

# THURSDAY'S TAKE 5!

On Jan. 13, just two days after the inauguration of Louisiana's 56th governor, Politico Magazine released "The States of Our Union...Are Not All Strong," an admittedly unscientific study of the strength of the 50 states and Washington, D.C. The study was based on 14 state rankings compiled by agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. All of the data points either directly deal with education—number of high school graduates, average math score, and average reading score—or had a close correlation: health, income, crime, unemployment and death rates.

How did Louisiana fare in the study? The first line in the report reads, "Congratulations to the 'first in the nation' New Hampshire, and condolences to Louisiana." In short, Louisiana came in 51st, dead last, a drop from last year when we had Mississippi to thank for its 2015 last place showing. (See the report here: <http://politi.co/1OZwTZP>.) Interestingly, the magazine juxtaposed the current rankings with a study published by H.L. Mencken in 1931 called "The Worst American State." In 1931, Louisiana came in 42nd in the nation.

For those of us who are proud to call Louisiana home, we know that data points do not capture our state's beauty and culture, nor the kind, generous, family-oriented people who live and work in our communities. The joie de vivre is unparalleled, and the natural resources we enjoy are unmatched by most other states. However, we ignore these kinds of reports at our own peril, as they provide a clear lens to peer through when our state leaders are debating laws and policies that potentially impact not only comparative rankings, but every Louisiana resident. Though we are all Louisiana proud, we must acknowledge that it is not easy to be poor and poorly educated in our state.

Of course, education is the key to lifting our state out of generational poverty and its affiliated conditions, such as crime, bad health and early death. Offering every child in Louisiana the ability to receive a quality education will bring additional high-paying with benefits jobs to the state, and transformational opportunities to every resident. In recent years, efforts to reform Louisiana's educational delivery system have yielded real progress, the type of growth that impact's people's futures. Raising the graduation rate; college attendance numbers; focusing on skills training and technology in school; and raising expectations for everyone in the education system have brought Louisiana and its innovative approach to student-focused education to both national and global attention.

Last year's Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) elections resulted in seven of eight elected BESE seats going to pro-reform supporters. Overall, residents voted to maintain the forward momentum, and demonstrated that they believe in high expectations, meaningful assessment, accountability and a belief that it would be detrimental to go backward.

One of LABI's top three priorities for this year is: Maintain the momentum gained in education reform initiatives, especially regarding school choice; taxpayer accountability and fairness; high educational standards; and meaningful assessments. Strongly defend against attacks on any reforms that have been won. (For the complete LABI 2016 Education and Workforce Development Program of Work, go to <http://bit.ly/1OwPtFm>.)

Additionally, following are five recommendations that LABI believes should be part of the new administration, legislative, and BESE agendas over the next four years. The importance of providing quality education to every Louisiana citizen cannot be overstated.

## Maintain Momentum on Louisiana's Education Reform Movement

Louisiana's education reform journey began decades ago with notable initiatives such as vouchers and teacher evaluation/professional development in the 1980s; a charter school law and the creation of an accountability system in the 1990s; passage of the Recovery School District legislation and the state takeover of schools following Hurricane Katrina in the early 2000s; and major expansions of school choice, school board reform, and skills training/JumpStart in schools in the years thereafter. These initiatives have yielded meaningful progress for students as measured on a number of indicators (state tests, graduation rates, improvement in ACT scores, etc.), and options for parents and students have never been greater.

Any attempt to diminish scholarship or charter laws will result in less choice for parents, who will once again be forced to educate their children based on the one choice they have – the school as assigned to them based on where they live. Accountability and school letter grades must be strong and maintained, or the transparency that citizens deserve and politicians promise will not exist. Students deserve excellent teachers, and good teachers deserve support. Learning standards must be rigorous, and assessments must be aligned to those standards.

If there are ways to make improvements to current law or policy, the proposals should be considered and debated. But, in the education arena, political decisions are more than simple politics—they impact lives, so proposed changes need to be viewed through a "what's in the best interest of students" vs. "what's in the best interest of adults or politicians" viewpoint.

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## Review the State Funding Formula and Continue to Move Toward a "Dollar Follows The Child" Philosophy

The state's education funding formula, called the Minimum Foundation Program or MFP, was designed to provide for a basic level of education for students in the state with an assurance of equity. It is a complicated formula that takes into account a number of factors such as capacity or wealth of the district. But, for most school districts the state is paying for about 60 percent to 70 percent of funding, while local and federal dollars make up the remainder. Clearly, state interest in student performance includes the financial investment of paying for the majority of the educational services.

