

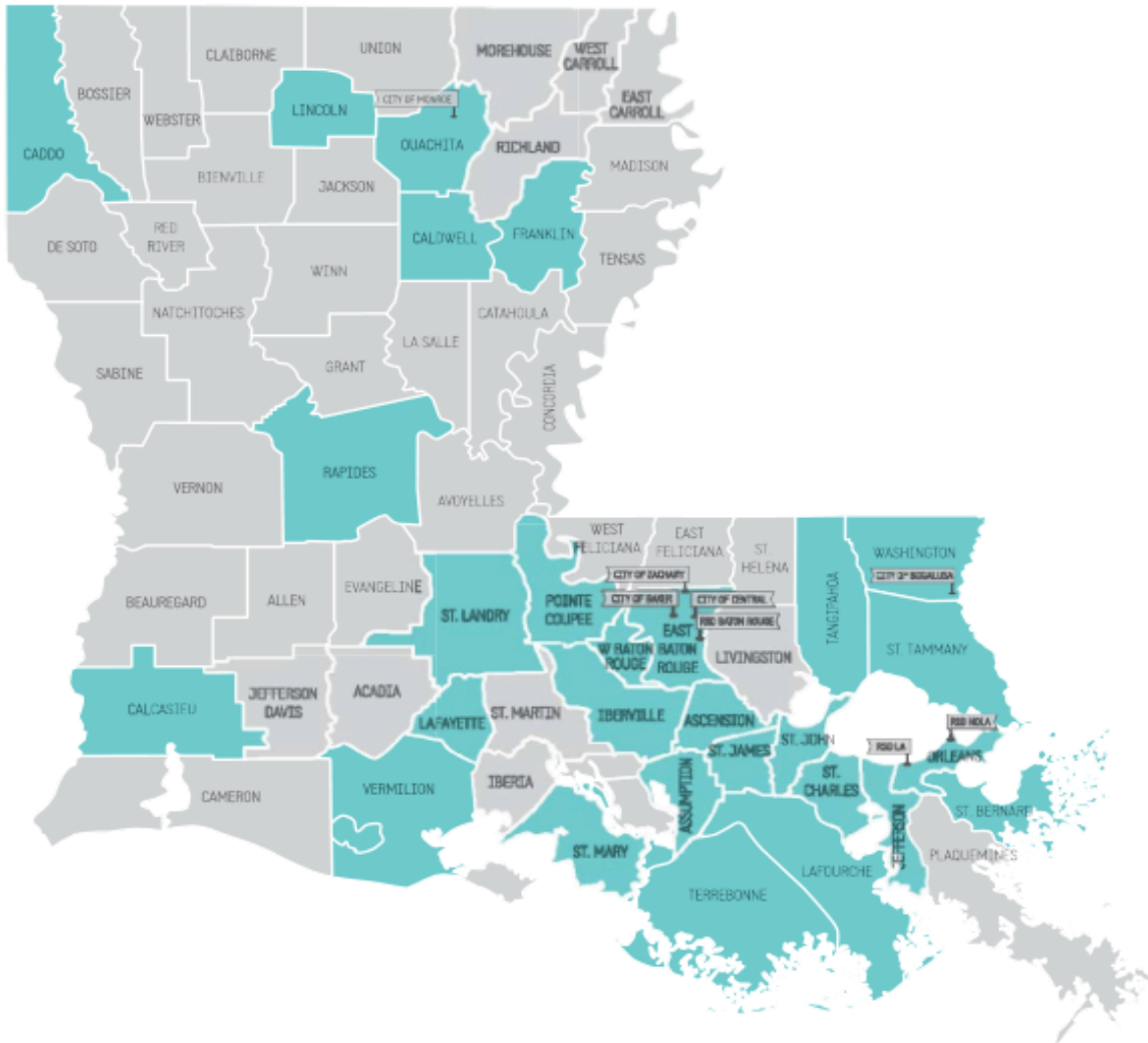
Vouchers Come to Louisiana

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The Louisiana voucher program began in 2008 as a pilot in New Orleans. Originally named the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, it was expanded statewide in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 12,000 students applied in the second year of the statewide program. Of those students, 6,700 enrolled in a participating school in the 2013-2014 school year.<sup>2</sup> Many of these schools are private institutions, with 126 schools across the state participating in total. According to the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE), the core mission of the program is to provide high-quality education through holding schools accountable for student performance and empowering parents and teachers of low-income students.<sup>3</sup> For the 2014-2015 school year, nearly 9,000 students were awarded a voucher scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Louisiana's approach is focused on eligibility only for relatively low-income students instead of a flat voucher for everyone, as Milton Friedman long ago proposed and as Nevada recently put in place. Children may come from homes where income is up to 250 percent of federal poverty guidelines. The Louisiana voucher allows all qualifying private schools and all public schools that have a rating of "A" or "B" to accept voucher students.<sup>5</sup> The opportunity to use the voucher is nevertheless restricted by the number of private schools available. Based on Louisiana's religious history, there are significantly fewer private schools in the northern than southern part of the state. Private schooling, particularly Catholic private schooling, has dominated many of the southern parishes, such as Orleans, Jefferson, East Baton Rouge and Lafayette Parishes.<sup>6</sup> Of the 126 schools participating in the voucher program, only 14 schools are located in northern Louisiana.<sup>7</sup>



