A STUDENTS FIRST AGENDA TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
Early Childhood Education

1. **Expand access to safe, high-quality childcare in Phase One of the economic restart.**

   As essential services, childcare facilities were allowed to operate during the COVID shutdown. Additional state guidance and support is now needed for providers, workers, and parents to feel safe to return, including PPE for staff, smaller and contained groups, and modified instruction. Those providers that remained open offer ample evidence that childcare can be provided safely in the first phase of an economic comeback. The state may consider prioritizing childcare workers for COVID testing or financially supporting the bulk acquisition of PPE for additional assurances to the public.

2. **Establish emergency childcare connective services for workers.**

   As employees return to the workplace yet childcare centers may still be closed, the state should provide a simple database, map, or list of alternative temporary and long-term options. While it does require more data collection from providers, it can be a worthwhile effort to support the workforce.

3. **Continue to offer childcare subsidies for low-income workers at higher rates per child, given the increased cost of care during this time.**

   As part of the CARES Act, the state rightly provided increased subsidies for the children of essential workers to attend childcare. Lower teacher-to-child ratios, while necessary to follow CDC guidelines and ensure public safety, substantially increase the costs per child. Enhanced support should continue into the immediate future to enable the full re-opening of the Louisiana economy.

4. **Support the childcare industry as a small business.**

   Funding enrollment rather than attendance is a creative mechanism to financially support childcare providers – small businesses that are hemorrhaging finances alongside tens of thousands of their peers across all industry sectors during the shutdown. While K12 schools have designated public funding streams, the private childcare industry does not. The state should consider best-practice models for creating shared services alliances to improve the financial viability of the childcare industry during response and recovery. Facilitating access to capital through grants, loans or technical support will be critical to maintaining childcare for the rest of the state’s economy.

5. **Seek ways to reward the essential childcare workforce.**

   The state should reward those providers and their workers that remained open through the crisis and then promote their safety procedures and lessons learned to the rest of the industry.

A Students First Agenda to Promote Economic Opportunity

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted both the fault lines and strengths of the existing education system in America. Like past challenges, Louisiana must seize this moment to transform outdated systems and models into new strategies and approaches that can better deliver on the promises of the future of work. Our students and families deserve both immediate and long-term solutions and support across the education continuum. State officials and education leaders should seek to:
K-12 Schools

1. Prioritize daily, substantive virtual learning in the immediate term.
   
   School district financing is not in jeopardy for the current school year, and there is still time for much-needed instruction. CARES Act funding allocated to school districts should therefore be utilized to purchase required technology, including devices and Internet connectivity, for students in low-income households or rural areas without broadband. Every student should have a device and Internet capacity to ensure equity and access to learning opportunities. Teachers should be offered professional development as needed, and technical support and drop-off repairs should be made available to families through the central office. If districts or schools are unable to provide daily learning opportunities, the state should offer students an expedited process to access instruction from other sources such as Course Choice or other schools within or outside the district.

2. Maintain school lunches and nutrition programs, even beyond the technical end of the school year.

   In addition to some districts that have served as models for feeding programs, partnerships with non-profit organizations and the private sector have also helped supplement schools in the immediate crisis. As the stay home order is lifted, school employees should be able to safely return to direct provision of these services in as many schools and neighborhoods as possible. Districts should be encouraged to extend these services into the summer.

3. Improve communications and engagement with students and families.

   While the cancellations of schools and the waiver of instructional time and testing requirements was quick and well communicated, an information gap followed in the aftermath in many areas of the state. School districts should be utilizing social media, email, telephone, and/or hard-copy communications where necessary to make parents aware of the tools to help educate their child. In the immediate term, lesson plans and instructions should be provided to students and families on a weekly if not daily basis, preferably by video with the student’s teacher continuing to offer remote instruction, particularly in critical subjects like mathematics and literacy. If needed, the state should offer technical assistance and training to principals and teachers – potentially in partnership with private-sector leaders in this industry. In the longer term, the state and school districts must provide the public with a plan to assure families that students will have an opportunity to learn this content and will not fall behind. School engagement with parents and families is more important now than ever before as full partners in educating children.

