

No Barriers. No Borders. No Zip Codes.

# ENSURING A BETTER FUTURE FOR LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN



LOUISIANA ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATORS' COMMUNITY CONVERSATION REPORT



Every Student Succeeds Act



**FROM SEPTEMBER 14, 2016 THROUGH OCTOBER 6, 2016, MORE THAN 750 CONCERNED CITIZENS GATHERED IN NINE CITIES ACROSS LOUISIANA TO DISCUSS WHAT THEIR COMMUNITY NEEDS TO ENSURE A BETTER FUTURE FOR THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THEIR RESPECTIVE PARISHES.**

Parents, educators, young people, and advocates came together in response to a call to action in order to...

## **CREATE OPEN CONVERSATIONS**

among diverse community members;

## **ENHANCE COLLABORATION**

as well as mutual support and common ground;

## **BUILD A HOLISTIC VISION**

of the services and supports our children need; and

## **CONSIDER NEXT STEPS**

for ensuring a better future for our youth.

This is a report on the conversations held by communities surrounding the opportunities for a better future for Louisiana.

# THERE ARE TWO WORLDS IN LOUISIANA: ONE SURROUNDED BY WEALTH AND OPPORTUNITY; THE OTHER FACED WITH POVERTY AND INSTABILITY

Louisiana is home to pockets of significant wealth alongside poverty and instability. The differences between these two worlds exist most significantly within our public school classrooms. Many Louisiana families of poverty have to resort to school meal programs to feed their children; oftentimes, some are forced to uproot their children from their schools due to lack of stable housing. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, the state serves children who have never experienced these types of insecurities. More than 67% of Louisiana's children come from low-income households. From 2013 to 2015, the state ranked 49th in hunger and food insecurity with more than 18% of households claiming to have experienced difficulty providing enough food due to a lack of money.<sup>1</sup> Nearly one in five Louisianans (almost 890,000 people) lived in poverty in 2015 - the third-highest rate in the nation. That includes more than 300,000 children (also third highest). One in four Louisiana kids are growing up in families that can't afford the basics necessary for a good start to life. Perhaps most disturbing is the state's poverty rate for children under five years of age: 32%. This certainly highlights the urgent need for Louisiana to make a serious investment in early childcare and education.

Wages in Louisiana continue to lag behind the rest of the nation with the median household income being \$45,727 in 2015, compared to a national median of \$55,775. Income inequality in Louisiana is fourth-highest among the states, trailing only Connecticut, New York, and the District of Columbia.<sup>2</sup>

In our schools, we see those inequalities reflected in our students opportunities as well as challenges. More than half of Louisiana's student population consists of minorities.

The economic gap between African Americans and Caucasians in Louisiana is significant, with one in three African Americans living below the federal poverty line in 2015 - this is almost two and a half times the rate than that of their Caucasian neighbors. The average Caucasian worker earned more than twice as much as an African American worker - \$56,093 compared to \$27,537. The poverty rate for Latinos was 24% and 23% for Native Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Our diversity is our strength, but the economic disparities are increasingly troubling to many residents. Louisiana will not thrive if a growing segment of our children are trapped in systemic poverty.

Our state could be thriving with opportunity, if we act now. There is both a moral and economic obligation to build vibrant and sustainable communities. Events around the nation surrounding issues of race and equity highlight the need to address how Louisiana will meet the challenge of the growing disparity of wealth; the state has never turned a blind eye to the needs of its citizens, but those needs are more far-reaching and dramatic due the current fiscal dilemma. The impact of reduced services is widespread leaving our kids to be particularly vulnerable; Louisiana's future relies on attention to this lingering issue.

