

Education Priorities and Strategic Approach

Since 1938, the Urban League of Louisiana (ULLA) has actively worked to assist underserved communities in securing economic self-reliance, parity, and civil rights. Educational equity is central to achieving this mission and is our statewide education priority. We define educational equity as an ongoing process that removes historic barriers and creates a system of opportunity by which ALL students have the necessary resources to reach their full potential. Achieving education equity requires that we address the institutionalized systems, structures, and histories that have led to the disparate outcomes experienced by students – and it is a vital prerequisite for communities to thrive.



The Urban League operates a variety of programs through its **Center for Education and Youth Development** which have made significant impact on the communities we serve. But to ensure equity and excellence in public education, we believe systemic change is needed. As such, the Urban League has released *Advancing Educational Equity* reports for public schools in New Orleans and Baton Rouge to identify persistent disparities in academic outcomes and access between African American students, economically disadvantaged students, and their peers. While not a solution in and of themselves, these reports are a critical tool for stakeholders at all levels, from parents and students to education leaders, board members, and decision makers.

The second edition of the New Orleans report, the summary of which was released in July 2020, found that many gaps remain unchanged or have grown since the first edition in 2017, despite increases in overall school performance. Achievement gaps begin early and last throughout a student's academic career; for example, in 3rd grade, economically disadvantaged and African American students are less likely to read at grade level, building a weak foundation for success in school and beyond. Economically disadvantaged and African American students continue to be underrepresented in high-quality schools and in rigorous, college-level courses that would level the academic playing field. The data show that when it comes to the distribution of the best teachers in New Orleans public schools, economically disadvantaged and African American students do not get their fair share.

Similar trends were found for public schools in East Baton Rouge Parish. Our 2019 report, *Advancing Educational Equity in Public Schools in Baton Rouge* found achievement gaps begin in elementary school and persist through high school. Too many economically disadvantaged and African American students attend schools with a less-than-ideal climate for learning and engagement. In many cases, selective admissions policies restrict access to economically disadvantaged and African American students. Truancy and disciplinary issues plague their schools and disproportionately impact, high-poverty, high-minority populations. As a culmination of the disparities they face, economically disadvantaged students and African American students are more likely to drop out or often “pushed out” of high school. Those who do graduate are less likely to earn Basic or Advanced diploma credentials.

Education Equity and COVID-19: Action Is Needed Now

As is true in many sectors, inequities in education are more pronounced and visible today than ever before. Public schools in Louisiana and across the country are facing myriad challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which is exacerbating financial and resource disparities between districts, schools, and students. Districts are more acutely seeing the inequities faced by many families related to limited access to food, physical and mental health care, transportation, housing, and more – which while not academic outcomes, significantly impact a student's ability to engage in education.

School closures due to **COVID-19** have placed a spotlight on how disparities contribute to educational inequalities. Large gaps in students' learning opportunities have always existed and the recent school closures are likely to cause disproportionate learning loss for economically disadvantaged and African American students, compounding existing gaps and possibly leading to increased dropout rates, especially if not addressed quickly and diligently. Additionally, learning loss is not the only consideration – students are experiencing “instruction loss” which is incumbent on our education system to address. Whether a worldwide pandemic or a natural disaster, we must be better prepared to respond. In the absence of an equity infrastructure, schools and districts are not and will not be prepared to respond appropriately, efficiently, and equitably – meaning that students who are already at a disadvantage will experience even greater achievement gaps than those documented in our Advancing Education Equity reports.



COVID-19 illuminates the acute impact of the technological and digital divide. Not all students have the technology, skills, and support they need to learn outside of the school building. In Louisiana, nearly 150,000 children do not have access to high speed internet and 47,000 do not have a computer at home (2018 US Census American Community Survey). Additionally, while 87% of White school-age children have access to a desktop or laptop computer at home, only 65% of Black children and 68% of Hispanic children have these resources. And for families with multiple children out of school, even a single computer may not be enough for each child to have adequate access to educational materials¹. The economically disadvantaged, African American, and Hispanic populations are the most vulnerable. This, among other factors including the ability of teachers to provide high quality remote instruction in a virtual setting, and the preparedness of schools to adequately serve students with disabilities and English Language

Learners, make it imperative that we closely monitor education through an equity lens. **As we move forward, we must explore the effect of COVID-19 on educational equity and consider what the long-term impact may be if we do not intentionally and proactively address inequities today.**

Lasting change results when a moral imperative to transform the broken and fragmented systems is coupled with a deep sense of urgency for change. Current public awareness of pervasive inequities in access and outcomes in Louisiana, combined with the obstacles and challenges associated with the pandemic, should serve as the call to action we have needed for a long time. It is our responsibility to use this moment and not to rush to get back to what was because what was did not serve all students. It is our responsibility not to rush to get back to what was – because it did not serve all students. We believe the families of Louisiana need change and need it now. The Urban League of Louisiana's equity infrastructure identifies gaps and helps education leaders, stakeholders, and community prioritize their commitment to address those gaps. It is a priority for the Urban League to see equity infrastructure built into our education systems moving forward and we are positioned to lead in efforts to ensure that all students and families have the resources and support to succeed in school and in life.

