AGENDA FOR CHILDREN

Data Brief

November 19, 2025

New Orleans' Fall 2025 Kindergarten Literacy Screening Results Reflect the Promise of Investments in Early Childhood Education

After years of increased investment in early childhood education (ECE), New Orleans sees meaningful improvements in kindergarten literacy outcomes. The Louisiana Department of Education's (LDOE) Fall 2025 literacy assessment results show New Orleans kindergarteners were more likely than their peers statewide to meet or exceed early literacy benchmarks, including children from all racial and ethnic groups, English Language Learners, children with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged children. These gains follow several years of increased investments in ECE, showing a potential relationship between ECE investment and tangible, achievable results. While we should celebrate this progress, far too many children enter kindergarten without foundational early literacy skills, putting them at a much higher risk of later reading challenges. In 2025, 63.3% of New Orleans kindergarteners scored below or well below benchmarks on the literacy screener.[1]

As local, state, and federal leaders make hard budget decisions, we encourage them to maintain investments in early care and education and to recognize the unique role that ECE access can play in accelerating our state's recent gains in reading proficiency and other long-term benefits.

KEY FINDINGS

Early literacy skills lay the foundation for future academic success. While Louisiana has made significant gains in reading proficiency in recent years, literacy screeners show that many Louisiana children enter kindergarten without foundational pre-literacy skills. Additionally, economically disadvantaged children are more likely to score below literacy benchmarks at kindergarten entry, placing them at a higher risk for later reading difficulties.

The LDOE's Fall 2025 early literacy assessment results show New Orleans is turning that tide:

1. More New Orleans children are arriving at kindergarten with the basic early literacy skills they need to succeed.
2. New Orleans kindergarteners were more likely than their peers statewide to meet or exceed early literacy benchmarks in 2025.
3. More economically disadvantaged New Orleans kindergarteners started the school year meeting or exceeding literacy benchmarks.
4. Fewer economically disadvantaged New Orleans kindergarteners entered school well below literacy benchmarks in 2025.
5. New Orleans kindergarteners of all backgrounds were more likely to score at or above early literacy benchmarks than the statewide average.

Further analysis is needed to definitively connect ECE funding increases to these results, but the initial findings are promising.

[1] Weixler, L., Gerry, A., & Fields, T. (May 2025). Many Louisiana children arrive at kindergarten unprepared to learn to read.

The New Orleans Context: Supporting school readiness through increased access to early care and education

In 2022, New Orleans voters made a big bet on the city's youngest residents when they approved the Early Childhood Millage, a 20-year commitment that provides over $21 million annually to fund free, high-quality early care and education (ECE) for 1,000 low-income children ages 0-3, along with investments to improve the quality and resilience of the local ECE system. These local funds are eligible for a dollar-for-dollar match with state Early Childhood Education Fund dollars, supporting an additional 800 children ages 0-3 from low-income working families. Together with longstanding programs like Early Head Start and the Child Care Assistance Program, these investments now enable New Orleans to serve 31% of its children ages 0-2 in a publicly funded ECE seat, the second-highest rate of any parish in the state.[2] Expanding access to high-quality ECE has been a key strategy for advocates and practitioners seeking to improve educational outcomes, including grade-level reading, for children in New Orleans.

As advocates made the case for further investments in early care and education through the campaign for the Early Childhood Millage in 2022, they consistently linked ECE investments to anticipated future improvements in reading proficiency.