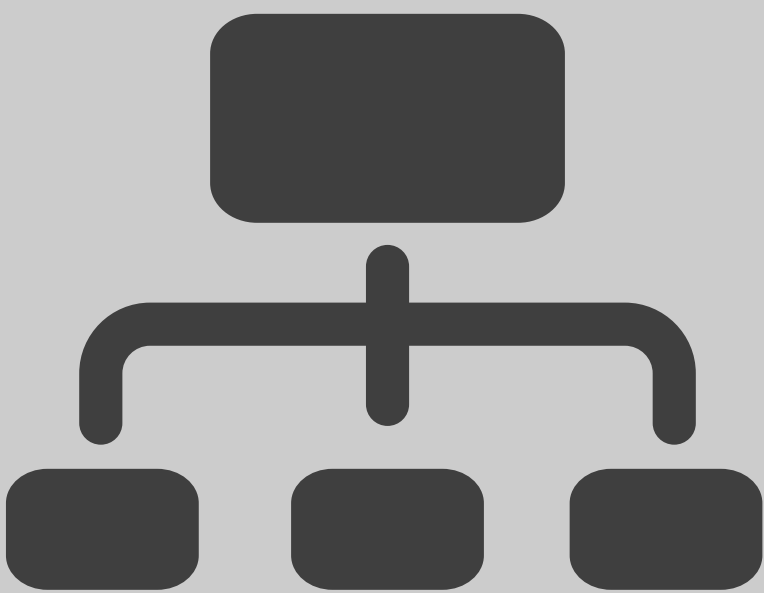
State leaders should review education funding to determine the actual cost of providing a quality educational experience based on individual student needs. Last year, the Legislature took a step in this direction when it passed a bill that revised special education funding in charter schools, and paved the way for a more student-centric, dollar follows the child approach to education aid. This type of funding should be investigated for all students so that funding suits the child, as opposed to the child having to suit the funding. The current MFP is \$3.7 billion for approximately 700,000 students. Federal funding adds an additional \$900 million each year, and local tax dollars equal about \$3 billion. It may (or may not) be determined that current funding levels are sufficient. However, how those dollars are being spent could be a different story.

## Put Even Greater Emphasis on Technical, Stem and Skills Training and Include Business as an Authentic Partner in Education

Business pays about 80 percent of the property taxes that fund education. But, more than just being a key and interested investor in education, business is dependent upon the students that come out of Louisiana's education systems to be a dynamic workforce that draws and retains economic investment in the state. When educational opportunities and business needs align, every resident in the state benefits, and the landscape of Louisiana can be transformed.

Most of the jobs in the coming decades are highly skilled and technologically oriented, but do not require four-year college degrees. BESE's stated goal is to have every student college or career ready by 2025, with career having numerous possibilities. Even in the current economic slump created by falling oil prices, Louisiana remains in the midst of sector specific booms, with many jobs going unfilled due to lack of availability of a ready, trained workforce. The problem will be exacerbated further with the anticipated retirement of thousands of experienced workers over the next 10 years. Better alignment and open lines of communication amongst business leaders, education officials, and state and local agencies could alleviate some of the issues with unemployment and underemployment. Businesses located in Louisiana want to hire Louisiana residents, but will be forced to look elsewhere when our state cannot provide the education or training, on a sufficient timetable, to get our citizens the skills they need to compete for good jobs.

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## Focus on Developing Educational Leaders

The impending retirement of hundreds of Louisiana principals will create a major shortage in leadership ranks. Local school boards are often challenged with hiring district superintendents. The number of educational leaders are few, and many veteran educators commonly decline the opportunity to move into leadership roles. Some do not wish to leave the classroom, yet others either do not know how to transition into different roles but would be willing to if provided with assistance. These positions are critical to moving Louisiana forward.

All laws and policies adopted at the state level ultimately must be locally implemented. District leaders must be plugged in, and strong leadership is required to implement reforms with fidelity, and providing crucial feedback to law and policymakers as to how laws and policies are working when they hit the "real world."

Last month, BESE voted to support a new concept, a superintendent's academy, which would identify potential leaders and provide the training and support they need to move into top leadership roles. These types of initiatives can strengthen both the education profession and classroom outcomes.

## Repeat Number One—Maintain Our Momentum!

Give the strong reforms that have been passed time to be fully implemented and show additional results. Support our students, parents and teachers by giving them a consistency. Attempts to turn back the clock will only result in more years of unpredictability and unease. Respect how far we've come, and how far we have to go.

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