resilient economy.



Three-fourths of working parents reported having to take at least one day off from work in the prior three months because of a child care disruption.



Two-thirds of Louisiana children under 5 years old have both their parents or their single parent in the workforce.

\$1.3 BILLION

Without reliable child care, parents miss work, leave or change jobs, come in late, or leave early. **These child care breakdowns cost our Louisiana economy \$1.3 billion annually.**

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA: FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT



Beyond its immediate economic effects, access to ECE is also a long-term workforce issue. The well-prepared children of today will become the competitive workforce of tomorrow. Research from the Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL) indicates that children who participate in the LA4 preschool program demonstrate significantly higher rates of kindergarten readiness, are 45% less likely to need special education services, and consistently outperform their peers on 4th- and 8th-grade assessments.²¹ These academic successes provide a foundation for children to transition successfully into adulthood, prepared with the skills needed to thrive in their careers.

When kids go to quality child care...



-  They are more likely to graduate high school
-  They are more likely to have a full-time job as an adult
-  They have lower rates of drug use
-  They have better quality of life
-  Their income as an adult is higher
-  They are less likely to participate in criminal activity
-  They have better health outcomes

The benefit of this investment applies to two generations, the children and their parents, creating both short- and long-term economic benefits:

-  Their parents will have higher educational attainment
-  Their parents will have higher income
-  Their parents will have more economic mobility

Note: These outcomes were measured annually until age 8, and again at ages 12, 15, 21, 30, and 35.
Source: The Heckman Equation, full report available online at <https://heckmanequation.org>

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA: FOUNDATIONS, FUNDING, AND FUTURE IMPACT

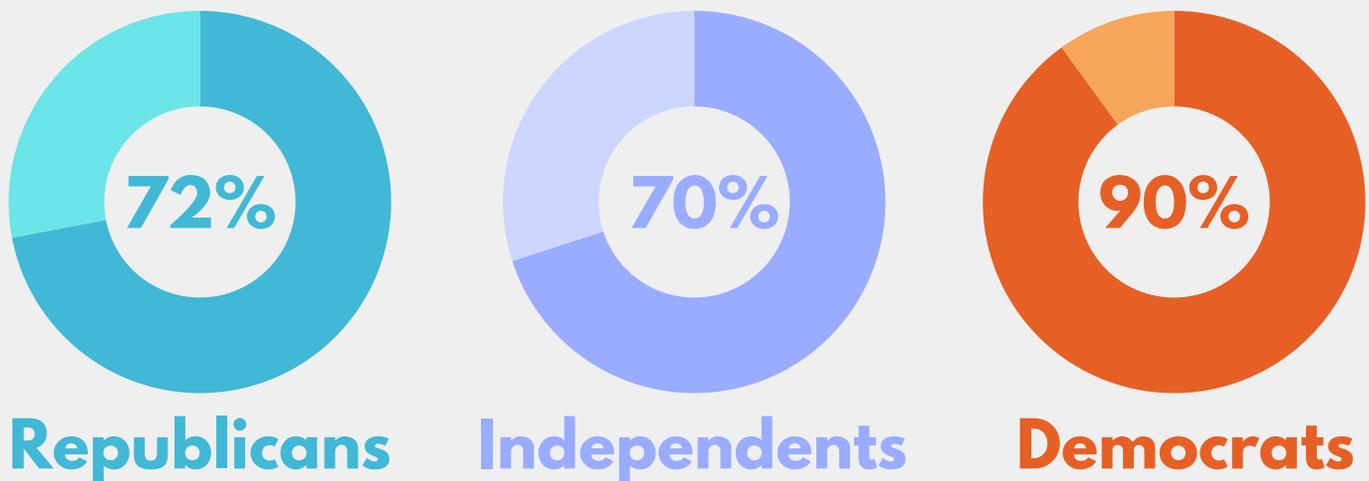


Additionally, **longitudinal studies show that children who experience high-quality early education are more likely to secure higher-paying, full-time jobs, enjoy better health outcomes, and are less likely to engage in criminal activity or rely on public assistance in adulthood.**²² These outcomes contribute to a competitive labor market, boosting workforce productivity and attracting new businesses to the state.

Investing in ECE also leads to substantial cost savings to the state and society, both in the short- and long-term. **Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman has found that the return on investment (ROI) for ECE is 13%, making it one of the most cost-effective public investments.**²³ By investing in quality early education, the state reduces future spending on remedial academic, social, and health services. Moreover, the positive social, academic, and health outcomes experienced by children who participate in high-quality early learning programs contribute to a thriving economy that attracts new businesses and talent, enhancing Louisiana's competitive economic position.

Recent polling data demonstrates strong and widespread public support for increased investment in ECE, both nationally and in Louisiana. Across the United States, voters from diverse political backgrounds agree that expanding federal funding for child care is an important priority and a responsible use of taxpayer dollars.²⁴

Support for Increasing Federal Investment in Child Care by Political Party



Source: *New Polling On Child Care & The 2024 Election, First Five Years Fund*

In Louisiana, support for early childhood education is equally strong. Voters from all political sides are broadly agreed that expanding access to affordable, high-quality child care should be a top priority for the state. **Nearly 80% of likely voters in Louisiana support making child care a priority in the coming year, recognizing its importance for working families.**²⁵ This consensus extends across all regions and political affiliations, underscoring the widespread acknowledgment of the benefits of investing in early learning for the state's youngest residents.

This overwhelming public support presents a clear opportunity for Louisiana to advance policies that prioritize early childhood education.

Investing in ECE is not only essential for the success and well-being of Louisiana's children, but also serves as a catalyst for economic growth for everyone. By ensuring that all families have access to high-quality, affordable child care, Louisiana can strengthen its workforce, reduce future costs, and build a more prosperous and sustainable economy for all.

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