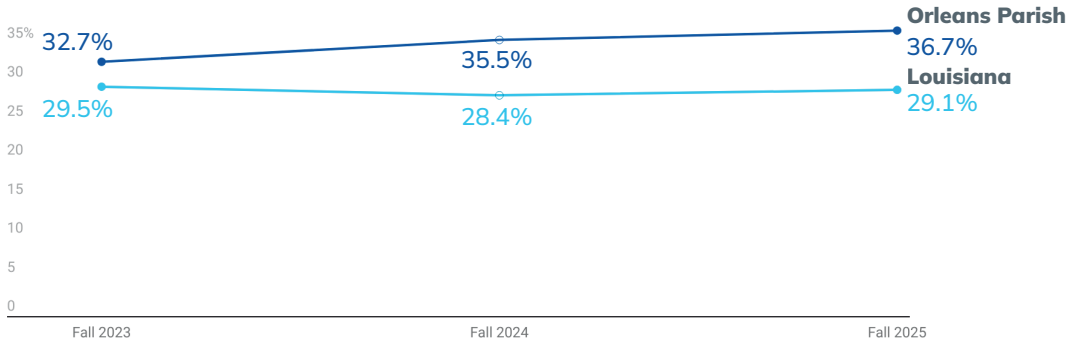
Fall 2025 Literacy Screening Results

The LDOE released beginning-of-year literacy screener results for children in grades K-3 on November 12, 2025. For the past three years, all Louisiana public schools have used the same screener, making it possible to track trends over time at the state, district, and school levels. LDOE also reports results by student subgroups, which helps identify whether progress is consistent or if gaps are widening.

1 More New Orleans children are arriving at kindergarten with the basic early literacy skills they need to succeed.

New Orleans continues to show improvement: the percentage of kindergarteners scoring at or above benchmarks on the literacy screener increased by four percentage points since 2023. Across the state, the share of students at or above benchmarks actually decreased by 0.4 percentage points during this time period, showing that New Orleans kindergarteners have consistently outperformed the state average since 2023.

Kindergarteners scoring at or well above benchmarks on Louisiana's literacy screener

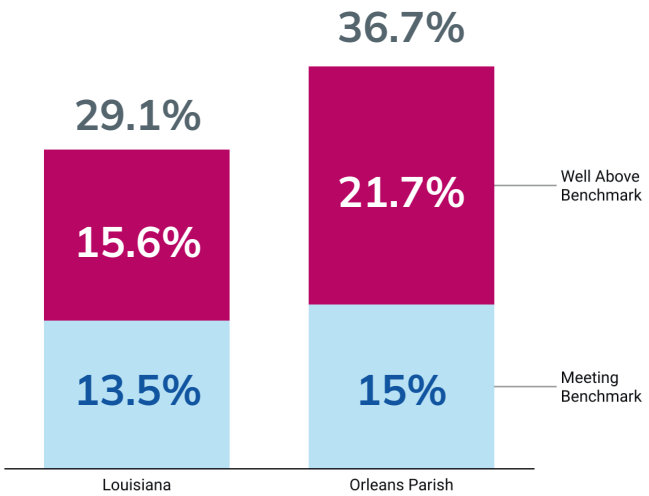


Source: Agenda for Children's analysis of LDOE DIBELS data

[2] Data provided to Agenda for Children by the Louisiana Department of Education, by special request

2 New Orleans kindergarteners were more likely than their peers statewide to meet or exceed early literacy benchmarks in 2025.

Kindergarteners scoring at or well above benchmarks on Louisiana's literacy screener



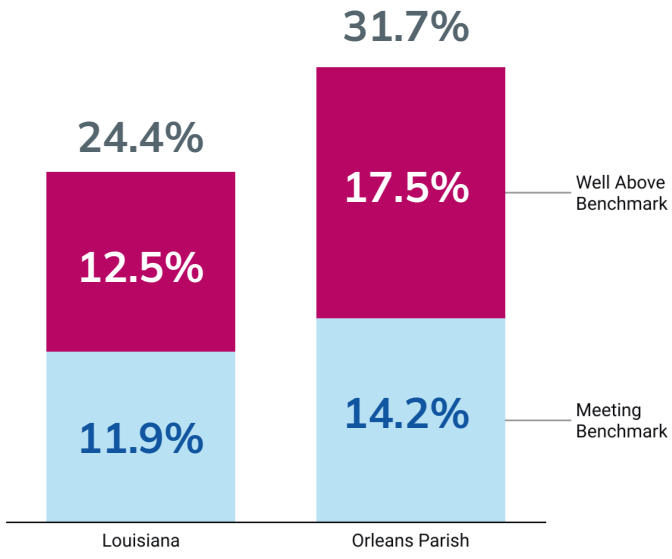
Source: Agenda for Children's analysis of LDOE DIBELS data

Statewide, 29.1% of all kindergarteners scored either "on level" (13.5%) or "well above" (15.6%) benchmarks at the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year.

In New Orleans, 36.7% of all kindergarteners scored either "on level" (15%) or "well above" (21.7%).