This document highlights our priorities and outlines the strategic direction for our work in education in Louisiana.

¹ Separate and unequal: Students' access to technology in the time of coronavirus. Louisiana Budget Project. (May 19, 2020). <https://www.labudget.org/2020/05/separate-and-unequal-students-access-to-technology-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/>

Our Approach

Every child deserves a high-quality education. The Urban League of Louisiana is committed to creating a statewide equitable education system which is foundational to our pursuit of economic self-reliance, parity, and civil rights. As we work with communities throughout the state of Louisiana, we are **DRIVEN** to help communities understand how we can collectively ensure equity.



We are Data-Driven

Our work is based on data and research. We take a data-driven approach to identify inequities, explore their root causes, and understand the effect they have on our youth, families, and communities. Through data, we inform an honest evaluation of our public education system and its ability to provide equity, access, and excellence to all students and families.



We are Community-Driven

Our work is with communities and for communities. We are responsive to the needs, wants, and desires of the communities we serve. We use a variety of methods for engaging directly with and taking direction from the community and engaging community stakeholders in the process of change armed with data, tools and platforms to advocate for change.



We are Partner-Driven

Our work serves as a catalyst for collective impact. We serve as a convener, facilitator, collaborator, and coordinator. We understand that the complex challenges communities face require multi-faceted, holistic approaches and partnerships with allies and unexpected partners, including those in education, businesses, government, the faith-based community, service providers, and grass roots organizers.



We are Results-Driven

Our work is focused on tangible results through institutional change. Our work is based on a community-informed theory of change that includes key indicators of sustainable success. The metrics allow us to measure progress, evaluate what is working well or not so well, and provide input needed for continuous improvement.



Our Priority: Implementing the Equity Framework

The Equity Framework examines educational disparities related to access and outcomes through key indicators disaggregated by race and other demographics, exploring historical and cultural context, and asking why identified disparities exist. By applying the Equity Framework to districts across the state, communities can evaluate the degree to which inequities limit access and hinder academic outcomes for their students and then develop interventions that are laser focused on these inequities and their root causes. Only when inequities are understood, can communities begin to advocate for change.

The Equity Framework examines **seven key indicators** for assessing educational equity that fall into two categories: Equity in Access and Equity in Outcomes. Below is an explanation of each of the key indicators we look at to track educational equity.

Equity in Access

Key indicators under Equity in Access measure inequities that students face when accessing opportunities that prepare them for college, careers, and citizenship.

1. Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education

High-Quality early childhood education can have a lasting effect on a child's intellectual and academic abilities and influence future learning capacity. The experiences and interactions children have in the early years affects brain development and helps establish the foundation for future learning.² High-quality early childhood education programs help children develop social skills, foster positive self-esteem, nurture emotional growth, and promote school readiness, and provide children with essential experiences for brain development and cognitive abilities.



By the time they enter school, children who attend high-quality early childhood education programs outperform children on measures of learning and development and are less likely to be referred for special education services, less likely to become court-involved, and more likely to graduate from high school.³ High-quality early childhood education programs help mitigate the negative effects of poverty. The inequities in access to high-quality early childhood education programs perpetuate achievement gaps.

2. Access to Highly Effective Teachers

Teacher quality matters. The most influential school-related factor of student learning is the quality of the teacher. More than socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, class size, and school funding, the effectiveness of the teacher is the major determinant in student academic growth.



Research has found that students taught by a highly effective teacher for one year outperform their peers⁴, even in subsequent years. Furthermore, the effect of quality teaching is both additive and cumulative; the more often students are taught by a highly effective teacher, the greater their growth, relative to their peers. Unfortunately, the opposite is true as well. The effect of being taught by an ineffective teacher is also additive and cumulative and has a major impact of students' current and future learning potential. Economically disadvantaged and African American students are more likely to be taught by an ineffective teacher.⁵

² Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, "In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development" (2007), available at <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/>

³ Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow, "The economics of investing in universal preschool education in California" (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2005), available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG349.pdf.

