

**News Release**

**Contact:** Melanie Bronfin, J.D.

 Executive Director

 Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

 504-417-3735

 mmbronfin@policyinstitutela.org

 www.policyinstitutela.org

**Improvements Needed to Strengthen Louisiana’s Early Childhood Accountability System**

**New Orleans—April 29, 2016**—[A new report](http://media.wix.com/ugd/20d35d_82f10cbc52c54583bd9d0ea07e6a81ba.pdf) by the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children offers a comprehensive roadmap for improving Louisiana’s system for observing and rating Pre-K classrooms and child care centers for some 62,000 children statewide age 4 and under attending publicly-funded early childhood care and education programs.

Under the [Louisiana Early Childhood Act (Act 3) of 2012](http://bese.louisiana.gov/current-initiatives/act-3-early-childhood-education), the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the state’s Department of Education are required to administer a uniform assessment and accountability system that mandates classroom assessments of young children attending programs receiving public funds. The ratings are based on an evidence-based and widely used assessment tool that measures emotional, behavioral, and instructional interactions among teachers and children. The 2015-2016 school year has been designated a “Learning Year” as the assessments conducted by trained observers two times during the school year at 98 percent of the state’s publicly-funded toddler and Pre-Kindergarten classrooms would not result in consequences for programs that demonstrate low quality. Overall, more than 95 percent of these classrooms rated as proficient, with the remaining classrooms rated either excellent or unsatisfactory.

The report applauded the release of the [overall findings](http://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/early-childhood/2016-early-childhood-roundtable-presentation.pdf?sfvrsn=2) by the Department of Education and the Department ’s [recommendations for changes to the accountability system,](http://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/early-childhood/2016-early-childhood-roundtable-presentation.pdf?sfvrsn=2) including a plan to add a fourth level—approaching proficiency—to better distinguish levels of quality between the vast majority of classrooms now ranked as proficient.

“After this Learning Year, it is time to apply the lessons learned that will strengthen Louisiana’s early childhood care and education programs,” said Melanie Bronfin, executive director of the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children. “While we agree with many of the changes proposed by the Department of Education, we need to refine the measurements for evaluating quality and strategically target the state’s investments and supports to those programs most likely to benefit, thus helping more young children in Louisiana enter kindergarten ready to succeed.”

As with any assessment system, ensuring reliable data is important to validate the results. The Department of Education’s findings showed a significant discrepancy from the classrooms that were locally rated versus those conducted by a third party observer.

“If provider funding is going to be dependent on this assessment system, we have to ensure the data is as accurate and reliable as possible,” said Bronfin. “We’re confident that if the proposed changes by the Department of Education as well as these other recommended improvements to the assessment and accountability system are adopted, we can continue the progress we are making in improving Louisiana’s early childhood education programs.”

The report offers five key recommendations to advancing Louisiana’s early childhood assessment and accountability system in the years ahead:

* **Expand and enhance the rating levels**—The current rating system which allows for only three levels is too narrow to provide meaningful data. Already, the Louisiana Department of Education has proposed adding a fourth rating level. Further steps should be taken to revise the way the rating levels are computed to ensure the ratings used can meaningfully differentiate between levels of program quality, inform professional development, and incentivize quality improvement. In addition, as proposed by the Department of Education, programs that continually earn unsatisfactory ratings should be defunded after they are given a fair chance to improve.
* **Revise the system for classroom observations—**In order to ensure that accountability scores are accurate, reliable, and efficiently obtained, the Department of Education should continue to refine and improve the system to be highly attentive to inter-rater reliability and highly systematic in the ways that it (1) trains, (2) calibrates, and (3) deploys observers to score classrooms. This includes defining reliable observers as those whose scores are within one point of third party scores at least 80 percent of the time, instead of the 50 percent requirement the Department is proposing.
* **Offer supports and incentives**—Strengthen and refine the system of targeted supports and incentives that are aligned to the state’s early childhood accountability system to drive quality improvement. This includes offering coaching and professional development to program administrators and teachers who would most benefit from this support.
* **Conduct and implementation evaluation**—Conduct an implementation evaluation study of Louisiana’s early childhood program to determine how well it is working and to identify improvements to increase overall quality of care and education for the state’s youngest children.
* **Explore other program quality indicators**—While Louisiana is using widely adopted quality assessment tools, many new indicators are being trial and tested across the U.S. in various Pre-K and early learning settings. The state should closely monitor the research findings and look to enhance its program quality assessments as evidence merits wide-scale adoption.

At their June meeting, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will consider the Department of Education’s proposed changes for the 2016-2017 school year. The report by the Louisiana Policy Institute for Children will be submitted to them, as well as to the members of their Early Care and Education Advisory Council, for review and consideration.

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**The Louisiana Policy Institute for Children** is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that Louisiana's young children are ready for success in school and in life. We are an independent source of data, research and pertinent information for policy makers, stakeholders and the public at large around issues related to young children in Louisiana. The Institute also develops policy proposals informed by research, best practices and the experiences of other states and conducts educational and outreach activities around these recommended policy solutions.