3 More economically disadvantaged New Orleans kindergarteners started the school year meeting or exceeding literacy benchmarks in 2025.

Economically disadvantaged kindergarteners scoring at or well above benchmarks on Louisiana's literacy screener



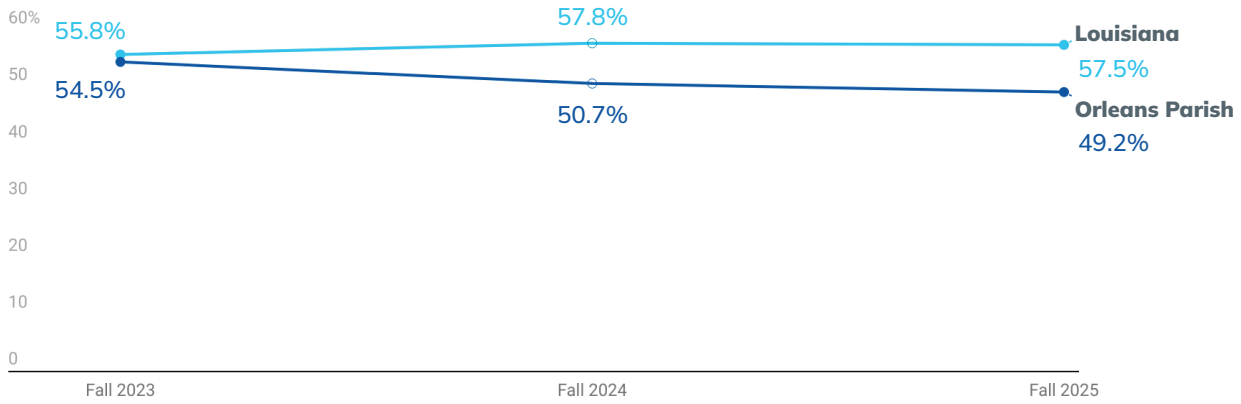
Source: Agenda for Children's analysis of LDOE DIBELS data

In New Orleans, almost a third (31.7%) of economically disadvantaged kindergarteners scored at or well above benchmarks in fall 2025, about seven percentage points higher than the statewide average of 24.4%.

The percentage of disadvantaged kindergarteners who score at or above benchmarks has improved in New Orleans. While the statewide average fell slightly between 2023 and 2025, from 24.7% to 24.4%, New Orleans made gains, increasing by 3.3 percentage points, from 28.4% to 31.7%.

4 Fewer economically disadvantaged New Orleans kindergarteners entered school well below literacy benchmarks in 2025.

Economically disadvantaged kindergarteners scoring well below benchmarks on Louisiana's literacy screener



Source: Agenda for Children's analysis of LDOE DIBELS data

Economically disadvantaged kindergarteners in New Orleans scoring "well below" benchmarks dropped from 54.5% in 2023 to 49.2% in 2025. By contrast, the statewide rate increased by 1.7 percentage points over that same time period, widening the gap between Orleans Parish and the state average from 1.3 to 8.3 percentage points.

Recent research from Tulane University shows that 80% of economically disadvantaged children in Louisiana who scored well below benchmarks in the middle of first grade had also entered kindergarten scoring well below benchmarks.[3] This suggests that reducing the number of children who start kindergarten significantly behind is key to improving literacy outcomes in later grades.

