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# How the Pelican Center used the Community Opportunity Map to support students in Louisiana

With significant increases in Louisiana's truancy rate and the number of children entering foster care and the juvenile delinquency system, the Office of the Governor's Children's Cabinet and the Pelican Center for Children and Families sounded a call to action and collaboration among school and juvenile justice system professionals. Leaders believed that forging local partnerships is critical to improve school conduct and attendance outcomes, maintain safe schools, proactively address the student engagement crisis, and mitigate child welfare and juvenile justice system involvement escalation. Alongside partners including the Louisiana Children's Trust Fund, Louisiana Youth for Excellence, and the Louisiana Court Improvement Program, these organizations planned the Strengthening Louisiana's Children and Families Solutions Summit to support solution planning.

## Why the Community Opportunity Map

Casey Family Programs' <u>Community Opportunity Map</u> allows anyone to find child and family well-being data for any neighborhood across this nation to analyze, plan, and act alongside others to build Communities of Hope. The Community Opportunity Map has 30 indicators across five topic areas: child and family well-being, education, economy, housing, and accessibility (of food, internet, and transportation). The tool uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and several other sources, covering states, counties, Congressional districts, cities, and ZIP codes in all 50 states as well as the municipios of Puerto Rico. Two-thirds of the indicators can be disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Using the tool, public-private partnerships

such as the Louisiana Solutions Summit can create precise, local strategic plans to invest in hope.

#### Summit brings together key people from 11 parishes

The Pelican Center alongside then-Gov. John Bel Edwards' Office planned a one-day summit in September 2023 to bring together key individuals from 11 parishes in the state. Two parishes had the lowest truancy rates in the state, and the remaining nine had some of the highest truancy rates. From each parish, the hosts invited a team of school superintendents, child welfare and attendance supervisors, principals, law enforcement, truancy/probation officers, judges, juvenile services and detention center staff, district attorney office staff, public defender office staff, Truancy and Assessment Service Centers (TASC) representatives, and Family in Need of Services (FINS) representatives. The goal was to convene these stakeholders to learn about best practice programs and resources that improve outcomes for students, share ideas and experiences, and create strategies and solutions to improve student attendance, behavior, engagement, and family stability in their specific jurisdictions.

#### Conversations around well-being take center stage

Attendees heard from the governor, the Office of Behavioral Health, the Department of Children and Family Services, the FINS Assistance Program, Center for Evidence to Practice, nonprofits such as the Louisiana Association of United Ways, Volunteers for Youth Justice, Empower 225, and representatives from youth advisory boards and others who are working to reduce truancy. The Rapides Parish School System superintendent shared the creative and collaborative ways they are improving truancy rates, while a former student who overcame numerous educational obstacles challenged attendees to look deeper at the root causes of truancy.

After participants learned about best practices from across the state, each parish team discussed truancy in their parish. To frame the conversation, each team used data from the Community Opportunity Map and child welfare, education, and other data. The teams used a strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats framework to highlight what was working in their school district that they could build upon and what their challenges were. The groups considered questions such as: What's going right in our school district that we could build upon? What are the top problems our jurisdiction is facing related to attendance, conduct, or school safety? What are some programs or processes that we learned about today that we think would be helpful in our parish? And, ultimately, how can our school district support students by strengthening community conditions so that all students are safe and supported in their families and communities?

### A commitment to hope through data unites the five sectors

After the summit, each parish team has continued to meet, with support from the Governor's Office, the FINS Assistance Program, and the Pelican Center, working with local groups to implement strategies to support students in the neighborhoods in their parish with the highest truancy rates. At Casey Family Programs, we believe that hope is an action word and that every one of us from each of the five sectors of community — government, business, nonprofit and faith-based, philanthropic and the community members themselves — must play our role. In this initiative, the Pelican Center for Children and Families alongside the Governor's Office of Louisiana partnered across the sectors to support young people and build Communities of Hope.

#### Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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