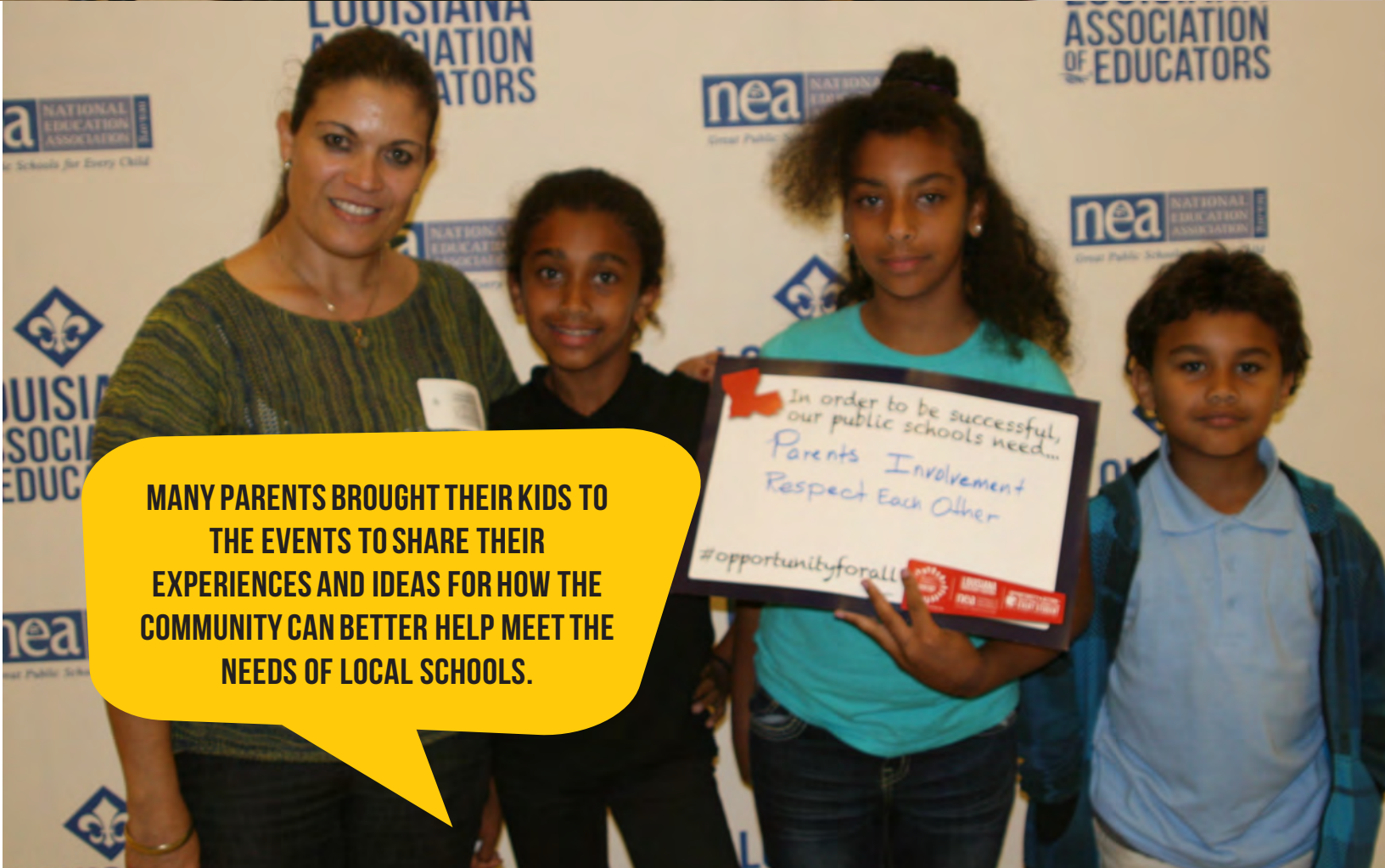
Starting a conversation is the first step to identifying the needs and building partnerships to support children - these conversations may be difficult, but acknowledging inequities in the state is of paramount importance. As a progressive community we must engage in honest discussions; this is the only way to craft solutions to a growing divide that - if left unchecked - will cripple the state's economic future.

**67%** OF LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN COME FROM LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS.