4. Outline a plan for school-based instruction to continue as soon as it is safe to do so.

   After a nine-week hiatus from physical school facilities – and for thousands of children across our state, a nine-week hiatus from instruction altogether – there is no obvious reason for a typical summer break, particularly in the absence of childcare, camps, and other activities. Online summer programs and supplemental work are an obvious option. When it is deemed safe by public health officials, summer school and an early start to the school year should be encouraged and incentivized, if not required by the state. Not only is it critically important for students to have an opportunity to learn lost content, but parents and guardians need childcare to return to work and fully re-start the Louisiana economy. The potential for another viral surge in the fall makes an early return all the more important.

5. Provide school safety protocols based on national best practices, guidelines, and standards.

   As the economy slowly re-opens, it is a certainty that COVID cases will continue and work sites, churches, schools, and public places must begin to operate safely within this new normal. The state should provide standard protocols for schools that may include aggressive sanitation, PPE for staff and/or students, spacing of student desks, limitations on size of school groups, shifts and alternative scheduling, or other guidance based on public health recommendations.
6. Establish a learning plan for each school district.
Rigorous supplemental work and summer online or in-person programs are necessary to keep students on track with their academic plans and goals. Adding hours to the school day, an early start or extension to the 2020-21 school year, and fewer holiday breaks should all be on the table as well as innovative partnerships with non-traditional providers to increase capacity. The state must provide a menu of options to school districts that includes a baseline guarantee for additional instructional time to learn lost content as well as technical support and professional development. Should an additional virus surge occur in the fall, leaders must also recognize there is the potential to return again to a virtual learning model and prepare in advance for that reality, wasting no time in returning to school-based instruction on the front end.

7. Adapt curriculum as needed.
The state should coordinate with content publishers and curriculum vendors to incentivize speedy adaptations to high-quality materials to account for lost learning and to help schools and teachers remediate students to bring them up to grade level and stay on track with academic goals. A coordinated plan from the state, potentially with federal stimulus support, is critical to giving school leaders and teachers the tools and training they need for this unprecedented form of remedial instruction and a fundamentally different academic model.

8. Maintain a modified form of accountability.
For years, Louisiana has received national accolades for high-quality standards, curriculum, and testing with outcomes made available to the public. While there is clear justification to waive requirements for state testing and school letter grades in the current year, accountability should continue in a modified form in the 2020-21 academic cycle. The state should make plans to assess students with a diagnostic exam on their return to school this summer as a baseline to inform instructional needs. Students, families, and the public should then be made aware of learning loss and supplemental needs and over time the academic progress, teacher effectiveness, and the performance of schools and districts as it relates to that baseline.

9. Make fiscally conservative decisions now.
With a massive drop in GDP and historic job losses, state and local government must consider spending restrictions and hiring freezes for the new fiscal year. Some aspects of virtual education and remote work may become permanent. Facilities that have been under-utilized for years should now be consolidated, re-purposed, or closed. Some districts were in extreme financial distress even before the current crisis, and innovative partnerships and approaches must be seriously considered rather than an effort to maintain “business as usual.” Traditional funding models and expenditures should be re-examined, and a “dollars follow the child” approach should be revisited.

