

Increasing Educational Options for Louisiana’s Children:
A Preliminary Plan to Expand the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program

A White Paper by the Louisiana Department of Education

In January, Governor Jindal announced his intent to expand the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program (SSEEP). This white paper summarizes proposed changes to the program, the delivery method the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) would use to administer such a statewide program, and the steps the LDOE would take to ensure the program is successful and responsive to the needs of children, parents, and taxpayers.

Background

In 2008, the Louisiana Legislature passed and Governor Jindal signed legislation to create the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, which provides educational options for children attending low-performing public schools. In this hallmark legislation, the Legislature declared, *“It is in the public interest that all Louisiana schoolchildren receive the best education that its citizens can provide, and the state of Louisiana has the right, the responsibility, the duty, and the obligation to accomplish the objective of quality education for all Louisiana children.”* The Legislature further acknowledged that qualified public and nonpublic schools can serve as quality alternatives for students attending low-performing public schools.

Current law allows children residing in Orleans Parish who meet certain requirements to receive a state-funded scholarship to attend a qualified public or nonpublic school. For children to qualify, family income must not exceed 250 percent of the current federal poverty guidelines, and children must be entering kindergarten or currently enrolled as a kindergarten through sixth-grade student in an *Academically Unacceptable school*.

The SSEEP began during the 2008-09 school year, serving kindergarten through third-grade students. The program is authorized to expand one grade level each year. Students must continue to meet residency and income requirements in order to remain eligible for a scholarship. School participation is open to *Academically Acceptable* public schools within Orleans Parish and Board of Elementary and Secondary Elementary-approved nonpublic schools throughout the state.

In January 2012, recognizing the tremendous need to provide high-quality and equitable educational opportunities to all Louisiana students enrolled in the state’s low-performing schools, Governor Jindal announced his intent to expand the SSEEP statewide. He noted that nearly 450,000 children in our state are attending *C, D, and F* public schools, where many students are performing below proficient levels. In *D* and *F* schools, up to half the student population is below grade level. In *C* schools, between 25 and 36 percent of students are performing below grade level. Sadly, an overwhelming majority of these students have little or no means to access other educational options due to family income. And gold-standard studies have demonstrated time and time again that scholarship programs offer a promising alternative for low-income children.

Governor Jindal has therefore proposed to expand SSEEP access for all low-income students in kindergarten and in first through twelfth grade attending *C, D, and F* public schools, offering those students the choice to attend BESE-approved nonpublic schools or higher performing public schools across parish lines. Additionally, the Governor and the BESE have proposed to fund the program through the Minimum Foundation Program

(MFP) funding formula. This will ensure education dollars follow students to their school of choice and that state and local governments fulfill their responsibility to equitably fund the education of all children.

Access to Quality Educational Options

Louisiana has a number of quality educational options for children in low-performing schools. There are over 375 public schools rated *A* or *B*, and over 350 approved non-public schools. A comparison of ACT scores further attests to the quality of education offered by many nonpublic schools.

ACT 2010-2011 Graduating Class	Composite	English	Math	Reading	Science
Louisiana Public/Nonpublic Combined	20.2	20.4	19.7	20.3	20.1
Louisiana Public Schools Only	19.7	19.6	19.3	19.7	19.8
Louisiana Nonpublic Schools Only	21.9	22.7	21	22	21.3

The circumstances involved in schools differ from site to site, but the ACT outcomes clearly demonstrate that it makes no sense to prohibit nonpublic schools from offering Louisiana students an option. The LDOE has mapped Louisiana public and approved nonpublic schools to determine the extent to which students attending *C*, *D*, and *F* schools might have options through this proposed program. Appendix A shows that many students attending low-performing schools could gain access to higher performing public schools across parish lines through this program. The chart further shows that in about a dozen communities, where there are large concentrations of low-performing schools, there are also several qualified nonpublic schools in operation that could serve eligible children. The LDOE will estimate the number of participating schools and seats that may be offered to scholarship recipients as this proposal advances through the legislative process and program requirements are finalized.