1. <https://talkpoverty.org/indicator/listing/hunger/2016>

2. <http://www.labudget.org/lbp/2016/09/poverty-and-inequality-in-louisiana/>

3. <http://www.labudget.org/lbp/2016/09/poverty-and-inequality-in-louisiana/>



**MANY PARENTS BROUGHT THEIR KIDS TO THE EVENTS TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND IDEAS FOR HOW THE COMMUNITY CAN BETTER HELP MEET THE NEEDS OF LOCAL SCHOOLS.**

In order to be successful,  
our public schools need...  
Parents Involvement  
Respect Each Other  
#opportunityforall

# THE CONVERSATION

The discussions held across the state followed a consistent format: a local association leader introducing the federal education policies brought forth in the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) followed by a presentation on community schools by a parent activist. Following the opening comments, participants broke into small groups (pre-assigned to ensure balanced representation) led by trained facilitators.

**The groups were charged with answering two questions:**

- 1. What do Louisiana schools need in order to ensure a better future for our children?**
- 2. What ideas do you have for creating the types of schools our children deserve?**

Following the discussions, each group had an opportunity to report their top answers to the larger assembly.

Seven major themes emerged from the discussions:



## COMMUNITY CONVERSATION: MAJOR THEMES

- 1. Parental involvement**
- 2. Building relationships**
- 3. Rating school quality and success**
- 4. School funding and resource equity**
- 5. Teacher preparation**
- 6. Testing**
- 7. Improvement for struggling schools**



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# Table 1

## Question 1-

- More parental involvement (High)
- Motivated, certified teachers who love children
- More resources for transitional students ie from high school to workforce, more
- Community involvement
- More health services on school site

A Table  
for the  
School Teachers

Table 1



# COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Upon analyzing the discussions, it was determined there was a strong consensus from across the state for the immediate need to address the following areas:

## 1. EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

## 2. SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY AND TESTING

## 3. COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



# EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Participant feedback revealed a broadly held belief that there is a crucial need to build communities in which all people feel accepted.

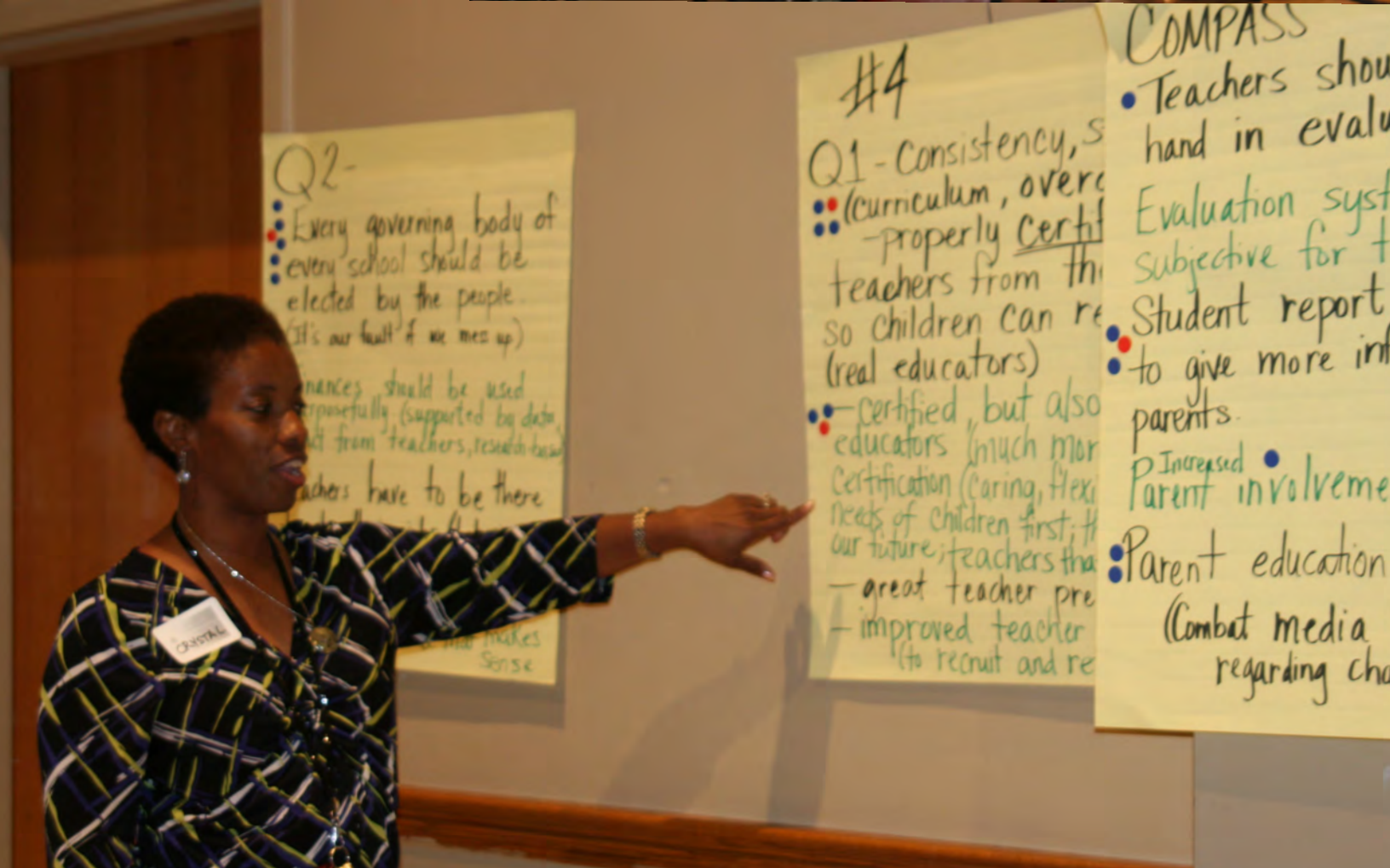
- Participants described an imbalance of power which leaves many (particularly immigrants and the poor) feeling marginalized in the public arena.
- Participants expressed an immediate need to address the dominant, affluent power structure, as well as the lack of equity in available neighborhood services.
- Participants expressed the need to build relationships across communities in order to promote understanding of culture.
- Participants pointed out the importance of having places for communities to gather in order to share collective interests - programs like athletics, music, arts, etc. Since some school athletic programs are unable to provide opportunities for all students due to eligibility standards, some of our most at-risk youth are left with little to do after school. Representatives from community organizations in attendance expressed eagerness to work with local schools in order to provide such services to the community.
- Participants expressed a sense of unfairness grounded in differences in cultures; they articulated a perception that those in power speak a cultural vernacular and follow protocols that are the norms of a wealthier, well-established group not consistent with the cultures of many African American, Latino, or other ethnic groups. Participants expressed feeling misunderstood and marginalized during discussions with politicians and community officials.