⁴ Sanders, W. and Rivers, J. (November, 1996). "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement." University of Tennessee Value Added Assessment Center. <https://www.beteronderwijsnederland.nl/files/cumulative%20and%20residual%20effects%20of%20teachers.pdf>

⁵ Sanders, W. and Horn, S. (1998). "Research Findings for the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) Database: Implications for Educational Evaluation and Research." University of Tennessee Value Added Research and Assessment Center. https://www.sas.com/govedu/edu/ed_eval.pdf

Teacher diversity is also critically important. Research shows that students benefit in many ways from having a teacher of the same race/ethnicity. Studies suggest that African American students do better in reading and math and are less likely to be suspended. Race/ethnicity match in elementary, middle, and high school has been linked to reduced rates of exclusionary discipline for African American students.⁶ Race/ethnicity match also influences teachers' expectations for their students. Researchers found that non-black teachers have significantly lower expectations for African American students than African American teachers. The effects were greater for African American male students and math teachers.⁷

3. Access to Rigorous, College-Level Courses

All students in Louisiana high schools could benefit by enrolling in rigorous, college-level courses, such as Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment, or the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. Earning college credits while in high school allows students an opportunity to graduate college early, saving them money in tuition.



AP is a program offered by the College Board and gives students the opportunity to earn college credit and placement while in high school. Many colleges recognize that passing AP courses demonstrates mastery and will allow students to skip those courses in college. Research cited by the Louisiana Department of Education shows that students who complete AP courses are better prepared for college work, have higher college persistence rates, and are more likely to graduate college in four or five years.⁸ Enrolling in an AP course can also increase access to college; students who take AP courses are favored in the college admissions process, and are more competitive in qualifying for scholarships.

Dual enrollment affords high school students the opportunity to earn high school credit and college credit simultaneously, either at their high school or on the college campus. Dual enrollment courses are college classes, taught by college instructors. Dual enrollment provides students a head-start on their college career or a career-recognized certification while completing high school.

Some Louisiana high schools opt to offer an International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. The IB Diploma Programme is recognized by universities across the world as providing students with a high-quality preparation for post-secondary success.

Equity in Outcomes

Key indicators under Equity in Outcome measure critical academic milestones that support students' ability to succeed in school and beyond.

1. 3rd Grade Reading

Reading at grade level by the end of 3rd grade is a significant turning point in a child's educational trajectory. During the first three years of elementary school, students learn to read. Beginning in 4th grade, emphasis focuses on reading to learn. Many subjects require literacy in order to progress; students use their reading skills to gain information, think critically, and solve problems. It is essential to examine 3rd grade literacy levels to identify and address achievement gaps that will have long-term implications on students' ability to succeed in school and life.



⁶ Constance A. Lindsay & Cassandra Hart. "Exposure to Same-Race Teachers and Student Disciplinary Outcomes for Black Students in North Carolina." Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. (2017).

⁷ Seth Gershenson, Stephen Holt, & Nicholas Papageorge. "Who Believes in Me? The Effect of Student-Teacher Demographic Match on Teacher Expectations." Economics of Education Review. (2016).

⁸ <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/courses/advanced-placement>

2. 8th Grade Math

The level of academic achievement that students attain by 8th grade has a larger impact on their college and career readiness by the time they graduate than anything that happens academically in high school.⁹ This is particularly true for 8th grade math. Concepts taught during 8th grade provide the foundation for understanding future math concepts.¹⁰ Math prepares and develops the ability to accept, analyze, and execute complex ideas. Even more than student demographics and gender, math performance has found to be a better predictor of post-secondary success.¹¹ Because of its impact on student success in high school and beyond, it is critical to examine 8th grade performance in math to identify and address gaps.



3. ACT Performance

ACT serves as a gateway to rigorous courses and post-secondary opportunities. Students take the ACT exam beginning in the 11th grade. The ACT exam is a national test that measures academic readiness for college and careers and evaluates what students learn in high school courses of English, math, reading, and science.



In addition to gauging students' academic readiness for college or careers, ACT scores are often used to determine high school students' eligibility for dual enrollment courses, acceptance into four-year colleges and universities, and eligibility for Taylor Opportunity Program (TOPS) scholarship awards, a state scholarship for Louisiana residents who attend an in-state college or university.

4. High School Graduation and Advanced Credentials

Louisiana uses a four-year cohort graduation rate as a measure of high school performance. Students who graduate within four years after beginning ninth grade are included in the cohort rate.¹² There are two types of graduation pathways: University Pathway and Jump Start Career Pathway. Graduation requirements differ based on the diploma track.