School Participation

Under current law and the Governor’s proposal, both public and nonpublic schools will be eligible to serve scholarship recipients. Public school participation will be limited to *A* and *B* schools. Schools—opting to participate through the choice of their local boards and superintendents—will be able to serve students who reside within or outside their current attendance zones and district/parish jurisdiction. A number of quality assurance provisions are in place for participating nonpublic schools as well. Nonpublic schools must be approved by the BESE as a testament to their overall quality. Likewise, these schools must meet the provisions of *Brumfield v. Dodd*, thus certifying they employ non-discriminatory admissions practices. In order to further ensure quality, nonpublic schools in operation for less than two years cannot exceed 20 percent of their total school enrollment with scholarship recipients unless they meet certain requirements.

As with the New Orleans scholarship program, interested public districts and nonpublic schools will apply to the LDOE. The LDOE will approve eligible schools for participation in the program. Schools deemed eligible will notify the LDOE of the number of seats available in each grade level and provide a copy of their rules and policies so these can be shared with potential students and families. The LDOE will ask about any services the participating school offers to students, including before- and after-school care, extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities, special education, and transportation. Nonpublic schools in the program may not turn assigned students away. However, since nonpublic schools do not receive federal IDEA funding, these schools are not required to offer special education services and transportation services.

The LDOE will ensure that all participating schools are aware of and adhere to the conditions of program participation. Schools must accept all eligible children who apply to attend the school and are assigned a place

by the state. If student applications exceed available seats, schools must accept all students selected through a lottery.

In addition, schools must accept the scholarship as full payment of state and local obligations for tuition and fees, must administer state tests to scholarship recipients, and must submit to an independent financial audit* paid for by the LDOE. The amount of the scholarship will be equal to the school's tuition and fees and cannot exceed the total state and local government allocation for students enrolled in traditional schools. The amount of the scholarship may additionally include any incidental or supplementary fees that are charged to non-scholarship recipients enrolled in the school as well as any costs incurred in administering state tests. Schools will be limited in the amount they can increase tuition annually.

Student Registration

Once schools have been approved to participate in the program, the LDOE will announce the list of participating schools to parents in order to begin the student application process. Parents will be provided information about the participating schools in order to inform their school selection. Families will apply for a scholarship using a simple application form that may be submitted directly to LDOE or to authorized acceptance centers in their communities. Families will be asked to identify their top school choices. Kindergarten students will also need to register with their local public school district in order to be entered into the districts' Student Information System (SIS), so they can receive the scholarship amount associated with that district.

The LDOE will verify students are eligible to receive a scholarship based on the performance of their current public schools—which must be labeled *C*, *D*, or *F* for students in grades one through twelve—and whether they qualify based on family income. Once eligibility is established, the LDOE will attempt to place students in their requested schools. If demand exceeds capacity for any grade level at any participating school, the LDOE will conduct a lottery to ensure fairness in determining which students are placed. Students who are awarded a scholarship must then formally accept the scholarship through a simple response to the LDOE and then enroll on-site at the school where they are assigned. As part of the enrollment process, parents will be given a copy of the school's rules, policies, and procedures and must agree in writing to follow those. Students assigned to a school may not be turned away by the school. There is no "screening" process.

Quality Assurance and Performance Management

The LDOE will continue to produce and publicize up-to-date information on school performance through the School and District Accountability System. This will be used to determine student eligibility for scholarships, as well as eligibility to serve as participating, scholarship-receiving public schools. Students receiving scholarships must take state tests, and, as with traditional and charter public schools, school-level results are reported online to ensure accurate information for parents and communities.

The LDOE will also continue to manage the nonpublic school approval process through BESE and the *Brumfield v. Dodd* approval process for nonpublic schools. This includes the determination of initial and continuing school eligibility. Participating schools that lose their eligibility status will not be permitted to continue in the scholarship program.

BESE and the LDOE are obligated under the Louisiana Constitution to ensure that nonpublic schools maintain

