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## LA 4 proves itself again

This time, results met expectations.

That's the early indication from the LA 4 program, now in year No. 7.

State education officials say that students who have enrolled in the pre-school programs — they were targeted for 4-year-olds in low- and moderate-income families, have benefited demonstrably from their enrollment in programs on most Louisiana parishes.

This legacy of former State Sen. Bill Jones, D-Ruston, and former state Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard has mushroomed from its embryonic stage in a handful of brave school systems to most parishes and widespread participation in Louisiana. Only Allen, Beauregard, Franklin, Grant, St. Charles and West Feliciana do not participate among our parishes.

Early childhood education expert Craig Ramey, director of the Georgetown Center on Health and Education, helped the state initiate and evaluate its early pre-K efforts, and says now that promise and performance have met in recently released results. The proof, educators say, is in enhanced performances on state standardized tests.

State education officials say students entering the program test around the 11th percentile; leaving the program, test scores approach the national level in language, print and math. Proof rests in such results.

"I think these most recent analyses affirm again the immediate benefits for Louisiana's young children in key gateway skills in LA 4, particularly in reading and math," Ramey, who visited Monroe during the program's formation and development, said. "We have strong evidence of the long-term effects ... as well as the reduction in the needs for special education and grade retention.

A cure-all? Of course not. Ours is a diverse population; the needs of our children vary. No program will solve every ill.

But in all, the state served 13,389 students in LA 4 last year. Almost 90 percent of them qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, evidence that the program has not strayed from its roots of enabling the hard-pressed to succeed in school.

That's not nearly all of the disadvantaged or at-risk children we have as a state. But this effort is a far cry better than serving no children at all.

Children must come to K-12 prepared to learn; this program ensures that many children who might have started from a long way back in kindergarten now stand a more even chance at academic success.

Better still, the program has proven to be a valuable part of the state's commitment to educating its young people from pre-school through college. That should send a message to those who consider moving or investing here that despite some lingering challenges in education, Louisiana continues its forward progress.

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