### Parishes with Scholarship Schools

\* Louisiana Department of Education. (2014). *Louisiana scholarship program annual report: 2013-2014*.

According to the LDOE, a voucher used to attend another public school is valued at that district’s Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) amount. The average state MFP allotment in 2014-2015 was \$8,537.<sup>8</sup> Since the voucher amount matches the MFP of the home district, the voucher is automatically differentiated according to schooling level and region. This formula also ensures that the scholarship does not exceed that of the costs to attend a public school.<sup>9</sup> To

participate, private schools cannot charge a scholarship student more than they do a non-scholarship student. The voucher for private schools is equivalent to the cost of tuition and fees unless it exceeds the MFP of the district in which it is located. Participating private schools are not allowed to charge parents for anything more than uniforms, after-school care, and related services.<sup>10</sup> Such additional fees may nevertheless limit participation for students from indigent homes.

Schools offering certain special education services may receive additional funding for these supplementary services.<sup>11</sup> This supplementary funding does not cover any additional costs associated with English Language Learners, however. Louisiana also offers another voucher program specifically for students with disabilities, School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities.<sup>12</sup>

To monitor funding, the Louisiana State Legislature in 2014 signed into law Act 467, requiring that participating schools account for scholarship funds separately for auditing purposes. In August 2014, the LDOE released the results of the first nonpublic schools audit. The audits showed that of the 126 schools participating in the Scholarship Program for the 2013-2014 school year, 24, or 19 percent, violated funding provisions, though only one school did so to a significant degree.<sup>13</sup> The LDOE has since recouped funding from the schools where violations were discovered.

Regulations determining which nonpublic schools may participate in the voucher program are relatively low. Nonpublic schools must submit a Notice of Intent (NOI) to the LDOE and have the capacity to acquire new students. Once the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) approves the NOI, schools may reach out to the community and

collect student applications. Nonpublic school participation is based mainly on site visits, audits, and health and safety compliance.<sup>14</sup> Pursuant to R.S. 17:11 of the Louisiana State Legislature, all private schools regardless of voucher students must meet requirements of a sustained curriculum equal to that of public schools. Just as public schools differ in outputs, nonpublic schools can differ, as well, yet there are no performance regulations around nonpublic schools prior to participation in the voucher program. There are also no regulations around certification of personnel, which may explain some of the underperformance on state exams by students using vouchers.

All Louisiana public schools are required to use the state-approved curriculum, the Common Core State Standards. Nonpublic schools are not required to use these standards, but voucher students in those schools must take state assessments that are aligned with the state standards. Concerns about voucher student performance on state assessments have plagued nonpublic schools.<sup>15</sup> According to an LDOE spokesperson, there has recently been a push to provide state assessment resources to nonpublic schools in the hopes that they can fully prepare voucher students for state testing. In response to this effort, the LDOE is witnessing many nonpublic schools adopting the Common Core State Standards.<sup>16</sup> From the beginning, there have been serious concerns over voucher student performance on state assessments. A 2013 report in the *Times-Picayune* showed voucher students performing nearly 30 points below the state average.<sup>17</sup> Voucher student test results for 2014 showed improvement, but performance still fell below the state average. As noted, some of this underperformance may be explained by insufficient credentialing of teachers in private schools; some of it may be explained by the academic needs of students employing vouchers.

In order for a participating school to continue in the voucher program, the LDOE looks at student achievement on state assessments. A Scholarship Cohort Index (SCI) is created when “... schools with 40 or more scholarship students are enrolled in tested grades (3-8 or high school) or a school has an average of 10 or more participating students per grade.”<sup>18</sup> This creates a built-in incentive for schools with low performance ratings to keep their voucher enrollment low because schools with fewer than 10 students will not receive a performance score.<sup>19</sup> The SCI only takes students participating in the scholarship program into account. This accountability measure began with the 2012-2013 school year. The LDOE's Web site explains, “If a school receives a SCI below 50 in the second year of participation or in any year thereafter, the school shall not enroll additional scholarship recipients for the next school year.”<sup>20</sup>

Curricula, on the other hand, are minimally regulated for nonpublic schools since the LDOE does not mandate what is taught in those schools. However, schools cannot venture too far from what is tested. Otherwise, schools risk lower scores and thus their eligibility for participation in the voucher program. Another distinguishing factor about participating private schools is that they set their own policies around student behavior and parent participation. Before voucher students enroll, participating schools must inform families of the academic and disciplinary policies and procedures of the school.<sup>21</sup> These are the same policies and procedures that non-voucher students and families must follow. Parents and students must adhere to the accepting school's policies in order to attend. The LDOE sets very loose regulations around nonpublic school policy standards. Nonpublic schools accepting voucher students do not have to adhere to specific personnel requirements.

