

## **Blueprint Louisiana's Five-Point Reform Agenda Hayride, The**

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From a press release put out by the business/reform group Blueprint Louisiana comes an interesting bit of discussion which might in part frame some of the discussion leading up to this fall's election cycle...

**Prioritize Student Success Over Traditional Practices That Impede Performance in Public Schools.** Our adherence to long-standing models and systems, for tradition's sake, is not delivering the outcomes our students deserve or that our society requires in the 21st century. It is past time to replicate what we know works in public education-high-quality teachers and principals empowered to make performance-based decisions-and implement proven strategies in public schools in our state.

**Create A Single High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten System.** Louisiana should prioritize funding for pre-kindergarten and simplify access through a coordinated statewide program of high quality with accountability for outcomes.

**Re-Engineer Public Retirement and Health Care Benefits for Long-Term Stability.** Louisiana must act now to stem the growth in retirement and health care debt for public employees-both state workers and teachers. The state cannot afford to put off structural and systemic changes that ensure we live up to our commitments now and make more affordable policies for the future.

**Transition Louisiana's Charity Hospitals to Public-Private Partnerships.** The New Orleans network of primary care clinics and the upcoming Baton Rouge partnership between Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center and Earl K. Long Hospital are best-practice models that should be applauded and replicated. The state should build on this progress and take the lead to encourage other regional partnerships, allowing Louisiana State University to focus on medical education and research.

**Adopt "Smart on Crime" Reforms that Reduce the Highest Incarceration Rate in the Nation.** Experts attribute "policy choices" as the primary determinant for incarceration rates, not crime itself. Louisiana must re-evaluate business as usual in our prison system and act on the recommendations of the Sentencing Commission to lower costs and improve outcomes.

**Jimmy Maurin**, chairman of the organization and a real estate developer, said the five points are needed to shake the state out of its poor results to date. "Years of experience and poor outcomes demonstrate that business as usual fails to serve our citizens well," said Maurin. "The election season is a time to remind state leaders the people of Louisiana want and deserve better. Bold leadership must be willing to take on tough issues and move us forward."

Maurin also claimed the agenda won't negatively affect the state's budget situation.

"In recognition of the state's ongoing fiscal challenges, the new Blueprint Agenda involves no cost to the state," he said. "While these recommendations do not require additional funds, they do require political will. We look forward to working with all of the experienced and new legislators when they arrive in Baton Rouge early next year."

What to make of these recommendations? Well, the first one – focusing on putting high-quality teachers in classrooms and abandoning the old model of trying to placate unions by watering down innovation and reform – is inarguable. How to do that is the question. And the surest and easiest way to do that is to get the market involved. Let parents choose schools for kids rather than bureaucrats and lawyers and schools will compete to hire the best teachers in order to attract those students. But the second-best way to handle the problem is to do away with teacher tenure, which is something good teachers don't need because they're in demand and bad teachers (and the unions) will fight to the death to preserve. And that reform Blueprint Louisiana is unmistakably advocating if you hit the link to the five-point plan.

The second recommendation, which is to consolidate several state pre-K programs into one and strengthen it, should be fairly uncontroversial. Some one-third of Louisiana's pre-K aged kids aren't enrolled in pre-K, and most of them are of a demographic profile which indicates they absolutely have to be in pre-K.

The third recommendation actually carries with it eight specific actions Blueprint calls for, all of which sound like good moves...

The state should reform, or end, the current defined benefits plan for new employees.

Louisiana should immediately offer a defined contributions option for public employees, including state workers and teachers.

Review and revise the benefits offered in the four state retirement systems, including the contribution rate, retirement age, and other components.

Require retirement systems to lower the percentage of anticipated investment returns to a more realistic figure.

Begin to consolidate the management and governance of retirement systems.

Change the membership of retirement boards so that beneficiaries are not the sole decision-makers and overseers of the system.

Prohibit convicted felons from receiving the state share of their pensions.

Reform the health benefits plan for state retirees.

State workers will howl about these ideas, but the state's unfunded liabilities for civil service employees' pensions are breathtaking. Something has to be done to make sure this problem doesn't kill Louisiana's public fisc like it threatens to do in states like California and Illinois.

The fourth recommendation, replicating the partnership model in Baton Rouge in which Earl K. Long Hospital will be phased out in favor of an access agreement with Our Lady of the Lake Hospital, is the best of the five. Louisiana spends some \$600 million per year on the Charity system that simply doesn't need to be spent; that's brick-and-mortar spending which just isn't necessary when there are private and non-profit operations willing to operate hospitals. State health-care spending on Medicaid and indigent patients is enough as it is without having to pay doctors, nurses, hospital administrators and other personnel who would have jobs in the private sector otherwise. Kudos to Blueprint for having the courage to recognize the Charity model has had its day.

This doesn't mean LSU shouldn't have teaching hospitals in New Orleans and Shreveport. It does mean we don't need Charity Hospitals in places like Houma, Monroe, Hammond, Alexandria and so on when Ochsner, Tenet and Humana would likely move into those markets to fill a hole.

And finally, the fifth recommendation speaks to something even many conservatives are recognizing – which is that we've got too many people in jail. When one out of 55 citizens are in prison in Louisiana, and we're not a Texas or Arizona or California where we can pin the blame on illegal immigrants coming in and committing crimes, we've got simply too many people incarcerated. Getting non-violent people who are in jail on drug charges into less-expensive and more productive means of rehabilitation is just smart policy and it saves money. Ultimately, though, we're going to have to demand more of our people; standards of behavior enforced by public values and social opprobrium do work when they're utilized, and we as a society – here in Louisiana and elsewhere – abandoned that method years ago.

Will these recommendations become campaign issues this fall? Blueprint Louisiana says it's going to ask candidates to pledge their support, but with so many unopposed and so many intraparty races likely driven by personality and "dirt" it might be a larger challenge to build legislative consensus for them this year.

That doesn't dilute the value of the recommendations. They would all move the state forward if implemented. And it will be interesting to see who among the state's political class embraces them.