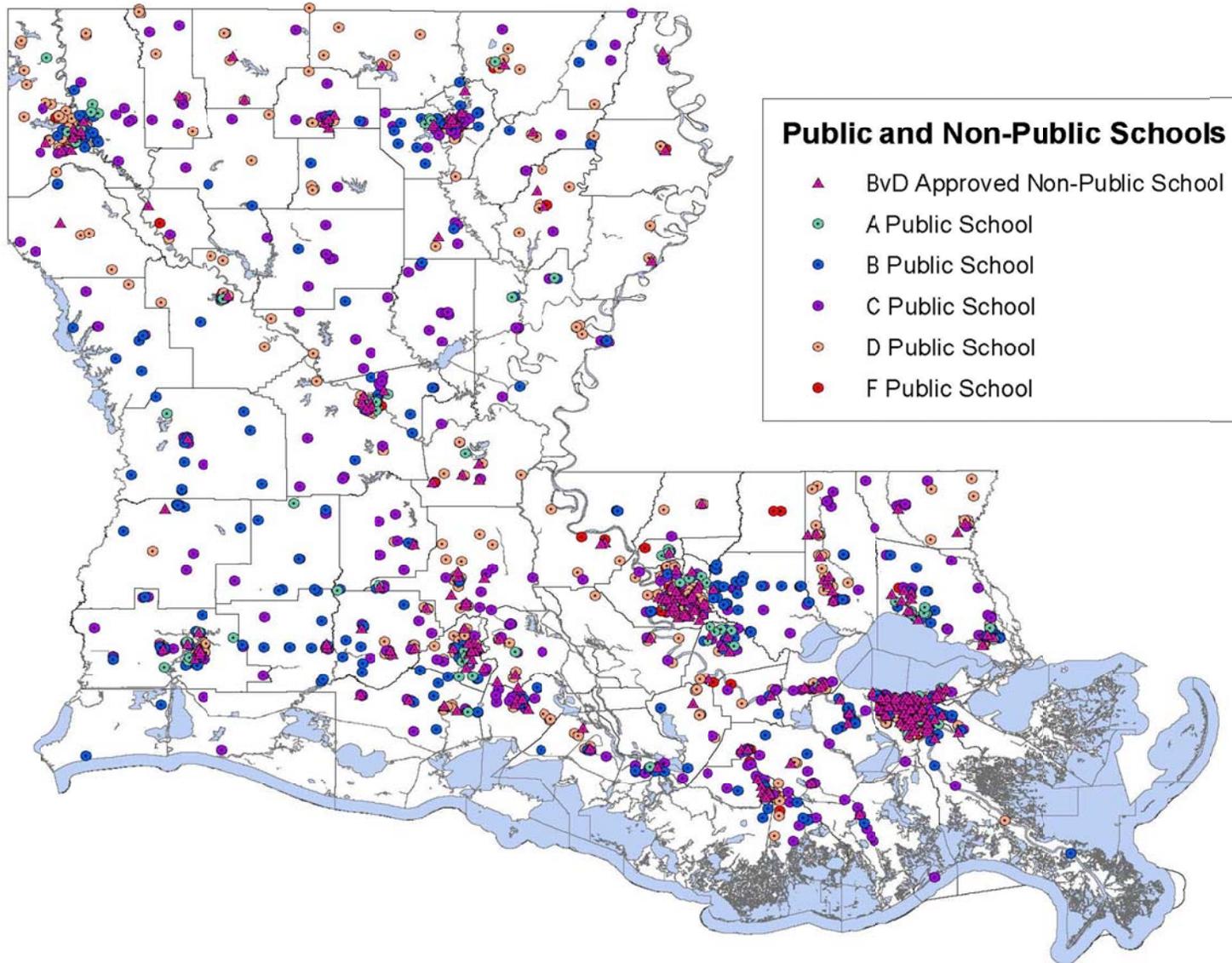
* Limited to those records necessary for LDOE to make scholarship payments in accordance with state law.

academic quality comparable to that of public schools. The LDOE will propose policies specific to the SSEEP in order to support effective implementation and quality assurance. This will include detailed policies related to the initial and continued eligibility of schools and students, loss of eligibility, and requirements for participation. For example, the LDOE will propose BESE policies relative to the mandatory administration of state tests for scholarship recipients and clear consequences for non-compliance. Schools will be required to administer each section of the required state tests and share results with parents. Failure to do so could render the school ineligible to continue participating in the program. A summary of LDOE activities to support the successful expansion of the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program is contained as Appendix B.

Conclusion

The LDOE stands ready to expand educational opportunities through this program to children across Louisiana. The Department further pledges, as the administering agency for this program, to effectively carry out the responsibilities with which the agency has been and will be charged in order to ensure that public funds are used efficiently and effectively, allowing Louisiana children to reap the maximum educational benefits from this opportunity.

APPENDIX A:
Map of Louisiana Public and Approved Non-public Schools



APPENDIX B:
LDOE Activities to Ensure Effective Implementation of a Statewide Expansion
of the Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program