Regarding staffing, salaries/benefits, certification, and class size, private schools employ their own policies in conformity with parameters set forth in Bulletin 741 of the Louisiana Administrative Code for nonpublic schools.<sup>22</sup> Also, there are no state regulations in regard to the religious or political practices of the schools. Participating schools must, however, adhere to current Bulletin 741 nonpublic standards around facilities and health codes.<sup>23</sup>

Information about participating schools is posted by the LDOE in January. The LDOE issues a press release announcing the opening of the student application process. Families may apply through the LDOE's Web site or at a participating voucher school. The Web site does not, however, list voucher information in any other language except English, which limits the access of families whose first language is not English. There is also a call center that the LDOE operates to respond to parent inquiries. Several school choice advocacy groups, such as the Louisiana Federation for Children and the Louisiana Black Alliance for Educational Options, assist with dissemination. Other efforts include direct mail campaigns and phone banks as well as radio, Internet, and billboard advertising. Accurate information about schools is nevertheless hard to find because many mission statements and school descriptions use common expressive language in their marketing efforts.<sup>24</sup> While a School Choice Expo is held each spring in New Orleans, not all parents have the time to attend.

In addition to barriers to information, there can be barriers to attendance. Currently, there is no formal transportation system for voucher students in Louisiana. Although this support service is costly, the absence of transportation can severely limit the number of students who can use vouchers. Some families may be able to use their city's public transportation system, but the

local school district does not provide a way for students to arrive and leave the school. Another barrier may be the previously cited fees for uniforms, after-school programs, and related services.

To make sure voucher students make progress on state assessments, the LDOE holds participating schools accountable through Scholarship Cohort Index (SCI) scores.<sup>25</sup> The SCI score for each participating school is based on the state assessment performance of voucher students. SCI scores can only be calculated for schools that enroll 40 or more students in tested grades or at least 10 students per grade. If a participating school's SCI falls below 50 for two consecutive years, the school cannot accept new voucher students.

Because the program is relatively new, studies comparing voucher student and non-voucher student performance have not been conducted. There have been comparisons between the test scores of voucher and non-voucher enrollees. In 2013, 40 percent of voucher students scored at or above grade level while the state average was 69 percent.<sup>26</sup> The LDOE found that schools who were in the program for multiple years saw greater student achievement on state standardized tests than first-time voucher schools.<sup>27</sup>

Table 1 shows third-grade performance growth in Scholarship schools that have been participating in the voucher program for multiple years. Since half of the students enrolled in the Scholarship program were in grades K-2,<sup>28</sup> Table 1 illustrates how academic achievement tends to improve overtime. For example, third-grade students who entered the Scholarship program in 2008-2009 had a 33 percent performance growth in ELA on the state standardized test (iLEAP). When the 2008-2009 first-grade scholarship students became the 2010-2011 third-grade scholarship students, they achieved a 46 percent performance growth in ELA on the state



standardized test (iLEAP). The 2012-2013 third-graders outperformed the 2008-2009 third-graders in ELA by 20 percentage points.

**Table 1: Performance Growth of Students at Schools Participating in the Scholarship Program for Two or More Years\***

**Third Grade**

| <b>School Year</b> | <b>ELA</b> | <b>Math</b> | <b>Science</b> | <b>Social Studies</b> |
|--------------------|------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| <b>2008-2009</b>   | 33%        | 24%         | 24%            | 33%                   |
| <b>2009-2010</b>   | 37%        | 29%         | 21%            | 29%                   |
| <b>2010-2011</b>   | 46%        | 47%         | 26%            | 38%                   |
| <b>2011-2012</b>   | 53%        | 59%         | 47%            | 50%                   |
| <b>2012-2013</b>   | 53%        | 52%         | 41%            | 46%                   |
| <b>Change</b>      | +20        | +28         | +17            | +13                   |

\*Louisiana Department of Education. (2013). *Louisiana scholarship program annual report: 2012-2013*.

