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Early childcare and education can lead Louisiana from "worst to first"
It is all too often said that Louisiana is at the bottom of all the "good lists" and top of all the "bad lists." This statement applies primarily to our social economic status. Unfortunately, the claim is supported by facts and statistics. We suffer from high rates of poverty, school drop outs, adult illiteracy, unskilled labor, crime, poor health, even obesity. All of these have huge social and economic costs. These dismal demographics diminish the opportunity for a true quality of life for ALL who live in Louisiana. Every time a crime is committed, every time a job is unfilled for lack of skilled, literate men and women, every time a young boy or girl drops out of school, and when 1/3 of our children are classified as at-risk, each of us is affected. We owe it to ourselves as a matter of pride, and we owe it to our children (all children) as a matter of stewardship and responsibility to overcome our social weaknesses. In my opinion, it is not that we do not know what has to be done, but we have lacked the collective will to focus on our children and their future. Louisiana needs a new paradigm built on the vision of enhancing the potential and the success of all our children. For the vision to become reality, we must engage parents, community and business and political leaders. And they should work together for high-quality day care, full utilization of LaCHIP, and Head Start's educational programs. The goal must

be to achieve kindergarten readiness for all children. If we commit to this vision, we will move to the top of the "good lists." The quickest, most enduring way to accomplish this is through education- it is essential that we begin EARLY. From extensive research, it is now known that 80 percent of brain development takes place in the first three years of a child's life. In Louisiana, over 40 percent of our children enter kindergarten ill prepared to learn. These children are at greater risk of needing special education, repeating grades and possibly dropping out. When they drop out, they do not drop into good places. If 40 percent of our children are at risk, it places the whole society at risk. Right now, there are 150,000 at-risk children ages 0-4 needing early care and education. Unfortunately, our state has cut the funding to meet this need by almost 70 percent. I know the financial situation in our state is very dire, and I compliment Governor Edwards for working diligently to meet the challenge of putting Louisiana on sound footing. However, if we do not start investing in our children earlier and staying the course, we will never break the vicious cycle that places us on the bottom of the "good lists" and the top of the "bad lists."