10. Initiate a dialogue on the future of public education.
The current crisis should accelerate modern trends and instigate a dialogue on the future of public education not just in Louisiana but across the country. It may be time to adjust this very traditional system from one that was created more than a century ago to one that is prepared for the next century of work and learning. Broadband utilization and virtual instruction are an obvious and necessary first step. In addition, high-quality options for students, blended forms of instruction that extend beyond the physical classroom, competency-based approaches to academic progression, stronger connections to college and careers through dual enrollment and work-based learning should all be on the table for discussion and advancement. Bold and creative approaches to public education in general should be embraced.
Higher Education

1. Leave no student behind.
   The Louisiana Department of Education, the Board of Regents, and the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance should coordinate to prepare every student graduating high school for the next step. The state needs to reach out proactively to graduating seniors to ensure that more than 40,000 young people know their options, understand amended admissions criteria, are aware of short-term workforce training options, and have access to the resources available to support them. Communications to this group of students is critically important to progress in their academic and career planning.

2. Federal stimulus funds should be utilized to double down on the Louisiana Board of Regents Master Plan for Higher Education and accelerate transformation in higher education.
   Now more than ever, education and training for jobs and careers is mission critical. The tenets of the statewide plan – moving to a competency-based approach for skills development at two-year and four-year institutions, clearly articulating attainable steps along career pathways, drawing on technology to enhance opportunities, condensing the time-to-credential, promoting equity in opportunity and outcomes, and much more – should be advanced and accelerated. Certainly, some funding must be utilized for revenue shortfalls and immediate needs, but there is also the opportunity to strategically invest and leverage funds for better outcomes for students in the short and long term. Similarly, the state funding formula should adapt to align with the Master Plan, reflect new realities of the job market, and incentivize programs with the best Return on Investment for students. Across the country, the traditional model of higher education – a costly, lengthy, facilities-based, rigid approach that leaves students with unsustainable debt even when a degree is attained – is overdue for change. This time should be used for bold action and re-invention to transform higher education to meet the reality of new student needs and expectations, modern forms of learning and knowledge creation, and the future of work.

3. Encourage students to invest in their ongoing education with CARES Act funds.
   Flexible financial resources for students are certainly helpful in the short term, particularly for Pell students. However, funding should be prioritized for those students who need it most to recover costs, rather than those students whose tuition and/or fees were largely covered by TOPS or other scholarships. Furthermore, institutions should offer suggested uses for the funds, especially the purchase of devices and Internet access to allow for ongoing coursework should the virus surge in the fall or winter. Leaders may even consider ways to incentivize completion, retention, or re-enrollment.

4. Mentor existing students who have immediate economic needs.
   In the current recession, many more students are undoubtedly experiencing economic hardship. Institutions and state workforce training agencies should communicate options to students and offer individualized coaching, potentially helping them bridge to shorter-term, less costly, relevant credentials that will allow for a transition back into their planned career when they are ready. Flexibility should be introduced into the TOPS Tech program to encourage low-cost, high-value programs and short-term credentials, even if it is a temporary change to reflect the unprecedented economic needs in our state at this time. The value proposition of finishing a program must be a part of the discussion during a severe recession – transparency with regard to the credential, the job ahead, and the salary expectations. The economic reality of our people must be visible to policymakers and a priority for administrators.

5. Develop affordable options for remediation.
   With the loss of the last quarter of the academic year for many in high school – and a rocky transition to virtual learning for some in college – institutions should prepare to offer timely remedial coursework on a large scale and at affordable rates. The plan should be developed with guidance from the Louisiana Department of Education and the Board of Regents and communicated to students and families.
Higher Education

6. Support faculty with professional development.

Professors, instructors, and staff need to be coached on the use of high-quality online curriculum and best-practice methods and modes of virtual instruction. Not all faculty may require the assistance, but it should be provided systemwide and include ways to better support students outside of a traditional classroom setting. One thing is certain – virtual education and training is here to stay in some shape or form and should be integrated into standard teaching and learning processes going forward.