The percentage of students meeting “basic” is the current proficiency standard used in Louisiana. In fact, a school that achieves a letter grade of “A” on the state’s annual report card is one where the average student scores “basic” on the state assessment.<sup>29</sup> This, however, is a low proficiency standard compared to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), students achieving “basic” exhibit only partial mastery.<sup>30</sup> In this, Louisiana is not alone. A 2009 NCES study revealed that 34 other state proficiency standards fell below NAEP’s “basic” achievement level in this category.<sup>31</sup> An assessment of 2013 NAEP scores, for example, revealed tremendous disparity between state and NAEP standards for proficiency: Louisiana rated 76 percent of its fourth-graders as proficient in reading while NAEP found 23 percent of the state’s fourth-graders proficient; and Louisiana rated 66 percent of its eighth-graders as proficient in reading

while NAEP found 24 percent of the state’s eighth-graders proficient.<sup>32</sup> As Louisiana makes the transition to the Common Core State Standards and the PARCC assessment, the state is committed to raising its proficiency standard from “basic” to “mastery,” but not until 2025.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond choice and efficiency, a central goal of any voucher system is equity. “This goal,” in the words of Belfield and Levin (2005), “refers to the quest for fairness in access to educational opportunities, resources, and outcomes by gender, social class, race, language origin, handicapping condition, and geographic location of students.”<sup>34</sup> Louisiana's voucher is designed to assist relatively low-income students in failing schools. Giving choice to this typically under-served population should increase the fairness of educational opportunity in the state. This, in theory, works to level the educational playing field for all students. Table 2 depicts the demographics of the voucher program compared to the state.

**Table 2: Demographics of the Louisiana Scholarship Program Compared to Demographics of the State**

|                                       | <b>African American</b> | <b>Asian</b> | <b>Hispanic/Latino</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Other</b> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Louisiana Scholarship Program*</b> | 83%                     | 2%           | 3%                     | 11%          | <1%          |
| <b>State**</b>                        | 32.4%                   | 1.7%         | 4.7%                   | 59.6%        | 1.6%         |

\* Louisiana Department of Education. (2014). *Louisiana scholarship program annual report: 2013-2014*.

\*\* U.S. Census Bureau. (2014, July 8). *State & county quickfacts: Louisiana*.

Although a major goal of the voucher program in Louisiana is equity, there has been cause for concern about segregation. Those against vouchers have argued that segregation in schools will increase with a voucher system.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a lawsuit in 2013 to stop students from using vouchers in districts still under desegregation orders.<sup>36</sup> A federal district court ruled in 2014 that Louisiana may continue its voucher program but must submit reports to the Department of Justice on enrollment demographics for private and public schools.<sup>37</sup> In 2015, voucher advocates appealed this ruling.<sup>38</sup>

Whether Louisiana's voucher program will substantially improve choice, efficiency, and equity remains to be seen. What is nevertheless clear is that the program has fierce advocates and opponents and that it will continue to be subjected to significant scrutiny.

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- <sup>1</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013
  - <sup>2</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013
  - <sup>3</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013
  - <sup>4</sup> "Audit," 2014
  - <sup>5</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013
  - <sup>6</sup> "Scholarship school list," 2013
  - <sup>7</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014
  - <sup>8</sup> "Projected 2013 MFP," 2013
  - <sup>9</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013
  - <sup>10</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014
  - <sup>11</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014
  - <sup>12</sup> "Scholarship programs," n.d.
  - <sup>13</sup> "Audit," 2014
  - <sup>14</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014
  - <sup>15</sup> Personal communication, May 5, 2014
  - <sup>16</sup> Personal communication, May 5, 2014
  - <sup>17</sup> Dreilinger, "Louisiana voucher students"
  - <sup>18</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014
  - <sup>19</sup> Dreilinger, "Half of Louisiana's", 2013
  - <sup>20</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014
  - <sup>21</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014

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- <sup>22</sup> LAC 28:LXXIX  
<sup>23</sup> LAC 28:LXXIX. Chapter 15  
<sup>24</sup> Levin, 1991, p. 144  
<sup>25</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2014  
<sup>26</sup> Dreilinger, "Louisiana voucher students", 2013  
<sup>27</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013  
<sup>28</sup> "Louisiana scholarship program," 2013  
<sup>29</sup> "Transition", 2013  
<sup>30</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, 2009  
<sup>31</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, 2009  
<sup>32</sup> Achieve, "Proficient vs. Prepared," May 14, 2015.  
<sup>33</sup> "Transition", 2013  
<sup>34</sup> Belfield & Levin, 2005, p. 551  
<sup>35</sup> Belfield & Levin, 2005, p. 551  
<sup>36</sup> Bidwell, 2013  
<sup>37</sup> McGill, 2014  
<sup>38</sup> Associated Press, 2015

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