Louisiana offers three levels of diplomas based on the credentials students earn. Students can graduate with a standard diploma – completing all the required high school coursework. Students can graduate with Basic credentials – earn a Basic Jump Start credential (attained proficiency with an industry-valued skill set recognized by the Workforce Investment Council) or pass a college-level course. Students who earn an Advanced Jump Start credential or pass a college-level exam graduate with an Advanced credential.

Earning a diploma with Basic or Advanced credentials provides students with an edge in preparing for a successful future. For example, a student earning a Basic credential can leave high school with his/her NCCER Welding Level 1 certificate or experience with rigorous college-level curriculum. A student earning an Advanced credential can leave high school with his/her NCCER Welding Level 2 certificate or receive college credit by passing a college-level exam.

⁹ "The Forgotten Middle." ACT. 2008.

¹⁰ Thinking Algebraically: Promoting Rigorous Mathematics for All Students." NEA Policy Brief. (2008)

¹¹ Dougherty, S., Goodman, J., Hill, D., Litke, E., and Page, L. (2014). "Middle School Math Acceleration and Equitable Access to 8th Grade Algebra: Evidence from the Wake County Public School System." HKS Faculty Research, Working Paper. Harvard University.

¹² Exceptions are made for students with disabilities.

Our Theory of Change

With the support of funders, school districts, the Louisiana Department of Education, and community leaders, the Urban League of Louisiana is prepared to support the establishment and implementation of Equity Frameworks in districts across the state. It is prepared to offer the following interrelated strategies to promote and support education equity in Louisiana by informing, convening, facilitating, advocating, and delivering programming.



Advancing Educational Equity Reports

Urban League of Louisiana aims to produce an Educational Equity Report in the seven urban areas of Louisiana to help communities identify the barriers of educational equity that prevent all students from reaching their highest potential. The reports will examine public school performance with an equity lens by disaggregating key educational metrics that measure areas that include but are not limited to the key indicators listed above. The report will document any existing inequities and serve as the basis for community developed and supported programming designed to close achievement gaps.

Community Convening and Facilitation of Collective Impact

Urban League of Louisiana will coordinate and host community convenings to provide critical context during data gathering and analysis processes to understand specific political and social nuances, to coordinate communications, and to champion the equity messaging. It will also convene community to share the findings of Advancing Educational Equity reports, to develop a common community “language” of educational equity, to create a sense of urgency, and to develop targeted support, resources, and strategies for programming to close the gaps. ULLA will help partners to envision the characteristics and outcomes associated with a high-quality public-school system, identify the barriers that impede progress toward that vision, and develop strategies and programming to address these barriers and close the gaps.

Community Specific Plan for Educational Equity

Informed by the community convenings, Urban League of Louisiana will work with stakeholders and community members to agree on a set of metrics to monitor and track progress for that are meaningful for students and their families, and through coordination with partners and funder, will be consistently measured over time and include annual updates. This set of shared metrics will serve as a Strategic Plan for Educational Equity, updated annually to measure progress toward educational equity and high outcomes for all students.

Programming

Urban League of Louisiana will implement and support programming specifically designed to target educational inequities. ULLA programming will be aligned with strategies that will impact improvement in the community-identified metrics. ULLA will provide Pride Academies and ULEAD cohorts with the skills to develop, analyze, and utilize data to impact change. ULLA will continue to support parents and families at its Parent Information Centers (PIC) and ensure that students are prepared for success on the ACT and graduate with advanced credentials through Project Ready.

Advocacy

Urban League of Louisiana will actively advocate for and promote policies and practices that foster educational equity and excellence in Louisiana, particularly those that align with the key indicators of our Equity Framework and that impact community-identified metrics of success.

The Way Forward

After more than eight decades, ULLA's dedicated efforts have yielded real results and notable gains in education for families in Louisiana but data has shown tremendous work remains.

Achieving a better Louisiana can happen – with support and commitment.

Rooted in a historic movement, and always responsive to the significant needs of the state's African American communities, the Urban League of Louisiana is committed and eager to take the steps necessary for change. While schools and districts are actively determining how to provide education during the COVID-19 pandemic, our students and communities need our action – especially those who have been most impacted by educational inequities historically so that they do not fall further behind. It will require immediate action to keep achievement gaps from widening during this time, and the Urban League of Louisiana calls on all of us to stay focused on building toward equity not just during this crisis but for all of the generations of students to come.



**Urban League of
Louisiana**

***Empowering Communities.
Changing Lives.***

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