7. Offer statewide guidance on work-based learning.

Internships and apprenticeships, as well as employer partnerships for career and technical training, are proven means to engage students and prepare them for the workplace. As the economy reopens in a new normal, the Louisiana Department of Education and the Board of Regents should work together to develop guidance for employers, schools, college, and training providers on how to safely integrate work-based learning in what is likely to be a combination of in-person and virtual training. These same partners should also recognize the changing jobs market and align JumpStart credentials with the new normal in our economy.
Workforce Training

1. **Fund rapid response training of the currently unemployed to put them on a path toward higher wage, in-demand careers.**

   With more than 350,000 Louisianans unemployed and the reality of a slow return to a new normal, workforce training is a mission-critical task. Major sectors of the economy – hospitality and oil and gas in particular – are undergoing seismic changes. Relatively generous federal unemployment benefits have opened a window whereby Louisianans may have several weeks or months of time to access workforce training. Some credentials can be earned in less than eight or 12 weeks, including those foundational to higher wage, in-demand careers. The state should consider utilizing existing proven mechanisms such as the Rapid Response Fund or the LED FastStart training initiative to support training for specific credentials. Training providers, particularly community colleges, should begin ramping up program offerings for virtual and minimal-contact courses based on the job needs in each regional labor market.

2. **Develop an aggressive and innovative plan to connect available workers to training and to jobs.**

   In the short-term, state agencies should apply for additional federal stimulus grants to better coordinate existing efforts and programs into a virtual one-stop that includes unemployment insurance, employment services, and workforce data systems. As job seekers begin to seek new employment, the federally funded facilities around the state will be overwhelmed, as they still operate on an outdated, bureaucratic model that has frequently failed to realize its full potential. Some regions have already gravitated toward co-location of jobs centers onto community college campuses and/or contracting the function to non-profit organizations with stakeholder reach and community credibility – a model that moves Louisiana toward a more seamless experience that keeps students and job seekers on track. The state needs both a comprehensive online system as well as a modernized, relevant, region-by-region, on-the-ground approach to ensure seamless connectivity of the unemployed to workforce training, supportive services, and available jobs.

3. **Prioritize employer engagement.**

   Data and analysis can only go so far. Employers must be an integral part of a recovery strategy for the workforce from designing the training on the front end to communicating during execution to preferential job interviews upon completion. The goal of a high-wage, in-demand job can only be achieved when employer needs and resources are aligned with the availability of job seekers and the provision of relevant workforce training and credentials.
Workforce Training

4. **Identify occupations and industry sectors with growth opportunities in the COVID aftermath.**

The traditional state methods of occupational forecasting will not be able to be adapt fast enough to the dramatic shifts in Louisiana’s economy. Instead, the state must work with the private sector, perhaps the regional Economic Development Organizations, to both analyze available data and interview employers to better understand likely trends. Available jobs can be prioritized and tiered to inform schools, community colleges, universities, and workforce training providers about time-sensitive needs. This immediate process should balance hard data with expert judgement and move quickly. The long-range forecast can be adjusted utilizing more traditional channels and data sets.

5. **Broadcast re-training opportunities to existing students and the unemployed.**

Make the public aware of available options for up-skilling and career advancement, particularly if the training is subsidized by federal stimulus dollars or other public funds.

6. **Coordinate with federal officials for flexibility and support.**

Louisiana’s private and public leaders should come together to support important national policy changes to help meet unprecedented needs, including: the authorization of Pell for short-term credentials (even if on a temporary basis only); the removal of administrative barriers to allow experienced industry personnel to teach or lead training; more flexibility for the use of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; and the expansion of tax credits for workforce training and earn-and-learn models, among other priorities.

7. **Boldly re-design the workforce delivery system.**

We have always known that Louisiana’s economy needs to move away from a heavy reliance on low-skilled, low-wage jobs. Leaders must use this time to create a coordinated, cohesive strategy to intentionally diversify the economy, and that begins with training our citizens for careers in IT, health care, advanced manufacturing, and other higher-paying occupations in fields that will add jobs in the long term. A comprehensive, statewide approach should be our vision and goal, harnessing federal, state, and self-generated funding for education, training, and supportive services that result in better jobs for more people.