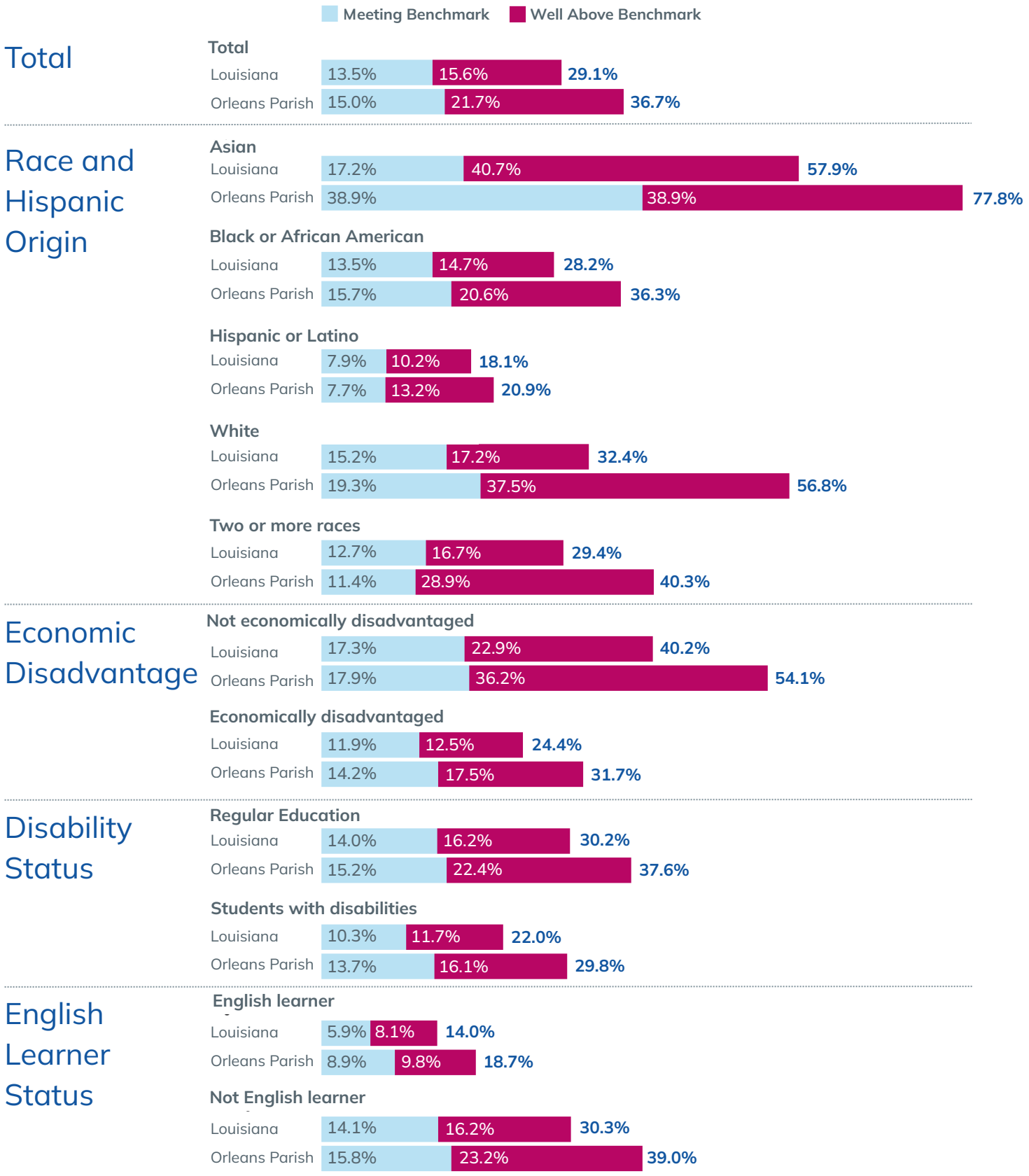
5 New Orleans kindergarteners of all backgrounds were more likely to score at or above early literacy benchmarks than the statewide average.

New Orleans kindergarteners were more likely than their peers statewide to score at or above early literacy benchmarks across all subgroups reported by the Louisiana Department of Education, including children from all racial and ethnic groups, learners, children with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged children.

For example, 29.8% of New Orleans kindergarteners with disabilities scored at or above literacy benchmarks, which was 7.8 percentage points higher than the statewide average, and 18.7% of New Orleans kindergarteners who were English Language Learners scored at or above literacy benchmarks, 4.7 percentage points higher than the statewide average.

[3] Weixler, L. et al. (May 2025).

Data and Methods

In the dataset used, "Orleans Parish" includes all schools in the R36 "district," including charter schools overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board. It does not include Type 2 charter schools, which are authorized by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and may accept children from any parish. In 2024, there were 43 schools that offered kindergarten in the R36 district, and three Type 2 charters located in Orleans Parish. Over 90% of kindergarteners in schools located in Orleans Parish attended a school included in R36.

Appendix: Kindergarteners scoring at or well above benchmarks on Fall 2025 literacy screener