A proposed solution was offering cultural trainings to any individuals working with community groups or organizations - trainings that truly define and explore racial/cultural barriers.



**...THERE IS A NEED TO BUILD A COMMUNITY IN WHICH ALL PEOPLE FEEL WELCOME AND CULTURALLY ACCEPTED.**





# SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY & TESTING



**MANY PARTICIPANTS EMPHASIZED A NEED TO ADDRESS THE LOSS OF LEARNING TIME, CREATIVITY, CRITICAL THINKING, AND INNOVATION IN THE CLASSROOM DUE TO AN OVEREMPHASIS AND HYPER-FOCUS ON TESTING.**

Participants agreed that the (now former) federal No Child Left Behind education policies stripped schools of rich curricula, which impacted the most vulnerable students. Many shared their thoughts on the best indicators of school quality and student success:

- **STRONGER, MORE DIVERSE SCHOOL CURRICULUMS**
- **EXPANSION OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS**
- **IMPORTANCE OF FULLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS, PARAEDUCATORS, LIBRARIANS, AND MEDIA SPECIALISTS**
- **ACCESS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER TECHNICAL EDUCATION CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS**
- **RE-EVALUATION OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES THAT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT STUDENTS OF COLOR, STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, AND STUDENTS WHO IDENTIFY AS LGBT**

There was major consensus around giving parents (as well as the public) an understanding of school performance through the use of an array of different indicators (instead of basing school performance scores entirely on an annual high-stakes test). Participants also expressed the need for school report cards to include more detailed information about a school's performance, rather than just a single letter grade.

Participants felt that the state's current letter grade system only reflects the economic status of the community rather than the true academic quality of the school.



# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Feedback affirmed a strong desire for schools to have closer connections to the communities they serve; Louisiana Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (LAROS) Director Karran Harper Royal offered a solution to this issue through an explanation of a new movement called *Community Schools*. The concept is founded upon the reality that some of our nation's so-called "school reform" efforts only address the instructional component of education, not the full development of a child. Students must have their basic needs met in order to be ready to learn. The offering of wraparound services is key to providing children with their basic needs. Community schools across the nation have proven to be an increasingly effective way to meet the more diverse needs of students based on the requirements of each individual neighborhood.

Many Louisiana parents are forced to work long hours in order to provide the basic necessities for their families, creating a need for more options for affordable child care, as well as universal Pre-K and Head Start programs. This is a situation where the community school structure would significantly benefit a neighborhood as the model encourages the formation of valuable partnerships between schools and the service providers in the parish. When schools and community service providers work together, they are able to provide crucial assistance to families that might not otherwise be available or accessible.

It was brought to light that a rising number of Louisiana students are in desperate need of mental health care that far surpasses the capacity in which school counselors are able to provide.

When communities establish mental wellness services, students have access to the help they need to overcome any illness that may be preventing them from thriving at school.

Participants of all events had a common ask: to be included in future community discussions so that they can share individual needs and address how they can overcome these areas of concern, together.

**PARTICIPANTS EXPRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING AVAILABLE SERVICES PUBLICIZED IN PLACES THAT ARE FREQUENTED BY THOSE WHO STAND TO BENEFIT FROM THE SUPPORTS.**



# NEXT STEPS

How can individuals, neighborhoods, schools, and other stakeholders work together to ensure a better future for Louisiana's children? We must start by working together to close the opportunity gaps which are too often based on race and economic status. We must continue to have an open dialogue which will ultimately lead to enhanced collaboration. ESSA provides us with an opportunity for stronger communities, which will bring a brighter tomorrow for Louisiana.

With the right mix in the state's accountability system and the promise of ESSA, educators, parents, and policymakers have a chance to get it right, but in order for this to happen, we all must make a commitment to get involved.

The LAE will continue to work alongside Louisiana communities to improve access to educational opportunities and attain college and career readiness for all children. Join us!

**SIGN-UP & STAY CONNECTED! GO TO  
[LAE.ORG/ESSAINLA](http://LAE.ORG/ESSAINLA)  
FOR MORE INFORMATION.**

*This report was produced by the Louisiana Association of Educators, an association of professional educators employed in Louisiana's public schools.*

## ***Louisiana Association of Educators***

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***"OUR GOAL MUST BE  
TO CREATE A  
COMMON VISION FOR  
LOUISIANA'S PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS AND THE  
STUDENTS THEY  
SERVE."***



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# Table 1

## Question 1-

- \* More parental involvement (High)
- \* Motivated, certified teachers who love children
- \* More resources for transitional students:  
i.e. from high school to workforce, more  
community involvement
- \* More health services on school site  
(full time health care professional)
- \* After school / Saturday schools / Tutoring
- \* Year round schools at every site
- \* Strong Visionary Leaders
- \* Strong Instructional Leadership
- \* Effective communication among all  
educational stakeholders
- \* Corporate Sponsorships (at least one for  
every school in their area/location)
- \* ~~Consistent curriculum across grade levels~~
- \* High quality instructional practices

Blue-top  
Green-top

# IN ORDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL, LOUISIANA PUBLIC SCHOOLS NEED...



## DID YOU KNOW THERE ARE IMMEDIATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION? MAKE A COMMITMENT TO GET INVOLVED TODAY, HERE'S HOW:

- HOST A CONVERSATION IN YOUR COMMUNITY
- SHARE THIS REPORT WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS
- VOLUNTEER AT YOUR SCHOOL
- GET INVOLVED WITH AN LAE-SPONSORED ESSA CAMPAIGN

WE NEED YOU. OUR SCHOOLS NEED YOU. OUR STUDENTS NEED YOU. JOIN THE MOVEMENT.

GO TO [LAE.ORG/ESSAINLA](https://lae.org/essainla) TO SIGN A COMMITMENT CARD.



Every Student Succeeds Act